

## Concept

### Ideal type

An ideal type (sometimes 'pure type') is a mental construct in which an attempt is made to draw out meaning from an otherwise almost infinitely complex reality through the presentation of a logical extreme. Ideal types were first used in economics, for instance, in the notion of perfect competition. Championed in the social sciences by Max Weber, ideal types are explanatory tools, not approximations of reality; they neither 'exhaust reality' nor offer an ethical ideal. Weberian examples include types of authority (see p. 5) and bureaucracy (see p. 359).

we live and have grown up. Family background, social experience, economic position, personal sympathies and so on thus build into each and every one of us a set of preconceptions about politics and the world around us. This means that scientific objectivity, in the sense of absolute impartiality or neutrality (see p. 305), must always remain an unachievable goal in political analysis, however rigorous our research methods may be. Perhaps the greatest threat to the accumulation of reliable knowledge thus comes not from bias as such, but from the failure to acknowledge bias, reflected in bogus claims to political neutrality.

## Concepts, models and theories

Concepts, models and theories are the tools of political analysis. However, as with most things in politics, the analytical tools must be used with care. First, let us consider concepts. A concept is a general idea about something, usually expressed in a single word or a short phrase. A concept is more than a proper noun or the name of a thing. There is, for example, a difference between talking about a cat (a particular and unique cat) and having a concept of a 'cat' (the idea of a cat). The concept of a cat is not a 'thing' but an 'idea', an idea composed of the various attributes that give a cat its distinctive character: 'a furry mammal', 'small', 'domesticated', 'catches rats and mice', and so on. The concept of 'equality' is thus a principle or ideal. This is different from using the term to say that a runner has 'equalled' a world record, or that an inheritance is to be shared 'equally' between two brothers. In the same way, the concept of 'presidency' refers not to any specific president, but rather to a set of ideas about the organization of executive power.

What, then, is the value of concepts? Concepts are the tools with which we think, criticize, argue, explain and analyse. Merely perceiving the external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world we must, in a sense, impose meaning upon it, and this we do through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a cat as a cat, we must first have a concept of what it is. Concepts also help us to classify objects by recognizing that they have similar forms or similar properties. A cat, for instance, is a member of the class of 'cats'. Concepts are therefore 'general': they can relate to a number of objects, indeed to any object that complies with the characteristics of the general idea itself. It is no exaggeration to say that our knowledge of the political world is built up through developing and refining concepts that help us make sense of that world. Concepts, in that sense, are the building blocks of human knowledge.

Nevertheless, concepts can also be slippery customers. In the first place, the political reality we seek to understand is constantly shifting and is highly complex. There is always the danger that concepts such as 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'capitalism' will be more rounded and coherent than the unshapely realities they seek to describe. Max Weber tried to overcome this problem by recognizing particular concepts as 'ideal types'. This view implies that the concepts we use are constructed by singling out certain basic or central features of the phenomenon in question, which means that other features are downgraded or ignored altogether. The concept of 'revolution' can be regarded as an ideal type in this sense, in that it draws attention to a process of fundamental and usually violent political change. It thus helps us make sense of, say, the 1789 French Revolution and the eastern European revolutions of 1989-91 by highlighting important parallels between them. The concept must nevertheless be used with care because it can also conceal vital differences, and

