Contents

Thinking Politically: An Introduction

In this anthology you will find selections from important works of political theory that span some 2,500 years, from the ancient Greeks through today. The author of each wrestles, in his or her own time, place, and way, with the most basic questions that human beings can ask about living together—questions about justice, and about relations and institutions of power.

Studying political theory forces us to wrestle with these questions in order to clarify what politics is all about. Indeed, the word "theory" comes from the ancient Greek *theoria*, which means "viewing," "speculation," "contemplation."[1] Here is just a partial list of what political theorists look at, speculate about, and contemplate:

What is power?
What defines a citizen and what are a citizen's obligations?
Who should be "sovereign" in a political community? Who should be included in the community? Who can be excluded?
When does a government become "illegitimate"? When is it legitimate to rebel against political authority? Are there rights with which a government may never tamper?
How far should a government intrude into our private lives?
What should be the role of the state in a just society? What *is* a just society?
What means and what ends are legitimate in politics?

Formulating questions like these can be deceptively simple. Political philosophers frequently find that half their task is defining the very words they use, for how one demarcates terms will affect how one thinks through political problems. Indeed, we can see this throughout the entire history of Western political thought. At its dawn, in *The Republic* (see chapter 2), we find Plato seeking to answer the question: What is justice? In attempting to explain this basic term, he concluded that justice was to be found in a society with a proper division of labor, in which everybody plays the role for which he or she is naturally best suited. The ideal state, Plato thought, would be a dictatorship of its smartest citizens, "philosopher-kings." The vast majority of the people were simply not competent to govern; they would have other tasks. If we skip ahead—over two millennia ahead—we find the same question still being posed: What is justice? In the 1970s a Harvard professor, John Rawls, inaugurated a renaissance in political theory with a book entitled *A Theory of Justice* (see chapter 59). He argued that given "fair" conditions in which to select the principles governing their society, everyone would choose equal liberty, equal opportunity, and the idea that inequalities—socioeconomic differences—would be acceptable provided they are to the benefit of the least advantaged in society.

Plato and Rawls obviously reached different conclusions when trying to define justice. But to grasp their respective contributions—and to see what both of them have to say to us nowadays—we must not just think about their conclusions but must examine the structure of their arguments as well. What claims do they make and how do they make them? Are they justified? How do they construct their assertions?

II

Now you may be saying to yourself, "Theory, philosophy—it all seems so abstract. Don't these theorists just weave grand webs out of the recesses of their minds? What effect do they

all have on the real world anyway?" The impact has been more than you might imagine. Ideas are, of course, only one element of what makes history. Still, how people think politically very much affects how they act politically.

Consider this: when the French Revolution took place in 1789, one powerful influence on leading revolutionaries was the ideas of the Geneva-born political theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, even though he had died eleven years earlier. "Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains," reads the incendiary first sentence of his book *The Social Contract* (see the selection in chapter 17). One was completely "free," Rousseau argued, only in a "state of nature" where there were no governments nor social constraints. Since life in society always requires governance and rules (which, when enforceable, are forms of coercion), and since we will not live in a state of nature, Rousseau asked: Under what conditions can we say that these "chains" are legitimate?

Rousseau wrote that we are politically free when we are subject to laws we have embraced ourselves. So he insisted that "the People" should be "sovereign" and that their "General Will" should be the author of a land's basic laws. These were subversive ideas in prerevolutionary France, a hierarchical society in which the Crown was sovereign and the inhabitants of this realm were the king's subjects, not self-governing citizens. No wonder that *The Social Contract* was banned in Paris and Geneva when it was first published in 1762. Its author had to flee into exile. Yet when the revolution came, captivated crowds—or so the story goes—listened as the celebrated revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat read Rousseau's book aloud on Paris street corners.

For another example, take a case closer to home. In the late seventeenth century, the British political theorist John Locke articulated a famous theory of revolution in his *Second Treatise of Government* (see chapter 13). When Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues wrote the Declaration of Independence, shortly after the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired at the British by American farmers in Concord, Massachusetts, they did so with Locke's ideas very much in mind.

Locke argued that there were rights that belonged to human beings by nature—the rights of life, liberty, and property—and that government was entrusted to protect them. Should a government violate this trust, it was no longer legitimate. Then, citizens had a right to overthrow it and establish a new one. Locke's ideas were tied to the nonviolent "Glorious Revolution of 1688," which established a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary supremacy in Britain: the king was now below, instead of above, the law (although Locke's book was written before this revolution).

