



# **An Introduction to Politics, State and Society**

## **Introduction: Politics, State and Society**

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## Introduction: Politics, State and Society

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### Key Concepts and Issues

- Defining politics and the political
- Political ideologies
- Political legitimacy
- Political cultures
- Political power

### Key Theorists and Writers

- Louis Althusser
- Ronald Inglehart
- Steven Lukes
- Chantal Mouffe

Areas in social life where political struggles take place (known as 'sites of power') are not just limited to the actions of those in government, or violent armed struggles between revolutionary groups, but instead politics is a wide category existing at both a macro and micro level. Sites of power in contemporary life can be anything from power in interpersonal communication, gender relations in a family, the ability of a professional group to have their 'professional' status recognized in law, up to and including the actions in the House of Commons of those elected to run the country. (Kidd et al., 1998b: 529)

### Introduction

All of us live in a social world dramatically altered and recreated in recent decades. It is a world still undergoing rapid economic, social and political change in lifestyle, in gender roles, in the running of the state, and in the very definition of society in a globalized world. How, for example, are we to best understand such climactic transformations as those involving the

collapse of the Soviet bloc and end of the Cold War, the startling speed of technological change, the effects of globalization and the turn towards religious fundamentalist, ethnic, regionalist, environmentalist and consumerist politics?

In addressing such issues, many social scientists, media commentators, journalists and leading politicians constantly tell us that the old social theories and established political explanations have little meaning or validity. Further, it is argued that the whole realm of politics has lost its capacity to inspire, and that political leaders have lost their ability to guide and influence society. Rather, public debates and discourses are dominated by arguments about declining moral values, individual lifestyles, consumption and the new politics of environmentalism, anti-corporate protests or other contemporary countercultures.

Beyond this we are increasingly seen as subject to irrepressible social and political forces of change, such as globalization, which are dissolving national boundaries and the power of individual nation-states. The major industrial processes are now post-Fordist and the intellectual thrust of society postmodern. What is being experienced is a fundamental restructuring of both economic and social relations. In the developed world, societies are overtly multicultural, the nature of the family has been transformed and old elites have been dissolved. It is a new world of freedom for individual choice and individual expression.

More broadly, the collectivism of the past, expressed through a commitment to full employment, rising living standards and the generous provisions of welfare, which provided key organizational and analytical principles throughout the West, has faded. The time of social democracy, dominant in the postwar period has, it is further claimed, now passed. In its place is a new set of social relations focused around individualism. Indeed, some even argue that the terms 'Right' and 'Left' are no longer meaningful in understanding or structuring contemporary politics and society.

But how realistic are the claims and arguments sketched out above and rather more straightforwardly what does it all mean? In trying to analyse and answer these questions this book seeks to introduce, explore and develop a fuller understanding of some of the central theories and issues in political sociology and to apply these to a series of substantive case studies. In doing so we will also consider how social divisions are embodied in the understandings and definitions of 'politics' and the relationship of the individual to the major institutional settings of power and policy-making.

One of the underlying themes of this book concerns the relationships between politics, the social structure and how individuals become and remain engaged with politics. Several further strands emerge in the book. These include, first, the rapid transformations in contemporary social structures and their impact on social and political life. Secondly, the role of human agency and its significance to social and political action and contemporary social and political movements. Thirdly, considerations of contemporary cultural and social dislocations, and the consequences of these processes for some of the major contested areas of political life and political structures.

To do this the book will explore the discourses of and connections between various political ideas and concepts and a range of political groupings, social and political movements and organizations. In particular, it will consider the complex and diverse ways in which divisions of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and other social identities still interact to shape life chances, experiences, identities and politics and how these are expressed through political thinking, movements, organization and processes. To begin with, however, we first need to discuss briefly what is understood by the term 'politics'.

## Politics and Society

For many, the question 'what is politics?' merits a straightforward and probably rather brief answer. There are certain areas of our lives that to many are obviously 'political'. Recent examples of the political include, the government's responses to the conflicts in the Balkans, party political broadcasts on television and the giant political billboard advertising that have become features of our everyday lives. There are also debates in parliament, Prime Minister's question time and of course the politics involved in corralling votes in local and more often general elections, such as those that resulted in the Labour 'landslide' election victories of 1997 and 2001.

