

1

A Hundred Years of Studying Politics: What Have We Got to Show For It?

BRIAN BARRY
Fellow of the Academy

WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE does the study of politics produce? If we are told that people are talking about politics, our expectation probably is that they are discussing the latest attempt at spin from the government, some new twist in immigration policy or some such matter. Now suppose we are told that some people are discussing economics. We are not so likely to think of them as discussing the Euro or the budget. We are liable, rather, to envisage them as being engaged in an academic discipline, the mastery of which requires knowing a lot of mathematically expressed theory.

If you teach economics to undergraduates, your primary objective will be to ensure that they finish with the ability to operate with at any rate some part of this analytical apparatus. But if you teach them politics, are you engaging in anything of a different kind from ordinary talk about politics? Of course, it will be more focused and systematic. If you spend a good deal of your time reading French newspapers and journals, talking to French politicians and civil servants and reading the work of other academics who do the same thing, you will know a lot more about French politics than most people do, including French people. But is it simply more of the same? One quite plausible answer is that immersion in the politics of a country puts you in a position to explain what happens. But such explanations will not be derived from some body of theory about politics in general. Rather, they will typically be internal to the system

Read at the University of Glasgow 16 May 2002.

Proceedings of the British Academy, 122, 9–28. © The British Academy 2004.

being studied: some action flowed from particular French institutions, characteristic French beliefs and from norms and ambitions shaped in a distinctive way by French culture. Comparative work can be done within this framework by juxtaposing explanatory accounts of this kind. For example, the different ways in which Britain, France and Germany have dealt with issues of immigration and citizenship can be related to different conceptions of nationality arising from their different histories. Such work can be highly illuminating. But its focus on the interaction of cultural and institutional factors in each country tends to suggest that not much can be learned from one country that would provide a basis for explaining what happens in another. Specifically, those who practice this approach warn us against trying to disaggregate the arrangements that make up the totality of each political system in the hope of generalising about political parties, prime ministers, or whatever. For the way in which an institution works in one country reflects the way in which it fits in with everything else. This does not rule out the possibility of discussing the effects of possible reforms in a country's institutions. But it suggests that comparisons with the ways in which formally similar institutions work in other countries are more likely to be misleading than illuminating.

This approach to politics is Burkean in spirit, and its generally conservative implications were spelled out in Michael Oakeshott's Inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics, 'Political Education', which was delivered in 1951. According to him, all we can hope to do is employ 'the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour'¹ to deal with our own country's problems. We can study the politics of other countries, but only in a similar spirit: it should not be 'an anatomical study of mechanical devices'.² As an example of a sinner who thought of 'institutions and procedures' as 'pieces of machinery', Oakeshott prudently avoided mentioning any of his contemporaries or immediate predecessors.³ Instead he picked on the safely dead John Stuart Mill, who was foolish enough to imagine that it was possible to say something about 'a "form" of politics' called 'representative government'.⁴

We might accept Oakeshott's strictures on the notion that political institutions can be abstracted from their context but draw a different conclusion from his. Conceding that the history of institutional transfers has

¹ Michael Oakeshott, 'Political Education', pp. 111–36 in *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 127.

² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*

not been a success story in the fifty years since Oakeshott warned against ‘rang[ing] the world in order to select the “best” of the practices and purposes of others’, we might suggest that this shows only that the ‘ranging’ was not done very intelligently.⁵ Thus, Donald Horowitz has complained that ‘when they seek to innovate, most decision-makers borrow (or sometimes avoid) institutions from countries with which they are familiar, whether or not the institutions are apt for their predicament. Ex-colonial countries typically opt for the institutions associated with the mother country, often with unfortunate results.’⁶ Indeed, political institutions modeled on those of the colonial power were often turned over by them to newly independent countries as part of their legacy. Many of these constitutional arrangements did not even last beyond the first election held under them. But why should we be surprised that political institutions transplanted into places that differed on so many dimensions did not work in the same way as they did in their countries of origin?

Horowitz’s conclusion is not that we must insist on the utter singularity of every society, but that we should be more savvy about the features of a society that should be taken into account. His own example is that societies at high risk for ethnic conflict need institutions that will tend to alleviate it rather than exacerbate it. Despite this, he complains, ‘many specialists, called in to help design systems in lands far from home simply bring along their usual tool kits, which were developed for more or less homogeneous societies’.⁷ The remedy he supports is not to eschew the idea that one country can learn from another but rather to argue that the right comparisons have to be made and the right conclusions drawn. This, of course, presupposes that there is available some body of knowledge of this general kind. But is there?

A popular way of posing this question is to ask how we have got on with the project of constructing a science of politics. This is all right as long as we understand a science simply as an organised body of knowledge. When Beatrice and Sidney Webb conceived the idea of The London School of Economics and Political Science (to give it its full title), a large part of their concern was to train up the cadre of public servants who would be needed to run a collectivist state. This ambition presupposed that a body of usable knowledge about public administration could be

⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶ Donald L. Horowitz, ‘Constitutional Design: An Oxymoron?’, pp. 253–84 in Ian Shapiro and Stephen Macedo (eds.), *Designing Democratic Institutions*, NOMOS XLII (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 268.