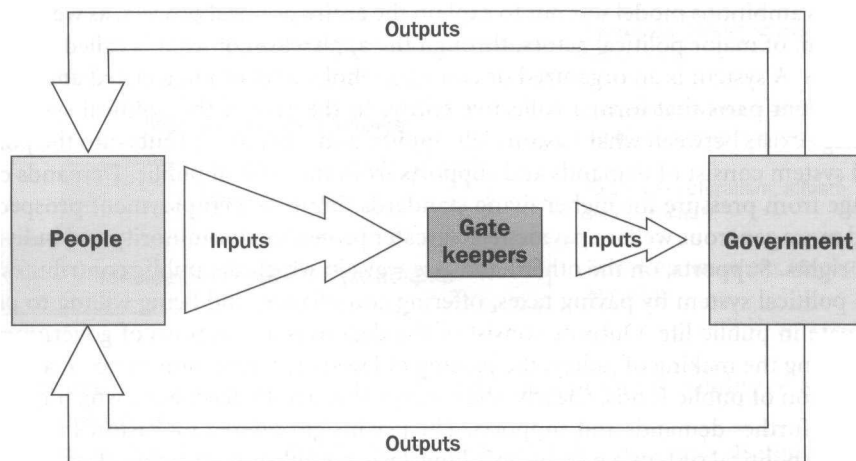


Fig. 1.3 The political system

thereby distort understanding - in this case, for example, about the ideological and social character of revolution. For this reason, it is better to think of concepts or ideal types not as being 'true' or 'false', but merely as more or less 'useful'.

A further problem is that political concepts are often the subject of deep ideological controversy. Politics is, in part, a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms and concepts. Enemies may argue, fight and even go to war, all claiming to be 'defending freedom', 'upholding democracy' or 'having justice on their side'. The problem is that words such as 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'justice' have different meanings to different people. How can we establish what is 'true' democracy, 'true' freedom or 'true' justice? The simple answer is that we cannot. Just as with the attempt to define 'politics' above, we have to accept that there are competing versions of many political concepts. Such concepts are best regarded as 'essentially contested' concepts (Gallie, 1955/56), in that controversy about them runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. In effect, a single term can represent a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its 'true' meaning. For example, it is equally legitimate to define politics as what concerns the state, as the conduct of public life, as debate and conciliation, and as the distribution of power and resources.

Models and theories are broader than concepts; they comprise a range of ideas rather than a single idea. A **model** is usually thought of as a representation of something, usually on a smaller scale, as in the case of a doll's house or a toy aeroplane. In this sense, the purpose of the model is to resemble the original object as faithfully as possible. However, conceptual models need not in any way resemble an object. It would be absurd, for instance, to insist that a computer model of the economy should bear a physical resemblance to the economy itself. Rather, conceptual models are analytical tools; their value is that they are devices through which meaning can be imposed upon what would otherwise be a bewildering and disorganized collection of facts. The simple point is that facts do not speak for themselves: they must be interpreted, and they must be organized. Models assist in the accomplishment of this task because they include a network of relationships that highlight the meaning and significance of relevant empirical data. The best way of understanding this is through an example. One of the most influential models in political analysis is the model of the political system developed by David Easton (1979, 1981). This can be represented diagrammatically (see Figure 1.3).

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**Model:** A theoretical representation of empirical data that aims to advance understanding by highlighting significant relationships and interactions.

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## Concept

### Paradigm

A paradigm is, in a general sense, a pattern or model that highlights relevant features of a particular phenomenon, rather in the manner of an ideal type. As used by Kuhn (1962), however, it refers to an intellectual framework comprising interrelated values, theories and assumptions, within which the search for knowledge is conducted. 'Normal' science is therefore conducted within the established intellectual framework; in 'revolutionary' science, an attempt is made to replace the old paradigm with a new

This ambitious model sets out to explain the entire political process, as well as the function of major political actors, through the application of what is called systems analysis. A system is an organized or complex whole, a set of interrelated and interdependent parts that form a collective entity. In the case of the political system, a linkage exists between what Easton calls 'inputs' and 'outputs'. Inputs into the political system consist of demands and supports from the general public. Demands can range from pressure for higher living standards, improved employment prospects, and more generous welfare payments to greater protection for minority and individual rights. Supports, on the other hand, are ways in which the public contributes to the political system by paying taxes, offering compliance, and being willing to participate in public life. Outputs consist of the decisions and actions of government, including the making of policy, the passing of laws, the imposition of taxes, and the allocation of public funds. Clearly, these outputs generate 'feedback', which in turn shapes further demands and supports. The key insight offered by Easton's model is that the political system tends towards long-term equilibrium or political stability, as its survival depends on outputs being brought into line with inputs.

