
UNIT 1 CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE POLITICAL

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the course MWG-001, in Block I, Unit 1,2,3 and 4 we have already studied about the feminist discourse of 19th and 20th centuries, the emergence of the idea of the political and so on. In this Unit, our attempts will be to investigate the historical and contextual underpinnings of the notion of the political. Broadly, it tries to understand and examine the tradition of western political theory. It also examines the categories of state, individual and citizenship. We start with an introduction to the notion of the political that is ingrained within Greek thought. We will then shift to the medieval political thought that linked the political to notions of power and force and detached itself from the realm of ethics. The Unit will then provide debates on the modern understanding of the political and conclude with the feminist departure from these readings.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the historical evolution of the notion of the political in western context;
- Explain the meaning of the 'political';
- Describe medieval political thought ; and
- Analyse the modern understanding of the political

1.3 LIBERAL PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

One of the chief characteristics of modern political life is that it unfolds within a sovereign nation-state based on the idea of separation of the individual citizen and the state. This hinges upon many assumptions about the nature of human life, about individuals and rationality, and of course the relationship between the individual citizen and the state. The central idea of liberalism is the separation of the public and the private. When we talk about politics, it is clear that we are referring to a specialized field that occupies the public sphere. Today we assume that there is a commonsensical and ‘natural’ division between the public and the private sphere. But this has not been the case always. Indeed this separation is what in a sense separates the modern from the pre-modern.

Most pre-modern conceptions of life and society did not subscribe to either a notion of an autonomous individual or for that matter to a separation of the private and the public. Thus to chance upon a separate sphere of politics and indeed the ‘political’ in a pre-modern context would be impossible. Like most concepts that we employ, the term political also has a history. This history tells us a lot about the nature and meaning of the concept itself. We will see that the term political sits together with a whole host of other concepts and assumptions and none of these can be separated from one another. They are part of a family of concepts that characterize modern thinking.

When we discuss the history of the term ‘political’ in this Unit, we are necessarily referring to its history in the western context. The term political has multiple meanings and is clearly a ‘political’ concept in that it has been disputed and debated. It is difficult to assign a final and singular meaning to the term political. We shall see in these two Units, to a great extent our understanding of the term political would depend on our conception of the state, individual, citizenship and so on. One of the earliest references to the idea of the ‘political’ is attributable to the ancient Greeks.

1.4 ‘POLIS’ IS POLITICAL

Most of you would be familiar with the term ‘*polis*’ that the Greeks employed. It is from here that we get the term political. *Polis* referred to the Greek city-state, actually implying a shared space and community. In the classical Greek understanding political referred to the shared context of community living and the decisions taken within the community. The *polis* was seen as that which encompassed all facets of life and everyone who lived within it. Of course you would also know that it was only Greek, adult, male property owning sections that constituted the *polis*. The Greeks saw no dichotomy in talking about the universality of polis on the one hand, and its exclusivity on the other hand.

The classical Greek understanding of the term political thus hinged upon the idea of community, and participation. It meant the activity of community living and communal decision-making. It evoked a community of people where all members belonged and took collective decisions regarding their future. Of course we should remind ourselves once again about the limited nature of the Greek notion of collective and universal membership of the *polis* and thus obviously the limited notion of the political. Clearly foreigners, women and slaves had no role to play in the polis and thus were excluded from the definition of the term political.

Significantly for us, classical Greek philosophy made no distinction between the private and the public. Indeed, it made no distinction between the *polis* and other facets of life. This meant that the political was all encompassing. Such a view was intrinsically linked with an organic view of community life. Every part and member of the *polis* was seen as inextricably linked with the other; hence decisions taken in the context of one part would be significant for the other. All aspects of life and living were thus part of the political. Thus, there was no place to seek shelter from the polis or the political, wherein political suggested a kind of life that would be committed to maintaining the balance and equilibrium of life within the *polis* through the decisions taken. Thus, the Greek notion of the political was committed to finding and determining the good life for the community, it did not separate the social from the political. This was so because there was no notion of a life that could be meaningful and purposeful outside of the membership of the community. The notion of an individual simply did not exist, an individual in abstraction and autonomous of the *polis* was inconceivable.

Let us turn to **Aristotle** in specific for greater clarity on this issue. Aristotle was of the opinion that the good life would be possible only through participation in the life of the *polis*, which he described as the final and perfect association. All associations according to Aristotle aim at some good; however, the highest good could be achieved only through membership of the *polis*. He explained the exclusion of women, slaves and children by referring to the 'essential' difference between greater (free, male) and lesser (unfree, female). These two classes of people however were linked according to Aristotle by a relationship of necessary super ordination. Aristotle considered this relationship to be natural and indeed essential for the preservation of both.

For Aristotle, the household constituted the non-public sphere within which the female was subsumed and was defined by. In Aristotle's understanding the household too being an association was aimed at good, but of a lesser nature as compared with the *polis*. Thus the life of the *polis* was considered to be naturally superior and those fit enough to be part of the political were obviously naturally superior as well. Women, children and slaves of

course provided the necessary background and condition for the life in the *polis*, he compared them to the flute makers and the men who participated in the political matters with the flute player!