⁷ Ibid., p. 269.

developed and taught to others. But we have no reason for imagining that they expected this endeavour to be underpinned by some kind of comprehensive deductive theory of politics.

The argument I want to make is that there does exist useful knowledge about political institutions, and also useful ways to think about them. At the same time, I believe that the failure of attempts to construct a science of politics modelled on physics or on microeconomics has tended to obscure the value of our contributions. To see the attraction of the scientific model, let us ask how the study of politics is to be defined. For Oakeshott the study of a country's politics was not differentiable from a study of history.⁸ But then how do we split off politics as a subject? In about 1965, a meeting of politics teachers at Oxford University decided that, after the current crop of undergraduates had gone through, the date at which politics began should be moved forward from 1951 to 1958. I believe that I may have been the only person in the room to regard this as a not very funny joke. It seemed to me—and still does—that there has to be something wrong with a conception of the discipline as having a continually updated 'use-from' date, as it were. But if politics is not to be the study of events too old for journalism but too recent for history, must it not be defined as the study of some phenomenon—regardless, in principle, of when or where it occurred?

I would still say that it must, and that there can be no limits on the times and places within its scope. But it does not follow from this that all instances of this phenomenon must be capable of being subsumed under some unified theory of politics. What would this involve? The maximally ambitious programme would be to aim for a discipline within which the politically significant features of any state of affairs should be capable of being expressed as a set of variables. There would then be a body of theory relating these variables to one another. To explain some outcome, we would assign values to all the variables for the case in hand and apply the theory to them. If this programme could be carried through completely, everything interesting about the politics of Rome in 55 BC could be accounted for by plugging in different values for a set of variables that would serve equally well for the politics of France in 1955.

This would be a 'Unified Science' in the sense in which Otto Neurath and his collaborators envisaged one.⁹ But merely stating its requirements

⁸ Oakeshott, p. 130.

⁹ Otto Neurath et al. (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science: Foundations of the Unity of Science*. 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

is enough to show why no such programme can ever be realised. Although it must be true that these two cases differ along a finite number of dimensions, the differences are so great that we can scarcely even begin to imagine identifying them all. And even if we had hit upon a few thousand variables and devised some way of measuring them, however roughly, the crucial problem would remain: how to construct and test a theoretical apparatus that connected up all the variables, allowing that the relations between them might be very complex.

I want to maintain, however, that reflecting upon this model is helpful. Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from it is a negative one. If a complete explanatory theory would have to be like that, we should not be surprised if generalisations claiming simple relations between a few variables are unlikely to be attainable. Moreover, if we do find that certain relationships hold across a number of countries, we can never be sure what are the things those countries have in common that are preconditions for these relationships to hold. Thus, generalisations that are robust in western Europe may fail outside it, even though we may not know what it is that makes the difference. Putting it positively, the failure of a generalisation to extend beyond a certain group of countries constitutes a challenge to figure out what the disturbing factor is. This seems to me an approach that holds out more prospect of discovering things than one that is content to say that what we are up against is the ineffable Frenchness of the French or the irreducible Serbiness of the Serbs.

Calls for a 'science of politics' understood roughly in the model I have outlined date from at least the 1920s. Some were content to play the role of John the Baptist, foretelling the coming of the Messiah and leaving it at that. Others made the preliminary moves, but the problem lay in following them up. Thus, we can posit a political system, with inputs and outputs, and with something going on in between to transform one into the other. As a way of thinking about politics, this may be on occasion useful, but it is probably more useful in thinking about dairy farming or manufacturing toothbrushes. Nobody (including its inventor) could ever construct a model of a political system that got beyond banalities. A more fruitful approach can be derived from asking what is the distinctive phenomenon studied by political science. The answer may be that there is no single defining feature, but if we press for a single answer, the most plausible is that political science studies power. This has at least two things going for it. First, the term 'power' is in actual use among political actors, journalists and citizens generally. If political scientists could say

interesting things about it, the relevance of their contribution would not be in doubt. At the same time, there is a venerable tradition of political theorising that classifies types of polity on the basis of the distribution of power within them.

There is no room for doubt about the value of asking questions about power. In the British Academy's centennial volume on the study of politics in Britain in the past century, Jeremy Richardson concluded his chapter on the study of parties and pressure groups by suggesting that it might have produced more challenging results by 'focus[ing] more on the key concept of power—and less on activity and organization'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it has not been possible to make the whole of the study of politics into the systematic analysis of power. Why were the hopes of those of us who invested in this project dashed? Let me just mention a couple of reasons. First, an obvious limitation of power as an explanatory concept is that to understand what happens we need to know not only where the power lies but what are the objectives of the people or the bodies that have it. It is sometimes said that politicians want power as an end in itself, and perhaps some do. But most people or organisations want power so as to be in a position to get some things done or to prevent things from happening. Even if we make the simplifying assumption that everyone pursues his or her self-interest, the crucial question may still be how that is seen. Thus, to put it very schematically, let us say that in contemporary western societies the people in the middle of the income distribution hold the balance of electoral power. Then what is momentous for political outcomes is whether they see their self-interest in keeping down those below or pulling down those above.

