What is Politics?

Edited by Adrian Leftwich

Preface

Adrian Leftwich

This book is based on a collection of essays on the different conceptions and understandings of politics which was published twenty years ago (Leftwich, 1984). That edition arose out of a series of discussions in the early 1980s, in the Politics Department at the University of York, in the United Kingdom, about the way in which the undergraduate syllabus at York should be structured so as to introduce students most effectively to the discipline of Politics. It soon emerged in those discussions that one of the key issues which shaped the differences in approach to the content and structure of an undergraduate degree was that many, if not all, of us had very different understandings of what 'politics' is, and what it is not. To new students coming afresh to the discipline, that might seem surprising, but not so to colleagues and older hands, since any experienced academic in this field will know that the conception of politics one adopts directly influences not only the questions one asks but also the framework of analysis one uses and also, to some degree, one's political practices. And so it seemed that it might be fruitful if we could articulate more sharply, and at some length, what these different conceptions of politics were. Our hope was that this would, at least, help to clarify such distinctions while at the same time revealing where they overlapped. But it was also hoped that a book of essays on the subject would serve the important purpose of introducing new students (at both undergraduate and graduate levels) to the range of approaches they would encounter (or should be aware of) in the discipline of Politics, Political Science or, under its now slightly older and perhaps more dignified

title, of Government. The 1984 book was the fruit of those endeavours.

The book was widely used in the United Kingdom and elsewhere – in both Australia and South Africa, for instance – and was translated into Spanish for use in Mexico and other countries in Latin America. It went out of print in the early 1990s. Despite many requests for a new edition, there was simply not the opportunity to revise and re-publish it until recently when David Held and Louise Knight at Polity in Cambridge persuaded me to edit the present book.

As with the 1984 edition, the central aim of this book is to introduce readers coming to the formal study of Politics for the first time to some of the diverse meanings attached to the word 'politics'. It is hoped that this will help them to situate their own understanding, studies and thinking in a wider comparative context of competing conceptions. Throughout, the use of the word 'politics', with a lowercase 'p', refers to the actual activity out there in the world, while the word 'Politics' (or Political Science), with an upper-case 'P', refers to the academic discipline, that is to the study of political life. With a primarily undergraduate readership in mind, all the authors have organized their contributions around one key question which forms the title of the book: what is politics?

A second objective of the book is to use these different conceptions of politics to stimulate debate amongst both students and staff, not only about the nature of politics as an activity, but also about Politics as a discipline. For there can be nothing more important for any discipline than regular and far-reaching self-appraisal of, and argument about, its essential focus and its fundamental concerns and approaches.

Three of the essays from the 1984 edition (by Alex Callinicos on the Marxist approach to politics, by Peter

Nicholson on politics as force and by Albert Weale on politics as collective choice) have been retained, but each has been fully revised and updated. My own chapters (on thinking politically and the political approach to human behaviour) take forward some ideas outlined in the 1984 edition, but add new arguments. All the other chapters are new and the focus of each reflects a distinctive contribution to the continuing debate about the nature of politics. Though there was a chapter in the 1984 edition on politics as being about government, the new chapter by B. Guy Peters is about *governing*, which is conceptually wider and incorporates notions derived from the new institutionalism. Bernard Crick's new chapter restates and advances the thesis he originally argued in his classic study *In Defence of Politics* that politics is a distinctive form of rule and that not all forms of rule are expressions of politics. Judith Squires offers a feminist conception of politics and points out why and how this view has helped to broaden our understanding of the scope of politics and its inextricable link with relations of power, whether in or between societies or in the domestic domain. Neil Carter's account of the human–nature interaction as itself a political process amplifies this broad connection of politics even more, reminding us that human societies are an inextricable part of an environment. In another new chapter, Adam Swift shows concisely how important political philosophy is for understanding politics in its contribution to the development of clear thinking about complex issues, while Salwa Ismail offers a very important insight into Islamic conceptions of politics. She argues with great effect that simplistic western notions about a single Islamic understanding of politics (that it is inseparable from religion) are deeply flawed and that there is as much debate and variance in thinking about politics in Islamic discourses as there are in western ones. Finally, we have tended to think of politics as something that occurs within

nation states and that international relations concern the relations between states. Tony McGrew shows in his new chapter that the interpenetration of national and international processes makes this distinction quite untenable.

