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Chapter 2

Political Philosophy: Taking a Theorem to Keep From Getting Thick

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

“The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.”

- John Maynard Keynes

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- What a theory is
- Some important political philosophers and what they believed
- Three big ideas about how society should be organized, and the assumptions that lie beneath them

2.1 What's the Big Idea?

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand what a theory is, and what a political theory is.
2. Understand the three main directions of political philosophy.
3. Understand why the ancient Greeks and Romans were so important to the development of modern politics.

Behind (and in front and alongside) every flavor of politics, there's a theory. Theory matters because it tells us something about why we do what we do. It can give us ideas about what we ought to do. It can help us understand why things happen the way they do. The best, most interesting theory seems to have grown out of crisis and trouble (and pain seems to be the genesis of much art—two enduring forms of American music, the blues and country, derive from the experiences of poor black and white Americans, respectively). Time and again, political philosophy has arisen at times when somebody saw something wrong and had to say something about it. Theory also matters because people use it to make political arguments today, snatching up (sometimes incorrectly) snippets of things that people are supposed to have said to justify what they happen to believe at the moment. (In American politics in particular, we find the Founding Fathers reinvented to support every current flavor of politics. And we should be careful about that, for, as Abraham Lincoln once said, “You just can believe all this stuff you read on the internet.”)

A **theory**¹ is a testable proposition about the nature and reality of something. In “hard” sciences such as physics, chemistry or biology, it's often possible to physically test a theory: What happens when you do X to Y? We can begin with a hypothesis, and try to disprove it (because if you fail to actively disprove it, it might just be solid). In social sciences, such as political science, it's a lot more difficult to actively test a theory, if only because people tend to object when you perform experiments on them. This is an oversimplification, of course; in behavioral economics, for example, researchers do in fact perform experiments on willing groups of subjects (such as setting up auction situations to explore whether people are rational when it comes to money). But even in that kind of test, even if there's

1. A testable proposition about what is true or not true.

real money on the table, it's not real life. So to test political theory, we have to observe what people actually do while trying to account for the other things that might make them behave one way or another.

What is a **political theory**²? Blackwell's Encyclopedia of Political Thought (a pretty handy resource if you decide to get serious about political science) defines it as "Systematic reflection on the nature and purposes of government, characteristically involving both an understanding of existing political institutions and a view about how (if at all) they ought to be changed." David Miller, "Political Theory," The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought. Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 1991. Granted, that's a mouthful. But it shouldn't be hard to dissect: Systematic, as in organized and purposeful. We don't try to understand politics in a random way; we try to work thought things carefully, step-by-step, in hopes that we will miss fewer clues. Reflection, as in taking a step back and looking at what's happened, to see what we might notice that we might have missed while we were in the middle of it. It's usually to see where you were when you've moved on to someplace else. The nature and purposes of government: What's it actually like, what's it for, and what does it do? Political institutions: The structures of government, including the offices and agencies where elected and appointed officials serve. Congress and the Canadian House of Commons are examples of political institutions. Finally, should they be changed? Can they be improved? Would change make things worse? Along with much of the rest of political science, this is what political theory—also called political philosophy—tries to do. And at the moment you tell someone something you believe about politics, you have become, in the words of economist Paul Krugman, "an accidental theorist." Everything we say about politics is essentially a theory that something is true or not true. We are all philosophers, in our way.

What Is and What Ought to Be: Three Versions of Politics

And that's not new. Throughout recorded history, wherever people have developed writing, political philosophers have tried to figure out why people behave the way they do, and then to prescribe what they should do to create the ideal state. We have positive theory, which says this how things are, and normative theory, which says this is how things ought to be. Normative theory prescribes; positive theory explains. Theory can both drive politics and follow after it. Theory sometimes predates political practice; sometimes theory is developed to justify what's already happening. Much of what we're dealing with in this chapter is normative theory, but it tends to be based on positive theory about things really are. Most of history's great thinkers had ideas about how things ought to be, as well as how they actually were. Remarkably, nearly all of them thought they were creating a better state.

2. Systematic study of government, including how it works and how it might be improved.

We can group most political theories into a few broad categories. If we were put nearly 3,000 years of human writing about politics in a pot and boil it down to its essence, we might find three basic approaches in political theory:

- One version says that people—lots of people—can know something. This is the version of theory that says it's possible for people to participate in governing themselves. This school of thought argues that the actions of people create the conditions of government. Aristotle, John Locke and James Madison fall into this category. We might call this the democratic tradition, because in this tradition, people are expected to participate.
- The second version argues that some people have knowledge, and some people have to be taught. The people, ruling themselves without proper instruction, will go astray. Plato and Marx fall into this category. We might call this the authoritarian tradition, because it tends to argue that if people do participate, more problems will arise than will be solved.
- The third version argues that government is the problem, not the solution, and that the institutions of government in fact lead people astray. Rousseau, Proudhon and modern anarchists fall into this category. We can call this the anarchic tradition, because it argues that it is institutions, not people, who cause the most trouble in the world.

Of course, the theories often overlap. Madison, who was the chief author of the U.S. Constitution, did not have complete faith in the voice of the people. Marx, as we shall see, seemed to believe that people, once properly socialized, would be capable of living virtuously. Both the second and third schools of thought argue that the conditions of material life create people's spiritual, mental and physical reality.

Different societies developed different ways of ruling themselves throughout antiquity, all over the world. In some places kings were elected, ruling for life, but not replaced by any of their children. In other instances, **monarchy**³—rule by one person—became hereditary, so that a king or emperor was replaced by his nearest descendant (most often his oldest son).