This would not be so bad if we simply had to add the right ingredients to the distribution of power in order to obtain a complete explanation of what happens in politics. But unfortunately the whole notion of a distribution of power is problematic. The problem can be illustrated by reflecting on the suggestion sometimes made that, as economics is the science of wealth, so politics is the science of power. Now comparing the wealth of different people is easy if they all face the same prices, because we can say that, if A has more money than B, A can buy everything that B can and then some more. If people face different relative prices, A may be able to buy more of one bundle of goods than B while B can buy more of some

¹⁰ Jeremy Richardson, 'Pressure Groups and Parties: A "Haze of Common Knowledge" or the Empirical Advance of the Discipline?', pp. 181–222 in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown (eds.), *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1999).

other bundle than A. This is recognised as an index number problem and has to be fudged in some way if a comparison is still to be made attributing more wealth to one of them. The trouble with attributing power is that it always faces the index number problem in an extreme form. A may be in a position to achieve things that B cannot, while B is in a position to achieve things that A cannot. There may not even be any overlap between the area in which A has power and that in which B has power. We might still be prepared to ascribe more power to A than to B in such a situation. But all we are doing then is expressing the judgement that the things that A can get done are more important than those that B can get done. But this is far from the 'scientific' measure of power on which the aspiration to achieve a science of politics was premised.

Even in the unusually well-specified context of voting, 'power' turns out to be an equivocal term. Thus, if no one party but any two of three parties can form a government, it is illuminating to point out that they have equal power, even if they are very different sizes. But suppose that the three parties' positions fall on a single continuum (e.g. left to right), there is a certain sense in which the one in the middle has more power than the others, but this is a quite different sense. What we still have to realise is that both of these forms of power are attributes of parliamentary arithmetic, and neither has anything in common with the familiar sense in which we say that the prime minister has more power than any minister, or maybe that the prime minister and the chancellor of the exchequer have more power than the rest of the cabinet put together. There is still the question of measurement: what would we need to establish in order to support either of these propositions? What makes 'power' so problematic as a central organising concept is that two people might agree on a number of relevant points of the 'What would happen if . . .?' kind yet still not reach a common conclusion about the distribution of power. Asking about power may be more helpful as a way of initiating an inquiry than as a way of concluding it.

For these and other reasons, we have to reject the idea that the study of politics can be reduced to the analysis of power. Especially in the last half century, a number of efforts have been made to come up with other one-size-fits-all definitions of politics. In my view, these have proved a waste of time on the part of their authors and readers alike. Why should not the study of politics be regarded as the investigation of a rather heterogeneous collection of problems? On the whole, we know politics when we see it, and nothing of importance turns on the inclusion or exclusion of this or that phenomenon.

We might, nevertheless, look for a unifying force within the study of politics by asking if it can bring to bear on its multifarious questions a common set of analytical tools. There is currently only one serious contender for this role: rational choice theory. Is it up to the job? Before I try to respond, I should emphasise that a great variety of work can be claimed to fall within the scope of rational choice theory. Leaving aside the nuances, let me simply indicate the two poles. At one end, we have formal game-theoretic modelling, with the whole apparatus of axioms and proofs familiar in other mathematicised subjects. Work at the other end of the scale cannot be recognised by its appearance on the page: it may be completely devoid of symbols or make extremely sparing use of them. What nevertheless brings it within the ambit of rational choice theory is that it takes as central the way in which institutions create incentives for political actors to behave in certain ways, while those institutions are in turn modified over time by political actors in pursuit of their own ends. Political actors have complex relations of conflict and cooperation (usually both at once) with one another, and the hope shared by rational choice theorists is that they may be able, by analysing the strategies selected by actors and the way in which those strategies interact with one another, to explain political outcomes.

This may sound pretty banal, and so it is. But we can see why it has been controversial if we locate such ideas within the development of the subject. For it entails rejecting a whole approach to the study of politics encapsulated in the title ‘political sociology’. This was a discipline premised on the assumption that political institutions were of little or no independent significance: they were in essence the expression of the underlying social structure.¹¹ In contrast, rational choice analysis is founded on the idea that political institutions matter and that political actors are not merely the puppets of mysterious ‘social forces’. All of those engaged in politics, in any way, have ambitions and policy objectives, for example, and the pursuit of these can lead to the transformation of the social and economic structures of their society—or, for better or worse, the whole world. The absurdity of the view that politics is an epiphenomenon can be seen in its starkest form when political order breaks down. In recent years we have seen all too many illustrations of

¹¹ Marxism clearly fed into this way of thinking. But when a number of sociologists who had cut their teeth on Marxism migrated rightward during the Cold War, they kept the same underlying assumptions and used them to generate complacent conclusions about the unimportance of politics for social change: a right-wing take on Lenin’s notion that politics could be replaced by administration.