Yet, despite the consequences that such a result may have on many peoples lives, it is important to recognize that politics can be, indeed should be, understood as so much more. To have real meaning, the notion of politics must be understood in much wider terms. The realization of such an idea has a strong personal resonance. I can still remember when I first seriously considered the idea that politics was more than putting a 'cross' in a box every four or five years. The precipitant was not any major event on the world stage. It was not even events in the highly politicized arena of my native Belfast, where I spent all of my youth, which invoked such a notion. Rather, it was one of the great loves in my life, music, that opened up this horizon to someone, who in retrospect, largely understood politics through the great set pieces of Unionism and Nationalism, which characterized so much of Northern Irish politics. In particular, for this author, it was the wave of highly politicized music in the mid- to late 1970s that opened horizons of the possibility of politics. The following is a vivid example, from one of my favourite groups of the time, the Tom Robinson Band, of a broader understanding of what politics can be about. Their album, *Power in the Darkness*, carried part of the following interview with the band's leader from *New Musical Express*, as part of its sleeve notes:

Politics isn't party political broadcasts and general election, it's yer kid sister who can't get an abortion, yer best mate getting paki-bashed, or sent down for possessing one joint of marijuana. ... I got no illusions about the political left any more than the right: just a shrew idea which of the two side's gonna stomp on us first. All of us – you, me, rock 'n' rollers, punks, longhairs, dope smokers, squatters, students, unmarried mothers, prisoners, gays, the jobless, immigrants, gypsies ... to stand aside is to take sides.

The political, therefore, is an adjective that can be applied to a whole range of activities. Or at least it should be. What do those people mean who say that 'there's a political dimension to everything we do'? Partly, this may be a result of the coming together of several lines of contemporary political thought. These may include, for example, the feminist argument that the 'personal is the political', or draw upon the Marxist tradition, used to produce a critique of all aspects of social life, or it may make reference to Foucault's important notion that power is everywhere. All of these viewpoints guide us towards a fuller understanding of the political world.

If we try to restrict politics to formal political exchanges we are in danger of leaving out something important, excluding something vital and dynamic, namely the social dimensions to politics. What this book seeks to develop is a view of politics that encloses and involves many areas of social life, such as social class, ethnicity, gender, identity and so on. To do this it is necessary to distinguish between what can be called politics and what is best termed 'the political'. Mouffe puts it as follows:

The political designates the potential antagonisms inherent in human relations and can manifest itself in many different social relations. Politics, for its part, indicates the ensemble of discourses, institutions and practices which aim at establishing an order; at organising human coexistence, in a context that is always conflictual because of the presence of the political. (Mouffe, 1993b: 8)

The main subject matter of this book is, therefore, what Mouffe terms 'the political'. Indeed, one of the features this book seeks to highlight is that this notion of the political is not a separate area of human activity. Rather, it is an aspect of broader social relationships, and certainly not something that is, or should be, confined to political organizations, institutions or government. The central links to be made are those of the book's title, connections between society, the state and the political.

Following on from this, it is also necessary to ask what is understood by the term 'society'? Clearly this is not a question that can be quickly answered. Indeed, it could easily provide the entire subject matter for the book. There are, however, two main senses in which the term 'society' is normally used.

First, and at its broadest, it can refer to the totality of human relationships. It is that system of interrelationships and structures that connects individuals. Secondly, in a more narrow sense, it can be used to make reference to a self-perpetuating grouping, which possesses its own distinctive and identifiable culture and institutions. It is probably most useful at this stage to think of a society as a social system, which can be distinguished by identifiable structural, cultural and political characteristics.

This includes an identifiable group of people, living in a clearly demarcated territory, subject to a system of political authority and understandings. It is this interpretation that finds most meaning in this book. The notion of society remains central to sociological analysis, if only because it is at this level that many of the most important elements of social life are organized.

A political culture is that system of attitudes, values and knowledge that is widely shared within a society. It is learned and transmitted from generation to generation (see below). Indeed, as Inglehart (1977a, 1977b, 1980) and Inglehart and Rabier (1986) point out, different societies can be characterized by those specific political cultural attitudes that are relatively enduring. This political culture approach suggests that both political socialization and subjective orientations shape people's responses to their situations. Central to these responses are how people interpret their own circumstances and how they construct their understandings of the broader social dimensions of politics.