Somewhere along the way, the king became king because he was the strongest man—the toughest, the smartest, the one who could organize and protect. And, as Plato was soon to note, if you had a really good king, like a really good CEO or a really clever professor, this could be a very good form of government. But, as Plato wrote in the fourth century BCE, in practice this could become the very worst form of government.

3. Rule by a king.

Why? A wise and clever king would sort things out. Like the biblical King Solomon, who, when confronted with two women each claiming that an infant was hers, offered to divide the baby in half. One woman said yes to Solomon's offer and the other offered to give the baby, whole, to the first woman. Solomon then gave the baby to the second woman, reasoning that the child's real mother would give up the child itself to preserve its life.

But kings weren't always that wise, and even Solomon, according to the Bible, helped fracture his kingdom by excessive taxation in order to build more temples and monuments. (When his son Rehoboam continued the high taxes, Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel and Judea. When divided, they were less able to withstand attacks by invaders from the east.) Moreover, often a king had all of the power and there was no check on that power. So if the king was cruel and greedy as opposed to smart, kind and thinking ahead, there was nothing to keep the king from oppressing the people.

The Ancients: It's All Greek (or Chinese) to Them

In ancient Greece and in ancient Rome, kings were overthrown in favor of various kinds of republics. And as these societies grew wealthy, people found time to write about what was happening and what they thought should happen. Although fragments and references by others tell us that there were political philosophers before Plato (some of whom, such as Thales, who might have had very interesting things to say), his work is the oldest that comes down to us in roughly whole form.

Plato lived in 424–384 BCE in Athens, the pre-eminent city-state of the ancient Greek world. City-states were just what the name implies—small, sovereign nations built around particular cities. The Greek city-states shared a common language, religion and culture, but tucked into the valleys between Greece's many mountains, they developed into independent states, each with its own government.

Athens was sort of a democracy—every free, property-owning male got to vote, although they elected councils and leaders above them to make decisions (although an estimated two-thirds of the city's population were slaves). The Athenians, at their peak, were rich, powerful and a dominant force in the Mediterranean world. It is largely Athenian ideas and literature that survive to this day, and what they did has had a big impact on the development of Europe and the western world.

Politics was everything to the ancient Greeks—their golf game, Netflix and Facebook all wrapped up into one. Politics was sport, hobby and passion. Our word idiot derives from the Greek word “idiotes,” which meant those who are not

interested in politics. So, perhaps like a nation devoted to cooking, the Greeks came up with a lot of recipes for politics.

This was the time and place that gave us two important philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. If you understand Plato and Aristotle, you understand most of what you need to know about politics. The two great traditions—democratic and authoritarian—flow from their ideas.

Unlike a lot of philosophers, Plato was a big, handsome, athletic guy. He also appears to have studied under Socrates (scholars disagree about the precise details of Plato’s life). Socrates created a framework for the study of politics by developing the Socratic method: asking enough good questions that you eventually get to something like the truth. Socrates is famous largely because Plato wrote about him at length.

Socrates made his living as a teacher. Wealthy Athenians paid him to teach their sons the basics of knowledge and how to achieve it. Socrates himself isn’t known to have written anything down, but was noted for his ability to ask probing questions to force his students to think things through. Plato uses the voice of Socrates to get his own points across.

Plato’s experience with Socrates seems to have driven Plato to a particular view of politics. Most of Plato’s work comes in the form of dialogues, involving Socrates and other historical figures of the time, exploring in their conversations all manner of philosophical topics, including politics.

What Plato saw in the history of democratic Athens was how common people tended to get carried away, and elect leaders who promised them everything but gave them very little. The Greeks developed the term “demagogue” to describe this kind of politics. A **demagogue**⁴ is someone who plays on people’s fears, prejudices and emotions in order to gain political power. History is full of demagogues (and full of people who call other people demagogues). But democracy in Athens came to mean that perfectly good leaders could get thrown out of office over some perceived offense, and be replaced by demagogues who would proceed to seriously mess things up. In Athens, for example, the citizens could not just vote somebody out of office, they could vote them out of the country (our word “ostracize” comes from the Greek ostraka, the shards of pottery on which citizens would write the name of someone who was to be expelled). For Athenian citizens, getting voted off the island (metaphorically speaking) was worse than death; it was like being forced to sit at the kid’s table at Thanksgiving but without any food. In Plato’s lifetime, the Athenian empire foundered, run aground on foreign adventures and questionable

4. Someone who aspires to political power by telling people what they want to hear, including demonizing his or her opponents, but often doing things that benefit themselves once they are in power.

policy choices, while political leaders competed for control like contestants on American Idol.

Perhaps the last straw for Plato was when Socrates was charged with impiety and corrupting the youth, his only real sin appearing to have been asking hard questions about the current and democratically chosen government of Athens. Socrates was effectively put to death (he was ordered to commit suicide) by the democratically elected government of Athens, as people who go around asking difficult questions sometimes get branded as troublemakers.

For Plato, then, democracy was not the answer. It was the problem. In his mind, popular, widespread political participation put decisions in the hands of people who had not studied and did not understand politics and governance, resulting in the elections of poor leaders and in too many changes in political direction. How does one then avoid this problem?

In a famous dialogue in *The Republic*, Plato's major work about politics, Socrates defines justice having people do those jobs for which they are best suited. The best farmer would grow the best crops; the best shoemaker would make the best shoes. Nobody would complain about having to do business with those folks. And, therefore, the best government would be run by the people best suited for the job of governing. Hence, the philosopher king—the perfect combination of wisdom and power.