the truth of Thomas Hobbes's claim that, under conditions of anarchy—more precisely, in most cases, group conflicts unconstrained by any overarching power—life becomes 'poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

What political sociology got right was its insistence that a certain set of rules—those defining a Westminster-style parliamentary system, for example—will have very different consequences when placed in different contexts. The American government, in an attempt to figure out what was going on (and, from its point of view, often going wrong) in newly independent countries put a lot of money in the 1960s and 1970s into a large-scale comparative research project. This was organised intellectually around the concept of 'political culture'. The idea was that, if we wanted to know why politics turned out differently in two African or South-East Asian countries with formally similar institutions, we were to identify the distinctive 'political culture' of each. But 'political culture' turned out to be merely a way of talking about all the ways in which these countries were different. It did not explain anything: it merely redescribed it in a pretentious and nonilluminating way.

The rational choice approach, in contrast, does at least point us in the right direction. If a country offers few opportunities for making money except by extracting it through control of the state apparatus, for example, we should hardly be surprised if those in office are much more reluctant to yield it up than they are in a country that provides ex-ministers with many lucrative options: why should Kenneth Clarke remain in politics after the dice have gone against him when he can make much more money advising British American Tobacco on ways of selling more cigarettes to third world countries? Needless to say, wherever deposed leaders are frequently executed, rather than merely sent into exile, the stakes become higher and this increases the incentives for hanging on.

If 'rational choice' covers such a wide variety of techniques, we have no reason for anticipating that it might ever fit the ideal model of a 'unified science'. It is true that a number of textbooks have been put before the public purporting to offer a unified 'positive political theory'. ('Positive' is here contrasted with 'normative'.) But on inspection these turn out to be a bait-and-switch operation. They do not answer any of the fundamental questions that real political theorists, from Plato on, have asked. Rather, they are expositions of game theory and other formalisms with a few desperate attempts to find applications—often trivial bits of legislative manoeuvring in Congress.

My own view is that a rational choice approach can assist in thinking about political theory. That is to say, it can shed light on perennial questions

such as the rationale of states and the conditions of political order. Enough has already been done along the lines I have in mind to establish that Hobbes and, even more, Hume had an extraordinarily acute intuitive grasp of game theory, and that their arguments can be probed effectively within this perspective. If I say that I believe more can be done to illuminate the classical problems of political theory, this is a bit more than a pious hope because I have already done enough work along these lines myself to convince at any rate myself that the project can be carried further. I hope to be able to convince others in due course by producing the pudding that we all agree is the only proof.

In assessing the scope of rational choice, we need to recognise that we cannot explain the substance of the outcomes of strategies deployed by political actors within some institutional matrix unless we factor in the substance of the actors' objectives. (The same issue arose, it may be recalled, in the context of power.) Many rational choice analysts would say this is no problem for them and that they are happy to start from the point at which the substantive objectives are taken as given. But then this is simply to concede that they are going to be leaving out half of politics: the half that deals with the ways in which people (at all levels of politics) acquire maps of the social world, identify themselves as members of this or that group, and form political preferences (to use a weak but general term).

The appeal is often made to the example of microeconomics, and it is true that the dazzling edifice of general equilibrium theory rests on abstraction from the specific features of the goods produced and consumed. But if we want to know why so many handguns are bought in the USA and so few in the UK, we have to know about those countries' histories, attitudes to government in them, and so on. If economists choose to define that as not part of their subject, that is their business. What is at any rate clear is that in the study of politics we very much want to know why the welfare systems of, say, Sweden, Germany and Britain are so different. And the answer is going to involve explaining how citizens, experts, civil servants and politicians came to hold crucial assumptions about objectives and methods. Political scientists, though not only political scientists, have done this work. They have traced the extraordinarily sophisticated debates within the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the trade union movement about ways of taking the market out of large areas of life, by providing a high (and expensive) standard of public services for all and creating a system of universal state benefits for citizens. This can be compared to the corporatism characteristic of countries such

as Austria, the Benelux countries and the original model, Germany, within which Bismarck pioneered a hierarchical form of social insurance that still endures in modified form. The third model, found primarily in the English-speaking countries, is closer to the old poor law in its residual character, relies more on means testing and is far less effective at getting rid of poverty. Tracing the evolution of these systems is essential to understanding them. But my point is that it calls for an analysis of the role of ideas that lies outside the province of rational choice theory.

Having said that, though, I should add that the rational choice approach can sometimes explain preferences, so that it is actually undersold by the dogma that preferences are to be taken as given. For choices that are explicable in rational choice terms can have profound—sometimes devastating—effects on preferences. To illustrate this, I shall suggest some extensions to a really first-rate study, Gary Cox's *Making Votes Count*.¹² If I were challenged to produce evidence that we do have a political science, this is one of the exhibits I would offer. By a 'science' I mean not only a systematically organised body of knowledge but also what Imre Lakatos would have called a 'progressive paradigm': an approach that directs research effort to good questions and enables incremental improvements to be made.