It is possible to read each of these chapters and appreciate the distinctiveness of their individual conceptions of politics and hence the unique contribution which they each make to our definition and understanding of politics. But, equally, it is also possible to see overlapping concerns which converge on some common themes and, in particular, on power: its sources and forms; its uses, abuses and effects; how – if at all – power is distributed and constrained by norms, by competition, by rules, regimes and institutions and by other countervailing sources and centres of power, exercised by and through states and governments, private corporations or international organizations. But, as I shall argue in [chapter 1](#), even while this underlying concern with power can be identified in the different approaches, it is still possible to classify them, broadly, in terms of the boundaries they draw around their definitions of the sites and scope of politics.

My first and major acknowledgement must be to all the contributors to this volume. They have cooperated wonderfully in its production. They were open-minded and uncomplaining in the face of my editorial badgering and suggestions and they directed their efforts whole-heartedly to meeting the central purpose of the book. My special thanks go to them. David Held, Louise Knight and Rachel Kerr at Polity together constitute the most generous, helpful and efficient publishers one could ever hope for. Without their constant support and encouragement, projects such as these would not see the light of day.

REFERENCE

Leftwich, Adrian (ed.) (1984) *What is Politics? The Activity and its Study* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell).

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Thinking Politically: On the politics of Politics

Adrian Leftwich

1 Introduction: Argument and Issues

What is politics? This apparently simple question is not as straightforward as it may first seem, and it raises many further and difficult questions. For example, is politics a universal feature of *all* human societies, past and present? Or is it confined to some types of society only and, if so, which societies and why? Is it possible that some societies have been, are or will be without politics? Is politics tied to certain sites, that is institutional arenas where it takes place? Is it solely concerned with issues and decisions affecting *public* policy, that is, the whole society? Or may politics be found in all groups and organizations, large or small, formal or informal? And how, if at all, is it to be distinguished from other social and economic activities? For instance, do wars, civil conflicts and revolutions represent extreme forms of politics? Or are they the result of the *failure*, or collapse, of politics? Does bargaining between businesses over prices and terms of contracts, or between managers and workers over pay and conditions, count as politics? Or are they simply expressions of economic processes in the form of market forces? Can they be both? And what of discussions in a family as to whether to redecorate the kitchen or go on holiday? Is that politics?

The issue can be taken further: is politics an activity which is confined to the human species alone? Or is it possible to

detect politics (however rudimentary) amongst other species, as Frans de Waal argues in his entertaining book about power and sex amongst the chimpanzees, entitled *Chimpanzee Politics* (1982). In that book he defines and illustrates chimpanzee politics as 'social manipulation to secure and maintain influential positions' (de Waal, 1982: 212). His definition is not significantly different from Harold Lasswell's account of the study of politics as 'the study of influence and the influential', as set out in his classic book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (1958).

While the last question is not one explored in this volume, all the others are addressed in different ways in an attempt to answer the organizing question of the book: What is politics?

But, to start, in this introductory chapter I wish to concentrate on three main issues. First, I provide some reasons why it is important to have an operational definition of politics. Next, I offer a preliminary way of distinguishing key elements in different views about politics, with some suggestions as to how readers might use these to develop their own views. I shall suggest that two broad approaches to the definition and conceptualization of politics dominate the debate. The first – the arena, or site, approach – holds that politics is an activity found only in certain kinds of societies (normally, those with states) and in certain kinds of institutional sites or processes *within* those societies. The second approach is the processual approach, which holds that politics is a much more generalized and universal process which has existed wherever the human species has been found (though it certainly takes many different forms), and hence is a characteristic and *necessary* feature, if not a function, of *all* societies, past and present: it always has been and always will be, and therefore stateless societies have politics, too. Finally, I explore some aspects of the

characteristics of a 'discipline' (and the discipline of Politics in particular).