Aristotle bifurcated the public (political) from private (apolitical) realms. The family for instance would be a lesser association, an apolitical association. The Greeks described those who did not participate in politics and were not part of the 'political' as idiots, and women were idiots in that sense. We can surely anticipate strong feminist objection to these ideas, which we shall take up in the next Unit. Those who participated in the public/political life were characterized by responsibility, rationality and were thus an integral part of the life of the public and of the *polis*. The non-political/private sphere was for those who were not fully rational and who could experience only limited goodness appropriate to their sphere. Within the Aristotelian philosophy, what ought to be because whatever ought to be has been actualized to – that is, is. Thus, Aristotle's theory could be used to justify and defend any kind of dominance or subordination.

This Aristoteleian understanding has had a far-reaching and deep impact on the nature of conceptualization of the political in the western political philosophy tradition. In the post-medieval period though, we will notice a shift in the conceptualization of the term 'political'. While the Greek understanding of the term political referred to the power to take part in decision-making it also suggested an ethical meaning wedded as it was to the pursuit of the 'good'.

Check Your Progress:

What is liberal philosophical discourse?

Discuss the Greek notion of the political.

Let us understand the relationship between power and the political in the next section.

1.5 POWER AND THE POLITICAL

With the gradual decline of feudalism in medieval Europe and the beginning of a new kind of life based on trade and mercantilism, the nature of the political began to undergo subtle but important changes. The political came to be seen as the arena for the assertion of power and indeed of force. **Bodin** and **Machiavelli** were among those who constructed the political as removed from the sphere of ethics and morals to one of power and force alone. Medieval political theory carrying on from the Aristotelian tradition had not separated ethics and morality from the political. The new understanding of politics as the exercise of force, of state as an organization of violence (tempered by law) reinforced Aristotle's distinction between the public and the private but added yet another division between politics and moral considerations.

In Machiavelli's understanding in order to be 'good' within the political sphere, the ruler had to 'bad' according to the standards of Christian morality. Thus, rules of conduct appropriate for one sphere (public) would not be appropriate for the other sphere. Consequently, the term good and bad lost any universal meaning, what was good in the private sphere would not work in politics and vice-versa.

The division between the private and the public, on which hinges the modern understanding of the political, very firmly excluded women from the public, while allowing men membership of both but with caveats attached. Men, because they occupy both spheres are subject to two disparate judgments in their capacities as public and private persons. Women, however, are totally immersed in the private, non-political sphere and therefore, would be judged by the single standard appropriate to that realm alone. **Hegel** drew a difference between the ethical life of a woman within a family and that of a man. The husband is as a citizen a self-conscious being who is part of the general life of the community, of the social whole, and at the same time is also a member of a particular household. He is a citizen as well as a husband, not so for the woman who is defined by her status as a wife and as a mother. Women in this situation are kind, virtuous and loving, all noble qualities that define private life. However, if such a woman were to attempt to be part of the political (public) she could do so only by forsaking her womanhood. Men on the other hand could be 'bad' in the political sphere but 'good' in private.

Politics comes to be seen as the realism of public power, the sphere of justice and systems of law. Women were not thought of as belonging to the

world of the political, rather, because of their capacities, they were expected to provide refuge to men from the harshness of the public life. A woman thus would be constantly judged by her private qualities and thus could be a 'good woman' in private. If she were to enter the political sphere she would continue to be evaluated by standards of private morality. Her moral superiority in fact comes ironically from her being publicly inferior. The non-political sphere comes to be seen as a private realm of feeling and sentiment, of moral persuasion. A sphere not subject to laws or rational standards. In this conception it is clear that women are part of the non-political and so are men in their private capacities, this bifurcation however was not available to women. Women are thus seen at all times as non-political and to be judged by the standards of the private, even if they do stray into the public, political world.

1.6 THE MODERN UNDERSTANDING OF THE POLITICAL

With the advent of modernity the understanding of the term 'political' becomes sharper. The political comes to be characterized by conflicts of interests and values within a given community. Whereas the Greeks thought of it as a collective decision making activity, by the time Europe is greeted capitalism, industrialization and a modern nation-state, politics was seen as conflictual and a space for assertion of force and power struggle. In this struggle within the political, friends and foes would be found and contests would be the norm. Thus, some people and some groups would occupy the 'political' space and have power over others. A specific set of institutions came to be associated with this activity of a certain group of people who would have power over others, and this came to be identified as the state. Thus, with modernity, it is the state that became the focus of the political and not the social or any other aspect of society.

The sovereign modern nation state as we know is integral to modernity as experienced in the west. On the other hand, was the autonomous, rational individual who would use his freedom to determine his choices-economic, political, religious, familial and so on similarly integral? The autonomy of the individual based on rationality was central to the new ethos that was helping Europe shake off the stifling ties imposed by the older, traditional feudal order. The flowering of renaissance culture and the reforms in the Church, the tremendous scientific advancements and of course the great strides made in manufacturing and trade were all developments that were premised on the free and unfettered individual.