As we shall see these perspectives can vary dramatically, cross-culturally and within sub-cultures, nations and states. Further, these variations in subjective orientations reflect different socialization patterns and are therefore difficult to undo or change. Thus, political orientations and actions are due not only to external circumstances, but also to enduring differences in processes and patterns of cultural learning.

This attempt to link macro variables with micro ones and to locate theoretical issues with actual events will be explored throughout the book. Politics and the struggle for power manifests and operates at different levels in society. Sociology involves the conceptualization and theorization of how power operates and is distributed in society. It also seeks to identify the key sources of power. This varies depending upon how power is understood but includes

the ideological, economic, military and the political, dispersed through structures of class, gender, ethnicity, patriarchy, sexual orientation and so on.

### The Individual and Politics

In every society individuals become acquainted with a political system in ways that often structure their reaction to political events and their perception of what politics is about. People, in this sense, have, at some level, to 'learn' what political issues and politics are. Most people live their lives sticking to their own political ideology, their own set of values, of understandings and beliefs. This is, of course, usually inconsistent over time, made up of a mixture of self-interest, self-evident 'truths', inconsistent or partially understood ideology, personalized reference points, life history experiences and interactions with other 'politically' motivated individuals, organizations and groups.

One important starting point is the consideration of just how in any given society individuals learn what is, and what is not, political. Likewise, people must also come to understand what is, and what is not, of political relevance and importance at any particular time. It is possible to illustrate this, if we take the following two examples, separated by distance, but occurring at roughly the same time.

The first reflects the experience of David Roediger as a boy growing up in the USA in the 1960s, the second that of John Boyd as a young Protestant living in Northern Ireland in the late 1950s. Here, Roediger recalls an incident of his youth:

When I was ten, it suddenly became possible to hit Little League pitching and, after my first (and only) five-hit game, the league's best player asked if I'd go to the carnival with him. This was a sign of acceptance, but as we walked to the fairgrounds the stakes increased. My new friend produced a long knife that he was not supposed to have and I was not supposed to know he had. 'This', he told me conspiratorially, 'is a nigger gigger.' Neither of us knew if this meant that the knife was for attacking blacks or of a sort used by them. Neither of us knew any blacks. None lived in the small German-American quarrying and farming town in which we were growing up.... Even in an all-white town race was never absent. I learned absolutely no lore of my German ancestry and no more than a few meaningless snatches of Irish songs, but missed little of racist folklore. (Roediger, 1991: 3)

Boyd (1985: 176) also recounts part of his early socialization in a predominately working-class, Protestant area of Belfast, at more or less the same time, "Fight for Billy", "Fight for Billy", "Fight for the Cock o' the North!". That was one of our best songs, and we used to shout it at the top of our voices as we paraded along the smelly back entries in defiance of the Catholics who were preparing to attack us.' He continues, 'That none of us had ever seen a Catholic or knew anything about the "Cock of the North" didn't matter in the least. Somewhere near us there was a big fight going on and we Protestants wanted to be on the winning side.'

Both patterns of socialization into racism and sectarianism (admirably resisted by both authors) clearly show the strength and development of strong common communal values and how each community's ignorance of the other's life patterns gave rise to a distinctive worldview. The social construction of 'the Other' was central to both sets of experiences in determining perceptions and understandings of politics. Moreover, both examples illustrate the construction of common reactions to political phenomena. Further, the reproduction of the dominant ideological views on display bore little, or no, overlap with concrete everyday

experiences.

## Political Ideology

Culture, understood in its broadest sociological sense, consists of sets of shared meanings and values transmitted from one generation to the next. One aspect of culture vital to our understanding of politics is the concept of 'ideology'. The definition of ideology is complex and contested. Most broadly, it concerns how individuals interpret and understand the world in which they live. These understandings involve relationships between individual political psychologies and social structures. Ideology mediates between and overlaps these core areas.

Such relationships are far from direct or uncontested. One problem is that the term 'ideology' has often been used in many different ways, so as to accumulate many different meanings and responses. It may therefore be useful to outline some starting points. What is the extent to which ideology is at work in all societies most of the time and how is to be recognized? This will be another theme upon which we shall touch throughout the book.

