

4. Political Theory

I INTRODUCTION

Political Theory, subdivision of political science traditionally concerned with the body of ideas expressed by political philosophers who have asked not only how politics work but how they should work. These philosophers have been concerned with the nature and justification of political obligation and authority and the goals of political action. Although their prescriptions have varied, and some have been utopian in concept, they have shared the conviction that it is the political philosopher's duty to distinguish between what is and what ought to be, between existing political institutions and potentially more humane institutions. The term *political theory*, in the past century, has come to be used as well to denote descriptive, explanatory, and predictive generalizations about political behavior regardless of the morality involved. This approach is more concerned with mathematical, statistical, and quantifiable techniques than with normative concerns.

II THE STATE

The central concern of political theorists throughout history has been the theory of the state. Plato contributed to the founding of this theory in his discourse the *Republic*, which attempted to reconcile moral theory and political practice by projecting a community in which property was to be owned in common and which was to be governed by an aristocracy of philosopher-kings who would train the young. Such doctrines, in highly distorted form, have been used in modern times as the basis of the system of government known as totalitarianism, which, in contrast to democracy, asserts the supremacy of the state over the individual. A variant of this system, known as absolutism, vests the ruling power in a limited number of persons or in institutions, such as a priesthood, supporting certain fixed and generally immutable principles.

Aristotle is generally regarded as the founder of the scientific approach to political theory. His *Politics*, which classified governments as monarchies, aristocracies, and democracies, according to their control by one person, a select few, or many persons, successfully combined an empirical investigation of the facts and a critical inquiry into their ideal possibilities, thus providing a challenging model of political studies.

III CHURCH AND STATE

Important shifts of emphasis have usually been related to the challenges of concrete historical and social problems. In the Middle Ages, for example, much political writing dealt with the outstanding political issue of the time, the protracted struggle for supremacy between the Roman Catholic church and the Holy Roman Empire. The Italian philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas defended the role of the church in his *Summa Theologica* (1265-73), while Dante argued in *De Monarchia* (On Monarchy, c. 1313) for a united Christendom under emperor and pope, each supreme in his appropriate sphere. In *The Prince* (1532) the Italian statesman Niccolò Machiavelli transcended the traditional church-state debate by realistically evaluating the problems and possibilities of governments seeking to maintain power.

IV THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes also stressed governmental power. His major work, *Leviathan* (1651), argued that the sovereign's power should be unlimited, because the state originated in a so-called social contract, whereby individuals accept a common superior power to protect themselves from their own brutish instincts and to make possible the satisfaction of certain human desires. Another 17th-century English philosopher, John Locke, accepted much of Hobbes's social-contract theory but argued that sovereignty resided in the people for whom governments were trustees and that such governments could be legitimately overthrown if they failed to discharge their functions to the people.

The ideals and rhetoric of Locke later contributed to the establishment of the United States through their expression in the Declaration of Independence and *The Federalist*, two major documents of the American Revolution. Important contributions to republican and democratic ideals were also made by the French philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau, who expressed ideas similar to those of Locke, and the Baron de Montesquieu, who proposed a separation of governmental powers in prerevolutionary 18th-century France similar to that later embodied in the U.S. Constitution. The political theories of Locke and the early Americans, constituting the attitude generally known as liberalism, were further refined by the 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill.

V MARXISM AND OTHER FORMS OF TOTALITARIANISM

Karl Marx was in many respects the most influential political theorist of the 19th century. He sought to combine factual analysis and political prescription in a thorough survey of the modern economic system. Arguing that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," and that liberal governments and ideology were merely agents of the exploiting owners of property, Marx advocated the abolition of private property and predicted the demise of capitalism after a series of recurring crises. The abolition of property, and therefore of class exploitation, would make possible a situation in which individuals would contribute according to their abilities and take according to their needs. The state, following a transitional period in which the working class would rule, would eventually wither away. In the 20th century, Marxism has been the subject of conflicting interpretations. It served as the official ideology of a number of totalitarian states, and it was also the inspirational credo of many revolutionary and nationalist movements throughout the world (*see* Communism; Socialism).

Another type of political theory, also constituting a form of totalitarianism, emerged after World War I in the political movements known as fascism and National Socialism. Both asserted, in varying degrees, the doctrine of the total supremacy of the state and justified the use of force to achieve political ends.

See also Government; History and Historiography; Philosophy.

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