
UNIT 1 SIGNIFICANCE OF WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Political thought begins when there is an awareness of the possibility of attaining alternative political arrangements from the present one. Ever since organised life began with the invention of agriculture, slowly different forms of political organisations began. Predominantly this form was monarchy but the ancient Greek civilisation was marked by a remarkable variety of political forms, reflected by Aristotle's study of 158 constitutions and elaboration of the different typologies of political systems. It is for the prevalence of wide diversity and debate that western political thought begins with the Greeks and continues till the present.

Political thought means the five following things:

- a) Exposition of ideas, values and proposals for influencing policy, changing it and revising it drastically for total break and a new beginning. The entire classical tradition of western political thought provides a wide variety dealing with the above propositions.
- b) Political theory deals with political structure and institutions like dealing with the theories of the state, division of power, legal frameworks, various forms of representation and links with other social sciences..
- c) Political philosophy in the normative quest for what should be rather than what is in a large macro framework.
- d) Political thought is a key component of the discipline of political science providing it the basic concepts and tools with which the other sub-areas of the discipline are intrinsically linked.
- e) Comparative studies of different kinds of political theories originating and expanding with different civilisations like the western political thought, Indian or Chinese political thought.

1.2 WHAT IS POLITICAL THOUGHT?

Political thought is the description of the political ideas of a host of political philosophers from beginning to the end. It is the sum-total of ideas on matters relating to politics, state and government as expressed by the thinkers. It is historical in nature because it is described as history. It analyses, examines and evaluates issues that have a universal concern and are of perennial interest even though each political theorist responds to a particular political reality. It is written keeping the larger public in mind and is not confined to ivory towers for an intimate link is established between the political process, institutions, events and actors. Usually political theory flourishes in times of crises which act as stimulus though it is not necessary that all crises lead to political theorising.

Political thought is the description, analysis, expression, and evaluation of the philosophies of the philosophers of a political tradition. It is a tradition in so far as it comes to us as a body of thought. It is the sum-total of what stays on, and an accumulation of what is changed and what continues. It is what keeps responding to our circumstances. What becomes out-dated is not the part of the tradition.

Political thought attempts to identify values and norms and makes them an inseparable part of a particular political trend. Western political thought, if we wish to identify its magic themes, evolves and revolves around values such as liberty and libertarian, democracy and democratic tradition, equality and egalitarian. Political thought as it has existed and/or exists in India, for example, seeks to establish ethical/moral values in politics, spiritualism, cooperative living and the like.

Political thought is primarily the study of the state. It studies society insofar as society influences the state as political life and social life, though independent is inter-dependent. Similarly it focuses on economic institutions and process insofar it influences the political order and process. It also takes into consideration ethical questions for ultimately it is concerned with a just and good political order.

1.2.1 Distinction between Political Thought, Political Theory and Political Philosophy

Political thought and political philosophy have been used interchangeably. When we talk of the history of political thought, we refer to the classical tradition that began with Plato and ended with Marx though both Germino and MacIntyre consider Hegel's political philosophy as the ending of the classical tradition, for, both see Marx as re-interpreting Hegel. The works of the great philosophers depict not only the problems faced in their respective times, but also reflect their examination, enquiry and experience. Political philosophy may, thus, be said to be the political thought of a particular philosopher of a particular age. But political philosophy is larger than the political thought of a particular philosopher; it is the political thought of an age or of a community. Political thought is also intimately linked with political philosophy. It amplifies and clearly states political ideas, puts them in a time frame. So, political philosophy does include political thought even though all political thought is not political philosophy. The difference between political philosophy and philosophy is not about the mood or method but about the subject matter. Philosophy, according to Wolin attempts to understand the "truths publicly arrived and publicly demonstrable" while a political thinker tries to explain the meaning of the political and its link with the public sphere.

Political thought is a historical narrative, descriptive to a large extent. Though political thought is historical in its approach, it is also, at the same time observational, empirical, operational, comparative and scientific. Political theory deals with concepts and ideas of a particular thinker. Its mode of inquiry is comparative and explanatory.

