
UNIT 4 CONCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL THEORY

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit deals with the various conceptions of political theory. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss efforts to define political theory;
- Discuss various conceptions of political theory; and
- Give an overview of the recent effort at political theorisation.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this unit is to explicate different conceptions which are found in political theory. At the very outset, it should be mentioned that political theory is that enterprise which seeks to analyse political phenomena of various shades and descriptions which occur in real-world political life. In other words, political theory does effect the world in which we live and influences the choices we make therein. It helps us in improving and refining our understanding about social and political life. It is a different matter that there is a misconception about political theory in general, and the political theorist in particular, which imagines a political theorist as secluded and isolated entity who is least bothered about the problems of real life and lives in an imaginary world of his own from where he or she churns out theories about society and politics.

But the fact is otherwise. Political theory is always situated in the actual world about which it speaks, to which it addresses itself and the problem it seeks to resolve. Society is the runway from where the flight of its imagination takes off. Therefore, activists, indulging in public – political life make significant contributions to political theory as trained political scientists. Political theory, as a vocation is as important as political theory as a profession and the testimony that such a vocation has not only existed, but has also enriched the corpus of knowledge can be had from the long line of writers from Plato to Marx. Political theory as a vocation “sharpens our sense about complex interplay between political experience and thought” and “provides thoughtful political action and widens political vision” as Sheldon Wolin has pointed out in his book *Politics and Vision*.

4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL THEORY

Developments in political theory always reflect the changes which occur in society. Political theories are produced in response to the challenges which emerge at different times. Hegel's symbolic characterisation of political theory as 'the owl of Minerva takes flight when shadow of darkness falls' is very apt.

However, we will do well to remember that political thought, which also emerges due to societal challenges, is bound by time as well as space, and is therefore, different from theory which breaks such barriers and proves its worth in understanding and explaining political phenomena of different nature and origin. This happens, because theories are purged and purified from ideologies and biases and arrive at certain principles, which are not only timeless, but may even be called knowledge. Political theorists, while indulging in theorisation, pursue ideas not for the sake of fulfillment of their fads and fantasies, but in order to search those principles whose understanding can make life better. And in this enterprise, theorists, by and large, are motivated by the concrete political situation. The history of political theory bears out how ills and maladies afflicting societies have lubricated the tools of theorisation, through which various accepted principles and practices and the assumptions behind them were questioned and the blueprint for the future was drawn.

It is, however, true that the stimulus for theory always comes from some sort of failure and a related conviction that things can be bettered through an improved understanding and may, ultimately be resolved. Hence, political theory's task is not limited to providing a fleeting response and getting contented with a compromise. Rather, it has to reach at the root of the problem and has to discover remedies in the form of an alternative set of principles. Hence, any project on theory requires a 'vision' through which a theorist could think not only about the problems at hand, but also beyond them.

It is here that political theory might be differentiated from art or poetry. In terms of vision, reflections and ruminations, there is not much difference between political theory and other creative activities like art and poetry. But what sets apart the political theorist from the poet is that his urge and search are a conscious act with a definite design, whereas a poetic act is one of spontaneity. Therefore, it is not creativity, but consciousness that denies poetry the status of a theory.

4.3 TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF POLITICAL THEORY

Political theory is defined in different ways by different people. The definitions vary on the basis of emphasis and understanding of its constitutive elements. Sabine's well known definition of political theory is that it is something 'which has characteristically contained factors like the factual, the causal and the valuational'. To Hecker, political theory is 'dispassionate and disinterested activity. It is a body of philosophical and scientific knowledge which regardless of when and where it was originally written, can increase our understanding of the world in which we live today and we live tomorrow'.

Therefore, one may say that what we mean by political theory is a coherent group of propositions, with some explanatory principle, about a class of political phenomena. It implies that a theory *unlike* thought, cannot consider a multitude of phenomena at a time, and will have to get concerned with a class or type of issues only.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.
- 1) Write a few lines on the development of political theory.