Plato wrestled with the problem of how to find the philosopher king—the person with just the right stuff to effectively and fairly rule the state. To his credit, few other philosophers ever came up with such a precise prescription for how to do this. Plato's answer to this problem—the efficiency of someone who can make a decision versus the risk of someone who makes bad decisions—was complicated but interesting.

In the course of the dialogues in *The Republic*, Plato develops how he thinks this could work. As justice is having everyone do what they are best suited for—some should be soldiers; others business people; others craftsmen and women; Plato is notable for being one of the first thinkers to accord a potentially equal role for women in politics. and still others should be rulers. Plato lays out a program to find out who's best at what—a lot of schooling, experience at a number of jobs, and then, finally, advancement to the guardian class, who will rule the state, whose needs are taken care of, and who will both own and want for nothing, thus removing any urge to rob the people to enrich themselves. Moreover, anybody could apply to become a guardian, so in no way was the governing structure limited to any particular class. In this way, Plato believed, the just state could be created via rule by the wise.

Plato's prescription has both sense and nonsense to it. Clearly, not everybody is equally good at doing everything. Some people are simply better at some tasks than others. For example, one of my brothers is very good with mechanical things; one is very good with computers. We're all better off if the first brother works on cars and if the second brother works on computers. Plato applied this idea to the whole of society. Everyone will be better off if people do the jobs that they're best at.

This system wasn't tried in Plato's time. The one ruler who invited Plato to implement his system ended up throwing him in jail for a time once he realized what Plato really had in mind.

But this system has been tried. In medieval times, the Catholic Church operated very much like this. The church effectively governed a lot of land and people throughout Europe. Anyone could apply to join the church; church leaders didn't own anything personally; and they rose to power through years of testing and service. The Soviet Union also looked a bit like Plato's just state—a system of governance open to anyone (via joining the Communist Party); very little private ownership for this governing class, although their physical needs were met by the state; and people rose to power through years of testing and service (and, in some instances, by being more ruthless than their rivals).

And that's perhaps the biggest problem with this system: There is no check on the power of the guardians, and, particularly in the case of communist states, guardians arise who proceed to do very bad things to people. In practical terms, it's also true that people don't all develop at the same level. You might be better at something later in life, but a system that slots you into one job or another doesn't account for that, or give you much choice about changing your mind.

Undoubtedly, Plato didn't foresee this, nor would he have approved. And he said a lot of other interesting things. Like a number of political philosophers, he was an astute observer of his own times. He understood that too much disparity of wealth between the rich and the poor would cause social strife, and he understood that people don't always pay as much attention to political affairs as perhaps they should. But he also believed that not everybody was fit to participate in government, nor could they even truly understand it.

Like Socrates, Plato was a teacher, and at the Lyceum, the college he established, he taught another bright young Greek, Aristotle (384–322 BCE). In many ways, Aristotle is the father of political science, the man who first sat down and catalogued what politics and government is all about. Honestly, if you read Plato and Aristotle, you will see pretty much everything we talk about today.

Aristotle, unlike Plato, didn't write in dialogues, which can make him a bit easier for modern eyes to read. He just said what he thought. Like Plato, Aristotle didn't find the common people to be so smart. His work has been described as "a severely aristocratic" political philosophy; he doesn't have much good to say about ordinary people. But he recognized the flaws in Plato's proposals, even as he recognized the challenges faced by different kinds of government. (Aristotle says, in a thinly veiled reference to his former teacher, if this is such a good idea, why is nobody actually doing this?)

Aristotle lays out what he regards as the good forms of government: monarchy (rule by one); **aristocracy**⁵ (rule by the best); and **polity**⁶ (rule by the people). Each of these forms could erode into "perversions" of the original, however. Monarchy could become tyranny. Aristocracy could decay into oligarchy, rule by the few for their own benefit. Polity could become **democracy**⁷, rule by the mob.

Aristotle then laid down a couple of principles that are with us today. First he said, was that the people all together are likely to be slightly less crazy than any subset of the citizenry. So the common, aggregated wisdom of the masses stands a better chance of making fewer foolish choices in government. But he also said that the ideal state might want parts of polity, aristocracy and monarchy, so as to produce some balance of power within the state. This idea has been repeated often throughout political history, and became the foundation of American government, some 2,000 years later.

Across the world, another great thinker was in the process of coming up with ideas that would have an equally great impact on world history, Confucius (551–479 BCE), or Kung Fu-Tze (only one of many variations of his name, which was likely something else entirely). Confucius was a political official in the Chinese state of Lu, where he fixed quite a mess in the administration of justice through rational, respectful management. He either left his post over disgust with the ruler, or was done in by political intrigue, depending on which version you read. Either way, he became a sort of wandering scholar/consultant/teacher. He preached an ethical politics based on order, morality, and a respect for tradition. He might have been a conservative, and he might just been using a conservative appeal to push a different agenda. He favored an all-powerful ruler, whose power would nonetheless be checked by tradition, honesty and the rule of law. Like Socrates (and eventually like Mao Tse-Tung), he doesn't appear to have written anything down, but his disciples did, sometimes generations after the fact. What's important about Confucius in part is that his ideas eventually became central to the Chinese state. Study of Confucian classics became the backbone of the mandarin class, the Chinese civil servants who ran the state. At its best, this created a sturdy, predictable form of government (and the Chinese empire lasted for 2,000 years). At its worst, however, it created

5. Rule by the best people.

6. According to Aristotle, a fair, just government featuring rule by the people, as opposed to democracy, which he saw as rule by the mob.