1.2.2 Relationship between Political Thought and Political Science

Political thought is the assemblage of the philosophies of the numerous political philosophers wherein each political philosopher theorises on political issues confronting his times. Each political philosopher discusses the political ideas of his times and the age he lives in. It is in this sense that the assertion is made that each philosopher is the child of his own age. It is through his own circumstances that each philosopher gets impetus as well as inspiration. He also, in this sense, represents his age. His philosophy/thought responds to the times he represents. His thought is his views on the numerous political concepts. Political thought becomes political thought by moving through political philosophy.

Political thought is history-oriented. It is the political history of a particular time. It is history vertically, and history horizontally. Vertically in the sense that a political philosopher theorises on concepts historically drawn. Plato discussed the concept of justice after having discussed the numerous notions of justice prevailing then: the father-son (Cephalus-Polemarchus) traditional view of justice; (Thrasymachus) the radical view of justice and the two-brothers' (Glaucón and Adeimantus) pragmatic view of justice. As against the historically-horizontal view of justice, political thought discusses the concept of justice vertically when it examines the term 'justice' as it evolves in the writings of the subsequent political philosophers.

History is related to political science only casually, and to the extent it helps understand political phenomena. So understood, there is much that separates the two terms, political science and political thought. History is a characteristic feature of political thought; science, that of political science. The nature of political thought is philosophical while that of political science is empirical. Political thought is a value-laden exercise; political science is value-free. Political thought understands the present through the help of past and thereafter builds future on the present; political science deals mainly with the present, and with the future, only marginally. These distinctions apart there is much that both need from each other.

Political science depends on political thought in more than one way. Political thought places data at the disposal of political science for the latter's scrutiny. A political philosopher's philosophy is examined by a political scientist through scientific tools. The political ideas of a political philosopher are examined in a way that he is described as an idealist or a scientist. There is a valid point when Plato is said to be the father of political philosophy, and Aristotle, as the father of political science—political idealism owes its inspiration to Plato, political realism, to Aristotle.

Political thinkers do not ignore scientific methodology while putting forth their political philosophy. Aristotle is said to have adopted the comparative method of analysing and classifying states of his times—he is said to have read and examined 158 constitutions of his age. Hobbes, and before him, Machiavelli too had followed the scientific method in expressing their ideas, if science means a study derived from intensive readings, experimentation, observations, leading to testable and consistent conclusions. Marx, to take another example, is said to have given a scientific theory of socialism, I-however, though all of them had reached certain finality in political theorising the subsequent developments negated much of this claim. As such political theory is always a mixture of fact and value incorporating the subjective considerations of the thinkers and the prevailing climate of his age.

1.2.3 Framework of Political Thought

Political thought is about politics or what is relevant to politics. It is **an** account given by numerous political philosophers relating to political institutions, political events, and **political** activities, their evolution and their growth. The content with which political thought relates itself is 'politics'. Politics, therefore, constitutes the very soul of political thought. What has Plato discussed in his *Republic*? The *Republic* is about justice in the state and in the individual and thereby leading to the construction of an ideal state. Aristotle's *Politics* is about the possible, the desirable, and the best practicable state. Locke, in his **Two** *Treatises of Government*, stated to have given the chief end of people uniting into commonwealth, and that chief end of the state is the protection of the property of the people and about limiting the powers of a state. Marx, in his numerous writings, sought to foresee a classless and a stateless society from where, according to him, would begin the real freedom of man. It is, therefore, clear that political thought is the study of politics as expressed in the works of political philosophers.

Politics implies political activity. It is an activity, which helps a citizen participate in the composition and functioning of the government. It is an activity **which** helps the political parties seek and then rule the people. It is an activity through which political power is sought, maintained and retained. It is an activity of manipulation and bargaining, of seeking and exercising power. It is, therefore, rightly said to be an art of possible. It is about power, as Lasswell observed, who gets what, when and how. Politics, as an activity that helps secure political power, exercise it and retain it, is the central point of all political thought.

