

Chapter 1

Trajectories of the political

The domain of human action that we conventionally define as ‘politics’ is plagued with events and shattered by personalities. Moreover, it is an inherently dangerous domain, as through it men can injure and rob, not to mention ruin themselves. The realm of the political engenders no teleological optimisms or invisible hands, and the vigour of wills breeds no harmonious combination or good outcome. Hands are visible in politics and are often armed. Unsurprisingly, the discussion of the concept of ‘politics’ has always evidenced a striking diversity of perspectives and approaches, and a definite lack of a common vocabulary or of a dominant view. Therefore, although the reflection is hardly new, the questions of what is political, what is specific about it and what should be the knowledge task of the political scientist have proven particularly difficult to address. Even a short review of previous investigations and responses would keep us busy for a long time, and there is no scope in this book to analyse this large body of thought in critical depth.

Understanding of the political evolves, of course, and in this introductory chapter I briefly focus on its main trajectories to pave the way for my own elaboration. First, predominantly ‘vertical’ or ‘horizontal’ conceptualisations have alternated in the history of visions of ‘politics’. In the phases of horizontal predominance, politics spreads through all the interstices of the human experience, inextricably links to other dimensions of such experience and becomes ubiquitous and hard to grasp in its essential features. In the periods in which a vertical vision prevails, politics tends to be studied via characterisations that transcend its phenomenology, with definitions focusing on its essentialist nature and specific character.

Second, the vertical and horizontal conceptions of politics that have historically alternated have both been affected by a process of segmentation of the domains of human action in which politics has been progressively separated

from other spheres of action, and the discipline of politics has been separated from the neighbouring disciplines of law, sociology, economics, theology, philosophy and so on.

Third, twentieth-century conceptions of politics continue to reflect the vertical and horizontal dimensions while engaging with a politics dismembered of its connections with other disciplines. Politics is connected with ethics in ancient Greek thinking, with God in the Christian ecclesia, with law in the formation of modern absolutist states and with society in the age of great social conflicts. It increasingly connects with economics in the age of its domestication.

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL CONCEPTIONS

We recognise the starting point of any conception of politics in the Greek term *πολιτικός*, *politicos*, presumably, but not certainly, having the same pre-Indo-European root as the term *Πόλεμος*, *polemos*, war. The famous Aristotelian definition of man as a ‘political animal’ (*zoon politikon*) was a definition of ‘man’, not of ‘politics’. ‘Politics’ as such was undefined. In the Greek experience, a man’s participation in the *polis* was not a part of his life but its essence. A ‘non-political’ man was a defective animal who had lost the plenitude of his fusion with and within the *polis*. The political intertwined so much with the human experience that it was undefinable as a separate sphere of life or activity. In fact, ancient Greek did not possess the word ‘social’ and did not distinguish political life from social life.¹

In the Greek view, the *polis* was a particular and unprecedented way of managing internal affairs by virtue of one crucially innovative instrument: people talking one to one other as members of a collectivity of freemen and equals, sharing the duty and the right to constitute the *polis* and to generate and modify the specific arrangements to deal with its internal and external problems. This unprecedented innovation was verbally represented by the preamble introducing Greek laws that, as we have no systematic collection of Greek law, presumably started to be used in the seventh- or sixth-century BC: *edoxe te boule kei to demo*, ‘it seems right to the council and to the people’. The striking modernity of the formula lies in its pragmatism (it seems right) and in its reference to the ultimate source

1. The best historical reviews of the lemma ‘politics’ include Sartori, Giovanni (1973), ‘What Is “Politics”’, *Political Theory*, 1: 5–26, originally published as Sartori, Giovanni (1972), ‘La scienza politica’, in Luigi Firpo (ed.) *Storia delle idee politiche, economiche e sociali*, Torino: UTET; Sellin, Volker (1978), ‘Politik’, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Band 4, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, pp. 789–874; and Ornaghi, Lorenzo (2013), ‘Politica’, in *Nell’età della tarda democrazia. Scritti sullo stato, le istituzioni e la politica*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, pp. 65–73.

(the people).² People were supposed to voice their views, discuss those of others, try to persuade each other and eventually come to final decisions (often by voting). The same people were in principle eligible to be empowered, temporarily, to lead the others. This vision of the political process eventually led to decisions regarded as agreed upon by the collectivity, and which could therefore be imposed on it and associated with sanctioning non-compliers, be they opponents or opportunists, under the revolutionary implied concept of *isonomia*, the equality of citizens before the law.³

Isonomia and self-determination of the free were not, however, the foundation of the term ‘democracy’, which we now use in a positive sense. While the classical Greek intellectuals unanimously praised equality and freedom, they did not praise democracy. Democracy betrayed its social character of government by the ‘poor’ in their own interest, rather than the more recent meaning of government by the many or by the majority.⁴ In *Laws*, Plato complains that government by the many, by the populace and therefore inevitably by the poor is not subject to laws but superior to them and the final arbiter of them. From this comes the usual preference for mixed forms of government.

Notwithstanding the diffidence about government by the multitude (democracy), this conception of politics was distinctly horizontal. ‘Politicalness’ was not a vertical relationship between the ‘governed’ or ‘ruled’ and the ‘government’ or ‘rulers’ but mainly pertained to the relationships among citizens (although coercion was certainly not absent).⁵ The horizontal dimension and its participation practices were so important that the political experience was unviable beyond a certain number of free citizens. Its survival was unthinkable with the constitution of broader territorial and demographic units. However, it is surprising to note how much the legacy of this very particular and clearly ‘unviable’ (in different political units) conception has shaped the Western understanding of ‘politics’. The revolutionary nature of this experience was so overwhelming that we have tended to universalise an idealised reconstruction of it through the political education of generations of intellectuals in the West.

2. A point is made in Castoriadis, Cornelius (1993; 1974), *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 3 (1961–1979), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 164.

3. Poggi, G. (2014), *Varieties of Political Experiences. Power Phenomena in Modern Society*, Colchester: ECPR Press, pp. 1–2.

4. See Aristotle (350 BC; 2013, 2nd ed.), *Politics*, translated and with an introduction, notes and glossary by Carnes Lord, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, Books 3 and 4, pp. 62–128. For the consensus on this point among classical Greek thinkers, see the anthology of the most important writings on the form of government in Fassò, G. (1959), *La democrazia in Grecia*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

5. It is not that the Greek polis did not know or use ‘coercion’; it is rather that coercion played no role in their understanding of the route to reaching collective decisions and was seen as a necessary tool only for punishing deviance from the properly achieved common standings.

This experience was not the only one and not the dominant one in the world before, during and after the *polis*. Beyond the Greek *polis*, small village communities, larger possessions of lords or even vaster empires managed such common goods and collective activities with completely different, if not opposite, understandings. The Greek thinking regarded none of these as ‘political’. All those experiences that repressed and denied, or reserved, the practice of language and reason for the management of collective affairs to a few privileged individuals were indeed regarded as ‘non-political’; a more ‘vertical’ dimension of the political dominated phases and realities unlike the small city and the constitution or reconstitution of large-scale political entities. It prevailed in successive Western and Eastern political experiences focusing on the empirically sharp differences that existed between rulers and subjects. This differentiation of roles resulted from a more marked differentiation and contrast of interests and from the corresponding idea that rulers have an interest in maintaining their subjects in a position of subordination and in denying them a possibility of self-determination and of defining and pursuing their own interests as separate from those of the rulers. The ‘vertical’ conception of politics emerges, therefore, from the profound asymmetries among different social components of a polity (of a larger size) and the struggle for power distribution following from these asymmetries of economic, ideological, symbolic or coercive resources. In this understanding, a part of society tends to define itself as the whole and to forget shared commitments to engage in compromise and mutual adjustment by imposing its own visions and interests.