First, for example, it is possible to consider ideology as having distinctly limited parameters, as another way of expressing 'rigid thinking'. Hence in recent times, when Margaret Thatcher, Neil Kinnock, John Major, John Smith, Tony Blair, William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith have clashed at Westminster during Prime Minister's Question Time, they have often accused each other being overly 'ideological', or that each other's policy proposal is ideologically driven. What they usually mean in using the term in this highly negative way is that the person (or group) taking an opposing perspective is seen as having approached the issue in a limited way, through the filter of a fixed set of ideas. Each political opponent therefore believes that the other is incapable of seeing the 'truth' of the argument.

Central to the self-image that Tony Blair has sought to create since becoming leader has been the claim that the contemporary Labour Party has shed the ideological baggage of its past. This, in everyday speech, fits with what most people understand by the term, namely, a constricted and fixed worldview. What is in place is now called 'New Labour', supposedly capable of representing the new attitudes and economic realities and post-ideological in its construction (see, Brivati and Bale, 1997; D. Coates and Lawler, 2000; K. Coates, 1996; Gould, 1999).

We will deal with the politics of New Labour in later chapters, but for the meantime there are at least two major problems with this everyday understanding of ideology. First, every statement about the world is deeply embedded in a set of 'commonsense' assumptions. So, one person's inflexible, rigid worldview is for another merely a series of self-evident truths.

Secondly, it is important to introduce the classic Marxist notion of ideology as 'false consciousness'. We will encounter this notion at several points throughout the book. In broad terms, for the moment, Marx defined 'class consciousness' as a form of social condition whereby members of social classes would become 'aware' of themselves and their common conditions as a class. The idea of false consciousness refers to a lack of such awareness. One of the major consequences of this is that it results in a completely distorted view of reality, and in particular of the existence of the exploitation upon which the class system is based.

So far the definitions of ideology we have encountered could be read merely as a matter of

cognition and political ideas. Many modern commentators, however, have followed Althusser (1971, 1977, 1984) in stressing the idea of ideology as a lived experience. In this sense ideology is seen as deeply rooted in peoples' commonsense beliefs about the nature of the society in which they live and how the world 'works'. As Eagleton (1991: 18) explains, ideology for Althusser is a particular organization of signifying practices that go to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in society. There are also problems with Althusser's account, some of which we will encounter in [Chapter 2](#). He is, however, surely correct when he tries to widen the scope to consider those ways in which ideology pervades everyday life.

Central to further understanding this aspect of politics are the works of Gramsci (1968, 1971). From within a Gramscian framework, ideology is understood in terms of sets of ideas, meanings and practices, which, although represented as universal truths, are actually supporting the power of particular social groups. The process of producing these maps of meanings, maintaining and reproducing such ideas as authoritarian and dominant, is what Gramsci calls 'hegemony'. For those adopting a Gramscian perspective, ideology is not something that is separate from the practical activities of life. Rather, it is a material phenomenon embedded in everyday social and political relationships. Such ideologies provide people with the rules of behaviour.

The notion of hegemony refers to the position when a 'bloc' of ruling-class factions finds itself in a position to exercise social authority and leadership over subordinate factions. One way to exert such authority, of course, is through force or coercion. More importantly from a Gramscian viewpoint, however, is the ability of the dominant grouping to ensure its position through the construction of consent. In particular, the ruling faction must be able to present its own narrow interests as common to, and in the interests of, the vast majority. Hegemony is therefore understood as the strategies by which the perspectives of the dominant group, around, for example, class, sexuality, ethnicity or national identity, are so conferred (see [Chapter 2](#)).

This position is, however, far from stable. Hegemony can never be static. It is constructed through a whole series of discourses and social practices. It is consistently contested and must be constantly re-won and restructured. This understanding also allows for the formation of social forces to construct counter-hegemony to challenge dominant discourses and forms of organization. In the early part of the twenty-first century, for example, British nationality and sovereignty is an ideological matter, particularly manifest in debates over the United Kingdom's place in Europe and the ways in which 'Britishness' is represented, both internally and to the rest of the world.

Importantly, of course, for a large part Britishness is just this, a representation. This can be seen in the disparate populist images, which are projected as symbolizing Britishness. These may include calendar photographs or biscuit box covers reproducing Constable's and Turner's pictures of 'rural England', Coronation mugs, the Queen's Christmas Day speech on television and radio at 3 p.m., or Kenneth Moore's famous portrayal of Douglas Bader in the film, *Reach for the Sky*. Others may refer to cultural reference points such as the last night of the Proms, the singing of 'Abide with Me' before the FA Cup Final, pop music, an afternoon pint of bitter in the country pub, a game of village cricket or even the Archers on BBC Radio 4.