To begin with, Cox illustrates the new-found (or newly rediscovered) conviction that institutions matter, in this case electoral systems. The electoral system sets a limit to the number of parties, and the number of parties has a large effect on the way in which the whole political system works. I suppose everybody understands that the British electoral system penalises parties like the Liberals with thinly but widely spread support even though parties that are strong locally can win seats proportionally to their vote. Simplifying drastically, the rational choice angle is that voters who prefer the party lying second in their constituency to their own party, which is running third or lower, have an incentive to desert their own. Parties that run third or worse in most constituencies will not form or will disappear because professional politicians will see they have no future. Thus, as soon as it became clear that the SDP was not going to 'break the mould' and replace Labour as the main party of the left, its fate was sealed. It could not win in seats where the Liberals ran first or second, though it could cause the Liberal to lose. Elsewhere, even if there was no Liberal candidate, it could not displace Labour from first or second place,

¹² Gary W. Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

so it had no hope of attracting tactical votes from Labour supporters. The same logic, however, has more recently benefited the Liberals, who have improved their number of seats without increasing their share of the national vote by becoming the second party in large swathes of southern England and gaining tactical Labour votes.

All this is no doubt familiar. But what Cox does is extend the same line of reasoning to other electoral systems. The trick is to extend the coverage of the same assumptions: that parties with no prospects will not run and that many voters want their vote to make a difference. It is then possible to assign a 'carrying capacity', as it were, to any electoral system: the maximum number of parties it can sustain. Of course, no individual voter expects to change the result, and it is a sign of the maturity of the rational choice paradigm that Cox does not waste any time on this topic, which the earlier generation of theorists obsessed about. 'Making a difference' means that, if enough other people in a similar situation to you do the same thing, you will collectively make a difference. This is obviously a quite tricky coordination problem, and what is perhaps striking is how often voters solve it. But it requires information, and where this is lacking the whole thing may go haywire. Thus, Cox can explain failures as well as successes: for example, in Papua New Guinea, with a British-type electoral system, there are many candidates and no recognisable front-runners, so it is possible to be elected with as little as seven and a half per cent of the vote!¹³ The opposite extreme from the British-type single-member constituency system is one in which the whole country is treated as one constituency. In the Netherlands and Israel, which are examples, we find a proliferation of parties. Indeed, votes tend to be so dispersed across different parties that putting together a majority coalition may require the yoking together of several parties with quite distinctive programmes.

Cox's basic idea can be expressed as follows. We start from a given range of preferences among voters. We finish up with a single government

¹³ A more familiar case is that provided by the French presidential election of 2002 in which, on the second round vote, Chirac obtained 82% of the vote to Le Pen's 18%. In the first round, in which any number of candidates could stand, Le Pen did almost as well at 17%, showing that he had already collected the votes of those prepared to support him. Chirac, in contrast, went up to his 82% in the run-off from a mere 20% in the first round. Virtually all voters expected that the second round would be fought between Chirac and Jospin, yet Le Pen edged him out by 17% to 16%. Very many who would have voted for Jospin in the second round took advantage of the wide range of candidates in the first round to express their dissatisfaction with the Socialist government led by Jospin, counting on enough others to vote for him to put him into the last two. This was a spectacular example of a failure of coordination.

and a single set of laws and policies. Somewhere in between a drastic squeezing process has to take place. The question then is: where does the squeeze occur? In permissive electoral systems, which allow a number of parties to gain seats, most of the squeeze has to come in the process of forming a government after the election has produced the raw materials for a variety of different coalitions. In restrictive electoral systems, however, a single party may well win a majority with a good deal less than half of the vote (as in Britain), thus averting the need for any further squeezing after the election. But the electoral system has already, of course, done an enormous amount of squeezing before the election.

So far so good. But it seems to me that Cox errs in implicitly accepting the dogma (perhaps taken over from economics) that preferences are not themselves shaped by the electoral system. Why should the extremist single-issue parties that plague the Israeli political system be automatically assumed to be the expression of independently existing attitudes in the electorate? Perhaps, if such parties had not the remotest chance of ever winning a seat, the ideas themselves would not be fomented, because politicians would have no incentive to cultivate narrow and exclusive segments of the population. To get elected in a system with a higher threshold of representation, politicians would have no choice but to pitch their campaign at a much more inclusive set of voters. If they were not articulated by politicians, policies designed to appeal to just a few fanatics might simply never enter the public realm or—more basically—ever enter anybody's head.

Conversely, the British system tends to suppress or distort issues that do not fit into the very limited range of options available. A system in which constituencies had an average of ten seats, say, would quite plausibly have room for a party to the left of Labour on socioeconomic issues, on the lines of the one in Norway, but might also allow parties based on other dimensions to be elected: the potential for a Green party fairly clearly exists, and either it or the left party (or both) might take a much more liberal line on Home Office issues than either major party. (The Liberal Democrats do this already to some degree, but do not make a major issue of it.) The point I want to make here is that the nature of public debate and popular thought about politics would be changed by the existence in parliament of political parties committed to advancing positions of the kind I have mentioned. Currently, such ideas can be voiced only by dissidents within the major parties or outside them. Since 'impartiality' in radio and television is defined only as giving parliamentary parties fair coverage, this is a serious drawback.