Successive Western terminological innovations witnessed a continual tension between the horizontal and vertical dimensions. These remained influenced by the original Greek source but were found difficult to apply to the new realities on a different scale. The concepts derived from the word ‘polis’ shaped the understanding of successive horizontal experiences. If *politiké* indicated the art of government, *politeia* pointed to what we would today call the ‘constitution’ (or the ‘regime’), the form of government and the techniques and organisation for the distribution of offices and charges in the city government. But the same term also included the definition of citizenship, of its obligations and duties and, furthermore, in an inextricable mix, the citizens as a whole, their ‘togetherness’, and also their education, the ‘spirit’ of the city, the essence of the *polis* and citizenship as an ethical way of life.⁶ Therefore, Plato labels his work devoted to the living spirit, the ethos and definitely the essence of the *polis* as *politeia* – nowadays translated as ‘republic’ (*res publica*). Aristotle instead labels his treaty that deals with

6. See Bordes, J. (1982), *Politeia dans la pensée grecque jusqu’à Aristote*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

themes nearer to the modern positivist view of politics as study of the technical forms of government with a derivative term, *politikon* – now translated as ‘politics’ or ‘the political’.

The word ‘social’ was a Latin invention, although the medieval translators of Aristotle ended up attributing it to him. Latin thinking and language used *civis* and *civitas* for what the Greek labelled *polites*.⁷ However, *civitas* had lost most of the political connotation of the Greek *polis* as it was organised juridically in a *juris societas*. The Romans used the term *res publica* for what we could identify as ‘politics’. However, a ‘vertical’ dimension was also absent from this terminology.⁸

The original Greek terms disappeared for almost ten centuries until the rediscovery of the Aristotelian works in the thirteenth century. When these works were directly translated into Latin from Greek (in approximately 1260), the term ‘politics’ made a new entry on the scene. William of Moerbeke (1215), a Flemish Dominican, used a ‘Greekish’ version of the term, *politikos*, for which he was to be accused of monkish literalness. He might have chosen this literal translation out of uncertainty about the real meaning of the original term and therefore found it preferable to leave it ‘Greekish’. Perhaps modern languages acquired the lemma thanks to this insecurity about translation.⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas (1225) simply translated the term as ‘politics’. In the Middle Ages, the art of ruling and government persisted as part of the definition of politics, but there was nothing that resembled the idea of *politeia*, perhaps because there was nothing that resembled the specific territoriality of the Greek *polis*. Quite the contrary, one could say that in the ideals and praxis of medieval politics there was something alien and even hostile about the Greek concept of *politeia*. Christianity, the new element of togetherness, presented itself as hostile to politics on grounds of principle, as it was identified with the world of power, violence, abuse and temptation. The connection between ethics and politics was the opposite to the Greek one. Politics was not a source of ethical behaviour and the sphere of ethical action but rather its contrary. The Christian and medieval thinking (from St. Augustine) located ethics definitely outside politics, which was seen as something inevitably corrupt. Even medieval law presented itself as a law without politics. It was more an expression of society than of the state and manifested itself in traditions and orders that coexisted. They maintained themselves thanks to the inability of political power to unify and standardise

7. For the distinction between *civitas* and *urbs* in the Roman experience, see Foustel de Coulanges, Numa Denis (1956; 1980), *The Ancient City. A Study of Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 126–34.

8. Sartori, ‘What Is “Politics”’, p. 9.

9. Sternberger, Dolf (1982), ‘“Politics” in Language. Twelve Notes on the History of Words and Meanings’, in M. Cranston and P. Mair (eds.), *Language and Politics*, Bruxelles: Bruylant, p. 27.

all social manifestations because of its incapacity to extend itself to all areas of intersubjective relations, therefore allowing for wide areas of interference by competing powers.¹⁰

This was only the first of a complex series of linguistic and conceptual re-elaborations of the original *polis/politikon* terms that progressively represented the different political experiences of the Western world. The Middle Ages more explicitly conceptualised the vertical dimension in the political process by resorting to new and different concepts, such as *dominium*, *princeps* and *principatum*. Politics inevitably began to be more explicitly associated with this vertical dimension.

Unsurprisingly, the horizontal dimension of politics, which was absent from the concepts of politics and government in the Middle Ages, re-emerged forcefully in the thinking of the Renaissance city-states, having been rediscovered through the mediation of the Roman Republic and its 'public law'. Undoubtedly, Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* represents a form of heathen ideal that reproduces the Greek ideal of politics as ethics. However, a new alternation in the dominant ideal occurred with the demise of the Renaissance city-states before the growing influence of the new, modern, large territorial states. In the same vein in which the pre-modern conceptions of politics in the period 800–1300 had to refer to the Christian community and ecclesia, since the sixteenth-century discourse about politics has carried an ever-closer connection with the concept of the state, with constant association and reference to it. The new entity that consolidated through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressively monopolised political discourse. The development of the state allowed the redefinition of politics that, albeit differently, both Hobbes and Machiavelli operated. The concepts of ruling and being ruled, rulers and the ruled, obligations, laws and so forth were redefined in reference to the state. The modern-age and the post-Westphalian state-making process allowed a predominant vertical dimension of politics to re-emerge, strongly connected to the form of the bureaucratic and military state, which would only be challenged by the liberalisation and democratisation processes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

After a long period in which the vertical dimension was predominant, in the contemporary age, politics has again been rebalanced with a growing horizontal dimension. The study of what we call contemporary politics focuses on collective action problems, participation practices, decentralisation mechanisms, social movements, stakeholder involvement in authoritative decisions, governance and so forth – all concepts that refer to a newly reaffirmed horizontal dimension of politics. On the one hand, this re-emergence of the horizontal

10. See Grossi, Paolo (1997), *L'ordine giuridico medioevale*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, pp. 41–49.

dimension generates new pushes for localism and small-scale communities in search of the ideal size in which the community dimension of politics can recover. On the other hand, it paradoxically goes together with an ever-growing centralisation of resources and decision-making power in large corporate actors.

It is perhaps not fully accurate, but it is definitely tempting, to relate the purely vertical and horizontal conceptions of politics to the two great antagonists, Hobbes and Rousseau. Rousseau's scheme of extreme and pure democracy stands in sharp contrast to Hobbes's defence of pure political authority. Both, however, intended to prevent any emergence of other political forces in the polity and shared a profound dislike for any sort of intermediate authority formation above the atomised citizens as coequals – for Rousseau – or below the monistic sovereign – for Hobbes. Both would certainly regard the organised, mobilised, fragmented politics of our polyarchies as evil for their respective and definitely opposed ideal polities. Neither the extreme puritan democracy of Rousseau nor the absolutist authority of Hobbes see any place for competing and conflicting associations, and the political clashes of our contemporary politics were alien to both.

THE DISMEMBERING OF POLITICS

In parallel with, and somewhat independently of, the alternation of emphasis between the vertical and horizontal conceptions of the political, we observe a progressive fragmentation of the understanding of the human experience of which politics is a part. The early 'integrated' political experience has been progressively 'dismembered', fragmented into a set of separate subfields of activity, each with its own rules and legitimising principles.

Machiavelli and Hobbes are the founders of the separation of politics and its study from any consideration and reasoning of an ethical or religious nature. In laying the foundation for the autonomy of the political they ended the tradition that from St. Augustine's (350–430) *De Civitate Dei* to St. Thomas's (1225–1274) *Summa Theologiae* despised the world of politics for a thousand years while trying to firmly ground it in the 'holiness of law', whether it was 'eternal', 'goodly', 'natural' or 'human' law. The philosophical and deductive style of Hobbes's thinking led him to an extremised vision in which the political is not only autonomous and independent but is also all-including: the Leviathan creates and determines everything else. Machiavelli, with the empirical eyes of a more disenchanting observer, simply aimed to discover the rules that a prince had to use if he wanted to be successful. Terminologically, the term 'politics' would be used again by Althusius (1603), Spinoza (1677) and Bossuet (1670), but the definition of what politics is was becoming progressively more complex.

The development and differentiation of the specialised machinery of the large territorial state and the prevailing association of politics with its hierarchy and activities produced a further differentiation of the sphere of politics. A major step in the separation of the understanding of ‘politics’ from that of other realms of life came with the rebirth of the old Roman concept of *civitas*, society, and its new claim to independence and an a priori existence with respect to politics (the antithetical position to that of Hobbes). The differentiation between ‘society’ and ‘politics’ took place slowly from the Renaissance onwards. It took its final form with natural law thinking, the contractualist tradition and the emergence of the new idea of a ‘contract’ between a sovereign and the subjects as a way to fill the vertical gap, at least in part.