Such representations of Britishness, which would be recognized throughout the world, are also, of course, more often merely a presentation of Englishness. For many, Englishness and



Britishness remain synonymous. Indeed, if we reduce populist notions of Britishness to its essence, we find predominantly English historical myths, values and institutions. Further, England remains dominant, not just ideologically, but also in terms of population, economic and political power. After all, it is within England, and more specifically London, that we still find all of Britain's major financial institutions and the seats of the monarchy and political power.

As Paxman (1999: vii) demonstrates, however, for others the traditional images of Englishness are now most often met with amusement and that, 'the conventions that defined the English are dead'. What then, if anything, may replace these conventions and representations? Some such as Hall (2000) or Parekh (2000) argue that in order to develop a common feeling of belonging in the new millennium, the British need to redefine national identity in a way that is more encompassing and acceptable to all of its citizens. This will no doubt involve a continuing divorce of Britishness from Englishness.

In ideological terms this is no little task, given the strength of existing constructs. Politically, it has to some extent already been recognized and found expression through the political devolution of Scotland, Wales and, to a lesser extent, Northern Ireland (Bogdanor, 2001). Another core ideological manifestation of this is the tendency for many to equate Englishness with 'whiteness'. As the Runnymede Trust Report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000) argues, while whiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, it is widely understood that Englishness, and therefore by extension Britishness, is racially coded. Hall encapsulates this directly in the following:

That great patriot Enoch Powell once remarked that 'the life of nations is lived largely in the imagination'. It is worth continuing to ask the awkward question, how is the nation imagined? What pops into the mind's eye, when people say 'Britain' or 'British'? By now, few people can imagine the British Olympic team without a black face. On the other hand, during the recent celebration of 'Britain's Finest Hour', it was not the faces of Asian and Caribbean World War II volunteers which automatically first came to mind. Where were they in the fly-past? (Hall, 2000)

Given rapidly changing social and political circumstances, it is no coincidence that for the first time in a century the English are beginning to question their own sense of identity and that the hegemonic construction of Englishness is being overtly contested. This is an issue we will explore more fully at various points throughout the book, and especially in [Chapter 2](#), in terms of the ideological construction of political identity.

## Political Power

It is through the further study of various theories of ideology that it is possible to begin to understand how the interests of individuals and groups can be reinforced and strengthened, or rebutted and resisted by the promotion or relegation of 'ideas'. Power exists in many forms and on many levels. This book will examine power at various levels within our society, the state, and those directly involved in exercising power and determining who has power.

Hence, Giddens (1985) argues that power can be seen as a transforming capacity in all humans. It allows people to intervene in a variety of events throughout the world in order to alter them. However, in trying to develop a sociological concept of power, we must also recognize that the actions of human agents manifest in very different figurations of social relations. This leads us directly to consider the ultimate importance of the concept of power.

As Bottomore so insightfully explains, political sociology is concerned with power in its social context:

By 'power' is meant here the ability of an individual or a social group to pursue a course of action (to make and implement decisions, and more broadly to determine the agenda for decision making) if necessary against the interests, and even against the opposition, of other individuals or groups. (Bottomore, 1979: 8)

Thus, Mann (1986) suggests that power emerges constantly in human societies. He further identifies four organizational sources of power as follows:

- Ideological Power, which emerges from the fact that humans seek to operate in terms of meanings, norms and rituals. It is ideologies that meet these needs. As such, ideological power can be 'transcendent', standing apart from society in a sacred way, such as religion, or 'immanent', dispersed through society by group cohesion and a sense of shared membership.
- Economic Power, which derives from production, distribution, exchange and consumption. It is best expressed through a class structure.
- Military Power from competition for physical survival. It produces direct control within a concentrated centre and the effect of indirect coercion on surrounding areas.
- Political Power, which comes from the control of a physical territory and its population by a centrally administered regulation, concentrated in the state.