Throughout, my argument will be that because it is such a highly contested subject, debates about its proper definition and the scope of its subject matter are themselves political, and that it is not likely that there will ever be universal agreement on either what politics, as an activity, is or what the appropriate composition of the discipline of Politics should be. Nonetheless, it is possible to see a number of common concerns in all approaches which suggests, in turn, that there may be a little more common ground between them than at first appears to be the case. That common ground, I argue, is fundamentally their collective concern with the analysis of the origins, forms, distribution and control of power. And I suggest that the main differences in approach – though not the only differences – have less to do with disagreements about what politics is and more to do with explanatory differences about how politics happens, how it works, and especially how it is to be analysed, understood and taught.

2 The Need for a Definition

Why should we, as students of politics, need to think about its meaning – even in a preliminary and provisional way – and why should we be self-conscious about it? I think there are three main reasons.

A common discipline? The particular or the general?

First, it is clearly and obviously important for students of any subject to be clear about what they think they are studying. The problem here, however, is that it may often appear that what is being studied as politics in one place

seems very different to what is being studied elsewhere. For instance, students of Political Science in the USA are very likely to find themselves studying the American system of federal government; its political parties, interest groups, elections and public opinion; some major public policy issues and the nature, forms and even desirability of democracy. Students of Politics in the United Kingdom, on the other hand, where much of the discipline remains anchored to its two foundations in the study of political philosophy and political institutions, are more likely to be required to study some political philosophy (or normative theory) – perhaps Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill or even John Rawls. But they would also be likely to study United Kingdom political institutions and processes (and maybe the European Union), and rival interpretations of these, plus being able to choose option courses dealing with such areas as political ideologies, comparative politics (which might include the USA) and perhaps the politics of post-colonial states in the developing world. And in a South African university, by contrast, teaching may be more sharply focused on the history and character of South African politics and its institutions, perhaps also traditions in South African political thought, varying interpretations of the rise and fall of the apartheid system and the emergence of a new postapartheid politics in the context of wider theories and the comparative analysis of democratization.

Even *within* these countries, students at different universities might find that their studies varied significantly. The extent of this variation might depend on whether they were only studying a few courses, or less, in Politics, or whether they were majoring in it. But it would also depend on what the particular academics, the faculty, chose to teach and believed students ought to know about. For instance, some students might have to do foundation

courses on the basic concepts and theories in Politics; others might have to study various methodologies for political research. In some departments, the emphasis might be on the scientific and quantitative analysis of politics, on measurement and empirical analysis, whereas elsewhere the approach might be more historical, normative, evaluative and qualitative. On the face of it, there appears to be a wide variation in what is taught under the formal subject called Politics, Government or Political Science. It is thus worth asking what common issues students of Politics from these three countries – and others – would be able to discuss, if they were to meet.

Such a problem would be far less likely to arise if medical students from those three countries were to meet. Though teaching methods might be different, and though attention to the local patterns of diseases and their treatment might vary from country to country, there would probably be a much more common and comparable grounding in the basic terminology, concepts and theories (the constituent sciences, so to speak) of medicine (such as physiology, anatomy, neurology and biochemistry, for example) which would enable such students to talk to each other about medical issues and discuss causes, diagnoses and treatments.

The question that arises, then, is this. In what way can it be said that students of Politics are studying the same thing, politics, and could they have a coherent and mutually intelligible discussion about it, as the medical students might? Or would they be talking past each other because each would have only a limited and partial understanding of the 'politics' and institutions of their own society and perhaps one or two others? Are there common constituent elements in the discipline of Politics which represent the basic explanatory tools for the analysis of politics? If so, what are they? In short, is there a common terminological,

conceptual and theoretical apparatus which underpins the discipline? If there were, then it would not matter if American, British and South African students studied different forms and expressions of politics. They would still be able to have a coherent discussion about politics, using their own local or national studies of politics as illustrative material to demonstrate and compare the interesting ways in which deeper and wider patterns, theories and processes of politics are expressed in different ways in their different countries.

