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The Term Politics Reconsidered in the Light of Recent Theoretical Developments

Valeri MODEBADZE

Abstract

This article deals with the problems of the definition of the term “politics.” The definition of “politics” varies from time to time and from place to place. In other words “politics” is a “loaded term.” It has a wide range of meanings when used in everyday life. Politics is defined in such different ways: as the study of conflict resolution, the art of government, the conduct and management of public affairs, and so on. The aim of this article is to explain the difficulties of defining the term “politics.” This research is based on the comparative method: two contradictory approaches to understanding politics are compared with each other, the narrow definition of politics and the broad definition of politics. The narrow definition of politics is a highly restricted understanding of politics. According to the narrow definition, politics is what takes place within the government and state departments: only politicians, government officials, members of the political parties are involved in politics. In contrast to the narrow definition of politics, broader conception of politics argues that politics is not only confined to a particular sphere, but also takes place in all aspects of human life. The problem of the definition of politics is closely linked with these two contradictory approaches to understanding politics.

Keywords: *politics; definition of politics; broad conceptions of politics; narrow conceptions of politics*

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Introduction

We encounter a great difficulty when we try to define the term “politics.” There is not just one legally accepted definition of politics but a wide range of definitions; In other words the term has a great number of acceptable and legitimate meanings. Thus, politics is a “loaded” term. Even respected authorities cannot agree what the subject is about. Whereas the natural sciences have a uniform technical vocabulary, an adequate and precise terminology with words of recognized meaning, politics doesn't have it. If the Mathematician speaks of a logarithm, the chemist of a chain reaction, the physicist of a molecule, their hearers know what is meant by those terms. But if political scientist speaks of socialism, conservatism, liberalism, politics, then everyone of his audience places on those his own personal interpretation, they have different opinions and therefore, it is difficult to achieve agreement between them. (Miller,1962) Further, as time passes new definitions of politics emerge which leads to the inevitable loss of any precise meaning of the term “politics.” The definition of “politics” varies from time to time and from place to place. For instance, in the nineteenth century the arena of business and commercial affairs was not considered the legitimate sphere of politics as it is today. Politics is defined in such different ways: as the exercise of power, exercise of authority, the making of collective decisions, the allocation of scarce resources, the practice of deception and manipulation, and so on. (Heywood, 1997)

Political situations arise out of disagreement. In other words the disagreement provides the basis for politics. The disagreement arises from fundamental differences of condition, status, power, opinion, and aim. People have different opinions, viewpoints and make different judgments. They differ from each other in such a variety of ways that it would be impossible to achieve agreement about everything. People disagree how the limited resources which are available to the society should be distributed. Should political power be concentrated in the hands of a few leaders, or should it be widely dispersed among the members of a society? Should everything be shared equally, for example, or do some people deserve a bigger share than others? Since it is possible to increase the resources available to a group (by conquest, technological advance or better management of existing resources), further questions arise. For example, what strategy should be employed to increase resources and what

is the best way to protect the resources which already exist? Since there is not a single correct answer to such questions, different people have different ideas about what is the best action to take. According to some commentators, the conflict which arises from the expression of different views is at the heart of politics. Politics is the study of conflict resolution. (Bentley, Dobson, Grant, Roberts, 1995)

People are social beings. They are members of society. In order to survive they have to co-operate and work together. When the people work together there is a need to make decisions about how the problems that arise by working should be solved, or how the resources available to the group are to be shared out. Politics is the study of how such decisions are made. It may also be the study of how such decisions should be made.

Some political scientists define politics as the process by which scarce resources are allocated within a social unit (be it a city, a state, a nation, or an organization) for the purpose of providing for human needs and desires.

There is no universal definition of politics. Politics has been defined in many different ways. The different views of politics examined here are as follows: Politics as the art of government, politics as public affairs, politics as the study of conflict resolution, politics as the study of power.

Politics as the art of government

The chancellor Bismarck told the German Reichstag “politics is not a science ... but an art.” In other words he believed that politics was the art of government. This classical interpretation of politics was evolved from the original meaning of the term in Ancient Greece. (Heywood, 1997)

The word “politics” comes from the Greek word “polis,” meaning everything that concerns or belongs to the “polis,” or city-state. Since the city-states no longer exist, the modern form of this definition is “what concerns the state.” Thus, politics can be defined as the study of the state, its aims and purposes – the institutions by which those are going to be realized, its relations with its individual members and with other states. Politics is also defined as the study of the government – a collection of officers who make, interpret and enforce rules for the whole community. This definition

of politics offers a highly restricted view of politics. According to this definition politics takes place just within the government departments, cabinet rooms and legislative chambers. This means that politics is the matter of politicians, civil servants and lobbyists. According to this view the vast majority of the people are not involved in politics. All the institutions that are not engaged in “running the country” are regarded as “non-political.” (Heywood, 1997)