This leads on to the discussion of other important issues concerning political organization. What are classes and status groups and how important are they to understanding power in society? How do modern capitalist democratic states seek to maintain internal unity? Put even more simply what holds such societies together? How should we explain the 'power of belief in the state, and the continued importance of the power of ideology?

Much of the remainder of the book will, therefore, seek to develop these concepts and, in particular, the notion of social power and the relationships of power in the actions of human agents in a vast range of social relations. As Hay (1997) clearly demonstrates, while power is probably the most universal and fundamental of political concepts, it is still a highly contested one.

In this context, Lukes offers some perceptive thoughts, arguing that, at a basic level, power should be understood as the ability of 'bringing about of consequences' (1974: 634). In other words, power involves the production of causal effects. One of his central notions is the ability of core groups in society to control the political agenda. Moving past the notion of power as consisting of conscious actions which influence decisions and then through the idea of power as the ability to prevent decisions being made, Lukes arrives at the 'third dimension' of power.

This is the ability to influence others by shaping what they want (or at least think they want). This is power best understood as ideological indoctrination, to shape people's preferences, so that conflict largely remains concealed and dormant. It is about the ability of powerful groups to keep contentious issues from ever reaching the agenda for public debate.

We will encounter these different notions of power directly in several points in the book. It is possible to regard power simply as the ability of an individual, group or organization to force others in a particular way – hence, power as something that it is possible for individuals or groups to possess and as something observable and measurable. This conceptualization of

power represents an extremely stagnant and rigid understanding of power.

It is possible, however, to regard power in a more complex manner, as something deeply embedded in social relationships. Power is something that is mobilized and mediated through an individual's or group's political position within the state, and in relationships between the state and society. Further, it is also important to understand political power in a more sophisticated manner as the ability to define the situation within particular parameters. In this sense politics is socially constructed around definitions of knowledge and the power to define particular understandings and institutions as more relevant and reasonable than others are. It is through such processes that powerful groups and the state construct dominant paradigms by which politics are interpreted and understood.

Given this, there are important questions to be asked concerning the contemporary powers and roles of the state. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the primary dynamic throughout much of Europe and the USA was to move former state-dominated enterprises into the remit of private enterprise. It is almost impossible to over-estimate the historical and political impact of the New Right administrations vanguarded in the West by the political leaderships of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Their philosophy of neoliberalism was given further credence by the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the claims by some that history was at an end and liberal capitalism was to be forever more in the ascendancy.

Any review of the claim to widespread changes brought about by those administrations adhering to neoliberal philosophy, however, needs to be treated with some caution. The move towards the 'private' was never complete and never without resistance. In several European states, such as Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, government spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Products (GDP) actually rose in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

As we shall see, however, neoliberal ideology remains strong throughout much of the developed world, particularly with the increased pace of the dynamic of transnational capital and processes of globalization. Indeed, the functions and roles of the contemporary state have to be understood against the backdrop of this wider process. In particular, globalization has set in train a wide range of debates surrounding tensions between the forces of global capitalism and sovereign states, and between those promoting neoliberal free markets and those who seek to resist it from below.

This brings us to further issues concerning the power of governments and how they seek to maintain, or reject, traditional roles and to discard or embrace new ones. The state is faced with a vast range of policy options and alternatives. The various directives of government reflect political beliefs and give priority to certain individuals and groups over others within state boundaries. Increasingly, however, much of the power of the state seems limited by the development of the politics of a new world economic order. Obviously much of this is unpredictable, but the possibilities may be better understood if we can develop a systematic understanding of the theoretical basis of how the state works and the concept of political power.

### **Political Legitimacy**

The ultimate goals of the book are to gain a clearer understanding of how power is distributed in society, and the various forms that politics can take. It also provides insights into why things happen as they do in the political arena and develops some ideas around the forces that

develop to challenge the dominant forms of power and political organization. When we appreciate this understanding of power, we can begin to understand politics in much broader terms, as a much more social and collective activity. Politics can be seen to be something that operates at all levels of society and in all arenas of social behaviour. Traditional definitions of politics and the political have, for example, often excluded core groupings such as women and ethnic minorities, restricting them to a well-defined private arena.

The focus on established power also needs to consider how power and authority are challenged. Political power is seldom executed or expressed in any overt manner. Only rarely will the state unleash naked physical force, perhaps by way of its armed forces, in the open defence of its interests. Rather, there are various processes whereby the powerful can, and do, gain acceptance, and generate legitimacy for, their authority. For many, particularly those operating from within Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions, this function is central to understanding the role of ideology in society.