However, it is vital to remember that conceptual models are at best simplifications of the reality they seek to explain. They are merely devices for drawing out understanding; they are not reliable knowledge. In the case of Easton's model, for example, political parties and interest groups are portrayed as 'gatekeepers', the central function of which is to regulate the flow of inputs into the political system. Although this may be one of their significant functions, parties and interest groups also manage public perceptions, and thereby help to shape the nature of public demands. In short, these are in reality more interesting and more complex institutions than the systems model suggests. In the same way, Easton's model is more effective in explaining how and why political systems respond to popular pressures than it is in explaining why they employ repression and coercion, as, to some degree, all do.

The terms **theory** and model are often used interchangeably in politics. Theories and models are both conceptual constructs used as tools of political analysis. However, strictly speaking, a theory is a proposition. It offers a systematic explanation of a body of empirical data. In contrast, a model is merely an explanatory device; it is more like a hypothesis that has yet to be tested. In that sense, in politics, while theories can be said to be more or less 'true', models can only be said to be more or less 'useful'. Clearly, however, theories and models are often interlinked: broad political theories may be explained in terms of a series of models. For example, the theory of pluralism (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) encompasses a model of the state, a model of electoral competition, a model of group politics, and so on.

However, virtually all conceptual devices, theories and models contain hidden values or implicit assumptions. This is why it is difficult to construct theories that are purely empirical; values and normative beliefs invariably intrude. In the case of concepts, this is demonstrated by people's tendency to use terms as either 'hurrah! words' (for example 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'justice') or 'boo! words' (for example 'conflict', 'anarchy', 'ideology', and even 'politics'). Models and theories are also 'loaded' in the sense that they contain a range of biases. It is difficult, for example, to accept the claim that rational-choice theories (examined above) are value-neutral. As they are based on the assumption that human beings are basically egoistical and self-regarding, it is perhaps not surprising that they have often pointed to policy conclusions that are politically conservative. In the same way, class theories of politics, advanced by Marxists, are based on broader theories about

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**Theory:** A systematic explanation of empirical data, usually (unlike a hypothesis) presented as reliable knowledge.

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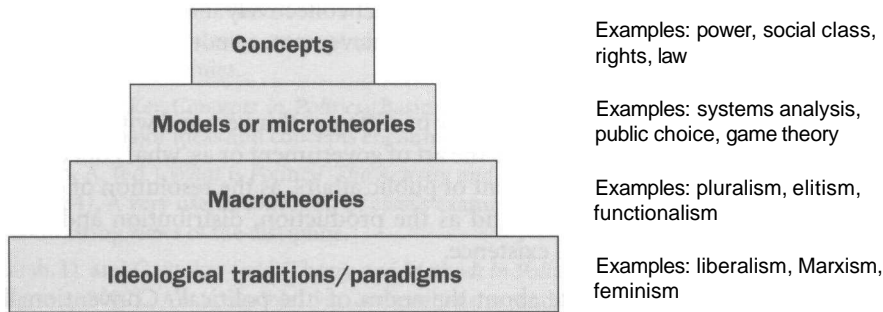


Fig. 1.4 Levels of conceptual analysis

history and society and, indeed, they ultimately rest upon the validity of an entire social philosophy.

There is therefore a sense in which analytical devices, such as models and microtheories, are constructed on the basis of broader macrotheories. These major theoretical tools of political analysis are those that address the issues of power and the role of the state: pluralism (see p. 78), elitism (see p. 80), class analysis, and so on. These theories are examined in Chapters 4 and 5. At a still deeper level, however, many of these macrotheories reflect the assumptions and beliefs of one or other of the major ideological traditions. These traditions operate rather like what Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) called paradigms. A paradigm is a related set of principles, doctrines and theories that help to structure the process of intellectual enquiry. In effect, a paradigm constitutes the framework within which the search for knowledge is conducted. In economics, this can be seen in the replacement of Keynesianism by monetarism (and perhaps the subsequent shift back to neo-Keynesianism); in transport policy it is shown in the rise of Green ideas.