Jefferson and the American colonists, facing King George III almost a century later, declared that it was a "self-evident" truth that human beings are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights," among which were "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Because George III had violated those rights (and others!), Americans no longer owed him fealty. Independence was declared, and the colonies became an independent American republic. Later, in 1787, when the delegates assembled in Philadelphia to debate the principles of and then write the U.S. Constitution, among them were men deeply immersed not only in Locke's writings but in European political theory in general. They read, thought, and talked about political ideas as they fashioned the document that would govern the United States.

III

Early in this anthology, in the section on the ancient world, you will read Aristotle, Plato's pupil. In the fourth century BCE he asserted, in *Politics*, that man is a political animal, a

being who can fulfill his nature only through participation in a political community. If you didn't live in one, Aristotle asserted, you were either less than human or more than human.

Even if you accepted this in principle, you would probably say it differently nowadays. You would probably say that men and women are political animals. Aristotle, living when he did, didn't accept the equality of women and also believed that slavery was natural. This just gives you a hint at how political ideas get reshaped over centuries. As you read this anthology, you will see that as concepts of human nature and human history change, so do concepts of politics. For one example, Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages didn't accept the idea that we are political animals. For them, religion came first and foremost. They thought religiously and fit politics into their theology. Later, when we enter the modern world, politics reasserts its independence.

But then, in the nineteenth century, we find one of the most important liberal political philosophers, John Stuart Mill, trying to assert the individual's independence from politics by delineating those dimensions of life in which government had no right to intervene—areas that ought to be strictly matters of individual liberty. Government ought not to interfere with acts that are strictly "self-regarding," he argued. Otherwise we will be unable to develop and fulfill ourselves as individuals. At the same time, Mill recognized that despotism comes not only from abusive governments but also from apparently nonpolitical sources. He warned of the "tyranny of majority opinion," of how popular views can have a chilling effect on individual creativity. People are often intimidated by new or unusual ideas. He once declared that "no society in which eccentricity is a matter of reproach can be a wholesome state."

Mill himself took up an unpopular cause in the Britain of his day: feminism. He was an early advocate of women's rights (and as a young man he was once arrested for trying to distribute information about birth control on London streets). This, of course, raises an interesting question: How far does "thinking politically" extend? In various sections of this anthology you will find writings concerning the status of women and the oppression of women. Is this "political"? Certainly, if you define politics in terms of power exercised by and among human beings.

However, some political thinkers contend that we should define politics more narrowly so as to keep an eye on specific features, dynamics, and questions—questions like the nature of the state and different forms of government. Take, for example, Max Weber, a formidable political thinker of the early twentieth century who is often called the "father of sociology." In his brilliant essay "Politics as a Vocation" (see chapter 37), he defined the "state" as a "human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory." This is a famous definition. Think of all the important questions it raises (and which Weber explored in many writings): What does "legitimate" force mean? Or a "human community" and a "given territory"? Do we specify these on the basis of size? Population?

And again: What about relations of power within this state? Weber's work, it is sometimes said, is a debate with the ghost of Karl Marx. It is easy to see why. Marx insisted that we could never think of "the state" or governments without placing them within a larger socioeconomic totality. He asked: If economic life is dominated by a small part of the population—"the ruling class"—then won't socioeconomic power be translated into political power?

Marx contended that "the state," the organization of political power within a society, was simply a means by which one social class oppresses other classes. Since for him all history is the history of class struggle, governments simply try to keep the have-nots in order on behalf of the haves. Consequently, "the state" is an "executive committee" asserting the

interests of the dominant economic class. Marx believed it possible to create a classless society in which the state would eventually vanish. If there is no ruling class and if society is organized cooperatively so that socioeconomic resources benefit all, there would no longer be a need for government as we have known it, he thought. In that case, politics would vanish and, presumably, we would no longer need to "think politically."

IV

Who is right? Who is wrong? Of course, there is no simple answer. You may find that *even when some political theorists seem very wrong—terribly wrong—you may learn a lot from their errors*. As John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty*, even if you believe something to be completely true—absolutely true—unless it is contested and debated and argued, it may well turn into a useless dogma.

So, in opening these pages, we invite you to think politically, to wrestle with great debates about political ideas. Some may lead you to see the world with new eyes, and some of the ideas may simply infuriate you. Perhaps unsettling arguments will raise for you new questions and open some new horizons about the ways power is exercised. If so, you may want to explore political theory in more depth. Perhaps these introductory selections will inspire you to read the full texts.

Note

1. F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 194.