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4.4 DOMINANT CONCEPTIONS IN POLITICAL THEORY

It is quite difficult to identify and categorise various conceptions of political theory which are put into use by theorists. The difficulty emanates from a tendency among theorists to go for an exercise in which they start drawing on different conceptions and traditions. This is more true, as we will see later, with contemporary political theory than with the ones which preceded it. In the past, theorists somewhat maintained a purity of conception in theory – building and seldom outstepped the framework they had chosen. But this does not apply to the contemporary times, which are a witness to a crop of theory which appears hybrid in nature.

But broadly speaking, three different conceptions emerge in political theory on the basis of which both the past and the present theories can be conceptualised, judged and evaluated. They are: **Historical, Normative, and Empirical.**

4.4.1 Historical Conception

Many theorists have attempted theory – building on the basis of insights and resources from history. Sabine is one of the main exponents of the historical conception. In his opinion, a question such as what is the nature of political theory can be answered descriptively; that is, how theory has responded to historical events and specific situations. In other words, in this perspective, political theory becomes situation-dependent in which each historical situation sets a problem, which in turn is taken care of through solutions devised by the theory.

This conception of political theory is deferential to tradition. Cobban also believes that the traditional mode, in which a sense of history is instilled to the full, is the right way to consider the problems of political theory.

It is true that the past acts as a valuable guide in our endeavour of theory – building and teaches us not to be too sure of our originality. It also hints that it is possible to think in ways other than those which are fashionable and dominant, besides shedding light on the sources. The historical understanding also sensitises us about the failings of the past generations and ties them with the collective wisdom of the present and promotes imaginativeness in us.

Over and above this, the historical conception also contributes significantly to our normative vision. The history of ideas may tell us that our social and political universe is a product of things whose root lies in the past. And knowing them better would tell us how we have certain values, norms and moral expectations and from where they have come. With this sense in us, it is possible to interrogate these values and critically assess their utility.

But a blind adherence to this conception is not without its folly. The novelty of the project called political theory is that each specific situation is unique, riddled with new challenges. Hence, worth of the past sometimes becomes redundant and could even be a hindrance, if one is oblivious of this aspect. Therefore, the utility of this approach in political theory beyond a certain level is doubtful as it is always wedded to outmoded ideas from outmoded ages. The suggestive values of the ideas remain, but the theoretical function recedes considerably.

4.4.2 Normative Conception

The normative conception in political theory is known by different names. Some people prefer to call it **philosophical theory**, while others refer to it as **ethical theory**. The normative conception is based on the belief that the world and its events can be interpreted in terms of logic, purpose and ends with the help of the theorist's intuition, reasoning, insights and experiences. In other words, it is a project of philosophical speculation about values.

The questions, which are asked by the normativists, would be: what should be the end of political institutions? What should inform the relationship between the individual and other social organisations? What arrangements in society can become model or ideal and what rules and principles should govern it?

One may say that their concerns are moral and the purpose is to build an ideal type. Hence, it is these theorists who have always conceived 'utopia' in the realm of political ideas through their powerful imagination.

Normative political theory leans heavily towards political philosophy, because it derives its knowledge of the good life from it and also uses it as a framework in its endeavour to create absolute norms. Infact, their tools of theorisation are borrowed from political philosophy and therefore, they always seek to established inter-relationships among concepts and look for coherence in the phenomena as well as in their theories, which are typical examples of a philosophical outlook.

Leo Strauss has strongly advocated the case for normative theory and has argued that political things by nature are subject to approval or disapproval and it is difficult to judge them in any other terms, except as good or bad and justice or injustice.

But the problem with the normativists is that while professing values which they cherish, they portray them as universal and absolute. They do not realise that their urge to create absolute standard for goodness is not without pitfalls. And that ethical values are relative to time and space with a heavy subjective content in them, which precludes the possibility of any creation of absolute standard. We will do well to remember that even a political theorist is a subjective instrument in the assessment of the world and these insights are conditioned by many factors, which may be ideological in nature.

The exponents of empirical theory take normativists to task for (a) relativity of values (b) cultural basis of ethics and norms (c) ideological content in the enterprise and (d) abstract and utopian nature of the project

It is true that the proponents of the normative conception get preoccupied with the inquiry in to the internal consistency of theory and that pertains, mostly to the nature

of ideas and rigour in the method, while remaining unmindful and sometimes, even negligent about the empirical understanding of the existing social and political reality. It is more agonising and distressing, when one finds that this proclivity among them is accompanied by another syndrome, under which they prefer to respond to a theorist and undertake only a review of his work by turning away their eyes from the empirical reality which stares at them. Thus, it turns out to be an illusory and deceptive exercise in theory-building in the name of high and noble normative concerns.