According to Kuhn, the natural sciences are dominated at any time by a single paradigm; science develops through a series of 'revolutions' in which an old paradigm is replaced by a new one. Political and social enquiry is, however, different, in that it is a battleground of contending and competing paradigms. These paradigms take the form of broad social philosophies, usually called political ideologies: liberalism, conservatism, socialism, fascism, feminism and so on. Each presents its own account of social existence; each offers a particular view of the world. To portray these ideologies as theoretical paradigms is not, of course, to say that most, if not all, political analysis is narrowly ideological in the sense that it advances the interests of a particular group or class. Rather, it merely acknowledges that political analysis is usually carried out on the basis of a particular ideological tradition. Much of academic political science, for example, has been constructed according to liberal-rationalist assumptions, and thus bears the imprint of its liberal heritage.

The various levels of conceptual analysis are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1.4.

## Summary

- Politics is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. As such, it is an essentially social activity, inextricably linked, on the one hand, to the existence of diversity and conflict, and

on the other to a willingness to cooperate and act collectively. Politics is better seen as a search for conflict resolution than as its achievement, as not all conflicts are, or can be, resolved.

- Politics has been understood differently by different thinkers and within different traditions. Politics has been viewed as the art of government or as 'what concerns the state', as the conduct and management of public affairs, as the resolution of conflict through debate and compromise, and as the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence.
- There is considerable debate about the realm of 'the political'. Conventionally, politics has narrowly been seen as embracing institutions and actors operating in a 'public' sphere concerned with the collective organization of social existence. However, when politics is understood in terms of power-structured relationships, it may be seen to operate in the 'private' sphere as well.
- A variety of approaches have been adopted to the study of politics as an academic discipline. These include political philosophy or the analysis of normative theory, an empirical tradition particularly concerned with the study of institutions and structures, attempts to introduce scientific rigour through behavioural analysis, and a variety of modern approaches including the use of rational-choice theory.
- The study of politics is scientific to the extent that it is possible to gain objective knowledge about the political world by distinguishing between facts and values. This task is nevertheless hampered by the difficulty of gaining access to reliable data, by values that are implicit in political models and theories, and by biases that operate within all students of politics.
- Concepts, models and theories are the tools of political analysis, providing the building blocks of knowledge. However, they are only analytical devices. Although they help to advance understanding, they are more rounded and coherent than the unshapely and complex realities they seek to describe. Ultimately, all political and social enquiry is conducted within a particular intellectual framework or ideological paradigm.

## ■ Questions for discussion

- If politics is essentially social, why is not all social activity political?
- Why has politics so often carried negative associations?
- How could you defend politics as a worthwhile and ennobling activity?
- Is politics inevitable? Could politics ever be brought to an end?
- Why has the idea of a science of politics been so attractive?
- Is it possible to study politics objectively and without bias?

## ■ Further reading

Ball, A. and B. Guy Peters *Modern Politics and Government* (5th ed.) (Basingstoke: Palgrave and New York: Chatham House Publishers Inc., 2000). A popular short introduction to politics that covers a wide variety of themes and issues.

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Crick, B. *In Defence of Politics* (rev. ed.) (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 2000). A thoughtful and stimulating attempt to justify politics (understood in a distinctively liberal sense) against its enemies.

Heywood, A. *Key Concepts in Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000). A clear and accessible guide to the major ideas and concepts encountered in political analysis.

Leftwich, A. (ed.) *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1984). A very useful collection of essays examining different concepts of politics as well as contrasting views of the discipline.

Marsh, D. and G. Stoker (eds) *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (2nd ed.) (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). An accessible, yet comprehensive and sophisticated, exploration of the nature and scope of the discipline of political science.



# Governments, Systems and Regimes

'That government is best which governs not at all.'

HENRY DAVID THOREAU *Civil Disobedience* (1849)

Classifying the various forms of government has been one of the principal concerns of political analysis through the ages. This process can be traced back to the fourth century BCE, when Aristotle made the first recorded attempt to describe the political regimes then in existence, using terms such as 'democracy', 'oligarchy' and 'tyranny' that are still commonly employed today. From the eighteenth century onwards, governments were increasingly classified as monarchies or republics, or as autocratic or constitutional regimes. During the twentieth century, these distinctions were further sharpened. The 'three worlds' classification of political systems, which was particularly fashionable during the Cold War period, created an image of world politics dominated by a struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. However, in the light of modern developments, such as the collapse of communism, the rise of East Asia, and the emergence of political Islam, all such classifications appear outdated. Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear what these shifts mean. Some interpret them as indications of the triumph of western liberal democracy; others see evidence of the modern world becoming politically more diffuse and fragmented.