7. A system of government involving direct rule by the people.

resistance to change and modernization and a state that was unable to cope with the technological superiority of the west.

When in Rome, Do as the Greeks Do (or Don't)

The Greeks were a great influence on the Romans, even after the Romans conquered the Greek city-states and made them parts of the Roman empire. The Romans are more noted for their political practice than for their theoretical ideas, although Roman law had a big impact on development of law in the western world. When the Romans ended the monarchy that originally ruled them, they chose instead a republic. In a republic, people elect other people to make decisions on their behalf. Having lived through the rule of tyrants, the Romans devised a system of government that had checks on power. The elected Senate made laws; while the consuls were chief executives and the tribunes represented the people. But it wasn't all that simple. In fact, the Roman republic featured a somewhat bewildering array of assemblies and elected officials, any one of who might check the power of any other person or body, to the point where it was often hard to get anything done. The system proved so cumbersome that the Romans often resorted to choosing a dictator to run the show during times of trouble.

Eventually the dictators became emperors and began to wield the real power in government, changing the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. (And it's worth noting, for those of you who have seen the Russell Crowe film *Gladiator*, that neither Marcus Aurelius or any other Roman emperor ever toyed with the idea of restoring the republic). Why did this happen? In part because there were so many checks on power that reforming the state became nearly impossible. Because the Senate, the consuls and the tribunes could each say no to almost anything that came up, needed changes in land reform, taxes and citizenship, for example, never quite got accomplished. And, eventually, the empire, desperate for revenue but also for political support, raised taxes on the middle class, even while they cut them on the wealthy. Why? Because emperors needed the support of the wealthy to remain in power. Eventually, people became so poor that they sold themselves to rich people so as to stay alive. In the end, the richest, most powerful empire in the western world couldn't afford to defend itself.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Political theory is a systematic way of studying the performance of government.
- Political theories tend to fall into authoritarian, democratic and anarchic models.
- Plato thought that average people were not fit to rule, and that people would need to be carefully trained to make them into rulers.
- Aristotle didn't trust common people either, but thought that a balanced constitution, combining elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy would be best.
- Confucius thought that emphasis on order, tradition and respect would lead to the best government.
- The Roman Republic had so many checks and balances it was unable to act when it needed to.

EXERCISES

1. Assume you were studying to be a member of Plato's guardian class. What things would you need to know to be an effective ruler?
2. In what ways to order and tradition play a role in everyday life today? Do these help or hinder progress?

2.2 From Antiquity to Modernity

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how early Christian and Moslem thinkers tried to reconcile the competing spheres of church and state.
2. Understand how political science was reinvented, and how that changed views on government

The Roman empire officially collapsed in 485 CE, overrun by various tribes who had come in large numbers from the east and the north, the barbarians (from another word derived from Greek, barbaros, or foreigners).

Every society is born out of chaos. Strong people create order out of chaos, which creates a different set of conditions and needs. Once order is established, people start thinking about other things, including food and wealth and a more comfortable existence. The Dark Ages (roughly 500–900 CE) and the Middle Ages (900–1200 CE) weren't periods of total chaos. There were states, sometimes quite substantial, but they typically were born of violence and often succumbed to the same. Charlemagne carved out an empire covering much of Europe, but it was subdivided between his sons, and not everybody wanted to be a part of it anyway. It didn't last another 100 years.

But for some time after the fall of the empire, in Europe, human human misery increased. It was often unsafe to travel, trade dried up, and people sought security above all else. This eventually gave rise to the economic and political system called feudalism. In feudalism, ordinary people agree to work for and feed the biggest, baddest guy with the pointy stick, who in return agrees to keep the peasants safe from danger and attack. Feudal states were self-sufficient, because there was very little trade (remember, it wasn't safe to travel). As not every place is equally good at producing every kind of good or service, this is not an economically very efficient way to organize things. It did, however, eventually, restore order.

All knowledge was not lost, however. With the rise of Islam in the eighth century CE, another rich and powerful civilization was born. Moslem philosophers built on the work of Plato and Aristotle. For both early Christian and early Moslem thinkers, the challenge was to reconcile earthly government with the idea of an all-powerful God who commanded strict adherence to his laws. St. Augustine (354–430 CE) saw the state as God’s punishment for man’s sinfulness. The City of God matters; the city of man, not as much. Moslem philosophers such as Al-Farabi (872–950 CE), Avicenna (980–1087 CE) and Averroes (1126–1198 CE), built on Plato’s idea of a philosopher-king (in this case, a prophet-imam) who would combine both religious righteousness with just rule. These Arab philosophers had access to both Plato and Aristotle, and Aristotle in particular had been lost to the Christian west.

But in 1085, the European Spanish reconquered the city of Toledo from the Moslem Spanish (the Moors), and Toledo had a really big library that, miraculously, wasn’t burned to the ground. Works of all kinds were translated from Arabic and Hebrew to Spanish and Latin, which meant that they were accessible to a much larger group of people. Aristotle was troubling at first to medieval Christian scholars; he said things that weren’t in the Bible. Eventually, however, he became the chief source for everything that wasn’t in the Bible, which, in fields such as science, wasn’t always the best choice.

Aristotle was partially rehabilitated in the west by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), whose work was to have enormous impact on the development of the Catholic Church. Aquinas said it was not necessary to have a theocratic state, ruled by the church, and that it was acceptable to have a secular (non-church government). The church in the form of the pope still had supreme authority, but unlike St. Augustine, Aquinas seems to be saying that it’s not just the next life that matters; this life matters a little too.