Political thought is thought about politics. When we take politics from its particularity to generality, we enter into the realms of political thought; when we take politics **from** its transitory and day-to-day form into its long-term and durable form, we **tend** to prepare the grounds of political thought. Political thought responds, in a general way, to the questions relating to politics, the state, political activities, state's policies and its functions, for various political philosophers, over the years, have done so. It seeks to find the permanent or near permanent solutions to the problems that confront politics. Political thought discusses not only the state, but also its **highest** form; it, through the philosophies of the political thinkers, not only examines the various theories of the origin of the state, it seeks to develop a consistent **theory** regarding the origin of the state that appeals to our reasoning. The day-to-day issues relating to the nature of the state, forms of government, functions of the state, nature of political power **become** the issues discussed by the political philosophers. Machiavelli's reference of casual questions relating to the ruler's security became the **characteristic** questions of state-craft. Marx's attempt to analyse capitalism is a **question** of politics, but in the process of analysis, if Marx builds a socialist and communist society after capitalism, it **becomes** a part of political thought.

Political thought obtains data from politics. Politics introduces political activities for discussion by the thinkers. Political thought, on the other hand, gives a direction to the activities concerning politics. Politics, during the Stuart period in England, for example, becomes the basis on which Hobbes and Locke build up their philosophies—Hobbes trying to prefer authority to freedom and Locke, doing just the reverse, i.e., giving freedom, a predominant place to authority. Marx, while analysing and studying capitalism and in the process seeking to obtain more **truth**, and thereafter keeping in the medieval and early history, was not only trying to know the **functioning** of the activities of capitalism, but was also building a new vision of political thought, creating history in what is known as the materialistic interpretation of history. Political philosophers are born in a particular political atmosphere; they study the atmosphere and in turn, build a new political environment, a new philosophy.

Politics assumes political activities; political thought studies them, seeks to know the objectives of those activities and gives them a shape, a vision and in the process, builds new concepts. Politics gives us the account of political activities; political thought gives up political education; politics is knowledge about the political conduct, political thought that of the theories of political conduct. Politics, therefore, identifies **the** way towards which political thought moves. Politics paves way for political thought, and political thought guides the future direction of politics. **Marx's** political theory inspired the Russians to launch the socialist **revolution** and the Soviet **Union sought** to guide **the** socialist movements in the underdeveloped world. The **ever-**continuing direction of politics makes the basis for political thought. If politics provides political thought, political thought provides politics a vision to look to.

1.3 WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT : NATURE AND CONTENT

It is impossible to imagine political thought of the West (for that matter, of **any** society without history, Political thought is related to politics, but it is history that provides political thought its very basis. We do not mean to say that political **thought** can be studied without politics, but we certainly want to insist **that** we cannot study political thought without history, Understanding political thought **in the** historical context is, in fact, understanding political thought in the real sense.' A political **philosopher's** political philosophy emerges in the age of philosopher breaths. In fact, his political **philosophy** is an answer to the times the philosopher lives in. His philosophy **cannot** be separated from **history** of his times. No political thinker builds up his political philosophy without taking an **account** of the age or his times. To put the point in another sense, it may **be** said that a political **philosopher** **is understood** only in his **milieu**. Plato, though an idealist, could hardly be separated from his soil. his classification of states depicted the **classification** as it prevailed then; his theory of **education** was **drawn** heavily from what existed in Athens and Sparta then. **Machiavelli's** whole methodology depicted **his** debt to history. The contractualists—Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau—made history as the basis of their social contract theory. Karl Marx went all the way to advocate the materialistic interpretation of history. The objective conditions of history always provide the foundations on which the political **philosophers have** built their philosophy.

Furthermore, we can understand the political philosophy of a political thinker only in the historical context. Separate a political philosopher from his times, one **will** always find a Popper condemning Plato as an enemy of open society. A contextual study is always a safer method of understanding a text. A text without a context is a structure without a base. Machiavelli is better understood in the context of renaissance. Hobbes and Locke, **with** their views as apart as the north-south poles, can be better studied **in the background** of the **English** civil war. Marx **can** be **understood** in the light of the growing capitalism of **the** European/Western society.