Let me now move on to another question. Granting (for the sake of argument, at least) that we have some methods that enable us to improve on the deliverances of untutored common sense or political journalism, what good do they do? The answer to that question is: not much. But if we change the question and ask what good they *could* do, I believe that it is possible to justify a more positive answer. I can easily explain the discrepancy. If, for example, we are to put our expertise at the service of the public and offer advice on, say, constitutional engineering, we have to start with some notions about the criteria that should be used for assessing a proposal. But it would, let us face it, be naive to expect those who actually make up the rules to give high priority—or maybe any value at all—to objectives that might in the abstract sound uncontroversial, such as the equitable treatment of all groups in a society or the maintenance of a democratic system of government. For example, we might venture the proposition that it would be advantageous, from the point of view of democratic legitimacy, if a government resting on a majority of seats also had a tendency to rest on a majority of votes. Perhaps surprisingly, in almost every country that has multimember constituencies (even when it sets quite high barriers to party representation, as in Spain and Ireland), a government with majority support in the legislature normally rests on a majority of votes, and the exceptions are only a couple of percentage points off fifty per cent.¹⁴ This contrasts with the forty-odd per cent of the vote which can be manufactured into a large majority of seats in the UK.

Tony Blair is reported as having cited Israel as an illustration of the way in which a system with proportional representation gives small parties too much power. But the proliferation of parties in Israel is possible only, as I said earlier, because of the exceptionally small proportion of votes a party has to receive to gain seats. Yet an electoral system with as few as five members returned from each constituency (as in Ireland) would set quite tight limits on the number of parties while making spurious majority governments much less likely. But I doubt if anybody imagines that Blair would be converted by appreciating the fallaciousness of his argument as long as he foresees his continued ability to obtain a majority under a single-member system.

A much more significant example of short-run expediency at work was the adoption of new constitutions by the states that arose or gained

¹⁴ This can be seen by putting together Table 5.1 (p. 96) and Table 5.2 (p. 100) in G. Bingham Powell, *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

independence from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The rules of the game in each country largely emerged from calculations about the likely results of the first elections held under these rules.¹⁵ Yet, if those drawing up these constitutions had been concerned to create democracies with the best possible chance of survival, they could have drawn on the pretty well-supported finding that, other things being equal, systems in which the government rests on parliamentary support alone are less likely to turn into some form of non-democratic rule than those in which the executive is constituted by a separate election for a fixed term either in whole (as in the USA) or in part (as in France). It is possible to tell a plausible story about the reason for the finding that non-parliamentary systems are more fragile. This is simply that they do not contain any constitutional mechanism for resolving conflicts between the president and a majority of the legislature. If, as often happens, the president does not have majority support there, the result is liable to be deadlock, which can be resolved only by extra-constitutional means in the form of a coup by the president or the overthrow of the president by force.¹⁶

Although arguments along these lines were already familiar in the early 1990s, almost all the new post-Soviet constitutions gave an elected president either all the executive power or a share of it. In a number of cases (especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia) these have turned into virtual plebiscitary dictatorships. However, as Juan Linz, one of those most persistently critical of presidential systems, has conceded, in these cases the adoption of the system may have been a way of giving a democratic veneer to a continuing dictatorial system.¹⁷ Most of the other post-Soviet countries, while giving executive powers to a cabinet responsible to the legislature, also wrote in some executive authority for the president, rather than making his office equivalent to that of a constitutional monarch. The reach of the president's powers was usually very ill-defined, and never clearly differentiated from that of the government responsible to the legislature. And although none of these regimes has fallen, they have in a number of cases run into conflict between presidents and prime

¹⁵ See Ray Taras (ed.), *Postcommunist Presidents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), *passim*.

¹⁶ 'Presidential regimes are vulnerable to collapse when no party controls a majority in the legislature, whereas this makes no difference to the longevity of parliamentary regimes.' Adam Przeworski *et al.*, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 128–36, p. 134.

¹⁷ Juan J. Linz, 'Introduction: Some Thoughts on Presidentialism in Postcommunist Europe', pp. 1–14 in Taras (ed.), *Postcommunist Presidents*, p. 2.

ministers with no constitutional means of resolving them, and this is fairly clearly a threat to the survival of the regime.

Compared with the practitioners of their sister discipline, economics, students of politics have had far less influence on government. I have already suggested one reason for this. Politicians are usually interested in achieving short-term political goals, and it is undeniable that, within an established and functioning political and economic framework, the technical advice that economists can give is of more use to politicians than that available from political scientists. Under these conditions, politicians would not be helped much in achieving their objectives by advice from political scientists, any more than fish would be able to swim better if they got advice from ichthyologists. When we are told that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has an economic adviser, we are not surprised to discover that he is an economist. But when we are told that a minister has a political adviser, we expect to find someone who combines in some proportion the roles of confidante, character assassin and spin doctor, and are rarely disappointed in our expectations. (Astrology and 'lifestyle counselling' are, it appears, optional extras.)