Political Science: The Comeback Kid

In Aquinas’ time, Europe was at last on the road to recovery from the collapse of the Roman Empire. That meant increasing stability and order. That produced the conditions that make it possible to trade. So, for example, by the 1200s, trade fairs began to spring up in the Champagne region of France. The rise of trade began to increase the demand for goods, such as cloth, which created a new class of people—merchants, bankers, the people of business. And their needs weren’t the same as those of the feudal lords.

In the midst of this change, things happened. Disagreements between English barons and King John led to the creation of the Magna Carta, which led to the creation of the English Parliament, the most representative body since the Roman

Senate. A century later, in 1295, the English King Edward I called Parliament into session all on his own. Why? Because he needed them to raise taxes to pay for wars. Having Parliament pass taxes legitimized them more than the king just calling for them on his own. That single act gave Parliament a power that was to change the nature of the state forever.

This era became known as the Renaissance, when, in Europe, cities began to grow and trade resumed and there was a rebirth of art, culture and science. (When people have time to think, they often do.) This struggle between the old feudal order, whose wealth and power was based on land, and the new business order, lasted for hundreds of years. Why it happened in Europe and not in, say, China or India, which also had very advanced societies, is hard to say. There have been a lot of theories, none of them completely satisfying. But it did happen in Europe, and, if nothing else, that had a great impact on what happened in America.

So whereas the political theory of the pre-Renaissance period was largely about how much power should be possessed by the church, after the Renaissance began theory increasingly was once again about what the ideal state should look like. Niccolo Machiavelli (one of history's most misunderstood philosophers) barely even mentions God and the church; he doesn't spend pages justifying the need for a state. Contrast that with St. Thomas Aquinas, who was still arguing that the state was divinely ordained and therefore, at the end of the day, subservient to the church. Machiavelli says, in effect, "get real" and assumes there will be a state. Writing at a time when Italy was a collection of uncertain city-states, and also the training ground for the armies of Europe, Machiavelli argued that 1. You don't get very far by playing fair if your enemies don't and 2. The ideal state has a balance of power that keeps tyranny from taking over. Machiavelli tried to look at what states were really like, and to deduce from that how we might make them better. People have tended to look at Machiavelli's most famous work, *The Prince*, and be horrified that anyone would say, in effect, if your enemies are trying to kill you, take them out first. But if you read his work carefully, you begin to understand that Machiavelli wanted 1. A free and united Italy and 2. A state that, when secure, would be governed fairly and for the benefit of the people. If nothing else, Machiavelli gives us the first truly practical discussion of political science since Aristotle.

Machiavelli is sometimes considered the first "modern" political philosopher. "**Modernity**⁸" is a funny sounding word (if you put the accent on the second syllable instead of the first, it will sound about right), but an important idea. As later thinkers such as Max Weber (1864–1920) were to recognize, the separation of church and state demystified the world. We might still believe in God, but we don't expect him to part the Red Sea or deliver messages through burning bushes. Without the moral guide rails of a universal faith, we are left to figure things out on

8. The era after the Middle Ages, and the problem of a world where reason and rationality have begun to replace faith.

our own. Our senses of right and wrong must be redefined. So, if life is really a journey and not a destination, modernity means we just lost the map.

Amid all this came the Reformation. Martin Luther, a German churchman, became frustrated with the excesses of the Catholic Church, such as shaking down people for money (indulgences) so as to buy their way into heaven. (The money, at that time, wasn't going to help the poor. It was going to build fancier palaces, fight more wars, and throw bigger parties.) Luther wasn't a political radical—he didn't argue that kings and princes didn't have the right to rule. But he did say that we are all equal for before God, regardless of wealth or privilege. And if we're all equal before God, it's not a great step to thinking we're also equal before the state. Luther probably didn't realize it, but he had just helped let the genie out of the bottle. Increasingly, from this point forward, more political philosophers began to argue that more people—not less—should participate in governing the state.

But not everybody, and not all in the same way. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) argued that government is a contract between the ruler and the ruled. Hobbes saw government and civil society as the antidote to what he called “the state of nature,” in which every person was out for him or herself, and in which life was best described as “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short” (spelling at that time being a somewhat creative affair). Hobbes' **social contract**⁹, therefore, keeps us and the barbarian hordes in check, allowing people to live better, longer, easier lives.

Hobbes granted the ruler, who he called the sovereign, pretty much absolute power (Hobbes had worked for the English king. In politics, where you stand often depends upon where you sit.) He thought that the sovereign would realize it's in his own self-interest to treat people well, because if your kingdom is decrepit, you won't be in power long. Having lived through the long and violent English Civil War, Hobbes thought that the contract was all about security. Having established the sovereign by mutual consent, the people were bound to support and obey the sovereign up to the point at which he or it could no longer protect them. (The fact that if the sovereign fell to such a level of powerlessness, he wasn't really a sovereign anymore, seems to have escaped Hobbes.)

The challenging part about Hobbes' argument is that it relies on the king understanding that the people's well-being was in his own best interest. And yet it doesn't always work out that way. Eventually, the English kings, thinking they were the only thing that mattered, so angered much of the rest of the country that they chased King James II away and replaced him with William and Mary (in what the British refer to as the Glorious Revolution of 1688). Another Englishman, John Locke (1632–1704) writing at about that time, argued for the supremacy of the

9. An agreement between people to create a certain type of government.

legislature—Parliament. Soon after, increasingly, Great Britain was, for all purposes, ruled by Parliament, not by the king.