Western political thought is **based** on history, but its history, Professor Sabine rightly says, has no concluding chapter. It has grown and is growing, and in fact, will always keep growing. It has grown in a typical **way**; each subsequent philosopher **condemns/criticises** the philosophy or political ideas of an earlier philosopher, and in the process builds his own philosophy. Aristotle did so **with** Plato; Locke did so with Filmer; **Bentham**, with Blackstone; John Stuart Mill, with **Bentham**; **Marx** did so with **Hegel**, Adam Smith, Proudhon. So western political thought has grown; it proceeds on polemics, it changes, but it continues. It is continuing since the days of Plato and Aristotle. No wonder if then it is said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato. Plato and Aristotle together gave **the** base on which stands the whole fabric of western

political thought; for political idealism and political realism are the two pillars of the western political philosophy from where rise numerous other related shades.

It is not easy to identify what the western political thought contains. The attempt, indeed, would be arbitrary. However, major contents of the western political thought can, for the sake of making a point, be stated, to be: (i) political institutions and procedures; (ii) political idealism and realism.

1.3.1 Western Political Thought, Political Institutions and Political Procedures

Western political thought deals, largely, with political institutions and procedures relating to them. If political theory deals with what is related to or is relevant to politics, political thought, coming as it is, from the writings of a host of political philosophers deals with political power, i.e., wherein it is vested and how it is exercised, and for what objects does it exist. The political thinkers from the earlier days to the present times have dealt with such questions relating to politics: Plato was more interested in the state as it ought to be than Aristotle who devoted all his energy on the best practicable state. The ancient Roman theorists talked about the nature and role of law in administration. With the medieval Church theorists, (Thomas Aquinas especially) political power was made to work under the divine law, the divine law under the natural law, the natural law under the eternal law. The early modern political theorists (Machiavelli and Bodin) were concerned with the supreme power (i.e., sovereignty) of the state or with actual and potential states). The contractualists (Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau) were eager to answer questions as to how the state came into existence and as to why people obey laws. While political philosophy deals with institutions as they were, as they are, and as they need/ought to be, Marx saw them in materialist terms. Sabine puts the point across when he says, "An important function of political thought (meaning the theorists or the political thought) is not only to show what a political practice (i.e., politics, political activity of his time) is but also to show what it means. In showing what a practice means, or what it ought to mean, political theory can alter what it is."

Political philosophers have sought to understand the political institutions of their times, have given them the meanings and, in doing so, have suggested ways of altering them. Thus, we may say that political thought deals with institutions. Further more, and it is important as well, subsequent philosophers have after having suggested the changes in the institutions, maintained continuity, the political philosopher, to use Sabine's words, is a 'connector', a 'relator' who weaves the political fabric.

Western political thought is equally dominated, since the beginning, with an interest in the political procedures as to how and why political power is applied. Indeed, political thought deals with political institutions, but it is also related to the working of political institution. The political philosophers were and are, primarily concerned not with what a state is or what it does, but also with how a state once entrusted with power, makes use of it. In other words, political thought has been, along with the study of political institutions, dominated with, if we want to give it a word, the rule of law, i.e., the procedure as to how the political power is put to use.

The rule of law means that there has to be the law that rules the people, and not the man that rules. It is a negation of the coercive, arbitrary and totalitarian rule. It is a justification of power and its use. The rule of law, as a concept, has certain features of its own: the law is to be applied impersonally; it cannot be used as a means for attaining individuals ends; it must be applied indiscriminately, though it is an act of particular circumstances, has to be independent

from the particularities, it forbids people to use coercive power over others; it has to respond to the general norms of society and equilibrium; it has to be in consonance to 'reason'. Plato's ideal republic was a construction of reason and one of the major concerns of the Republic was the development of leadership that would not be corrupt and would remain subservient to its rational law. Aristotle preferred the rule of law to the rule of man, howsoever wise these may be. The Romans and the medieval thinkers advocate the efficacy of law: temporal or ecclesiastical. The contractualists did refer to the natural law. The jurists, from Austin to Blackstone, and Coke, never lost sight of the juridical and legal power. The Marxists denounce the State as an instrument of exploitation while the anarchists reject externally imposed authority. No modern political philosopher, if any, should preach a system without making rule of law as the foundation of society.