So the first question students of politics might want to ask themselves when thinking about the discipline and the activity is this: is my aim to understand the *particular* politics, policies and institutions of a given country or countries? Or do I aim to find deeper and wider *general* principles and processes of politics, if such exist, for which these country studies are particular examples and expressions? In short, am I studying, or hoping to study, some kind of 'science' of politics in which there are general processes to be uncovered and analysed; or am I studying a particular, contingent and locally situated set of processes which is unique, *sui generis*, and illustrative of no wider underlying processes – for there are none? Putting it simply, is the study of politics a scientific endeavour which seeks to identify, on an explanatory and probabilistic basis, some *general* regularities, patterns and processes (if not laws) underlying *all* politics, as economists claim to do for economic activity, or as chemists might do for chemical reactions and interactions? Or is the study of politics a more humanistic, historical, normative and hence non-scientific exercise, concerned with the qualitative understanding and evaluative analysis (and moral judgement) of *particular* processes at particular times and in particular places? Or can it and should it be both,

enabling these different forms and levels of analysis to complement each other (Birch, 2002: 22–257)?

Definitions shape interpretations

Second, it is important to recognize that any definition, conception or understanding of politics is likely to carry with it quite far-reaching implications for methodology. That is to say, the way one defines politics will significantly influence what one looks for and how one analyses politics, that is, the methodology of enquiry. And it is important to be self-aware about this, for any one approachis likely to exclude – at least in part – other approaches, other forms of measurement, evidence and explanation. An example will help to illustrate the point.

In the course of the 1960s, and more especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the system of racial domination in South Africa, loosely known as apartheid, came under considerable pressure. Internal resistance, sabotage of public installations, guerrilla incursions, strikes and stay-at-homes had intensified. External pressures, including war in Angola, boycotts of South African goods and sports teams, widespread and intensifying international condemnation, a decline in foreign investment and general cultural isolation, had increased. Yet the National Party government, which had ruled South Africa since 1948 and had deepened and militarized coercive racial domination, showed no sign whatsoever of serious reform or change. A Commonwealth investigation in the mid-1980s saw little prospect of liberalization, let alone democratization.

Then, with very little warning, on 2 February 1990, the new president of South Africa, Mr F. W. de Klerk, stood up in the South African parliament, the House of Assembly, and effectively did, in Nelson Mandela's words, 'what no other South African head of state had ever done: he truly began

to dismantle the apartheid system and lay the groundwork for a democratic South Africa' (Mandela, 1995: 666). Not only were political prisoners released, but banned political organizations (like the African National Congress, the Communist Party and the Pan-Africanist Congress) were legalized. It was made clear that negotiations would commence to create a new constitution for a non-racial and democratic political system. Within a few years, all the apartheid (racially discriminatory) legislation was abolished, new elections took place on the basis of universal suffrage and an African National Congress government assumed power under a new constitution in 1994.

Though there had been prior rumours that Mr Mandela and others might be released and that some minor reforms to the political system might be introduced, almost no one predicted that apartheid would be so fully dismantled. So the question is why did this happen? The answer is of course a political answer. But what kind of political answer? What were the politics that brought this about and how does one explain it? The manner in which one defines politics will strongly shape one's analysis of what happened and why. In considering three rival interpretations for the fall of apartheid, it is first worth bearing in mind some basic differences in approaches to political explanation.

Many explanatory approaches overlap and merge, but one major division is between those approaches which emphasize the role of *structure* and those which emphasize the role of *agents*. Structural explanations will look to broad features in the social, economic and political structures of a society, for instance in the level of industrialization, the growth of cities and the shape of social class structure (for example the size, wealth and interests of a business class, or the organization and power of the working class). A good example of a structural

approach to politics comes from a recent paper on corruption: 'The many factors that contribute to corruption tend to be more common in poorer countries and in economies in transition than in rich countries. Thus, at some point in time, economic development reduces the level of corruption in a country' (Tanzi, 1998: 586). Note here the primary explanatory emphasis placed on structure, and the relative absence of mention of agents and institutions.

On the other hand, agency explanations will be more inclined to focus on the role of agents – individuals or even parties – in shaping political change. Certainly the 'great men or women in history' approach is illustrative of the agency approach, giving explanatory weight to the role of particular individuals at particular times in particular places. On this view, the roles of Messrs Mandela and de Klerk were of critical importance, and had there been different leaders at the time, the argument goes, the outcome might have been very different. Such an approach to politics is often found in political histories, but Political Scientists tend to place greater analytical weight on deeper and more theoretical explanations than those confined to the actions of particular agents, although it is often possible and desirable to combine both of these approaches.