Locke is important because he had such a big impact on so many others, including the American revolutionaries who were to create the United States. Like Hobbes, Locke saw government as a social contract between the governed and the governors. Unlike Hobbes, Locke didn't see people as inherently selfish and therefore potentially dangerous. They could, in fact, be charitable and rational. Government's role is not to restrain people, but to protect their rights to "life, health, liberty or possessions," (in some references rendered as "life, liberty or property"), as he put it. Any social contract that led to oppression was null and void before the ink had dried. Locke thought that sovereignty lay with the people, not kings, and that therefore an elected parliament was the best form of government. Although Locke acknowledged that kings did not have an exclusive franchise on tyranny, the only check on the power of parliament he provided was elections, short of revolution. Locke, like others who were involved in revolutions, argued that there was a right to revolution, which probably sounds better when you're on the front end than when you're on the receiving end.

Locke was also an influence on the Swiss-French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), one of those historical curiosities who loved humanity but wasn't so good with people (he gave up his own children for adoption, for example). Rousseau's state of nature was the opposite of Hobbes'—an idyllic Eden in which people lived peacefully, long and well before being corrupted by the advent of organized society. (This was to have a great impact on anarchist thinkers down the road.) "Man is born free," he wrote in *The Social Contract* (1762), "and everywhere he is in chains." Despite what sounds like a call to anarchy, Rousseau proceeded to argue that the chains would be much lighter in a properly constituted republic. Sovereignty rests with the people, who rule through a combination of magistrates (who don't make policy on their own) and direct democracy. The ideal republic is a city-state, like Geneva, the Swiss city where he was born. It's worth noting that Geneva was republican on the surface and a theocracy underneath, and of the latter Rousseau clearly did not approve. Unlike the real Geneva, proper government should be an expression of the general will (one of those somewhat hazy ideas that sound pretty good until you try to define it and make it practical). In his defense, Rousseau did appear to think that the general will should not be used to oppress the individual. Nonetheless, Rousseau's work influenced thinkers from anarchists to liberals to Marxists, everyone seeming to find a suitable present under the tree of his varied thought.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Medieval philosophers tried to reconcile the competing powers of church and state.
- Modern philosophers presumed the existence of the state, and set about trying to make it better.
- Social contract theory saw government as a contract between the government and the governed.

EXERCISES

1. Do you practice a particular faith? What should be the role of religion in civil society?
2. Is government a social contract? How does that contract work for people who weren't born when it was agreed upon?

2.3 From Modernity to Today

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why the U.S. Constitution was designed the way it was.
2. Understand Marx and Mill's different visions for a just society.
3. Understand contemporary approaches in political theory.

Sometimes overlooked among political philosophers is James Madison (1751–1836). A small man with a high voice, he nonetheless became the fourth president of the United States after being the chief author of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Madison read history and political philosophy and was able to build on the ideas of those who came before him. Unlike Locke, he argued for a balance of power in government, more like Aristotle, Machiavelli and Montesquieu (1685–1755), a French philosopher who influenced the American Founding Fathers. This balance of power became, in practical terms, the division of power in U.S. government between the states and the national government; the division of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches; and the literal encouragement of interest groups who would, Madison hoped, keep each other in check.

This last idea was a crucial one, for interest groups (which Madison called “**factions**¹⁰”) had been the downfall of Athens and other states throughout history. Factions, he argued, tended to become so obsessed with their own concerns that they forgot about everything else. That could mean that important issues were neglected and that good leaders could be thrown from office over differences on a particular topic. But, Madison argued, limiting the influence of interest groups would in fact limit the liberty they had just fought so hard to win. The answer, he said, was a system of government with many checks on power, so that no one group could dominate the government, and letting interest groups flourish so that they will keep each other in check. The challenge to this idea is the danger of ending up like the Roman Republic, with so many checks on power that you can't get anything done. For the United States, at least, we don't have a final score on that yet.

10. What James Madison called interest groups, which are collections of like-minded individuals who unite in pursuit of common political goals.

Revolution and Counter-Revolution

The American Revolution was followed by the French Revolution in 1789, with somewhat less benign results. The French monarchy was not meeting people's needs, and avenues for political participation and regime change were limited. When the cork finally popped on this over-shaken bottle of civic champagne, royals and revolutionaries lost their heads, literally and figuratively. (Eventually, Napoleon made himself emperor, and ushered in a few more decades of war in Europe.) Revolution produced different reactions among political thinkers.

Edmund Burke (1729–1797), a British politician, found himself on both sides of the issue. While serving in Parliament, he argued against any oppression of the American colonists, recognizing that a wealthy America would make Britain richer than it could imagine. He turned the other way on the French revolution, as people who disagreed with the new regime kept ending up dead.

A strong believer in representative government, Burke is nonetheless often regarded as the father of modern conservatism. Like Confucius, he argued against rapid, radical change, saying instead that human institutions are there for a reason, and embody the collective wisdom of generations.

Thomas Paine (1737–1809), whose pamphlet *Common Sense* helped reinvigorate the American revolution, later served in the revolutionary legislature in France (even though he didn't speak French). Paine was anti-monarchy, which made him a radical for his time and rather unpopular in his native Britain. In his pamphlet *Rights of Man*, he argued for a right to revolution when government does not protect people's rights. He also argued that rights are natural to human beings, and are not granted by government, because then they become mere privileges, which can be taken away.