Thus, existing political structures and ideas are often represented as 'normal', and 'right', in a way that continued obligation to and support of these political values is also seen as natural. In nearly all societies there exist laws that compel, or at least seek strongly to direct, individuals to engage in, or refrain from, particular forms of behaviour. Further, in most societies, again albeit in various forms, a central concern of those people who exercise power over others is to claim legitimacy for their actions.

When we seek to identify the exercises of power that require justification, the most obvious candidate is the state and its law-making powers. Conventional political studies often concentrate on questions surrounding the relationships between state and citizens, legalization and the powers and formal checks on those in positions of authority. To do so, however, is to miss out on other important questions regarding the social basis of legitimacy in contemporary societies.

There are also many exercises of power within society that are not obviously by the state at all, although they may well be underpinned by the state. This point has been increasingly recognized by some feminists and others, for example, who have asked whether the family is not best understood as part of the public sphere, rather than the private.

This distinction between public and private, and the blurring between them, has become an increasing concern for those who seek to question the distributions of power, authority and advantage. We are forced to ask, if power is exclusively, or even mainly, held in legal rights and obligations, or does it also consist of, and exist in, patterns of expectations, understandings and beliefs that are embedded in ideologies and even perhaps in the language of politics itself?

## **Political Cultures**

Before developing some of these arguments, it is necessary to clarify further the starting point and to return to the concept of political cultures. People often talk about politics and the resolution of political differences and conflict through it, as if it involves negotiation within an agreed set of values and ideas held by everyone. This, of course, is far from the case. Rather, there are a series of competing understandings and interpretations of politics. What it is possible to talk about meaningfully is a dominant political culture that sets the framework within which politics is interpreted and understood. The classic starting point for the study of political culture in the United Kingdom remains that of Almond and Verba (1963). Here they

claimed Britain had the ideal civic culture, which balanced values of citizen participation with trust in elites and responsiveness to the law.

Obviously, the political culture of the United Kingdom has radically altered since the position laid out by Almond and Verba in the early 1960s. This is especially true in terms of those who exercise most power, and in the variety of political sub-cultures and political identities that exist. The parameters and contours of this changing political culture will form the subject matter for much of this book. Indeed, there are those who would argue that long-standing notions of politics and society are now meaningless, given the relativity, dislocation, uncertainty, fragmentation, pluralism and multiculturalism of contemporary Western societies.

Such ideas rest on the concept of a break with modernity and the emergence of a new postmodern world. If this is so, then clearly it is of some significance. Postmodernism is seen to mark a discontinuity between the economy, society and politics which has, albeit in very different ways, been seen as marking a fundamental rupture with our interpretations of society and politics.

### **Issues, Organization and Structure of the Book**

From the above we can begin to distinguish the types of issue which set the parameters for the main themes of the book. Among these are the relationship between the individual and politics. Essential questions of 'who rules?' Who takes decisions in the capitalist democratic state and in whose interests do they take such decisions? How much validity is there in more recent postmodernist interpretations of society which highlight many people's disillusionment with contemporary politics? Or are contemporary politics in the United Kingdom, and beyond, still best understood in terms of capitalist power relations and the domination of powerful groups? Is it that powerful global forces and the resistance to them are a precursor to new form of politics?

Central to the arguments in this book is the belief that the fusion of sociology and politics can enrich the understanding of contemporary society, political events, and social and political change. It is this that the book seeks to undertake. One of the crucial ways in which individuals begin to understand what politics is about in our society remains through their interactions with state institutions.

The main task of the book is to introduce and expand upon some key concepts and topics in political sociology. Special attention is given to competing and contested notions of power and the state. The book also seeks to set these issues into a broader social context and provide a fuller understanding of the relationship between political cultures, political socialization, political action and wider social structural issues.

Broadly, this book takes an approach that is intended to show that politics cannot be properly understood in terms of institutions and issues cannot simply be derived directly from those setting the political agenda. Hence, the book introduces the importance of broader social relationships, and the links between society, social structure and power in defining and understanding politics.

To do this one key focus is the state. There are many lines of inquiry here. What roles do political elites and ordinary citizens have in the working of the state and how does it affect modern society? What is the relationship between states and the market in encouraging economic development? How does the development of a global civil society affect the

traditional functioning of the nation-state?