Now of course, structures cannot '*do*' things: only individual agents or actors do, singly or more commonly in groups – and normally through existing or new institutions. And therefore all agents nonetheless act within a particular structural context of constraint and opportunity, and it is the relationship between such contexts and agents that is important to grasp (Hay, 2002: 128). But even then, different conceptions of politics will deploy different ways of exploring those relationships, as shown in the following

examples of different interpretations of the collapse of apartheid.

(1) The so-called 'rational choice' conception of politics (as explored in this volume in Albert Weale's chapter, 'Politics as Collective Choice') holds that politics (everywhere) is best understood as a kind of market-place in which people pursue their interests in such a way as to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. This theory of politics is complicated and has many strands. But its fundamental assumption is that people – whoever they are and wherever they are – are rational agents, calculating their own interests and advantages, as they perceive them, and choosing between particular courses of action aimed at achieving desired ends under circumstances where their resources are scarce and their wants many. Of course these calculations change over time as the relationship between the costs and benefits of certain actions and policies changes, as context – or structure – changes. Some things, some policies, some practices may become more expensive over time, forcing a re-think about priorities, that is about whether it is worth continuing with them, as well as the costs of change.

In the South African case, such theorists might argue, white South Africa had long maintained a monopoly on political power and had used that power to implement the system of apartheid which had, over time, yielded great benefits to them, and relatively few costs. Their standard of living rose continually, they had prime access to good education and jobs, black labour was cheap and plentiful and investment flowed in as South Africa appeared stable and growth prospects good. Irrespective of any moral considerations, 'rational' calculation appeared to suggest that apartheid generated more benefits than costs (at least in the short term) and this made most of white South Africa support it.

But as the internal resistance began to grow and shift from nonviolent to more violent means, as blacks organized internally and externally to promote their cause and their interests, the regime cracked down even harder through more draconian laws of control and, as a consequence, attracted increasingly hostile international attention. As a result, external pressures began to intensify against the regime in the 1980s and white South Africa (and the government in particular) began to recalculate, finding that the *costs* of maintaining apartheid were now beginning to overtake the *benefits*. The economy began to decline, internal defence and security costs soared, wars on the borders brought about many deaths and injuries to their soldiers, cultural and sporting isolation became more and more frustrating, travel constraints made life difficult – and much more. As these *structural* consequences of apartheid generated more and more costs, the 'rational' calculation was that it was time to seek a peaceful and negotiated resolution. The African National Congress (ANC), too, it could be argued, realized that it could never seize state power in an outright revolutionary victory as had happened in China, Cuba or Vietnam, and therefore it also saw the advantages of a pact or a 'deal'. Crudely stated, the collapse of apartheid is best explained by agents (especially the elites on both sides) recognizing through a rational calculation of changing costs and benefits that their respective interests lay in doing a deal. The negotiations about the new constitution, which took almost four years to finalize, were the working out of that deal. So a conception of politics as the complex interplay of different individual and collective interests in the pursuit of their respective self-interests requires that analysts first identify the interests at stake and then seek to measure evidence of the changing balance of costs and benefits to the various parties of different policy options. The political outcomes (in non-revolutionary contexts) represent, at any given

point, the accommodations and compromises each interest makes in achieving the best deal it can get under the circumstances.

(2) The Marxist conception of politics (as Alex Callinicos highlights in his chapter) holds that politics is nothing less than class conflict. Where there are no classes, there is no fundamental conflict and no politics. Accordingly, when analysing politics, Marxists look to the analysis of class interests and relative class power in order to explain what happens. In the case of South Africa, a Marxist approach might well argue that two contradictory processes were working themselves out. On the one hand, the economic growth of South Africa during and after the Second World War had produced a fairly successful diversification of the economy from its earlier reliance on primary resources (agriculture and mining). This process, which stimulated industrialization and urbanization, generated a growing working class, which was almost entirely black, and served thereby to strengthen black political and trade union organizations. These groups increasingly demanded social justice and equality on behalf of the excluded majority and couched their demands in terms of non-racist democratic socialist objectives, as outlined in the Freedom Charter. These and other organizations pitted themselves against both the state and the (almost exclusively white) owners of capital.