But in the distant past those who championed normative theory always tried to connect their principles with the understanding of the reality of their times. Therefore, all normative enterprises in the past had direct or indirect empirical referents and Plato's theory of justice could be a good example to illustrate it.

In recent times, again the old sensibility within the normative theory has reemerged and the passion for good life and good society has been matched by methodological and empirical astuteness. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* is a case in point which attempts to anchor logical and moral political theory in empirical findings. Rawls, with his imagination, creates 'original position' to connect normative philosophical arguments with real world concerns about distributive justice and the welfare state. Some other theorists are also attending to the tasks of developing moral theories about equality, freedom and democracy by rooting them to every day concerns and marrying them to specific situations.

Some normative theorists of the new generation have also started discarding the well known inclination of theory, more a characteristic of the older days, under which either exuberant justification for the existing arrangements was offered or they hesitated to critique them and thus, carried the level of status – quoism in their thought. Now, a new crop of theory has surfaced known as *critical theory*, which as a part of the normative project, is engaged with political events and tries to combine ideas with practice, and also makes effective interventions to facilitate changes for the better in society and politics.

4.4.3 Empirical Conception

What has dominated political theory in the twentieth century is not normativism, but another conception known as empirical political theory which derives theories from empirical observations.

Empirical political theory refuses to accord the status of knowledge to those theories which indulge in value judgements. Naturally, therefore, normative political theory is debunked as a mere statement of opinion and preferences.

The drive for value – free theory started in order to make the field of political theory scientific and objective and hence, a more reliable guide for action. This new orientation came to be known as *positivism*.

Under the spell of positivism, political theorists set out to attain scientific knowledge about political phenomena based on the principle which could be empirically verified and proved. Thus, they attempted to create a natural science of society and in this endeavor, philosophy was made a mere adjunct of science. Such an account of theory also portrayed the role of a theorist as of a disinterested observer, purged of all commitments and drained of all values.

This empirical project in political theory was premised on the empiricist theory of knowledge which claims to have the full blown criteria to test what constitutes truth and falsehood. The essence of this criteria is lodged in the experimentation and the verification principle.

What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?

When political theory was reeling under this influence, a so called revolution started and became popular as 'Behavioural Revolution'. This revolution reached a commanding position within political theory in the 1950's and engulfed the entire field of study and research by advocating new features. They included : (a) encouragement to quantitative technique in analysis (b) demolition of the normative framework and promotion of empirical research which can be susceptible to statistical tests (c) non – acceptance and rejection of the history of ideas (d) focus on micro–study as it was more amenable to empirical treatment (e) glorification of specialisation (f) procurement of data from the behavior of the individual and (g) urge for value – free research.

Infact, the behavioural climate got surcharged by an anti – theory mood and those who lambasted theory in a conventional sense had a field day. Theory was caricatured and made synonymous with ideology, abstraction, metaphysics and utopia. Some adventurists even advocated farewell to theory as an enterprise.

Later on, when *logical positivism* appeared as a revitalised incarnation of positivism and included in its ranks such heavy–weights as Wittgenstein, not much change could occur in outlook. The only difference was that the positivists wanted to make the area of political theory scientific, while the logical positivists declared it metaphysical, non – rational and therefore, outside the purview of scientific knowledge.

But this mood did not last long as the entire understanding was erroneous. So much so that in the zeal of attaining objective knowledge, they even reduced thought to an aspect of reality and blurred the distinction between thought and reality. Thus, they soon attracted the ire and fire of some philosophers of science who offered a vision for a post – positivist approach to science. Karl Popper set the new mood by laying down the principle of 'falsification' as a criterion of scientific knowledge and argued that all knowledge was conjectural, tentative and far from the final truth.

The real turn or breakthrough came in the philosophy of science when Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos and Mary Hesse blasted the so called scientific theory which was playing havoc with political theory and discredited the positivist model by rejecting the notion of unified science and declared it as an improper understanding of natural scientific practice. The crux or the argument was that science as a form of human activity was impregnated with interpretation, which consisted of meaning, communication and translation.

Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* was a pioneer in bringing out the shortcomings and failures of the positivist theory and it demonstrated how all cognitions were dependent on understanding and interpretation as a means of inter-subjective communication. Kuhn cogently argued that it was not only the irrational conventions which lurked behind the construction of the semantic framework, but were also informed by rational discourses framed by interpretation and criticism.

This new Kuhnian perspective, thus, broke new grounds in the philosophy of science and subjected the positivist account of knowledge and theory to rigorous criticism and scrutiny. But the 'philosophy of the social science' was not to lag behind, and soon new churnings started which brought the problem of understanding under scanner and contested the attempt to perceive the problem within the framework of a unified science.

Peter Winch, Alfred Schutz and Charles Taylor heralded this new perspective, which suggested that understanding in the social science was loaded with problems and two of them deserved special attention : (a) all sciences are a form of interpretative undertaking and hence, it has a theory – laden nature of all understanding (b) the object of the social science is distinctively subjective, which implies an agent who is a self – interpreting social being. Therefore, the problem of social science, according to this perspective, snowballs in to a 'double hermeneutics'.

This new approach brought the problem of understanding, interpretation and the issue of how to look at the symbolic world of the subject into the discussion. This also infused new meaning in the interpretative project of the political theorists by sensitising them to the symbolic world. Hence, what got problematised was not only the understanding of meaning, but also the issue of explaining them. This reminds us of Max Weber, who had long wrestled with this problematic through his categories of ‘causal adequacy’ and ‘adequacy of meaning’.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Distinguish between the empirical and normative conceptions of political theory

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4.4.4 Contemporary Conception

It is a veritable challenge to map out the terrain traversed by the political theorists and the theoretical apparatus deployed by them in contemporary times. The challenge emanates from many sources. Contemporary political theory does not neatly follow the commonly accepted category of classification, viz, historical, normative and empirical and does not stay within a particular tradition, as the earlier theorists did. Sometimes, they appear to be making use of different conceptions in their enterprise and employ them in a manner which was not seen earlier. Contemporary theorisation in political theory has grown in reaction to the limitation of the earlier projects, mostly falling under the two great traditions, namely, Liberalism and Marxism and interrogates them and their category of analysis by selectively borrowing from them. But in the course of building the theoretical edifice, they break new grounds and create new sites for political investigation and also innovate new tools for searching and establishing the principles of politics. Nonetheless, the contemporary project on political theory does not move beyond the terms of trade called political theory as discussed earlier; that is, historical, normative and imperial but the mode of employing them has some hybridness in character.

Contemporary political theory made its appearance on the intellectual scene in the 1980s and 90s, mostly as a reaction against the established traditions in theory and put the categories of Enlightenment like reason and science to which all traditions in political theory were tied, to a scathing and searching criticism they brought in many aspects which were conquered as the foundation of truth by political theory under the scanner and set out to lay down the new principles to understand and imagine the new social and political universe which some of them put as ‘post – modern condition’.

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It is true that the engagement of contemporary writers with political theory has been critical, but not equally transformative, imaginative or visionary. Although the 'New Social Movements' in contemporary times have been given moral and intellectual support by many of these theorists in the name of transforming society and overcoming the maladies of the new situation.

However, it would be arbitrary to yoke the various theoretical trends visible today under one broad frame of analysis. For example, discussing post – structuralism and post- modernism with communitarianism and multiculturalism together would amount to intellectual atrocity against them and their concerns and commitments. Because their history, their normative concern as well as the theoretical apparatuses and empirical referents have a significant dissimilarity and diversion. But still one can lay out the theoretical terrain on which their engagement with political theory takes place.

The broad thrusts which bring many of the contemporary theorists and theories together could be put under the following:

1) Opposition to Universalism

Political theorisation in contemporary times has gone for subjecting the universal claims of political theory of yesteryears, irrespective of the tradition to which they belonged, to critical scrutiny. Liberal universalism has appeared to them as devoid of a social and temporal context and in their opinion, the hidden 'particularism' mostly based on the experience of western society has masqueraded as universal values and norms. They argue that the appeal to universal principles are tantamount to standardisation; hence, violative of justice which may be inherent in a particular community or form of life and which may embody its own values and normative principle. The communitarian theory and the multicultural theory in recent times have highlighted it quite forcefully and called this so called universalist theories as 'exclusivist' at the core, which has always presented one vision of 'good' as the only vision of mankind.