If secularisation had tended to reduce the concern of politics with matters of faith and relationships with ecclesiastical authorities, marketisation tended to reduce the involvement of politics in economic affairs. The idea insinuated itself that matters concerning the production and distribution of wealth should be better left to the activities of profit-seeking individuals. The limitations set on politics by secularisation and marketisation corresponded with each other and fostered the development of a new sphere of equal and free individuals in the space progressively identified as ‘civil society’,¹¹ which was similar to the Greek *polis* relationships among free and equal individuals but without the political dimension of collective decision-making that typified it.

Locke, Montesquieu and the liberal constitutionalists saw society as composed of pre-existing bodies and orders whose autonomy had to be preserved. Even Hegel forcefully maintained the distinction between state and civil society in his *Philosophy of Right* (1820/1821). Civil society was the realm where individuals engage in the pursuit of their private interests, and the tensions with the ‘state’ that this dualism generated were moderated, in his view, by the presence of intermediate institutions such as the family, the corporation and public administration – all distinctly ‘non-political’ institutions.¹² A most radical and crucial differentiation of economic life from political authority had been asserted by Adam Smith, Ricardo and, more generally, the laissez-faire thinkers. They emphasised the view that social life finds its own principle of self-organisation and can prosper if, and only if, it is left alone without interference from other spheres of life and, above all, without ‘political’ interference. This new thinking would see the autonomy of society

11. On the state–civil society relationship, see the classic work by von Humboldt written in 1792 and published in 1851: von Humboldt, W. (1969), *The Limits of State Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For a comprehensive anthology, see also Pellzyski, Z. A. (ed.) (1984), *The State and Civil Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

12. See Riedel, M. (1984), ‘“State” and “Civil Society”’: Linguistic Context and Historical Origin’, in *Between Tradition and Revolution: The Hegelian Transformation of Political Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

specifically in the sphere of individual economic transactions and contracts. The new independent status of ‘society’ was certified by its becoming the object of new sciences, one that Comte (1798–1857) was to label ‘sociology’ and another that Smith and Ricardo would denote as ‘political economy’, well before ‘economics’ was suggested as a shorter term for economy and science in the late nineteenth century. Somewhat paradoxically, civil society was seen as free and equal in the management of its own private dealings and activities exactly in the age in which new ideas supported a progressive widening of the state’s spheres of legitimate activities and a will to regulate, control or coerce levies on stocks and flows of private wealth, or through public debt. All this was carried out by an expanding body of public employees.

In passing, it is interesting to note that the scholars who have recently relaunched the ‘civil society’ concept and analysis of it have explicitly excluded economic activities and institutions from it, thus identifying the three separate domains of ‘politics’ (the state), ‘the market’ and ‘civil society’. The last of these is seen as the place for the development of collective identities, solidarities, non-market– or non-profit–oriented interactions and social movements, and so on – the ‘third sector’.¹³

Finally, the liaison between politics and the law was also broken when the political system came to no longer be seen as primarily a juridical system. The relative separation of law and politics was the result of intense efforts on both sides. On the one hand, the predominance of the set of legal theories going under the label of ‘legal positivism’ and the ‘pure theory of law’ represented a forceful professionalisation of legal studies. These theories provided a way to approach the study of law from a factual point of view or as a technical expression of sovereignty or as an identification of justice with law.¹⁴ In any case, the separation from the realm of production of law (by the sovereign) was accentuated. On the other hand, particularly in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, a growing critique of the excessive ‘legalism’ of traditional political studies led to the sparking of the behavioural ‘revolution’, which in redefining ‘institutions’ as behavioural regularities definitely sharpened the distance between the two spheres and disciplines.¹⁵ When the strong historical correspondence between state/law and politics dissolved and political processes began to expand beyond the field of the state and its institutions, politics somehow lost any element of institutional identification.

13. Such as in Cohen, Jean and Andrew Arata (1992), *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

14. For these three readings of legal positivism, see Bobbio, Norberto (1965), *Giusnaturalismo e positivismo giuridico*, Bari: Laterza.

15. Dahl, A. Robert (1961), ‘The Behavioural Approach in Political Science: Epitaph for a Monument to a Successful Protest’, *American Political Science Review* 55: 763–73.

In line with these tendencies, the political philosophy of the twentieth century moved towards a definition of the political somewhat detached from the classical reference to the state and the rulership stratification that it represented. Philosophical attempts to define the political resorted less frequently to the law/state connection as a privileged background. Sometimes, more encompassing and anodyne terms such as ‘political system’ or ‘political community’ substituted the term ‘state’.¹⁶ In other cases, the connection with law/state definitively disappears. Major scholars such as Dunn, Arendt, Oakeshott, Collingwood and Strauss defined politics as something different from the ruler-ruled relationships in the statist tradition.¹⁷ Even Schmitt and de Jouvenel strove to define politics without reference to the state. Schmitt’s *amicus-nemicus* category is clearly prior to any institutional definition referring to rulership. De Jouvenel’s elementary political action (to which I will come back extensively later) similarly takes the lead from a particular kind of interpersonal relationship.¹⁸

In recent times, the emphasis on the opposition between the horizontal (community) and the vertical (coercion) terminology and conception of the political has attenuated. At least in the Westernised politics of the democratic age, the horizontal dimension, so typical of city-state republican experiences, and the vertical dimension, so dominant in the period of the formation of states and empires, are now inexorably mixed. At the same time, progressively ‘denuded’ of or ‘dismembered’¹⁹ from ethics, religion, economy, society and law, politics has become different and autonomous and is left alone. The study of politics is more ‘ubiquitous’, both horizontally and vertically,²⁰

16. See the critique in Finer, S.E. (1969–1970), ‘Almond’s Concept of “The Political System”’: A Textual Critique’, *Government and Opposition*, V: 3–21.

17. Typical examples are Dunn, John (2000), *Cunning of the Unreason: Making Sense of Politics*, London: HarperCollins; Arendt, H. (1958), *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press; Oakeshott, M. (1975), *On Human Conduct*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Collingwood, R.G. (1943), *The New Leviathan*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Strauss, L. (1959), *What Is Political Philosophy?*, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

18. De Jouvenel, Bertrand (1954; 1992), ‘The Nature of Politics’, in Dennis Hale and Marc Landy (eds.), *The Nature of Politics: Selected Essays of Bertrand de Jouvenel*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, pp. 67–83; Schmitt, Carl (1927; 1966), *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 27–37; or Schmitt, Carl (ed.) (1927), ‘Der Begriff des Politischen’, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, 58: 1–33. The same applies to the more esoteric approaches of Rancière, J. (1999), *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press; Alexander, J. (2014), ‘Notes towards a Definition of Politics’, *Philosophy*, 89: 273–300; Badiou, A. (1998), *Abrégé de métapolitique*, Paris: Editions du Seuil; Mouffe, Chantal (2005), *On the Political*, London: Routledge.

19. ‘Denuded’ is the term used in Sartori’s ‘What Is “Politics”?’ to describe this process. Palonen uses ‘dismembered’ very much in the same vein in Palonen, Kari (2006), ‘Two Concepts of Politics: Conceptual History and Present Controversies’, *Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 7: 11–25, esp. pp. 11–12.

20. On the modern ubiquity of power (politics), see Popitz, H. (1992, 2nd ed.), *Phaenomene der Macht*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr. An English translation of the first chapter of this very important work is available in Poggi, G. (2014), *Varieties of Political Experiences*, pp. 163–65.

more ‘autonomous’, in the sense of standing alone, and more ‘professionalised’, in terms of the number of its practitioners, specialised reviews, topics, fields and subfields, approaches, schools and sects.²¹ An autonomous and dismembered ‘politics’ has been fragmented and redefined as ‘political system’, ‘political communication’, ‘political participation’, ‘political socialisation’, ‘political development’, ‘public policy’ and ‘political economy’ and so forth in a multiplication of subfields in which the adjective ‘political’ becomes an addendum of relatively soft theoretical significance to the substantive concern, be it development, economy, policies, communication or any other field. Along this line, the political is more difficult to define in its special character. Often it has been hetero-defined, that is, defined by those spheres that have historically separated from it: the sociology of politics, the economics of politics, the ethics of politics and so on. Recent conceptions of this ‘denuded’ politics witness these difficulties.