The 1800s saw a broader push for more popular participation in government, at least in Europe and the Americas. It also saw the Industrial Revolution, which began the movement from a world in which most people were farmers to a world in which most people were not. The Industrial Revolution, beginning with the widespread use of steam and water power and continuing through the revolution of electricity late in the 1800s, changed how we live. Farms got more efficient, so that fewer farmers were needed. Meanwhile, mass production, rapid transit (beginning with the steam train and the steam ship), and rapid, widespread communications (beginning with the telegraph and then the telephone), led to the creation both of efficient factories and of large business enterprises. When most people were farmers, people worked outdoors and, in theory, could at least feed themselves. Factory work meant less pleasant if not downright dangerous working conditions

and, frequently, low pay and no benefits. This was a world in which there were no child labor laws (and children were sometimes chained to the machines they operated), no overtime, no day off except Sunday, no industrial insurance, no unemployment insurance, and no protection for workers at all. (Some folks on the right would tell you that this was better; you'll have to decide that for yourself.) In this world, in which civic institutions were playing catch-up with the realities of modern life, a couple of different philosophers approached the problem in widely different ways.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) argued for broader political participation. Mill saw the benefits of expanding wealth, and thought that popular political institutions were the way to address the inequalities generated by the uneven flowering of capitalism.

Mill had a strange childhood. His father, a political philosopher in his own right, gave his son a rather rigid upbringing, so that he learned Ancient Greek at age 3 and was reading Plato and Aristotle by age 12. He has been estimated to have had the highest IQ in history, and at age 20 he had a mental breakdown, having become, in his own words, “an intellectual thoroughbred and an emotional hobbyhorse.”

Mill recovered, and wrote a lot of important work. He believed in individual liberty and limits on the power of government. He believed that society existed for the benefit of the individual, who ought to be able to do what she or he likes, as long as they aren't hurting others. In the concept of utilitarianism, in which Mill built on the work of his father and of the economist Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), Mill argued that society should provide the greatest good for the greatest number. For the most part, he believed that people should be allowed to participate in government (for the most part, because he allowed that despotism was OK in “backward” societies). He did, however, oppose slavery. But while he was not always a progressive thinker on race, he was perhaps the first major philosopher since Plato to argue for the rights of women (his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, is regarded as a first-rate philosopher in her own right).

Mill believed in free markets—leaving the economy alone and letting capitalism work as intended (though later in life he began to edge toward socialism). He also believed in some sort of workplace democracy, with workers given a say in choosing managers.

The Marx Brother

Karl Marx (1818–1883) did not believe in free markets (or God or capitalism or democracy. None of this, he said, helped people). Born in Germany, Marx described

the world as he saw it. Like most political philosophers, he was a voracious reader, a critical thinker, a voluminous writer, and a bit odd. (A visitor to his house in London, where he later lived, described a chaotic scene of dirt, broken furniture, randomly placed children and a heavy patina of stale cigarette smoke.) His analysis of the modern capitalist world was compelling, and his ideas had a huge impact on world history.

While Mill saw the upside of an evolving world, Marx saw the costs. Workers were oppressed, and capitalists, “the bourgeoisie,” as he called them, were unduly profiting from their labor. This led to what he and his writing partner, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), (who, ironically, was himself a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie), called the labor theory of value: The worth of anything is reflected by the labor it took to produce it. Profit, therefore, was merely value stolen from the workers.

Also unlike Mill, Marx said that the state was merely an instrument of the capitalist class, “the committee of the bourgeoisie,” there to enforce the rules that kept the workers in their places. Neither elections nor labor unions, which were quite weak in Marx’s time, would provide the workers with any meaningful protections against the depredations of capital.

Marx gave us what he called dialectical materialism. This argued that the conditions of production determined the material and political conditions of life. So, for example, under feudalism people were ruled by aristocrats such as kings and dukes, and were treated badly in the process. But, Marx said, each new system sewed the seeds of its own demise. So feudalism managed to create order out of chaos, which led to trade, the growth of cities, and the end of feudalism.

For Marx, history wasn’t a series of random events, but instead unfolded with all the crystalline clarity of a strand of DNA. One gene leads to another. The history of man was essentially the history of class struggle. And so, Marx predicted, capitalism would plant the flowers of its own funeral. It would so impoverish the workers that they would rise up, overthrow their capitalism overlords, and begin the happy march toward a workers’ paradise. (It was for this reason that Marx expected that what he called **communism**¹¹ would arise first in the industrialized west, rather than in the agrarian east.)

Marx’s answer was socialism, an idea developing in various times and places in the 19th century in response to the excesses of industrial capitalism. Under socialism, the workers would control the means of production, and people’s needs would be met: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” as Marx once put it. Marx understood that some people wouldn’t like this idea much, and so

11. A political and economic system featuring broad public ownership of resources with rule by a dictatorship.

the workers' paradise is to be reached through a transitory phase, "the dictatorship of the proletariat." The proletariat are the working class, and the dictatorship will allow them to learn, over time, that the promises of a market-based, capitalist economy are merely the siren song of our old friends the bourgeoisie, who never have your best interests at heart. Eventually, Marx said, people will be properly educated and the state will just "wither away," leaving people to produce for use, not profit, and leading more fulfilling lives. "Workers of the world unite," Marx and Engels wrote at the end of *The Communist Manifesto*. "The proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win." (Translations of this line vary from place to place, but you get the idea.)

Marx was a little hazy on how all this was supposed to work. As trenchant as his analysis of his time was, his prescriptions were a bit foggy. We are left to guess at how Marx would have regarded the oppressions that were later visited in his name.