There are also, however, two reasons for the greater respect granted to the expertise of economists that are very bad. In fact, I make so bold as to claim that the influence of economists has been on the whole pretty catastrophic for human welfare. Students of politics have not had much opportunity to do either good or harm. But even if they had been entrusted with more influence, their freedom from the characteristic vices found in economics means that they would have lacked the hubris to persist in making disastrous recommendations.

One reason for the prestige of economics is that it is said to have at its disposal 'the measuring rod of money'. This advantage is more than offset by a tendency (not only among economists) to underestimate the limitations of this measure. I pointed out earlier that, as an organising concept for a science of politics, 'power' does not have the attractive mathematical properties of money. The trouble is, however, that what can be measured is liable to be given more significance than what does not lend itself to measurement. Adam Smith's subject was the wealth of nations, and he quite correctly observed that the division of labour increases productivity. A man who moves around during the day between tasks is always liable, he said, to saunter. But if Smith had been writing about the happiness of nations, he would have been obliged to reflect that somebody who has the opportunity to saunter between doing a variety of things enjoys a far higher quality of life during the large proportion of his

waking hours that he spends at work than one who performs the same operation on a pin tens of thousands of times a day.

On the same lines, the downside of the ‘labour flexibility’ celebrated by Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair is the increased insecurity of workers in their jobs and their lack of control over workplace conditions.¹⁸ The costs can be measured, not in money but in stress and its physical manifestations and effects in creating disease. Small wonder that ‘in Britain, more than 80 percent of medical practitioners reported that “the number of patients treated for stress problems has risen since 1979”’.¹⁹ Even if everybody gained in the long run financially from lack of job security and increased power of employers over conditions of work (a heroic assumption given that the same forces will tend to depress wages), there could still be a massive loss of well-being in a society whose governments promoted these results.

The desire for control over one’s life is not a luxury reserved for people in rich countries, either. A typical World Bank development project in Thailand displaced roughly 12,000 people from the land and a subsequent survey in 1993 showed that all the families displaced had more income but ‘80 per cent of the affected people indicated that their living standards had deteriorated’. The World Bank report questioned the rationality of these responses—how could living standards have gone down if income had gone up? This, as the author from whom I am quoting pointed out, reflects the ‘tendency among development practitioners to treat income as a common-denominator yardstick for living standards’. Yet there is nothing mysterious about the result: ‘income gains from hiring out of personal labour are susceptible to decisions of others and to broader economic trends, and in this case they often required seasonal migration’.²⁰

Another apparent disadvantage from which students of politics suffer in comparison with economists is, as I have said, the lack of a mathematically sophisticated deductive theory. But this saves them from any tendency to trust theory when the facts fly in the face of its applicability.

¹⁸ See for example Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, ‘Wage Polarization in the U.S. and the “Flexibility” Debate’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 14 (1990), 351–73.

¹⁹ Robert E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 165.

²⁰ Daniel R. Gibson, ‘The World Bank and Displacement: The Challenge of Heterogeneity’, pp. 26–48 in Milton J. Esman and Ronald J. Herring (eds.), *Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict: Rethinking Development Assistance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 41.

I set out earlier the conditions for a comprehensive theory of politics, and their utter unattainability is patent the moment they are stated. The conditions for a complete theory of economic phenomena are not less far from ever conceivably being met. Most economists, to be fair, recognise that the rigorous bit of economics captures only a tiny proportion of the elements relevant to policy-making. But it is the others whose simple-minded convictions are all too often influential.

Without the illusory backing of a sophisticated but totally inadequate theory, could the World Bank and the IMF have persisted with ‘development plans based on rigorous economic logic but [which] failed to take account of local circumstances in the face of their repeated bad results, on just about any criterion of badness?’²¹ Joseph Stiglitz, no rabble-rouser and a recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, has said that ‘IMF policies, including lower government spending and higher rates on central bank lending . . . [have] never brought a country to prosperity’.²² Even the most zombie-like New Labour cabinet minister, Stephen Byers, has now admitted, once out of office, that ‘I was wrong. Free market trade policies hurt the poor’ (the headline of an article that appeared just as I had written the previous sentence).²³

It is instructive to compare the contributions of political scientists and economists to reconstruction in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet countries. The advice that political scientists could have given was not followed, as we have seen, but at the best it would have avoided some constitutional crises and at the worst would almost certainly have met the requirements of the medical maxim ‘At least do no harm’. In contrast, ‘the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Western advisors, with little understanding of Soviet economic practices or of post-Soviet conditions imposed neoliberal policies on an economy that was unable to accommodate them, with devastating economic and social effects’.²⁴ The economists are condemned by their own favourite measure, per capita income. Russia’s has fallen massively in the 1990s, and that income is now extremely unequally distributed.²⁵

²¹ Daniel Altman, ‘As Global Lenders Refocus, a Needy World Awaits’, *New York Times*, 17 March 2002, section 3, pp. 1 and 11, p. 11.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Stephen Byers, ‘The IMF and World Bank Orthodoxy is Increasing Global Poverty. I Was Wrong: free Market Trade Policies Hurt the Poor’. *The Guardian*, 29 May 2003, p. 18.