CONCEPTIONS OF ‘DISMEMBERED’ POLITICS

With the same speed and inevitable simplification with which I have reviewed political terminology from Greek antiquity to modern times, I now move on to reviewing the main contributions of the twentieth century to the definition of ‘politics’, regrouping them into six main families.²² The focus of the review is on the main approaches to the problem. Scholars and schools are characterised by their main theme, while they often resort to more complex and composite criteria. This reconstruction does not review critically and thoroughly the thought of single prominent scholars. Instead, through reference to them it characterises the main directions along which the attempt to define the political travels.

Politics as activities

A first line of thought engages in defining politics through the activities that common-sense perceptions attribute to it. A discussion on the nature of the

21. Almond, A. Gabriel (1988), ‘Separate Tables: Schools and Sects in Political Science’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 21: 828–42.

22. I was tempted to add a seventh ‘family’, making reference to a conception of politics as a practice, and in particular as a linguistic practice. The emphasis of much of twentieth-century philosophy on language as a constitutive property of the human experience and as the ontological reality of the political would justify this. The work of scholars such as Russell, Saussure, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Lacan, Derrida and Foucault includes elements of such a vision. However, I have been unable to systematise these somewhat-scattered elements of a conception of politics as language into a relatively coherent paradigm. See Cranston, Maurice (1982), ‘The Language of Politics’, in M. Cranston and P. Mair (eds.), *Language and Politics*, pp. 11–24.

political is not mandatory if we believe we know what constitutes politics and what politics is about. As Maurice Cranston put it in his usual straightforward language, “‘Politics’ is a world which seems to me to need no definition. We all know how to use it, and we are liable to be confused only if we rely on definitions provided by political scientists”.²³ However, even an emphasis on politics as ‘acting’ or on politics as a ‘practice’ does not seem to produce the obvious meaning Cranston alludes to if we consider that Plato compared acting politicians to flute players, Oakeshott concluded that politics as a practice could be compared to the art of cookery²⁴ and Cranston himself wondered whether politics should be regarded as a performing or a creative art.

Of course, distinctive *activities* may define politics: voting, legislative life, party propaganda, trade union–employer negotiations, legislation and so on. In other words, we may resort to a taxonomic approach to the definition of politics and political behaviours, listing those behaviours that intuitively belong to a class (political versus non-political), very much as lawyers define behaviours as lawful or unlawful. The tendency to identify politics with specific activities is a clear indication that in this domain the praxeological element and the reality of political life prevail over any shared theorising. This involves a definitive abandonment of any attempt to define the specificity of the political in general terms and to derive from it a conceptual guide to what is politically relevant or irrelevant. Moreover, this line of thought must accept a potential exponential growth of activities that a large community may eventually regard as ‘politically relevant’.

One often attempts to define politics via a lexicographic formulation large enough to cover the endless list of phenomena that are intuitively political. Assuming one knows what all the instances of politics are, one can find a definition that includes them all. Along this line, discussions often focus on examples used to support or discard certain views of politics. A variety of definitions of politics can rapidly be refuted by making reference to activities, phenomena and events that are regarded as ‘clear instances of politics’, ‘unquestionably belonging to politics’ or ‘an example of politics’, and which are not included in the definition to be refuted.²⁵

There is an inbuilt circularity in any attempt to define politics in a way that encompasses all its relevant instances. These require a definition of the political that cannot be left to mere intuition or common sense. Moreover, attempts to be inclusive lead to all-encompassing definitions. Accommodating the

23. Cranston, Maurice (1982), ‘The Language of Politics’, in M. Cranston and P. Mair (eds.), *Language and Politics*, Bruxelles: Bruylant, p. 11.

24. Oakeshott, Michael (1962), *Rationalism in Politics*, London: Methuen, p. 119.

25. These quotations are from one of the most extensive exercises of this type: Donahue, T. J. (2014), *What Is Politics?* Working Paper, 14 October.

variety of intuitive political manifestations stretches the concept of politics to a rarefied abstractness, which is only satisfactory because its terms are vague and ambiguous enough to include almost everything. The attempt to define the political in its supposed phenomenological entirety may lead to triviality or, worse, to the destruction of any specificity.

The 'deep ecology' school is the most all-encompassing attempt to characterise politics. It equates politics with human activities and choices, leaving little room for anything to be non-political. In this perspective, politics extends beyond human interactions, includes any activity which deserves ethical consideration by human beings and therefore also encompasses the relationship between human beings, even isolated ones, with inanimate or non-human animate beings in the natural environment.²⁶ Examples of such all-encompassing definitions abound: 'politics comprises all the activities of co-operation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about organising the use, production and distribution of human, natural and other resources in the production and reproduction of its biological and social life';²⁷ politics is an activity with two faces: (1) making, breaking and preserving the general arrangement of a group's affairs; (2) trying to get a group to take certain decisions when some members of the group oppose them.²⁸ These characterisations can easily accommodate almost everything, with no eventual advantage. The concept of politics is so 'stretched' that the certainty of not missing anything results in the certainty of defining nothing.

Defining politics by distilling an encompassing definition able to include a known list of activities is not a very interesting exercise.²⁹ In fact, however, this is most often the strategy in general labelling definitions at the beginning of textbooks on politics. We need to at least begin to identify some criteria from which to draw the political element of the set of facts, behaviours and activities that we conventionally regard as political.

Politics as institutional locus

Instead of defining politics via specific activities, one can search for a definition that is 'locational', that is, a definition that defines as political the

26. There could hardly be a broader vision of politics. Politics identifies with the presence of a duty towards something else. Inanimates and non-human animates are attributed rights and interests (supposedly defined by somebody else) and generate duties towards nature. See Burns, Tony (2000), 'What Is Politics? Robinson Crusoe, Deep Ecology and Immanuel Kant', *Politics*, 20: 93–98.

27. Leftwich, A. (1984), 'Politics: People, Resources and Power', in A. Leftwich (ed.), *What Is Politics?*, Oxford: Basic Blackwell, pp. 64–65.

28. Donahue, *What Is Politics?*

29. Frohock formulates an explicit critique of the taxonomic approach to the definition of politics. Frohock, F. M. (1978), 'The Structure of Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 72: 859–70, particularly pp. 865–67.

activities and behaviours that take place in specific institutional places that are ‘political’. A spatial understanding of politics – as we may call it – requires a physical location, a ‘locus’. This is most often identified in the ‘state’ or in slightly more abstract spaces such as ‘political formations’ (*politischer Verband*, Weber), ‘political entities’ (*politische Einheit*, Carl Schmitt), ‘political communities’ or even ‘government’. The most clearly ‘spatial’ connotation of politics and that most referred to in textbooks is Easton’s reference to politics as the inputs, outputs and processes of the ‘political system’.

This is also the line followed by Sartori, who explicitly denies the possibility of defining politics or political action in any essentialist way: ‘Political behaviour should not be understood literally. The expression does not point to any particular type of behaviour; rather it denotes a locus, a *site* of behaviour’.³⁰ The spatial metaphor in locational definitions refers to lines of demarcation or to more abstract divisions of spheres and immediately calls into question the idea of boundaries between politics and other types of activities or relations (which are not political).³¹ Sartori solves the difficulty generated by moving the definition of politics from its intrinsic characteristics to its spatial location by pushing its reasoning to extreme consequences. In his view, any kind of activity or behaviour, the political as well as the social or economic, can be defined only in locational terms, in terms of the structures and roles in which it manifests itself. In his opinion, only the category of ethical behaviour escapes a spatial characterisation, that is, a definition of it as ‘behaviour in . . .’.³²

A spatial metaphor for the definition of the political leaves open the problem that it includes the terms to be defined in its own definition. Whatever place, institution, role or other entity we identify as the ‘locus’ of political activities or behaviours, its constitution remains mysteriously outside the realm of politics. It has to be treated as a ‘given’. We end up giving away what constitutes, maintains or changes such spaces that identify the political. We exclude from politics its most fundamental and problematic component: the creation, modification and destruction of political communities, systems, institutions and so forth. Such ways of defining the ‘political’ have the advantage of cutting short the unpleasant definitional quarrel, but they do not have much else to recommend them.