1.3.2 Western Political Thought, Political Idealism and Political Realism

The two major streams along with which the whole western political thought keeps marching on are: (i) political idealism or as one may see political philosophy, (ii) political realism, or as one may call it political science. Plato represents political idealism, and is rightly described as the father of political philosophy; Aristotle represents political realism, and is very aptly called the father of political philosophy.

Philosophy and science have dominated the course of the western political thought. For a long time in the history of the west, philosophy ruled political thought till about the first half of the 19th Century. It was then that science, owing largely to the development made in other social sciences and the urge to make political phenomena relevant, captured the attention of the political philosophers, especially during the early years and the decades of 1950s-1960s in United States. Then came an era of debates between the normative political theory and the empirical one; the traditionalists and the behaviourist, the debate whether political theory is dead or alive. These debates characterised nothing but the tussle between philosophy and science, between idealism and realism. All these testified nothing but change and continuity in the western tradition. Berlin, in an article in Gould and Thurston, *Contemporary Political Thought*, writes, "Neo-Marxism, neo-Thomism, nationalism, historicism, existentialism, anti-essential liberalism and socialism, transposition of doctrines of natural rights and natural law into empirical terms...indicate not the death of a great tradition but, if anything, new and unpredictable developments." All political thought, as it has developed or evolved, has tossed between what it ought to be and what is and constantly moves between the two levels.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Western political thought, since its beginning from ancient Greece has dealt with diverse varieties of issues, and each philosopher has handled them from his own angle. Indeed, the political philosophers have, at times, disagreed on the solutions, but what is important is the continuity of the issues which have captured their intentions. The major issues relating to politics (i.e. the content of the western political tradition) have been the concerns of political philosophers. By attempting to find solutions to these political issues, the political theorists have given the western political thought not only a direction, but also a unity of thought processes. The significance of western political thought lies in the attempt of the political philosophers to identify political issues, and provide solutions, thus giving political thought a meaning and a vision. Sheldon Wolin puts a point, saying, "the designation of certain activities and arrangements as political, the characteristic way that we think about them, and the concepts

we employ to communicate our observations and reactions ... none of these are written in the nature of things but are the legacy accruing from the historical **activity** of political philosophers". He states **these** political issues: the power relations between government and subject, the nature of political **authority**, **the problems** created by social conflicts, purposes and objectives of political activity, and **the** character and utility of political knowledge.

1.4.1 characteristic Features of the Great Works of Western Political Thought

Any writing of a political discourse does not constitute part of the western political thought, but those **which** do are rightly described as the great works or the classics. It is a classic because it is a "class" by itself, "a work of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence" (Oxford English Dictionary). **The** classics in political thought include the works of **Plato** to that of Marx. The word 'classics' **signify** 'a conversation of many voices', 'a dialogue' between different perspectives and interpretations of reality as a work.

The works on political theory are written by political philosophers from time to time, and are related to a particular time, and yet they are timeless. They are timeless because they live **in** all times and live beyond their own time. They are timeless because they are relevant in all ages—part, present and future. They are timeless because they highlight problems which are problems for all times to come: corruption in politics had been a problem in **Plato's** times, and it is a problem even today. The works are timeless because they deal with issues confronting every age. They are timeless because the themes they touch reflect all times in all circumstances. They are timeless because they live in perpetuity.

The works on political theory are not outstanding because what is expressed therein is original, a 'who said it first' type. All the terms such as 'class', 'class struggle', 'proletariat', 'bourgeois', 'revolution', 'surplus value', which Marx used, Isaiah Berlin says, were not his, **i.e.**, he was not the first person **who** used them, for they have been used by many scholars earlier. But that was not what goes to the credit of Marx. **Marx's** contribution lies in giving these terms new and **definite** meanings, and above all, a new political thought built on them. What is original may be an important factor, but **what** is more important is the understanding of a political situation and giving to the world, a new interpretation. That is where lies the importance of Mam, and, for that matter, of any political philosopher.