This definition can, however, be narrowed still further. This is evident in the tendency to treat politics as an activity carried on by certain designated organizations (“parties”). In other words politics is regarded as an activity connected with political parties. Thus, only politicians are considered as “political,” whereas civil servants are seen as “non-political.” In the popular mind, politics is closely associated with the activities of political parties and politicians. This extremely narrow view of politics helps to explain why negative images have so often been attached to the world politics. Politics is often described as a negative phenomenon because only politicians are seen as decision-makers. .

Politics as public affairs

Is politics something associated solely with government and state? The term is widely used in other context than that of the government and state. People are often said to be acting politically in their relations with their bosses and colleagues in an office, or in the management of the club of some kind, or in many other situations in which government, state and political parties are not mentioned. Nevertheless, much western political thinking rests on a distinction between the public realm and private life. The distinction between “the political” and “the non-political” coincides with the division between an essentially public sphere of life and private sphere. How can we differentiate the public sphere from private sphere? The traditional division between the public realm and private realm conforms to the distinction between the state and civil society. The institutions of the state are considered as the part of the public sector, whereas the civil society belongs to private sector. Thus, public sector is regarded as “political”, whereas the private sector is considered to be “non-political”. Thus, politics is an essentially “public” activity and it does not take place in private sphere of life. It does not have right to infringe upon “private” affairs and institutions.

Politics as the study of conflict resolution

Some political scientists see conflict as the essence of politics. Conflict is a necessary characteristic of society. Human beings differ from each other, they come from varying cultural backgrounds and have differing and complex set of preferences. People's wants are infinite and the resources possessed by societies are limited and therefore generally insufficient to satisfy everybody's desires fully. Since the resources available to society are limited, choices have to be made. (Bentley, Dobson, Grant, Roberts, 1995) It is the necessity of making such choices which leads to conflict. The conflict does not take place between individuals but also exists between larger groups – between countries, as well as within them. There is a competition for access to, or control over, a society's resources. Some political scientists see politics as a particular means of abolishing conflict by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force, so that people can live in reasonable harmony with each other. Politics is the art of finding peaceful resolutions to conflict, through compromise and the building of consensus. (Garner)

Politics as the study of power

On hearing the word politics, what usually springs to mind are images of state institutions, political parties, law enforcement agencies and various departments of government. But politics is not only confined to a particular sphere, but also takes place in every corner of human existence. According to the sociologists Dowse & Hughes (1972) politics is about power. They say: “politics occurs when there are differentials in power.” This suggests that: “Any social relationship which involves power differentials is political. Political relationships would extend from parents assigning domestic chores to their children to teachers enforcing discipline in the classroom; from a manager organizing a workforce to a general ordering troop into battle.” (Haralambos & Holborn, 1995)

Power is the ability to make other people do whatever you want either by threat, sanctions or through manipulation. Politics is, in essence, power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means.

Leftwich argues that politics exists at every level and in every sphere of human societies. Politics is the defining characteristic of all human groups. Politics takes place not only within the institutions of the state, but also occurs in private sphere of life. Thus, all people are somehow involved in politics. It influences the lives of all of us whether or not we participate in politics. “Politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal,

public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies.” (Adrian Leftwich, 1984)

Conclusion

Politics is difficult to define because of the contradiction between the broad and the narrow conceptions of politics. According to the narrow conception of politics only politicians are involved in politics. In the popular mind politics is closely associated with politicians and the machinery of government. Politics is often portrayed as an essentially state-bound activity. Most people are considered to be “outside” politics because they are not involved in decision-making process. Critics of the narrow view of politics define it in broader terms. They argue that politics exists within and outside the institutional boundaries of the modern state. They believe that politics is not just confined to the actions of government but also takes place in every corner of human existence. Political theorists disagree about whether 'politics' should be defined narrowly or broadly.

Politics has been understood differently by different thinkers and within different traditions. In addition, the definition of politics changes as time passes and societies develop. Political Scientists disagree about the definition of politics and there is a lack of consensus on its meaning. What is politics? Is it something associated solely with specific institutional arenas? Or is it found in all groups and organizations? It is difficult to draw the boundaries between the political and non-political. Nobody can tell us with complete certainty what politics is because of the wide range of meanings attributed to this concept.

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