30. Sartori, ‘What Is “Politics”’, p. 17.

31. Palonen, Kari (2006), ‘Two Concepts of Politics: Conceptual History and Present Controversies’, *Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 7: 11–25. Palonen refers to two different concepts of politics: the ‘sphere’ and the ‘activity’ concepts.

32. Sartori, ‘What Is “Politics”’, p. 18. Note that Sartori, while underlining the historicity of the various conceptions of politics, does not adhere to the radical position of Nietzsche, according to whom it is possible to ‘define’ only inanimate entities, while concepts that have a historical development defy any definitional attempt.

Facing this problem, Sartori moves towards a more substantive definition of specific political activity. Political decisions binding *erga omnes* can be defined as ‘sovereign’ collectivised decisions from which it is most difficult to subtract, because of both their territorial and their coercive intensity. He nevertheless immediately underlines afterwards that ‘if all these decisions are prejudicially “political” it is for the fact that they are taken by personnel located in political seats. This is their “political” nature’.³³ We will come back to these substantive definitional criteria at length later. For the moment, it seems that no locational criteria can get away without the most substantive definitional attributes.

Politics as conflict

A further conception of politics identifies its distinctive feature in the idea of conflicts among interests and conciliation of them. In this tradition, the essential aspect of politics is conflict among individuals, and a situation or phenomenon is political to the extent that it involves a conflict of interest, preferences and so on. This vision of politics as conflict and accommodation of interests dominated general theories of politics in the United States in the twentieth century.³⁴ Two concise definitions are (1) ‘Genuinely political situations involve multiple and conflicting demands addressed to the same resources and occurring within the same institutional framework’³⁵ and (2) ‘At a minimum politics has to do with the distribution of scarce and sought-after resources among contending parties’.³⁶ Politics is defined as that activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are reconciled by giving them a share of power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community.³⁷ Conflict and antagonism are also at the core of the definition offered by Chantal Mouffe.³⁸ Warren suggests that politics is that subset of social relations characterised by conflict over goods in the face of pressure to associate for collective action, where at least one party to the conflict seeks collectively binding decisions and seeks

33. Sartori, ‘What Is “Politics”’, p. 21.

34. I leave aside here conflict theories of a more sociological nature, such as those of Marx, Coser and Dahrendorf. The entire works of Marx are permeated by social conflict and the prospects for overcoming it. Coser, Lewis (1956), *The Function of Social Conflict*, New York: The Free Press; Dahrendorf, Ralf (1959), *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. There is usually little ‘politics’ in them as the ‘coalition’ side is decidedly less developed.

35. Leftwich, *Politics: People, Resources and Power*, 39.

36. Bennett, W. Lance (1975), ‘Political Scenarios and the Nature of Politics’, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 8: 23–42, esp. p. 26.

37. Crick, Bernard (1992), *In Defence of Politics*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, p. 21.

38. Mouffe, Chantal (2005), *On the Political*, London: Routledge, p. 9.

to sanction decisions by means of power.³⁹ More clearly than those of the previous authors, in this last definition conflict is associated with power as a means to solve it, which justifies considering Warren among the scholars who emphasise power in their definition of politics (see next section). In Warren's view, conflict may exist without power being exercised, which defines situations that are non-political, and power may exist without any conflict being expressed, which he also defines as non-political to the extent that politics is 'suppressed' by exorbitant power.

This tradition sees politics as the arena in which interests enter, are dealt with through various processes and are finally transformed into outputs or policies, with or without feedback effects. Politics is confrontation and occasional struggle among individual or collective actors/agents who pursue different desires and interests in public matters, and its main function is to reconcile the diversity of individuals and their interests. Politics is an interaction of interests, desires and demands and how this interaction generates those structures that we call political.⁴⁰

It is debatable whether one can enrol Carl Schmitt within this family. Schmitt tries to define the core element of politics by making reference to contrast or conflict, but such conflicts assume *only* their 'political' character when their degree of 'intensity' is such as to generate an opposition between *amicus* and *nemicus*. Politics is the intensity that opposes us as enemies and friends. The intensity of the *amicus/nemicus* dichotomy finds its behavioural criteria in the possibility of violent conflict and in the possibility of the solution of the political problem via the physical annihilation of the *nemicus*. In this sense, politics finds its specific source in conflict, but the 'politicalness' of such conflicts rests in their potentially irreconcilable nature and the ever-present possibility of violent confrontation. Schmitt presents the undomesticated and non-domesticable side of the political and an extreme conception of politics which is characterised by the possibility of resorting to specific unpleasant and ultimate means.⁴¹ As such, his view also defines politics by its (extreme) means.

Politics as specific 'means': Power, coercion

A further line of thought about politics, perhaps the most familiar one, identifies politics with the typical means to which it resorts, usually power and

39. Warren, Mark E. (1999), 'What Is Political?', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 11: 207–31, esp. p. 218.

40. For a review of the post-World War II (WWII) 'politics of interest' literature, see Cochran, Clarke E. (1973), 'The Politics of Interests: Philosophy and the Limitations of the Science of Politics', *American Journal of Political Science*, 17: 745–66.

41. Schmitt, Carl (1996), *The Concept of the Political*.

coercion (or sheer violence, as in Schmitt, mentioned earlier). Whatever politics can be or does, its specificity lies in the resort to means that are particular to it.

Max Weber devoted many pages of his monumental work to power and its various forms, and he provided possibly the most extended definition of the concept as ‘the chance of a man or a group of men to realise their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action’.⁴² Although coercion – legitimate or otherwise – is a crucial presence in all his writings, it is neither the explicative nor the definitional element of politics. Although politics may have a special relationship with violence as its extreme form, violence is not the substance of politics. Note that Weber used the monopoly of legitimate violence to define the essence of the modern state, not the essence of politics.⁴³ He rarely embarked on an explicit characterisation of ‘politics’ through power. In fact, Weber does not embark on any characterisation of ‘politics’ at all in *Economy and Society*. To the best of my knowledge, this happens only once, when he succinctly states without much elaboration that ‘We define therefore politics as the aspiration to power or to an influence over the distribution of power, both among states and within one state, among the groups of people that it includes’.⁴⁴

An explicit connection and identification of politics with power is notably the approach most clearly represented by authors such as George E. G. Catlin,⁴⁵ Harold D. Lasswell,⁴⁶ de Jouvenel,⁴⁷ Robert Dahl⁴⁸ and many other scholars following in the footsteps of this tradition.⁴⁹ It is unfair to enrol them all in one specific school as these significant authors have sophisticated

42. Weber, Max (1922; 1978), *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 926.

43. See Poggi, G. (2014), *Varieties of Political Experiences*, p. 17.

44. This explicit but concise connection between power and politics reappears in Weber, M. (1991), ‘Politics as a Vocation’, in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London: Routledge, p. 78.

45. Catlin holds that politics is the relations among men in so far as they seek to have their way with their fellows; Catlin, G. E. G. (1964), *The Science and Method of Politics*, Hamden, CT: Archon, pp. 210–11.

46. Lasswell, H. D. and A. Kaplan (1950), *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

47. See de Jouvenel, Bertrand (1963), *The Pure Theory of Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

48. Dahl sees politics as ‘any persistent pattern of human relationship that involves, to a significant extent, control, influence, power or authority’; Dahl, R. (1963), *Modern Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 8–9.