Thus, the 'success' of a racist capitalist system in promoting growth (for a while) had produced the very class and the ideology that was to threaten it. As black radicalism deepened, it promoted strikes, demonstrations and disruption. When banned or driven underground, these organizations turned to more violent forms of revolutionary struggle – using sabotage and guerrilla tactics. Instability spread and economic decline followed. If capital in South Africa was to save itself from this downward cycle, whites

would need to come to some sort of agreement with blacks. So on this view of politics Marxists will look for explanations less concerned with the individual and collective calculations of self-interest and more to the changing character, organizational capacity and relative power of respective classes to advance their class interests against the interests of other classes. The end of apartheid should therefore be seen as the only way in which South African capitalism could protect itself from the threatening contradictions of unfolding race and class conflict – at least for the time being.

(3) Finally, to complete this illustration of how different conceptions of politics steer explanations in different (though not necessarily exclusive) directions, how would those who hold that politics is about *governing* interpret the demise of apartheid? It is important to note two preliminary points here. First, the notion of 'governing' is wider than that of 'government', because the latter tends to imply *formal* institutions of government, and it is clear that not all societies have them, but all societies have in some respects to 'govern' themselves. In addition, institutions other than those of government are involved in governing, at least in the broadest sense. For instance, organizations of business or labour, schools, voluntary groups – like consumers' associations – are all involved in one way or another in setting rules or conventions (or seeking to do so) which govern some aspects of behaviour of their members. So the idea of politics as being about *governing* has a wider applicability than politics being about *government*.

Moreover, the concept of '*governance*' is wider still. It refers to the general patterns and interlocking systems of governing across both public and private spheres by which the overall social, economic and political life of a society is organized and managed, whether democratically or not, whether there are formal institutions or not and whether

done by national, international or transnational agencies and institutions. In short, in its broadest sense – and it is broad – *governance* refers to the web of formal or informal institutions, rules, norms and expectations which govern behaviour in societies and without which the very idea of a human society is impossible.

Second, when politics is understood as being about the practices of governing, it is usually quite closely and self-consciously allied to an institutional approach. Simply stated, this approach holds that *institutions* are fundamental in shaping political (and other) behaviour in societies and are therefore vital to our understanding of the forms and features of politics.

But what are institutions? Political institutions (indeed any institutions) have been defined as 'collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate action in terms of relations between roles and situations' (March and Olsen, 1989: 160). In short, institutions are the 'rules of the game of a society' (North, 1995: 23) or, better still, the rules of the *games* of society, since all spheres of behaviour – cultural, social, economic or political – are shaped and constrained by different sets of rules. So, in prescribing (by law or by custom) patterned and predictable ways of behaviour, institutions (sets of rules) reduce uncertainty about how to act in diverse situations. Even in post-revolutionary situations, new regimes, social movements and groups move quickly to establish new institutions – that is, new ways of doing things – to shape and constrain behaviour in new post-revolutionary ways. And to count as an institution, such a set of rules or agreements must endure over time, must constrain or shape the behaviour of its members and normally be sustained by some kind of consensus amongst them.

Now institutions may be formal or they may be informal. *Formal* institutions are recognizable by the rules and regulations constituting and governing the conduct of organizations such as companies, universities, associations and armies or, in the more obviously political sense, legislatures, political parties and bureaucracies – all of which shape and constrain human behaviour and interaction within them (North, 1995: 23; Peters, 1999: 18). *Informal* institutions, on the other hand, may be understood in a much looser way as the customs, norms of behaviour, unwritten rules, or generally agreed ways of doing things within a society and its culture more broadly. They range from forms of greeting, to methods of conducting meetings and canvassing at election times (though some formal rules, as well, govern that), to conventions within the culture covering social interaction, marriage customs and burial ceremonies.

