

Meaning of political theory



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Political theory is a subdivision of the study of politics. It is a contested expression in that political theorists have failed to reach a consensus on an all-encompassing definition as any such definition is bound to alienate someone. Theorists have tried to bring some exactness to the contested concepts so that one can provide convincing arguments for the particular social arrangements aimed. However, John Plamenatz defined political theory as the systematic thinking about the purposes of government (Farrelly, 2004). The expression Political Theory is composed of two words, 'Politics' and 'Theory'. Politics literally means the study of politics and it is about conflict of interest and its resolution which occurs at every level of the society. Theory is anything from a plan to a piece of abstract knowledge. In academic discourse, however, a theory is an explanatory proposition, an idea or set of ideas that in some way seeks to impose order or meaning upon phenomena (Heywood, 2004). This paper therefore seeks to discuss what political theory is.

The role of political theory is to analyze the political concepts, understand and criticize them through the use of the four tools: concepts, models, theories and paradigms. Concept is a general idea about something usually expressed in a single word or short phrase that draws out meaning from an otherwise infinitely complex reality, for example; equality, presidency, political party, power, social class, rights, law, etc. (Heywood, 2004). It helps to make sense of the world by serving as a tool for thinking, criticizing, arguing, explaining and analyzing political developments and to classify objects by recognizing that they have similar forms or properties, hence concepts serve as building blocks of human knowledge. Model is a

representation of empirical data that aims to advance understanding by highlighting significant relationships and interactions among variables, for example; systems analysis, public choice, game theory, etc. Models are built around a number of concepts to aptly resemble the original object without necessarily becoming its copy. A theory is an explanation and prediction of relationships among specific variables, for example; pluralism, elitism, functionalism, etc. It is usually used interchangeably with model and may be explained by a series of models. A theory attempts to present a full explanation and prediction of future events while a model attempts to accurately reflect reality. Paradigm is an intellectual framework comprising interrelated values, theories and assumptions, within which search for knowledge is conducted. It consists of a set of principles that structure the process of intellectual inquiry, for example; liberalism, Marxism, feminism, etc.

According to Heywood (2004), political theory was broadly defined to include normative theory and systematic theory. Normative theory contains the history of political ideas and the continuous generation of new ideas about what society ought to be. It is concerned with ethical or normative questions, such as why should I obey the state, how should rewards be distributed and what should be the limits of individual liberty. This traditional approach is primarily interested in examining how thinkers developed and justified their views, and the intellectual context in which they worked. Systematic theory includes the explanation and understanding of the existing society and enables one to make projections for the possible future transformations. Given this difference in the definition of political theory, it is not easy to

reach a compromise on the definition. Political theory involves analytical study of ideas and doctrines that have been central to political thought unlike Political Philosophy which is concerned with the critical evaluation of political beliefs, paying attention to both inductive and deductive forms of reasoning and to clarify and refine the concepts employed in political discourse. It has attempted to understand better the behavior of actors like voters, politicians, lobbyists and bureaucrats, and has spawned rational choice, public choice and social choice schools of thought (*Heywood, 2004*).

Hoffman and Graham, in their book, *Introduction to Political Theory* , explain that political theory takes account of activity that focuses on the states that are formed by political parties through elections to govern a country. In everyday life, we are guided by notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, so that everything we do is informed by concepts, just like politicians. Humans in general cannot work without ideas as it is a defining property of human activity that we can only act when we have ideas in our head as to what we should do (*Hoffman et al., 2009*).

The objective of political theory is also to train citizens to think rationally about political questions and assess correctly the political events of their time. Human beings are unique in two respects: they possess reason and the ability to reflect on their actions. They communicate with each other in the language they know. Unlike other species, they can express their innermost thoughts and desires; they can share their ideas and discuss what they consider to be good and desirable. Political theory has its roots in these twin aspects of the human self. It analyzes certain basic questions such as how the society should be organized, why government is needed, what is the best

form of government, what does the state owe its citizens and what do we owe each other as citizens (*www. politics. as. nyu. edu*). It examines questions of this kind and systematically deals with the origins, meanings and significance of political ideas that we are familiar with such as freedom, equality, democracy, citizenship, justice, development, nationalism, secularism, etc. It clarifies the existing definitions of these concepts by focusing on some major political thinkers of the past and present. It also examines the extent to which freedom or equality are actually present in the institutions that we participate in everyday such as schools, shops, buses, trains, government offices, etc. It looks at whether existing definitions are adequate and how existing institutions of government and policy practices must be modified to become more democratic in a systematic manner. It probes the significance of principles such as rule of law, separation of powers, judicial review, etc. This is done by examining the arguments advanced by different thinkers in defense of these concepts. Besides examining arguments, political theorists also reflect upon the current political experiences and point out trends and possibilities for the future. When we begin a debate or argument on any topic, we usually ask what does it mean and how does it matter (*www. politics. as. nyu. edu*).

Conclusion

Political theory means theorizing politics. It encourages people to examine their ideas and feelings about political things. It exposes them to systematic thinking on justice or equality so that they can polish their opinions and argue in an informed manner and for the sake of common interests. It analyzes and explains political ideas and concepts rather than advance any

particular beliefs or interpretations like what political philosophy does. In this context, political theory will mean an explanatory proposition, an idea or set of ideas that seeks to explain matters about politics.

Bibliography

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