49. The list is definitely too long to be exhaustively cited. Masters defines politics as behaviour that simultaneously partakes of the attributes of bonding, dominance and submission and of the legal and customary regulation of social life; Masters, Roger D. (1989), *The Nature of Politics*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 140. Wolff sees politics as ‘the exercise of the power of the state, or the attempt to influence that exercise’; Wolff, R. P. (1970), *In Defence of Anarchism*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 4.

visions of the political process that deserve much scrutiny. However, it is correct to say that they all share an attribution of a central role to power, power fights and power aspirations in their conceptions of the political.

At least since *Power and Society* (1950), Lasswell has definitely identified 'politics' with 'power'. To the extent that it is characterised and influenced by power, the entire social process is 'political'. In this sense, there is no difference between the power of government, on the one hand, and any other form of power, on the other. Whatever power relation, wherever it manifests itself, it indicates and identifies a political relationship.⁵⁰ For Lasswell, where there is power there is ipso facto politics. In this case, any activity, phenomenon or relationship that is structured by power is political.

Another scholar of the twentieth century regarded power as an essentialist category of the political. Bertrand de Jouvenel offered a concise definition of politics as 'to make somebody else act' (according to your will, of course). De Jouvenel identified elementary political action in the movement of men by another man: 'I hold the view that we should regard as "political" every systematic effort, performed at any place in the social field, to move other men in pursuit of some design cherished by the mover'.⁵¹ Very much in line with Lasswell, de Jouvenel therefore does not distinguish between power in general and power in a political context.⁵² Their positions had the deliberate aim of separating the definition of the political from the structure and activities of government (the state, etc.), that is, from any locational characterisation.

This approach was criticised for its inability to identify the specific form of power that is inherently 'political'. Under the category of 'politics' these authors subsume any form of compliance due to a power relationship. The claim that the existence of a power structure makes a relationship political – whether it is master-slave, officer-private, male-female and so on – makes 'politics' indistinguishable from the many aspects of social life that involve power relationships, or, alternatively, redefines them as political in nature. The explosion of the political along this line is best epitomised by the feminist slogan 'the personal is political'. However, power – so the criticism runs – indicates a social relationship that is too general and pervasive to be

50. There is no space and in fact no need here to enter a more detailed discussion of the complex relation between the concept of power and that of 'influence' in Lasswell's work. The interested reader may refer to Zimmerling, Ruth (2006), *Influence and Power: Variations on a Messy Theme*, Dordrecht: Springer, chapter 2.

51. De Jouvenel, *The Pure Theory of Politics*, p. 30.

52. However, de Jouvenel's position is more sophisticated than Lasswell's assimilation of power with politics. He uses power to qualify 'elementary political action', not politics as such. Therefore, he defends his stand better from the usual accusation that the definition of the political in terms of power is excessively general. On this point, see Harbold, William H. (1953), 'Bertrand de Jouvenel on the Essence of Politics', *The Western Political Quarterly*, 6: 742–49; and Stoppino, M. (2001, 3rd ed.), *Potere e teoria politica*, Milano: Giuffrè, pp. 213–216.

able to offer a theoretical object for the study of politics. Faced with this criticism, Lasswell and de Jouvenel replied that their vision challenged the conventional definition of politics centred on the concepts and the activities of government and the state. The new definition, centred on the reality of power, redefined politics in an unconventional and extensive way.

Scholars who have not found this line of argument satisfactory have focused on the possibility of specifying the nature of 'political power' with respect to other forms of power. Eckstein suggests that there is politics whenever there is a structure of authority, of whatever kind: a form of government, public or private.⁵³ Warren attempts to criticise the coextensive nature of politics with 'power' – and of politics with 'conflict' – as, in his view, politics 'encompasses a narrower range of social relations than do all power relations and all conflict relations'. His definition of politics combines power with conflict. Politics is the intersection of those social relationships that involve conflict over means and goals and in which at least one of the parties seeks to resolve the problem through resort to power. This identifies with control of livelihood and (economic) well-being, means of interpretation and means of coercion, the three classic sources of economic, ideological and coercive power.⁵⁴

Politics as allocation

A further way of conceptualising politics is to focus on what it produces: on its outputs and results, on its effects. Many definitions of what politics is about refer to goals that we can immediately evaluate: public order, legality, good government and the distribution of collectively accumulated resources. Sometimes politics identifies with distinct outputs of these activities, such as specific 'policies'. More generally, it associates with the function of 'distributing values' within a given political community.

The best label for this vision springs from the title of a book that does not share it: *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*.⁵⁵ Lasswell's influential book followed a different characterisation of politics (see the previous section),

53. Eckstein, H. (1973), 'Authority Patterns: A Structural Basis for Political Inquiry', *American Political Science Review*, 63: 1142–61. This was later elaborated in Eckstein, H. and T.R. Gurr (1975), *Patterns of Authority; A Structural Basis for Political Inquiry*, New York: Wiley.

54. Warren, M. E. (1999), 'What Is Political?', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 11: 207–31, esp. p. 217. Note, however, that this excellent article explicitly characterises politics in relation to the normative goals of democratic theory. This ends up setting arbitrary boundaries to the 'political', on the one hand, and adding unnecessary attributes to it, on the other hand. For instance, dominance, slavery, totalitarianism, hegemony and so forth are non-political to the extent that power is so overwhelming as to extinguish conflict. 'Where conflict does not exist we do not have politics, conflict is necessary for politics in combination with power', pp. 220–21.

55. Lasswell, H. (1936), *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, New York: McGraw Hill.

but its imaginative title best epitomises the school that defines politics via the actual values that are achieved through it (and by the identity of those who achieve them). What brings these conceptions together is a functional understanding of politics defined by means of its effects, and in particular its allocation effects.

David Easton is perhaps the most influential thinker in this line, although the many others who identify politics in functional terms may not share his systemic approach. Easton defines politics as the authoritative allocation by the political system of values for society: 'My point is, in summary, that the property of a social act *that informs it with a political aspect* is the act's relation to the authoritative allocation of values for a society' [my emphasis]. In turn, the political system consists of 'those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society'.⁵⁶

By the word 'value', Easton means any sought-after goal in life, tangible or intangible. According to him, the basic functions of any political society are to allocate society's values and to obtain widespread acceptance of the authoritative, or binding, nature of the allocations. 'It is through the presence of activities that fulfil these two basic functions that a society can commit the resources and energies of its members in the settlement of differences that cannot be autonomously (i.e., individually or privately) resolved'.⁵⁷ To put it differently, Easton defines 'politics' as relating to the authoritative decisions of a society's government and to the effect that enforcement of these decisions has on the allocation, or distribution, of rewards and values among the different segments of the society.

The assimilation of politics to an allocative activity, to a production function, taps an undeniably essential dimension. There is no question that politics distributes 'values'. There can be doubt, however, about the legitimacy of characterising politics by its end results. In fact, the assimilation of 'politics' to a general acquisition or distribution activity leaves something to be desired. The wide-ranging extension of 'values' dangerously exposes politics to an overstretching of its content. In the Eastonian perspective, any fact, event or behaviour that happens to cross the boundaries of the political system, or to 'enter' the system and its production of 'values', is political. The consequence is that *whatever can contingently become politically 'relevant' is political*. The 'politicalness' of these facts, events and behaviours cannot in fact be defined but is entirely dependent on their capacity to cross the

56. Easton, David (1953), *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 134; Easton, David (1965), *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, p. 21.

57. Easton, David (1965), *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 96.

boundaries of the political system. However, if behaviours are ‘political’ or ‘non-political’ because of their consequences, this leads to the conclusion that almost all behaviours can be regarded as politically relevant at some stage and in certain circumstances.⁵⁸

Moreover, one cannot forget Schumpeter’s lesson concerning economic activity. Few would deny that economic activity produces food, clothes and so on and that human beings need to eat to survive, and need clothes to protect themselves from the cold and so on. However, Schumpeter underlined the lack of realism of this perspective and sees the satisfaction of concrete needs as an unintended consequence of other drives, namely profit. In other words, the result of an activity does not necessarily constitute the motivational principle for the actor or therefore the explanation for his or her action.⁵⁹

Politics as aggregation

The various aggregation approaches include all those visions of politics that with some simplification we can regroup under the rubric of ‘economic theories of politics’. Under the assumptions that the actors worth considering are individuals, that they have preferences, that these preferences are mutually incompatible or jointly inconsistent and that not everybody can be simultaneously completely satisfied, the individuals engage in exchanges, threats, promises, agreements, coalitions and so on. The core problem of politics is identified in the procedures with which we allocate the scarce resources in a satisfactory way without reducing or eliminating the variety of interests and values.