Thus, it became very important to safeguard the limits of the legitimate intervention by the newly created sovereign modern nation-state that was the site of the 'political' in the lives and freedoms of the individuals. It is

thus that the distinction between the public and the private became so crucial to the understanding of modern politics and life. Those aspects of life that could be regulated by state legitimately came to be understood as constituting the public realm. Whereas those aspects of life of the individual that were out of bound for the state came to be described as the private realm. The boundaries between the private and the public have always been controversial and rather slippery.

The 'political' within the liberal conception came to be seen as a space that requires reasoned deliberation and action. The history of western philosophy tells us that from Aristotle to Hegel the assumption has been that women are incapable of reasoned deliberation and action. This belief worked itself into the liberal worldview, as well. However, the liberal conception of human beings was radically different from the Greek perception. While there is continuity in terms of the sharp bifurcation between the political and the non-political, the Aristotelian worldview saw the placement of women, slaves, children and foreigners as a natural and unalterable fact. Whereas, the liberal worldview begins with the fundamentally different assumption about human universality. The core principles of liberalism are individualism, universalism, egalitarianism and of course ameliorism. This implies that all individuals are equal and this equality stems from the fact that human beings are characterized by the possession of rationality. It is this quality that makes all human being equal, irrespective of their station in life, profession, property and dare one say sex. If all human beings have rationality and therefore they are equal, the argument to be made is that therefore everyone has the potential to improve and change. This wonderfully radical idea however has in a sense proved to be rather fatal for conventional liberal philosophy. Liberal feminists have famously argued that hence, women although stationed in the private sphere possess rationality because they are human beings and therefore are equal to men and should be able to place themselves comfortably in the public sphere. In the classical Greek outlook, no such alteration was possible, because their fundamental point of departure was inequality that was assumed to be natural and indeed even biological and hence unalterable, whereas in liberal philosophy the take off point is equality and the belief that all human beings are potentially capable of becoming individuals through the autonomous assertion of their rationality. This implied that change was possible, and women could eventually hone their rationality and acquire deliberative skills and assume their rightful place in the public sphere. Within the liberal worldview interestingly unlike in the classical conception it is the public which is the exclusive repository of good. However, ironically, there is great deal of worth attached to the private sphere that is secluded from state interference. Nonetheless there is no denying that it is only by belonging to the public that the full benefits and experiences of modern citizenship based on universality and equality could come to the individual.

Check Your Progress:

Discuss the division between the private and the public.

Explain the sovereign modern nation state.

Let us read why feminist are discomfort with the idea of the ‘political’.

1.7 FEMINIST DISCOMFORT WITH THE ‘POLITICAL’

This meant that while the bounties of freedom, autonomy and participation in the political were available to men since they possessed reason, it was not so for women. Much of the early feminist efforts were thus directed at establishing that women too possessed the ability to engage in reasoned deliberation and hence should be part of the political. The non-political sphere has been characterized as a space occupied by repetitive ‘natural’ activities, of love, nurturance, care and sacrifice. The political/ public sphere is characterized by reason, deliberation and authority. Since, women lacked these abilities they had no room in the political/public sphere. Even modern disciplines like psychology were pressed into service to justify women’s exclusion from the public/political sphere. Let us turn to **Freud** to see what he had to say... “Women have but little sense of justice”, “their social interests are weaker than those of men and their capacity for sublimation of their instincts is less”.(Rieff, 1959 (1979), p.184) .

Much of feminist theory and politics has had to contend with this notion of the ‘political’ that locates power and contest in the public realm and relegate women to the private realm characterized by the qualities of love, co-operation and sharing. Feminism in its various avatars has been battling this notion and trying to re-define the political— to expose the dark underbelly of power and contest the assumption that supposedly warm and loving institutions such as the family that have supposedly nothing to do with the public/political. Feminism has argued and campaigned for women’s presence, involvement and participation in the ‘political’ sphere. Feminists have argued that women are ‘political’ creatures just as men are and men can be intimate and caring just as women are usually understood to be. Feminists have argued that one does not have to step outside of one’s family and home to encounter the political and experience politics, it is immediate and intimate- within the most personal aspects of one’s life and hence the famous slogan ‘the personal is political’. In the next Unit we shall see the journey that feminism has undertaken to reach this understanding and in the process learn about the re-definition of the term political.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have studied some of the debates on the category of the political. It analyses the western background of the history of this particular concept. It demonstrates the ways in which the question of the political is linked to the ideas of state, individual and citizenship. It also exposed us to the Greek conception of the political. Thus, it shows the conceptual differences that mark the Greek thought and medieval political theory on this specific category. This Unit ends with modern and feminist renderings on notion of the political.

1.9 GLOSSARY

- Ethics** : It studies ideas that are deployed in choice, virtue, freedom, rationality, good, reasoning, obligation and duty.
- Liberalism** : An ideology that believes in freedom, individualism, consent and tolerance.
- Polis** : It refers to city-state.
- State** : A political system which defends sovereign jurisdiction with in territories and legitimate forms of violence.

1.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the liberal philosophical discourse and idea of political.
- 2) Explain the modern understanding of the political.
- 3) Do you agree that feminist are not comfortable with the idea of the 'political'. Explain it.

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