The central issues examined in this chapter are as follows:

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## Key issues

- ▶ What is the difference between governments, political systems and regimes?
- ▶ What is the purpose of classifying systems of government?
- ▶ On what basis have, and should, regimes be classified?
- ▶ What are the major regimes of the modern world?
- ▶ Has western liberal democracy triumphed worldwide?



## Concept

### Government

In its broadest sense, to govern means to rule or control others. Government can therefore be taken to include any mechanism through which ordered rule is maintained, its central features being the ability to make collective decisions and the capacity to enforce them. A form of government can thus be identified in almost all social institutions: families, schools, businesses, trade unions and so on. However, 'government', as opposed to 'governance' (see p. 6), is more commonly understood to refer to the formal and institutional processes that operate at the national level to maintain public order and facilitate collective action. The core functions of government are thus to make law (legislation), implement law (execution) and interpret law (adjudication). In some cases, the political executive (see p. 316) alone is referred to as 'the Government', making it equivalent to 'the Administration' in presidential systems.

**Political system:** A network of relationships through which government generates 'outputs' (policies) in response to 'inputs' (demands or support) from the general public.

**Government gridlock:** Paralysis resulting from institutional rivalry within government or the attempt to respond to conflicting public demands.

## Traditional systems of classification

Before we examine how different systems of rule have been classified, it is necessary for us to reflect on both *what* is being classified, and *why* such classifications have been undertaken. First, what is 'government', and how do governments differ from 'political systems' or 'regimes'? 'Government' refers to the institutional processes through which collective and usually binding decisions are made; its various institutions constitute the subject matter of Part 4 of this book. A **political system** or regime, on the other hand, is a broader term that encompasses not only the mechanisms of government and the institutions of the state, but also the structures and processes through which these interact with the larger society.

A political system is, in effect, a subsystem of the larger social system. It is a 'system' in that there are interrelationships within a complex whole, and 'political' in that these interrelationships relate to the distribution of power, wealth and resources in society. Political regimes can thus be characterized as effectively by the organization of economic life as they are by the governmental processes through which they operate. A regime is therefore a 'system of rule' that endures despite the fact that governments come and go. Whereas governments can be changed by elections, through dynastic succession, as a result of *coups d'état* (see p. 387), and so on, regimes can be changed only by military intervention from without or by some kind of revolutionary upheaval from within.

### Why classify political systems?

The interest in classifying political systems stems from two sources. First, classification is an essential aid to the *understanding* of politics and government. As in most social sciences, understanding in politics is acquired largely through a process of comparison, particularly as experimental methods are generally inapplicable. It is not possible, for instance, to devise experiments to test whether, say, US government would be less susceptible to institutional **government gridlock** if it abandoned the separation of powers (see p. 315), or whether communism could have survived in the USSR had reforms been instigated a generation earlier. In consequence, we look to comparison to throw into relief what we are studying. Through the highlighting of similarities and differences between what might otherwise be bewildering collections of facts, comparison helps us to distinguish between what is significant and meaningful, and what is not. In this process, we are able both to develop theories, hypotheses and concepts, and, to some extent, to test them. As Alexis de Tocqueville (see p. 218) put it, 'without comparisons to make, the mind does not know how to proceed'. The attempt to classify systems of rule is therefore merely a device for making the process of comparison more methodical and systematic.

The second purpose of classification is to facilitate *evaluation* rather than analysis. Since Aristotle (see p. 7), those who have sought to understand political regimes have often been as keen to 'improve' government as to understand it. In other words, descriptive understanding is closely tied up with normative judgements: questions about what *is* are linked to questions about what *should* be. In its extreme form, this process may involve a search for an 'ideal' system of rule, or even a Utopia, and this can be seen in works such as Plato's (see p. 13) *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia* ([1516] 1965), and Peter Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1912). In a more