Politics is functionally defined as the problem of aggregating prior and exogenous individual preferences into a collective choice. This tradition labels the interactions among actors and their (equilibrium) outcomes as ‘political’. Due to the origins of this version of the definition in economics, ‘politics’ tends to be seen as a system of action in which individual preferences are aggregated through *voluntary* exchanges. The institutional and political arrangements resulting from these interactions are therefore conceptualised and evaluated primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of their capacity to achieve Pareto-optimal solutions. Discussion focuses on ‘efficiency’ in arranging these voluntary exchanges of resources. Problems of efficiency are in part due to (a) structural problems (i.e., externalities) and (b) subjective

58. See Finer, S.E. (1969–1970), ‘Almond’s Concept of “The Political System”: A Textual Critique’.

59. Schumpeter, J.A. (1942, 3rd ed., 1949), *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London: Harper and Row, p. 282.

behavioural problems, such as problems of information, more or less complete rationality, agency and so on.

This view of politics can be summarised as follows: the political system is a decentralised exchange system that, subject to a number of constitutional constraints and a given distribution of endowments (positions, resources), eventually defines acceptable solutions. They are ‘acceptable’ because none or few of the actors can improve their standing from a personal point of view by acting unilaterally or with allies.

This line of thought tends to see the sphere of action of the political in constant comparison with other spheres of action that are not political – such as the market and the third sector of non-profit-driven social institutions – and for which the same evaluation criteria apply. Given that different individuals have different interests, positions and resources in these different spheres of action (politics, markets, non-profit third sector), and that the different spheres do not produce the same outcomes, individuals therefore have preferences as to the sphere which should be selected in which to decide the policies to be pursued. This view has quite a strong normative flavour, centred on the evaluation of the efficiency of the political sphere as compared to other ‘non-political’ spheres. This often leads to evaluating ‘politics’ as a mechanism for aggregating preferences which is alternative to markets and voluntary social institutions and to comparing it to the latter in terms of ‘efficiency’.⁶⁰

The version of the aggregation paradigm focusing on ‘social dilemmas’ deserves, perhaps, a separate mention. What is particular to the social dilemma version of the aggregation paradigm is the emphasis that it puts on the pervasive conflict between individual and group rationality. A set of participants in a social relationship have an option to contribute or not to a joint benefit. If everybody contributes, they achieve a net positive benefit. However, everybody has a temptation to shift from being a contributor to a non-contributor. The theoretical prediction is that everybody will do this and therefore not contribute. If this is the case, then the outcome will be a less valuable payoff, which, however, is a (Nash) equilibrium from which no one has an interest to move. The situation is a dilemma because an alternative exists that would yield a greater outcome for all the participants, but rational participants making isolated choices are not expected to realise this outcome.

Social dilemma studies are quite central to the contemporary discipline of political science. Unsurprisingly, social dilemmas frequently emerge when

60. This approach regards the distribution of endowments (rights, resources, competences, powers) as unproblematic; they are usually seen as properly allocated. Similarly, preferences lie outside the realm of the technical treatment of the function of aggregation. The same applies to problems of integrity. See March, James G. and Johan P. Olsen (1989), *Rediscovering Institutions. The Organisational Basis of Politics*, New York: The Free Press, p. 122.

humans are imagined as being without morals or ethical principles, unencumbered by social norms and conventions, uninterested in social honour or prestige, unaffected by love and hatred, insensitive to the lust for command and not prone to error. As Aristotle bluntly put it a long time ago, creatures of this kind must be either beasts or gods,⁶¹ and for such entities almost any social relationship turns into a social dilemma, and social dilemmas pop up anytime and anywhere.⁶² However, this is of no concern here, where the focus is on the conception of the political that derives from these premises.

In this perspective, the problem that remains in the shadow is the origin of ‘sanctions’. In social dilemmas, the option of introducing sanctions to punish non-cooperators or to keep agreements is not available. The action of sanctioning constitutes new public goods and generates a second-order dilemma of equal or even greater difficulty, in an endless regression. Under these conditions, the possibility of avoiding the negative outcome of social dilemmas is linked to the possibility of the players achieving self-enforcing equilibria by committing themselves to punish non-cooperators sufficiently severely to deter non-cooperation. That is, sanctions must be generated by the game and within the game. Alternatively, one can work towards constituting different models of choice theory that include trust, reciprocity, reputations, norms, roles and so forth and that apply without an external authority offering inducements or imposing sanctions. In specific conditions, people can establish rules and sanctions by themselves. In particular, when dealing with pooled common resources, individuals may be willing to act collectively to change the institutional structure of the game.⁶³ In any case, it seems that these schemes may at best generate sanctions only within the interacting set of actors. A broader sanctioning system can result only from a mysterious *deus ex machina* exogenous to the model: the state. The ‘state’ is seen as an authority that is constituted in functional terms: to solve social dilemmas for everybody whenever they fail to solve them otherwise. But it remains puzzling where such a benevolent institution comes from within the anthropological assumptions of this paradigm. The solution reintroduces through the windows what it discharged from the door. If the state has always existed, it

61. ‘But he who is unable to live in society, and who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god’. Aristotle (350 BC; 2013), *Politics*, Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 55.

62. This leads to the criticism that ‘orientations’ unlike selfishness have developed exactly because no one can live in a constant social dilemma, an argument developed in Green, Donald P. and Ian Schapiro (1994), *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theories. A Critique of Applications in Political Science*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

63. Olstrom has consistently worked in this direction. See Olstrom, Elinor (1990), *Governing the Commons*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Olstrom, Elinor (2010), ‘Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance and Complex Economic Systems’, *American Economic Review*, 100: 1–33.

could defeat social dilemma situations by its sheer presence; if it is not there, it is hard to imagine how it could help to solve lower-order social dilemmas.

From the point of view that interests us here, models of social dilemmas may be made more realistic, but they remain limited to the interactions and to the sanctions spontaneously generated by a set of independent actors. In this view, politics is the sphere of interactions deprived of authority structures. Politics identified with social dilemmas redefines the political by expelling its most distinctive features: authority and command. When conceived as a spontaneous generation of order and authority among a set of independent autonomous actors, the political appears to have a benign nature.

WHY A CONTINUING DEBATE?

The previous succinct discussion of contemporary conceptions of the political has identified six large families which respectively emphasise ‘activities’, ‘locations’, ‘conflict’, ‘means’ (power/coercion), ‘allocative outcomes’ and the ‘aggregation of preferences’. Why do we need further reflection with such a variety available to us? I have three claims of relevance, two of which are strictly scientific, while the third relates to the connection between the study of politics and current developments in the world.

My first claim is that most if not all the conceptions of ‘politics’ discussed previously offer a general definition of politics encompassing all its phenomenology. In so doing, they often fall into functional definitions: what politics does, produces, distributes and so on. Such definitions do not rest on an underlying theory of individual political action as a starting point and from which to reconstruct more complex macro-outcomes. I would like to explore this latter neglected perspective. It is interesting to note that almost all the scholars I have mentioned deny the possibility of constructing a theory of politics starting from a motivational basis.⁶⁴ I propose to discuss this issue anew and to investigate whether a motivational theory of political action is possible and whether it can logically connect to other key political questions. In other words, I do not start from what ‘politics’ as a field, sphere or activity is or does but rather from an

64. Sartori does this explicitly. Warren rejects the conception of politics as a kind of ‘behaviour’, assuming that this rules out any primary reference to intentional states, actions or social relationships. He therefore seems to equate the term ‘behaviour’ with a specific methodological school. However, his definition does not refer to ‘political action’ either. Warren, M.E. (1999), ‘What Is Political?’, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 11: 207–31, p. 210. Most other scholars are less explicit in their attitude to political behaviour (or political action) as a foundation for a theory of politics. To the best of my knowledge, only de Jouvenel and Stoppino follow him and explicitly pursue this line of reasoning, in part at least.

interpretation of what individual ‘nuclear’ or ‘elementary’ political action is from a motivational point of view. Once this elementary individual political action is defined with reference to other types of action (in chapter 2), I will proceed to specify its variety of forms depending on the fields in which it manifests itself (chapters 3 and 4). Finally, in chapter 5 I will come back to the question of what politics is and try to reconstruct its overall complex phenomenology from the viewpoint of the definition of individual political action.