The book addresses these and related questions through developing an understanding of both classical and contemporary sociological theory and case studies. Further, the book also seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the origins, nature, development and transformation of the state, examining the basis of and relationships between politics, the state and society in different settings.

[Section I](#) begins by addressing some major issues concerning theories of politics, power and the state. Hence, [Chapter 1](#) presents an analysis of the major founding theories of politics and the state, including pluralism and elite theory, Marxist and feminist theories, the writings of Foucault and some of their variants.

[Chapter 2](#) provides material on conflicting perspectives on legitimacy and power. This leads to a critical analysis of classical and contemporary theories of nationalism and a case study of nationalisms within the United Kingdom. It provides an examination of the nature and role of the state in the less-developed periphery, explicating neo-colonial variants within the United Kingdom.

In [Section II](#), we consider some central issues of political change in society. One key issue for political sociology is the interrelationship of society and the state. This section highlights the interactive nature of that relationship. The context is that within which the state acts upon society and is itself the object of political action. As [Chapter 2](#) indicates, some theories of power, such as pluralism and elitism, have concentrated on how the structure of society impinges on action by the state. Other theories of the state have concentrated on the effects of state action upon society. The main goal of the chapter is to accentuate and examine some major starting points to investigate issues of power and theories of the state.

In [Chapter 3](#) we consider the effect of the New Right domination of both party and ideological dimensions of United Kingdom politics throughout the 1980s and part of the 1990s. Moreover, its legacy is still profoundly felt into the new millennium. Some of the specific aspects of political change surrounding welfare provision and the welfare state are considered in [Chapter 4](#). This chapter is grounded in a discussion of contested theoretical approaches, although empirical and comparative issues are dealt with to some extent.

One set of questions examines how is it possible to best conceptualize the political and social basis of welfare states? Another series of issues involves evaluating the various available theoretical perspectives, such as Marxism, neoliberalism and feminism on the role of welfare states and social policy. Finally, consideration is given to the conflicting visions for the future directions for welfare states.

[Chapter 5](#) considers the politics of Northern Ireland. It focuses mainly on the contemporary issues of political change surrounding the peace process and the search for a political settlement. This, however, is addressed in the context of broader political and historical changes. In particular, issues surrounding the politics of defining terrorism and political violence and the continuing conflictual nature of Northern Irish society are dealt with in some detail.

The far-reaching theme for [Section III](#) is the future of politics and the state. In [Chapter 6](#) the contemporary relevance of class is discussed in detail. To begin we shall discuss competing perspectives on the relationship between the nature of the state, its class basis and the development of politics. There are those who argue that we are now in an era of 'post-class'

politics and that class can no longer be regarded as a central organizing theme in society.

A fuller assessment of this perspective is crucial, especially given the changing patterns of social movements and collective action over the last 30 years. This part of the book, therefore, considers some of the major roles of social movements in political life, including why they originate, why people join them, the effects they have on ushering social and political change, and the cycles they experience.

Finally, [Chapter 7](#) examines the possible nature of politics in the new millennium. The book concludes with a discussion on the relationship between class, state and power on a world scale and attempts to explain the politics of change as the outcome of social transformation effected through control of the state.

Overall, this book seeks to provide a concise and comprehensive guide to, and analysis of, the role of politics and the state in the United Kingdom. To do this the book engages with a wide variety of theoretical approaches which different writers have developed to explain social and political phenomena and the social and cultural bases of power and authority. In doing so, it hopes to make a positive contribution to political sociology and to those related disciplines devoted to the study of the state.

To begin with, let us consider some of the most important ways in which the state has been understood, and some of the fundamental understandings that have been developed. One key starting point concerns debates surrounding the future form of the state. In particular there are intense political controversies concerning the continuance of social democracy and ideas that social inequalities can be alleviated by direct state intervention, as a central organizing principle in the United Kingdom and beyond. This dispute underpins much of the book and sets this discussion within the context of broader social and political processes, societal and global change.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- What is politics?
- What is political power and who holds it?
- How do people 'experience' politics?
- How are political values transmitted from generation to generation?

- politics
- political culture
- prime ministers questions
- political change
- ideology
- political sociology
- political concepts

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