The objections to Marx are many and worth considering. First, while he sees human history as an evolutionary process, for some unexplained reason it apparently just stops evolving when we get to communism. Seriously, if capitalism sowed the seeds of its own demise, wouldn't communism also naturally give birth to its own Oedipal assassin? (The Greek tragic hero Oedipus kills his own father to become king. Of course, he didn't know it was his own father, but that's Greek tragedy for you.) Second, if the problem with capitalist classical liberalism is that it tends to centralize power to the point where the system oppresses the many for the benefit of the few, wouldn't communism, run by a doctrinaire dictatorship, have the same problem all over? The anarchist writer Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) correctly predicted that if Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat came to pass, it would simply be just that, a dictatorship, oppressing people in much the same they'd been oppressed by business and government under capitalism. Finally, Marx may have underestimated people's ability to get change through normal democratic means—choosing leaders who would pass laws to empower and protect workers through the excesses of capitalism. It's worth noting that while Marx predicted communism would occur in the industrialized west, in fact it was two very poor, largely agrarian societies—China and Russia—that took to communism, whereas Europe and the Americas never really did. In societies where people already owned nothing, perhaps communism offered something. In societies where people were becoming wealthier, perhaps it did not offer as much.

Modern/Contemporary Theories

History did not stop with communism; people have continued to make arguments about the nature of politics and government long after Marx. Human beings are pretty clever, and people frequently think of new ways of looking at and explaining things. (And, let's be honest: In contemporary academics, you have to say

something new and different if you want to get anywhere.) And while some of this theory isn't quite as fun as the older theory, it can be helpful in explaining why things happen the way they do (even if the answers aren't any clearer than they've ever been).

For example: Institutionalists have long looked at the institutions of politics and government, and tried to understand how the way we organize things can influence how we behave. From Madison until recent times, **institutionalism**¹² was the dominant school of political philosophy in the United States. Certainly, as people figure out how the institutions of modern governments actually work, they will adjust their behavior to try to achieve what they want by making best use of those institutions. Institutionalism fell somewhat out of vogue as governments that looked good on paper, such as the Soviet Union's (whose constitution had substantial guarantees of individual liberty) failed to match their descriptions.

Other contemporary (which usually means after World War II) theories have drawn on other disciplines to try to explain politics, such as psychology, sociology and biology. **Behavioralists**¹³ have attempted to collect data on people's actual behavior and use that to explain why they behave the way they do. Post-behavioralists attempt to combine this with more traditional forms of analysis to form a more well-rounded picture of current political behavior. **Systems theory**¹⁴, which borrows from biology, tries to look at politics as a living system, in which all the players interact to create the political environment in which we live. As a change in climate would affect a forest and the creatures that live in it, a change in political and economic conditions tends to produce reactions among citizens, which are somewhat reflected in actions by government (presuming the government is at all responsive to public pressure). **Modernization theory**¹⁵ notes that as nations get richer, they become more stable and more democratic (rich people don't riot, except maybe at sales where they run out of Guccis). Feminist theories examine the role of women in politics, rightly pointing out that, historically, women were excluded from politics and economic and public life. While **feminist political theory**¹⁶ is generally aimed at gaining and preserving an equal footing for women in politics, it comes in all kinds of flavors, from Marxist feminists to democratic feminists, with several stops in between.

Rational choice theory¹⁷ attempted to apply economic logic to politics: People calculate what serves their interests best, and behave accordingly. This may seem sort of obvious, and it is, and it's also not so easy to predict what's rational from person to person. It also presumes that people are completely self-interested, and operate with perfect information, neither which is likely to be true all the time. And it also ignores culture-driven aspects of people's behavior. It can, however, help us predict elected officials' behavior. For example, will a city council approve a rezone for an apartment complex, or insist that the land be used for single-family homes?

12. The study of political institutions with an eye to understanding and improving them.
13. The scientific study of politics, through observation and collection of data and statistical measurement.
14. The idea that people and politics form a living ecosystem, and the effort to understand political behavior by studying that ecosystem.
15. The idea that democracy becomes more likely as societies grow wealthier.
16. The effort to understand and end the political and economic subjugation of women.
17. The idea that people are rational decision-makers, so that their political behavior can be predicted by looking at what choices would best serve their personal interests.

Rational choice theory would tell us that they will choose single-family homes, because they will attract wealthier people who will pay more taxes and demand less services, thus costing the city less money (and this is what often happens).

Critical theory¹⁸ might best be summed up in a light-bulb joke: How many critical theorists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Only one, but first he has to sit in a darkened room and determine whether light is something he really needs, or if it's just something that's been culturally imposed upon him. Critical theory looks at communication and culture to try to determine if 1. We make choices because we are driven by culture (which might lead us to make less than optimal choices) and 2. If, when we communicate, we are actually getting true to each other. The assumption of the leading light of critical theory, the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, is that if we create this "ideal speech situation," is that we'll all be Marxists. And since communism ended up looking so much like Plato's guardian plan, that rather takes us back to the beginning, doesn't it?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Madison and the Founding Fathers sought to balance government's need for power with citizens' need for liberty
- Mill thought that government and society should create the greatest good for the greatest number.
- Marx thought that capitalism would so impoverish the workers that they would revolt and create communism.
- Contemporary theories have sought explain people's political actions by applying the disciplines of other social sciences.

EXERCISES

1. Read the preamble to the U.S. Constitution at http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html (It won't take you long to read the whole thing.) Based on what you know about American government, is the nation living up to this?
2. Imagine Karl Marx's ideal state, run by and for workers. What could be better about this? What might be worse? Could this work?

18. The idea that political problems come down to cultural blinders and communication problems. If we can remove/solve these problems, we should be able to decide a right course in government.

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