# Introduction

## Politics

Any society’s capacity to endure and develop over time is dependent on its possession of power; that is, its ability to make its constituent elements – human and non-human resources – behave in such a way as to establish an ordered design. However, in every society, power is disseminated disproportionately among different social subgroups, and these groups – each with its own interpretation of the best ethical, economic, and cultural mode of living for their society – use their share to try to shape the direction of social development in any number of diverse and often contrary directions. As a consequence, the order of every society is shaped by the push and pull of its contesting elements, each developing its own ideas as to how things should be ordered and engaging in strategic action towards their desired outcome. This is the ‘stuff’ of political life.

While the need for survival and the common desire for peaceful and sociable existence often calms the struggle and aims it towards consensus, social co-existence is inherently combative and conflict-prone. The factors that play a significant part in whether a society falls into destructive internal conflict or endures peaceably with its internal differences are often circumstantial, unforeseen environmental changes, and novel technological advances can unhinge social arrangements and set groups against each other. These historically contingent factors ensure that the particulars facing any given society at any given time are always unique. Different historical periods throw up different types of problems for people to deal with. For example, the major issues faced by the Aztecs upon meeting with Don Cortez are not issues which the Mexicans of today have to deal with, while the major issues of current times, such as the problems attending the production and potential use of nuclear weaponry, would not be meaningful to people of earlier times. Yet, despite the historical relativity of much politics, sets of issues revolving around the possession and use of power arise again and again, shaped into various guises by the particulars

I N T R O D U C T I O N

of the current events of each historical epoch. The concepts and language of political theory enable people from different historical situations to engage in an ongoing analysis of perennial issues which are involved in and are definitive of the political condition in much the same way as the concepts and language of medicine have enable physicians to analyse, discuss and further their understanding of the biology of the human condition across generations.

## Political theory

Political life is therefore a rich mix of action and ideas, played out dramatically over time. The role of political theorists in the political world is to provide an understanding of this mix. Theorists critically examine the coherence of commonly held ideas about politics; they observe the effect of such ideas on political action and analyse the social constructs which are built by that action and which in turn provide its social context. As critical examination always reveals incoherence at the level of ideas, and confusion at the level of action, theorists invariably suggest modifications and alternatives to the political world they observe.

Seen in this way, the political theorist appears as a kind of objective observer, viewing the life-world of politics as if from above, but theorists are not eternal observers since they are involved in the world they reflect upon. Theorists live and work within a political world and their theorising is bound to be affected by the cultural norms and values, as by the academic methods and intellectual puzzles which prevail in the world of ideas of their time. In addition, like all members of a political society, theorists are affected by the prevailing concerns and sometimes dramatic events that shape or disrupt their common world.

This involvement is not just a case of theorists being influenced by their environment; in many cases, the critical reflections and the prescriptions for change produced by theorists have had such an impact on the prevailing understanding of their contemporaries or on later generations that they have been deployed as directives for common political activity. In this way, theory often integrates with action. The arguments and analyses of the most influential political theorists have significantly affected the course of political action and, with it, the shaping of the political world. In order to understand the ideas of particular political thinkers (and to provide a substantive critique of their work), we must take them in context, not only the context of their times, their particular historical setting, but also their philo- sophical and theoretical context. If we abstract authors from their intellectual and temporal environment we are in danger of distorting their work and of committing the crime of turning their ideas into the worst kind of dogma.

Thus there is a central tension involved in the activity of political theorists. Their goal is to be critical observers, viewing the political world as if they stand outside it, and yet, in order to achieve the truthfulness required for accurate observation, they must recognise that they are also actors involved in the world they attempt to observe.

Anyone who hopes to understand the social effects and political functions of political theory must address this tension in the activity of theorising, the specific questions it raises about the relationship of the theorist to the world of action on

###### 2

I N T R O D U C T I O N

which they are commenting and helping to shape, and the more general questions it raises about the relationship of theory to action. These questions are the under- pinning themes of this book.