The political texts have contributed a great deal to the evolution of the specialised **language**, expressed through words, symbols, concepts and has become the vocabulary of political philosophy. The concept of 'general will' used by Rousseau is an example of such vocabulary. **The** words such as 'state of nature', 'civil society' and the like are other examples, These works in politics by numerous philosophers have enriched our literature.

1.4.2 Relevance of Western Political Thought

western political thought is political theory spread over history. It is the **embodiment** of the writings of **numerous** political philosophers. These writings are works in the field of Political Science which have stood the test of time. They **have survived** through ages because of their intrinsic worth. They **remain** interesting and instructive because of their perennial themes, sound comprehension, subtle style and **profound** analysis. They wield great influence, and are, basically, suggestive.

The works of political thought are outstanding not because they are universally praised. **In** fact, they are neither praised nor denounced. Plato is rated very high by some like Barker, **Wilde**,

Whitelyad who go to the extent of saying (*Adventures of Ideas*) that all subsequent philosophy is a footnote to Plato, while others such as Popper, Crossman and Winterspear, condemn him as fascist, totalitarian, and enemy of democracy (see Karl Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, 1945). Machiavelli, to take another example, has been denounced by Catholic writers such as Butterfield, but has been admired by secular scholars such as Allen, Gramsci and Wolin. These works on political thought flourish because they are continuously studied, interpreted, and discussed, each subsequent reading gives a new and fresh orientation. They are a great aid to thinking. It is in this sense that they are suggestive. Plato does not impose his 'communistic' devices for acceptance, but he does stimulate our mind and reactivate it to think other possible devices. They are not only suggestive, but are essentially inspirational.

About the importance of the western political thought, Sheldon Wolin writes: "In teaching about the past theories, the theorist is engaged in the task of political unification, that is of introducing new generations of the students to the complexities of politics and the efforts of the theorist to confront its predicaments, of developing the capacity for discriminating judgement, and of cultivating that sense of significance... which is vital to the scientific enquiry but cannot be furnished by scientific methods, and of exploring the ways in which new theoretical vistas are opened." Dilthey also says; "In studying classics, we construct our life experience with the aid of experiences of the great thinkers. Communication with their experiences enriches our own experience. After all, did not Karl Marx write: only music can awaken the musical sense in man."

The great tradition of Western political theory from Plato to Hegel deals exhaustively with the major contradictions and dimensions of the political process. Their importance is exhibited by the fact that though they were primarily concerned with the immediate problems besetting their contemporary situation, yet they were able to transcend their localism. In the process they were able to provide a framework of analysis that would enrich other periods as well by their penetrating insights and thoughtful reflections on perennial problems of politics, power, authority, legitimacy, equity and order. They are masterpieces as they do not belong to any one culture, civilisation or time but cherished by the entire humankind.

1.5 SUMMARY

Political thought may be understood as the description of the political ideas of a host of political philosophers from the ancient Greeks, if we are trying to know what it is in the West. It is the sum-total of the ideas as matters relating to politics, state and government as expressed by thinkers from time to time. It is the narration of the thought of the political theorists. It is, as in the West, a history, a tradition and a culture. It is not the entire political science because it refuses to reject its historical basis. It is essentially historical, logical, ideological, evaluational and methodological.

Western political thought is rich in its contents. It has helped in stating the utility of political institutions, political procedures to be followed. It has given the western tradition values such as democracy, nationalism, liberty, justice and above all the two parallel pillars—idealism and realism—on which rest the major frameworks of political theory within which most theorists operate.

Western political theory is objective, illuminative, ethical, and educative. Wolin concludes; "... since the history of political philosophy is... an intellectual development wherein successive thinkers have added new dimensions to the analysis and understanding of politics, an enquiry into that development is not so much a venture into antiquarianism as is a form of political education."

1.6 EXERCISES

- 1) What is political thought? Distinguish political thought from political theory and political philosophy?
- 2) Describe the nature of the western political thought.
- 3) What are, in your opinion, the major contents of western political thought?
- 4) Amplify the significance and relevance of western political⁴ thought.