As will be clear from the above, institutions are not confined to the political sphere. Moreover, the way in which 'political' and 'non-political' institutions interact is very important in shaping overall patterns of governance. For example, a market – or *the* market in the broadest sense of the term – is also an institution, shaping how people exchange things (there may be barter, or sale for money, for instance). But markets may also be governed by formal rules and regulations which are not devised by the participants in the market but imposed by legislation, such as laws governing health and hygiene in the food or restaurant trades, or working conditions or minimum wages. In this case, one sees how one set of institutions (political ones) can impact on another set of institutions (markets). Provided there are not significant contradictions between the aims, objectives and procedures of one set of institutions and those of others, there is usually no major problem. More generally, societies are usually more stable

when there is consistency and continuity across their institutional spheres, both private or public, such that these institutions mutually support and enhance each other. (Of course, while such stability may seem a good thing, it can also give rise to conservatism and a hostility to change or innovation, which is a separate question.) But where there is tension and inconsistency between the relative power, aims and practices of institutions (for example, between church and state, or market and state, or patronage and meritocracy), problems of governance can become acute because there is, at the very least, uncertainty and, at most, outright conflict about which institutions predominate and which rules apply. The deep and sometimes violent conflicts between workers and bosses in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European politics (and elsewhere since then) were about many issues: but they were fundamentally about which rules would govern the distribution not only of power but also of resources in society.

Having explored some aspects of the centrality of institutions to patterns of governing and governance, I can now return to the case of South Africa because it illustrates very well the problems caused when tensions emerge between different institutional spheres and goals, thereby severely affecting the governing of the country. The central point here is that from the perspective of those who see politics as being about *governing*, the system of apartheid needs to be understood as having been a massive *political* interference (by the formal institutions of government through legislation and regulation) in the *economic* institutions of the markets for land, labour and capital. By making rules for these markets which required them to discriminate on the grounds of colour or ethnicity – for example, in determining which colour groups could have access to which jobs, or to land or capital – the political

institutions intervened in, and distorted, the economic institutions. While this may have worked at first, sooner or later there was bound to be conflict between these institutional spheres and goals. For the aims and outputs of the political institutions sought to establish and sustain white rule, while the aims and processes of market institutions were to make profits which the political constraints began to damage. On this view, the political restraints on economic and personal freedom (which apartheid so massively entailed) inevitably served to distort or strangle economic growth and sooner or later would have had to be eliminated if capitalist economic growth was to prosper.

It should be clear by now that each of these three different conceptions of politics directs our attention to different levels and spheres of evidence for explanatory purposes, although there are some obvious areas of overlap and common interest amongst them. The same is true for other definitions of politics. Each, that is to say, contains within itself a particular method of enquiry and a distinctive priority of research questions which yield very different explanations to the others, though it is important to see that there are points where they can usefully be made to intersect and complement each other. And this is the second reason why we need to be self-consciously clear or, at least, think about what we mean by politics: the way we define politics can profoundly affect how we 'do' Politics.

Thinking clearly, thinking politically

This brings me to a third reason why facing the question 'What is Politics?' is so important. As Adam Swift emphasizes in his chapter in this book, one of the main contributions of political philosophy to our understanding of politics is its potential for developing consistency and clarity of thought and judgement. In practice, any attempt

to spell out meanings, make distinctions or clarify understandings will help this process, whether in the context of political philosophy or not. I hope that I have already shown how different conceptions of politics carry with them far-reaching implications for methods of analysis and usually lead to different conclusions. But this process of clarification is not only about analytical or explanatory activity: it is also about listening. And listening can be a very active thing.[1] It is to be hoped that this book will help that, too, so that next time a reader 'listens' to a political discussion – in the media, club, pub or sitting-room – he or she may be in a better position to recognize the kind of conception of politics which is being employed and whether the argument which follows is consistent, clear or true to its underlying assumptions and meanings. In short, we hope that, when 'listening', readers of this book will be in a better position to recognize the level or sphere of discourse about politics which is being advanced and hence be in a better position both to understand what is being said, really understand, and to engage in argument about it.

3 A Simple Classification of Meanings of Politics

There are three useful preliminary distinctions to make when thinking about how one might classify different types of meaning of politics and where one might situate oneself in relation to them.

Process or arena?