Dealing with the first question brings with it an engagement with the exciting dramas of political lives. The theorists we discuss are all individuals with a deep commitment to the goal of establishing the best order of life for humankind. Each in their way shows profound insight into the political condition of human life. In many cases, their arguments attracted such angry responses from powerful and at times dangerous opponents that their activities as theorists required great personal bravery. Examination of such scenarios focuses our attention on the theorist as political actor reminding us of the traditional role of the political theorist that has now become lost, due to the professionalisation of the theorist and the safe and sanitised academic environment that most political thinkers now inhabit.

Addressing the second question is intellectually exciting, involving, as it does, the consideration of the relationship of ideas to the author’s conditions of being. More importantly for our purposes, it is also the starting point in any journey towards under- standing the centrifugal force that this relationship holds on the spinning political world. It is only when one has an understanding of the general relationship of moving ideas to moving action that any valuation of the importance of a particular theorist to the world of politics can be made.

## Book outline: theorists in context

The two questions we have set ourselves to address are the question of the rela- tionship of particular theorists to the world of action on which they are commenting and which they help to shape, and the overarching question of the relationship of theory as an activity to action in general. For this reason, we shall keep our focus upon the theorising situation – the exciting point of convergence between think- ing upon and acting into the political world. This interest not only influences our choice of political theorists for discussion, but also directs our treatment of the philo- sophical concerns and political issues they address. The political theories selected for consideration have not been chosen because they are outstanding examples of political philosophy (though many of the arguments we cover are generally recog- nised as being so), but because they are highly influential representatives of a tradition of political theory that is umbilically tied to the political world which the theorists struggle to interpret. To have any sense of the place of political theorists within the political sphere, one must have a sense of them as political actors. Far from writing from ‘ivory towers’ about political affairs, these theorists were deeply embroiled in their political worlds. John Milton risked execution, John Lilburne was imprisoned, John Locke and Karl Marx both had to write incognito, in exile or ‘on the run’, since their ideas inflamed revolutionary imaginations, threatening various national political orders and the power of those who dominated them. Rousseau struggled with his exclusion from and his antipathy towards French aristocratic society, a struggle that when expressed in writing fired the imaginations of the French revolutionaries, although only after it had reduced their author to a state of isolated semi-madness. Edmund Burke presented his arguments in the hothouse atmosphere

###### 3

I N T R O D U C T I O N

of the House of Commons. These were not members of an aloof elite, tossing out clever theories while waiting to be immortalised in stone. They were actors and thinkers, living dangerously and writing against treacherous opposition in the hope that they were contributing to a better world. For this reason at least, we owe them the debt of treating their work and lives as public statements of a commitment to political life.

In order to help locate these theorists and their ideas in historical context, we have ordered them into three broad historical settings, each of which is defined by a set of central themes. The contextual setting for the first section is the turbulent England of the 1600s, the civil war of the 1640s, and the events leading up to the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1689. These events map out the crises of religious and political identity in the shape of constitutional conflicts. During this period, the newly assertive monarchy found itself challenged by radical Protestant liberalism at the levels of ideology and action. The debates among political theorists during this time set out the struggle to establish ideological grounds for sovereign authority and to assert definitive power over the national terrain. We explore this struggle through a presentation of the arguments of John Milton, whose career as a poet followed his first public life as an advocate of Protestant revolt. We look at John Locke, a revo- lutionary thinker whose ideas came to be used in later times as an ideological foundation for liberal democratic order. We explore two other profoundly influential political visions that were also cast from the uncertain conditions of seventeenth- century England. The first of these is the work of Thomas Hobbes on the horrors of lawlessness and the ethical basis of absolutist sovereignty. Like Locke, Hobbes’ ideas are imbued with a concern for the troubles of his times but have been taken up, reinterpreted and represented by many theorists after him, so that varied mutations of his ideas have endured as influential reference points for political actors and theorists. The second political vision is the democratic and communistic reappraisal of the relationship of human communities to their government and to their environ- ment, presented in the writings and activities of the Levellers and Diggers. Their period of existence was brief, but their ideas percolated the discourse of non- conformist Christian organisations. The eventual involvement of these groups in the nineteenth century in the emergence of the labour movement helped construct a quasi-religious and distinctly non-Marxist brand of socialism.