²⁴ Milton J. Esman, ‘Policy Dimensions: What Can Development Assistance Do?’, in Esman and Herring (eds.), *Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 235–56, p. 239.

²⁵ Stephen D. Shenfield, ‘Foreign Assistance as Genocide: The Crisis in Russia, the IMF and Interethnic Relations’, pp. 173–209 in Esman and Herring (eds.), *Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 176, 185.

Professor Stewart Asquith of Glasgow University, which hosted the lecture from which this chapter is derived, was quoted in the University's *News Review* to the following effect: 'The break-up of the Soviet Union and the impact of the economic changes that have followed it have resulted in many more children being sexually abused, living in the streets, involved in committing crime and living in abject poverty.'²⁶ Getting the relative prices of goods and services right makes it easier to apply elementary micro-economics, but this is an advantage scarcely likely to be appreciated by the people living in the country, who have suffered from mass unemployment and the collapse of public services.

A comprehensive theory of politics and a comprehensive theory of economics are equally fantastical projects. But what is even more worth emphasising is that what would actually be needed would be an integrated theory containing both kinds of phenomena—and many more besides. Furthermore, in any such theory, politics would have to play the primary role. I have already cited Hobbes's well-known description of the anarchistic 'war of all against all' as making life 'poor, nasty, brutish and short'. But what is perhaps less well known is that, in addition to violent death, Hobbes emphasised the economic consequences of anarchy: 'no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth'. He also made the point that nothing requiring large-scale cooperation can be accomplished.²⁷

One implication of this priority of politics is that, when a broad-based government emerges from chaos or autocracy, the first priority should be to give it the best possible chance of establishing itself. Developing the legitimacy of a regime is a slow and precarious process, which is not well understood. But the kind of off-the-peg economic policies pressed on its clients by the IMF could have been designed to undermine the government politically: 'the link between mass protest and structural adjustment cross-nationally is strong . . .; resultant insecurity and deprivation so frequently produce mass protest that the term *IMF riot* . . . appeared in the literature'.²⁸ Even if the IMF's policies had been in some sense the best, not taking politics into account, they were often counterproductive once the economic effects of political turmoil were factored in, leaving aside their other human costs.

²⁶ 'Professor with a Mission to Change the Way the World Treats its Children', Glasgow University *News Review*, no. 1, Jan. 2002, pp. 18–19, p. 19.

²⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 13.

²⁸ Ronald J. Herring, 'Making Ethnic Conflict: The Civil War in Sri Lanka', pp. 140–74 in Esman and Herring (eds.), *Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict*, p. 143.

It is essential to recognise that a certain economic policy may affect the political alignments and the distribution of power within a country in a way that precludes a subsequent change of course: paths available at one time may subsequently be closed. A fairly crude political analysis of this point is better than applying a sophisticated economic one that leaves it out of account. For example, suppose that there are two alternative ways of making a relatively poor country richer. One is to build up the infrastructure and increase the productivity of the workers by ensuring that they have adequate nutrition, salubrious living conditions, health care and education. The other is to maximise wealth, even if the policy advocated will foreseeably make the rich a lot richer and the poor worse off, as a result of 'structural adjustments' that create unemployment and destroy what public provision and subsidisation already exists. It is no good saying that the distributive problems can be addressed later, because the open capital market that goes with such policies provides the rich with an opportunity to take their money out of the country, so that they have an effective veto over any redistributive policy. Moreover, the rich are bound to be reluctant to accept a government of the left and may well, because of the connection between money and power, be able to subvert any electoral process that threatens to produce such a government.²⁹

I have claimed that political scientists have accumulated useful knowledge that could form the basis for advice. Perhaps, though, in the end, what is most important is not what we have learned in a hundred years but two things we have not forgotten. The first is that there is no such thing as a neutral recommendation. We therefore need political theory to help us clarify our ideas about what makes a society good or bad, just or unjust.³⁰ The second is that no policy advice is worth taking seriously unless it pays careful attention to its possible or probable impact on politics.

²⁹ Joseph Stiglitz, writing from an authoritative position as former Chief Economist at the World Bank, makes a related point in the course of his indictment of the policies of the Bank and (even more) the IMF. 'The IMF argues that it is far more important to privatize quickly; one can deal with the issues of competition and regulation later. But the danger here is that once a vested interest has been created, it has an incentive, and the money, to maintain its monopoly position, squelching regulation and competition, and distorting the political process along the way'. Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 56.

³⁰ I believe that the kind of normative political theory required for this task has gained enormously in sophistication over the past century. However, since I have devoted most of the past forty-five years to work of this nature, some allowance for bias has to be made. In any case, I have deliberately chosen to sideline my own speciality, and a final footnote is not the right occasion for saying more about it.