To return to the introductory section of this chapter, it is probably the case that the single most important factor influencing the way theorists conceive of politics is whether they define it primarily in terms of a *process*, or whether they define it in terms of a site or an *arena*, that is, the

place or institutional forum where it happens. The latter, or *arena*, approach tends to have a narrower and sharper focus (normally the state and the institutions of government and local government – sometimes, in a more comparative context, including kings, chiefs or emperors and their courts and their relations with the public). What characterizes this *arena* approach is the sometimes implicit but always important contention that only governments define goals, policies and binding decisions for a whole society and that is what politics is about: the debates, conflicts and agreements about what policies are to be implemented, and by whom, and, therefore, what rules apply. Policies for a school, private club or corporation are not binding outside the organization and, even then, may require wider legislation of a political kind to be binding within it. Those who adopt this site or arena approach hold that politics is about the activities which lead up to such binding decisions, and the institutions which make them. They are therefore much less inclined to accept that politics can be defined as a more generalized process in human societies which also occurs beyond these arenas or sites of binding policy-making. But is this too limiting a conception of politics when we can see many of the features of public or site-based politics replicated in private organizations and small-scale interactions between people?

Those who do regard this approach as limited tend to see politics as a much wider phenomenon in human societies, defining it as a general *process* which is not confined to certain institutional arenas or sites. Of course this involves the activities and relations of public institutions such as states, governments, parties and pressure groups – and some may even see this as the most important form of politics. But they go further and identify the activities they call politics as occurring pervasively in a much wider range of institutions, activities and groups – for example, in

families or in voluntary associations, beyond or below the state or formal institutions of government, and wherever questions of power, control, decision-making and resource allocation between two or more people occur in any human society, past or present. Moreover, politics on this view is also clearly to be found in non-state (or stateless) societies, within and between all the groups which constitute them, whether they be based on kin or clan, gender or age. Even more broadly than this, as Neil Carter argues in his chapter in this book, politics is embedded in the necessary and pervasive interaction between humans and nature. But does such an encompassing view mean that every human interaction is political in some respect? If so, and if politics is thus so broadly defined, what is left that is distinctive about it?

Extensive or limited?

This initial distinction between the *arena / site* and *process* approaches, while important, is not sufficient. A second distinction needs to be made which acts to refine these two initial categories, and that is whether these approaches are extensive or limited.

To illustrate, some arena or site-based institutional approaches limit their conception of politics to formal and public governmental (national or local) decision-making about, for example, tax policy, welfare provision, law reform, education or local garbage removal. Debates and arguments within private institutions, such as companies or corporations, about investment strategy or organizational restructuring would not be regarded as politics or, at least, as politics proper.

Neither would arguments within and between institutions such as football clubs and television stations about the rights to, and prices for, screening televised games be

thought of as politics. Only when governments become involved in such disputes – for instance, in setting the rules by which such arrangements may be made – would such issues become 'political'.

Other institutionalists, however, may take a broader view. Some regard *all* formal institutions as sites of politics, as Christopher Hill (1988) showed in his study of the politics of the institutions governing the sport of horse-racing. On an even wider front, those who prefer to deploy the concept of *governance* (see above) would treat politics as being an intimate part of the totality of interactions within and between both public and private institutions, formal *and* informal, in decision-making *and* implementation. That is, the politics of *governance*, in this overarching sense, refers to the whole web of political relations between all the institutions which together 'govern' social, economic and political life in a society and this would obviously include government, courts, private organizations like banks, chambers of commerce and industry, trade unions, professional associations like doctors' organizations, as well as the prevailing norms, ideologies and cultures within the society. But some go even further than this. In his chapter in this book, for example, Tony McGrew reminds us that politics can no longer be understood or identified with, or 'contained' within, the nation state: what happens locally may be profoundly affected by decisions and actions of both foreign, international and inter-governmental institutions, both public and private. In short, even those who adopt a more institutional or arena-based approach vary greatly in the extent to which they might include non-public and non-national institutions within their definition of the political. But so do *processual* approaches to politics.

By 'processual' approaches, I refer to those theories which emphasize that politics is best understood as a distinctive *process* (within or without formal institutions). For my part