The second set of theorists is explored in the context of the major intellectual and political events affecting Europe and the colonial world of the eighteenth century. These events included the destruction of the *ancien régime* and the socio-political order of Christendom (a continental power bloc covering the territories of Europe). The period also covers the creation of a range of new liberal nation states in Europe and America. At the level of ideas, this section illustrates the centrifugal forces that built up to the revolutionary changes of the French Enlightenment and the sub- sequent political landmarks of the French and American revolutions. Two theorists whose works and reputations above all others were posthumously claimed by those involved in the revolutions are Baron de Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Exploration of these theorists’ arguments, consideration of their reception during their lives, their posthumous evaluation by revolutionaries and conservatives, and some later evaluations made in the past two centuries, reveal the complex relationship of ideas to world-changing action.

###### 4

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Perhaps the most influential and historically significant piece of theorising was Montesquieu’s modification of Lockean theory regarding the argument for a separa- tion of powers. It is also one of the most intriguing, for while Montesquieu’s presentation is now widely considered to be a conservative defence of aristocratic power within the *ancien régime*, the intellectuals and activists of the French and American revolutions interpreted it as the core feature of a radical liberal manifes to for constitutional republicanism. Similarly, many of Rousseau’s key concepts – most notably the ideas of the ‘general will’ and the nation state – were adopted by French revolutionaries, taken out of textual context, and adapted to the practical circumstances of building a new republican nation state.

The last of our theorists may also be said to have been interpreted differently by his contemporaries than by subsequent generations. Edmund Burke was a liberal thinking Whig politician who had supported many revolutionary movements including the uprisings in his native Ireland against the British. He numbered many radical Members of Parliament and activists among his friends; yet his thesis condemning the French Revolution has marked him out by commentators as the founder of modern Conservatism. Such a view of his work is only possible if, as with Rousseau, his key concepts are taken out of context. For Burke offers us much more than a mere manifesto for the Conservative Party. He confronts us with a theory of liberty and identity that needs to be taken in its own right, without any regard for the ideological ‘box’ in which he has been put. Looking at theorists in this way can produce rich and creative results, since we find in Burke not a narrow and sceptical anti-politics, but an engaging theory of rights that makes an interesting contribution to contemporary debates.

The final section of the book sets out the context and concerns of the most influential political thinkers of the nineteenth century. The almost overbearing context with which our chosen theorists engaged was that of the increasingly urbanised, overtly class-ridden socio-economic order of industrial capitalism. This overwhelming new order manifested huge changes in almost every aspect of social and cultural life. Theorists made sense of the new order by conceptualising socio- economic classes, mass society, non-personal social structures and impersonal economic forces. In presenting some central ideas of John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, we will consider two of the most influential and enduring attempts of the time to understand and evaluate the political implications of the new socio-economic order. Mill’s work may be seen as an argument for the modification of classical liberal individualism. He sets out a pluralistic, social democratic vision of society, in which individual liberty can be maintained in the face of progress towards mass society. Marx’s work arguably represents the most powerful rejection of liberal society and morality through his analysis of class-based politics. However, these two theorists’ work will not only be presented as a case of opposites. Rather, we shall explore how both theorists typified nineteenth-century awareness of history as a moving force, imposing conditions and setting terms for human agency, and how they were concerned to establish the possibilities of human liberty in the face of social and historical determinants.

Finally, we shall explore the subversive theories and activities of anarchism through the political thoughts and deeds of Mikhail Bakunin, as well as the often- discredited work of the anarcho-syndicalist Georges Sorel. Anarchism was a strong

###### 5

I N T R O D U C T I O N

and vibrant political movement in the nineteenth century, yet too often political texts have ignored the influence of its leading figures. This is strange, as the anarchist dis- course stretches right back through the whole history of modern political ideas. We can trace its lines of thought from the Levellers and the Diggers, through Rousseau and eventually to Marx. It has many overlapping debates with the libertarianism of J.S. Mill and classical liberalism. It also offers a direct challenge to the tradition of state-centred politics that began with Hobbes. Coming at the end of the modern period of political ideas, before we reach the terrain of the ‘contemporary’, anarchism is a fitting way to end the enquiry into the context of political theory and practice that has been presented here. It brings together many of the themes of the book and points the way to the new type of ideological politics that was destined to be bound up in conflict for most of the twentieth century.