Interestingly, political theory of this variety has not discarded the normative world view, but the objection they have raised is that political theory, earlier, couched its value judgement in 'essentialist' terms and discriminated against relative values. Thus, they sacrificed the truth in social and political life. Therefore, these theories seek to deconstruct the normative category of political theory like justice, freedom and democracy and desist from prioritising judgement on them or privileging one over the other. The post-structuralist and the post-modernist indulge in this exercise.

2) Critique of Grand Narratives

The grand narratives of both the liberal and the marxist variety have come under fire on the premise that there is an overarching or transcendental 'foundation' of reality and truth. Some of the contemporary theories have been declared 'anti-foundational', because of the continuous contestation of all well accepted foundations in political theory, viz, state, sovereignty and power. In all fairness to them, they do not reject all foundations, but only transcendental ones.

The post-modernists are in the forefront in attacking the grand narratives and argue that there is nothing like objective pre-given reality or an objective social good which can support such grand narratives and their designs. Their opinion is that this is nothing but 'objectivist illusion'. Here, they look at the discursively constituted reality which opens it for subjective interpretation. We will do well to remember that the post- structuralist and the post-modernist break from the 'structural' argument once so popular in political theory and reject their notion of structure which was synchronic (located in space), universal and timeless and hence, was ahistorical. In its place, they deploy a new concept of structure called 'Discourse' which is diachronic (located in time), historical and relative in nature.

3) **Post – positivism**

It is reminiscent of the earlier engagement with value neutrality in social science once championed by the behaviouralists in political theory. The contemporary theories call valuefree enterprises as useless and believe that political theory is an inherently normative and politically engaged project, which is supposed to offer prescription and a vision for the future.

4) **Empirical and Comparative**

The post-positivist thrust among contemporary theorists do not stop them from advocating the need for empirical and comparative approaches before any generalisation attempt is made. Multiculturalism is one such example, which is sensitive to the context. Infact, this kind of empirical – comparative methodology would be a check on the broad generalisation across cultures and continents.

Inspite of the new insights which come from contemporary political theory, they suffer from many weaknesses. Unlike classical political theory, there is not much comparative – empirical inquiry as yet and the tendency among theorists to borrow from the other theorists is galore. The normative enterprise can be useful only when it is tied to reality. Therefore, the real challenge lies in grounding normative theory to empirical reality of society and politics. This is the only way a valid political theory with just generalisations can emerge, which would also overcome the limitation of the post-modernist perspective and its weaknesses of relativity and diffusion which are not always congenial for political projects. This may fructify what Sheldon Wolin calls ‘epic theory’.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss some of the broad thrusts which bring contemporary theorists together.

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

Since we have different conceptions of political theory, they acquire different meanings in different traditions. We have seen why political theory emerges and how it shapes and decides the course of history by facilitating human intervention in politics. What are the different conceptions held by the theorists have also been discussed and their pitfalls highlighted. The contemporary enterprise, which claims to open new vistas in our understanding of social and political reality has been discussed along with its limitations. What emerges clearly from the preceding discussion is that philosophy

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and science can not replace each other in the project called political theory, if a vision for the emancipation of mankind is the mission and that even in the absence of anything called objective 'good' or objective 'truth', the practical basis for theory should be attempted. It is not only desirable, but also derivable. Any project in political theory which unifies empirical findings with normative thinking by subjecting them to rigorous criticism can open the gate for creativity in political theory on the basis of which we can navigate into the future.

4.6 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

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G. H. Sabine, *What is Political theory*, *Journal of Politics*, (1) PP. 1-16,1939

W.E. Connolly *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983)

David Miller (Ed) *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, (Oxford Blackwell 1987)

4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) See Section 4.2

Check Your Progress 2

1) See sub-section 4.4.2 and 4.4.3

Check Your Progress 3

1) See sub-section 4.4.4