My second claim is that the six predominant approaches often try to define different things at the same time. We search for the unique predicaments that characterise any a priori non-given group in its constitution as a political entity. Within a so-defined group, we are concerned to identify the confining conditions that define the political in the area that extends between the sheer violence of the state of nature and the private synallagmatic⁶⁵ dealings of unconnected and non-confined individuals free to determine their outcomes through unilateral action. We engage in the identification of the specific and essential element of individual political action and its difference from other motivations. We discuss the specific means and essential instruments with which politics operates. We also define politics functionally, via its ‘production’: what it achieves and what it is useful for. There is a resemblance between these questions and the traditions I have briefly outlined in this chapter, but it is unlikely that any single family accurately addresses all the questions.

I propose to proceed by separating these issues but linking them in an analytical and logically consistent way, so that the answer to any question may logically derive from that provided for the previous one. This requires political theory to be built on the foundation of a single solid rock to which all other reasoning can be traced. I propose that this solid rock be a definition of nuclear or elementary political behaviour (or action) in its motivational dimension. In the following chapters, I will carry out this ‘unpacking’ of the political phenomenon. Proceeding in this way, I will return to some of the approaches to politics discussed briefly in the introduction and discuss them more thoroughly. However, rather than seeing these approaches as alternative attempts at a general definition of the political, I will order them along a ladder of abstraction that may account for the variety of specifically political experiences.

65. I introduce here, and will use throughout the rest of this book, the outmoded terms ‘synallagma’ and ‘synallagmatic’ to refer to pure deals among autonomous and unconfined parties bounded only by reciprocal obligations. Later (pp. 120–21), it will be shown that the term ‘contract’ is misleading, as it implicitly includes far more than a mutual obligation among parties.

I will try to define ‘politics’

- by identifying the minimal characteristic element of nuclear political behaviour with respect to other behaviours via an analysis of motivations;
- in terms of the nature of the environmental conditions that transform and differentiate such nuclear political behaviour;
- in terms of the unique predicaments that political behaviours generate in the constitution of aggregate political entities;
- in terms of the specific means with which politics operates; and
- in terms of the single-value that politics generates.

It is necessary to link ‘motivations’, ‘conditions’, ‘predicaments’, ‘means’ and ‘outcomes’ in a framework of progressive specification which underlies the connections among them. Rather than characterising politics in terms of praxeological manifestations, loci, means or functions, I would like to achieve the opposite result: to derive the specific activities, ‘locations’ and contingent manifestations from the analytical characteristics are identified. This may lead to a few rather counterintuitive and controversial results emerging.

Finally, let me advance a few more mundane reasons why it is not advisable to abandon the question of the nature of politics in the garret of our cognitively mobilised, organisationally dense and pluralistic ‘societies’. In the current state of the discipline of political science, continuing the debate may have positive methodological or perhaps therapeutic effects on the knowledge enterprise undertaken by political scientists. The debate clearly spells out the underlying assumptions of different conceptions of politics which are definitely ‘historical’. A characterisation of what is political is part of political science, not only as a mere *ex ante* definition of its subject but also as a continuing reflection on the substance of politics in each historical period. This is particularly important in view of the complex relations, which were alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, between the political and the many disciplines that legitimately include them within their scope: philosophy, sociology, law, history, economics and anthropology. The mushrooming of highly specialised and technically hyper-sophisticated studies has led to a poor level of exchange and communication within the discipline. If direct exchange is difficult, a meta-debate about what is politically relevant and about the ‘political’ relevance of the stories we are telling can represent an element of unity for the discipline.

Moreover, in the last three or four decades ‘politics’ has come under attack. In the post-WWII period, an alliance among anti-capitalist social groups, bureaucratic elites and elected political officials successfully shaped

the regulatory cage to make capital nationally ‘responsible’ and dependent’.⁶⁶ In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this statist trend came under attack from holders of economic resources who felt damaged by the negotiated agreements they had been forced to accept. Neoliberal ideas overtook the economic expectations that emerged among the Western publics after the long phase of *étatisme* and Keynesianism. A worldwide network of private institutions (including high-grade research institutes and universities) and personnel in leading positions in both national and international economic institutions communicated these ideas and deeply influenced the media. Large sections of national electorates evidenced increasing concern over growing fiscal burdens and misgivings about management or mismanagement of public funds by the political personnel. This justified and supported a reversal of the relationship between political power and economic power. State intervention should stop charging society for its costs. The political elite was advised to adopt a measure of self-denial.⁶⁷ A subordination of the political to the economic (and to the social) had never been so explicitly advocated. Politics was redefined as a supporting activity and ancillary knowledge for the maintenance of the efficiency of markets, and policies are now predominantly the result of collusion between the political class as a whole and the commanding economic forces.⁶⁸ My preoccupation lies in the observation that this outcome may not be stable. Tensions are unlikely to reverberate on the markets themselves; they will instead reverberate through politics, which is likely to be asked to provide the stabilising mechanisms for unstable economies and societies. Signs are accumulating of a turning point, with renewed requests for the political to rescue the unchained Prometheus of the market from excessive expectations about its capacity of self-regulation. In such a situation of discredited politics and states, the means and instruments that can be deployed to this end are a source of serious concern.

Finally, the question of the nature of politics is still relevant, necessary and pertinent today because in the geographical area of the West the seventy years since WWII have made a vision of politics as a successfully ‘domesticated’ domain predominant. This state of affairs may be neither permanent nor generalisable to the rest of the world. A (temporary?) attenuation of the interstate rivalries that have ravaged the modern era has reduced people’s feelings of physical insecurity. Impressive economic growth and the feeling that we can manage production, distribution and consumption crises have reduced the

66. Bartolini, S. (2005), *Restructuring Europe. Centre Formation, System Building and Political Structuring between the Nation State and the EU*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 109.

67. On this point, see the arguments in Strange, S. (1995), ‘The Limits of Politics’, *Government and Opposition*, 30: 291–311.

68. Mair, P. (2013), *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, New York: Verso.

dilemmas of hunger and deprivation. Advances in science and technology and a disenchantment and secularisation of our societies have somehow displaced the existential dilemma of personal insignificance and cosmic meaninglessness. The attenuation of these inescapable human vulnerabilities⁶⁹ in the West has made political science somehow less sensitive to and less interested in the dark side of politics, in the evil face of domination and violence and in the role of powerful ideologies.⁷⁰ The idea that the rest of the world is simply *en marche* towards the same values has further contributed to focalising political science on specialised analyses of interstitial political phenomena, narrow policies and a restricted range of behaviour, with overemphasis on individual autonomy and an optimistic faith in reasoning and dialogic learning as a basis for collective outcomes. Nevertheless, in large parts of the world, politics is still unchained and undomesticated, and so we should wonder how representative our concerns for these realities are. We should perhaps leave room for less benign variants. This is not an act of condescension. It is a reminder that things change, that nothing in human affairs is guaranteed and secured forever and that vulnerabilities re-emerge; that is, in politics, the dark side is always burning under the ashes of favourable circumstances.

69. These are the vulnerabilities to which Popitz links the phenomenology of different forms of power. Popitz, H. (1992, 2nd ed.), *Phaenomene der Macht*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.

70. What Ritter labelled the *demoniac face of politics*. Ritter, Gerhard (1948; 1940), *Die Dämonie der Macht*, München: Verlag G. R. Oldenbourg.