

**History and Controversies in Political Theory****Mousumi Sikidar****Assistant Professor****Ramkishana Nagar College****Dt.Karimganj****Assam****(Received:20February2022/Revised:5March2022/Accepted:15March2022/Published:29March2022)****Abstract**

Political theory has a hoary historical past. It is more than 2300 years old. It has often sprung from incongruous and heterogeneous sources, and was even seeded and nourished by other branches of knowledge. From the days of the Greeks to the present age, it has flowed through luscious meadows and thorny paths, sunny days and weedy gloom, and the periods of fructification and decay. Its birth was characterised by Plato's idealism and Aristotle's rationalism-the two most powerful currents which have often been interpreted, tossed or twisted by the political thinkers of the latter ages. The elevated idealism of Plato, and the scientific methodology of Aristotle, have been a considerable source of inspiration, debate and even wrangles among political thinkers from age to age. Since the days of the Greeks, the setting of political theory has altered often, the emphasis has moved back and forth, the term used has changed its meanings, until sometimes it bears almost the opposite of its original significance. The lack of consensus as to its meaning and the varieties of political theory, often overlapping, make the task of delivering lectures on political theory almost a difficult and intricate one. So many hands have helped in developing its myriad forms and shapes that the corpus of political theory has, today, many 'odd shaped humps and bumps'. It is in a state of considerable confusion, for not only are the matters which it discusses of a highly controversial nature, but there is disagreement both as to the character of its central problems, and as to the appropriate methods of treating them. In its development, there is no systematic evolution, no logical continuum; and its amorphous contours are often shifting, even radically changing boundaries. It has passed through various odysseys and periods of glorification and depression, of turmoil and conflict, of political and social crises, and of pessimism and confidence.

**Keywords: Idealism, Rationalism, Scientific-Methodology, Continuum, Amorphous**

## **Introduction**

Political theory has always been seeded and nourished by other branches of knowledge. Its traditional bases have been history, philosophy, ethics, geography and related social sciences. In recent years, there has been a formidable invasion of sociology and psychology over its terrain. The contemporary onslaught of mathematics, statistics, biology, cultural anthropology and economics has conspicuously altered and twisted its frontiers. As a result of the massive invasions of varied disciplines over the unprotected fortress of political theory, the boundary lines between political theory and other disciplines have grown less distinct, as a result of which it seems that the writings on political theory follow fashion. The literature of political theory in consequence has adopted new styles, themes and goals, similar to the changes that occur in women's fashions from time to time. These fashions are the product of historical events, wars and social upheavals, periods of depression and agony, the urge of super-powers towards domination and the centrifugal tendencies of multi-polar world, and the remarkable advances in technology and the computer science, which have produced political theories and ideological movements of an unprecedented character. Too many scholars from diverse walks of life and too many conflicting ideas and ideologies, sprawl over the field of political theory, that it is hardly possible to explore and locate its exact parameters. It is apparent, thus, that political theory is coiled and ensnared in a web of serious challenges and problems of gigantic magnitude. Even over the definition and value of political theory, there are acrimonious debates and endless wrangles. One observer considers political theory to be inseparable from thought; another contends that it cannot be distinguished from philosophy; a third points out the necessity of analytically separating it from philosophy and ideology; a fourth suggests that it is the most encompassing type of intellectual activity and classifies thought, philosophy and ideology as specific forms of theory. The fifth contends that in the subject-matter of political theory statements about historical events ought to be included; the sixth emphasises that subject-matter is amenable to scientific analysis; the seventh is strongly concerned with value presuppositions; and the eighth states that it is a systematic analysis of political relations. The ninth considers theory as a search for political wisdom; whereas the tenth refutes it by saying that theory is not knowledge, but a necessary tool on the road to knowledge; and the eleventh would prefer to refer it as an interpretation or crystallization of a point of view. As regards the value of political theory, answers of an extreme nature have frequently been given. One is that political theory has no value, it is arid, abstract and dull; another is that it is damnably dangerous, dealing with darkness and devoted like the devil to

disaster; the third states that sensibly handled with a commonsense attitude to the real value of social life, political theory is both concrete and a fruitful study; and the fourth asserts that it contains the distilled wisdom of ages, essential for the establishment of a just order. Thus, the controversy over the academic credentials of its definition and value, have introduced massive confusions in the realm of political theory.

Politics today is full of ideas and theories. The idea of politics includes the notion of government as the social function of political activity, and the notions of power and influence, both as individual and group goals and as the means whereby decisions are taken and enforced. But definitions diverge sharply when one asks what the purposes of the rules are, and what kind of power and influence are characteristically 'political'. One writer calls the object of rule-making as the creation of "the good life" for a society; the second sees its object as 'a life of moral perfection'; the third lays emphasis on 'the realization of human freedom'; the fourth attempts to combine concepts of 'freedom' with 'goodness' in his vision of the purpose of political life; and the fifth is satisfied simply with order or control as the end of political activity. Similarly, there are many views about the characteristics of political influence. To the Greeks, it meant government by pure persuasion, and they spoke of force in governing as a 'prepolitical' phenomenon. In contrast, Treitschke, a nineteenth century philosopher, spoke of war and violence as "politics in the highest degree". A contemporary writer, Heinz Eulau, says that "what makes a man's behaviour political is that he rules and obeys, persuades and compromises, promises and bargains, coerces and represents, fights and fears." Another group of writers stress the cooperative and harmonious aspects of political activity, others emphasize rivalry and conflict. Political theories, one must remember, have been associated with diverse purposes. One writer has associated theories with the 'public government'; the second prefers to study 'small groups'; the third wants to explore the nature of the good, best, right, or rational order; in the fourth it has the character of a logical construct, developed from empirical data but not identical with any observable political system; the fifth is engaged in an endless wrangle over an ethical or a purely technical character of theory; and the sixth claims the field of 'political choice' as relevant for a theorist. This diversification in the application of political theory is a subject of never-ending disharmony and disagreed answers.

Added to it, has been the overwhelming interest of our generation in politics. A man may decide that he is uninterested in poetry and art or in chemistry and mathematics and no one may be the loser save himself nor will anyone trouble him. "But, although a man may

decide that he is uninterested in politics and may prefer to have the provincial mind, the practice of politics will not be uninterested in him, whether in peace or in war. If he will not pull his weight, he will most certainly be pulled." This ever-expanding field of politics has considerably altered the meaning attached to the term 'politics', which in turn has intensified controversies in political theory. The study of politics and its processes are no longer clothed in the traditional garments. The traditional contours of politics in terms of governments, states, sovereignty, and authority appear to be narrow and restrictive. A host of theorists have interpreted politics in a new fashion, such as; "politics is the authoritative allocation of values";<sup>4</sup> or, "politics is who gets what, when and how"s, or, "politics is an activity by which an issue is agitated or settled"; or, "politics is the struggle for power",<sup>6</sup> or, "politics is a systematic effort to move other men in the pursuit of other design", or, "politics is the study of social relationship and of the human (and even non-human) social structure", and "it is identical with sociology",<sup>7</sup> or, "the central problem in politics is the management of conflict". It is this new interpretation of politics that has drastically altered the parameters of political theory.

The interests, angles, and commitments of political theorists have been different. A contemporary writer William T. Bluhm in his *Theories of the Political System* has shown renewed interest in the great theorists of the past; C.B. Macpherson in his *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* has forcefully set out the argument for the unstated, tacit assumptions which underlie a theory, or the events which form the backdrop of a theorist's work; the interest of Sir Ernest Barker's *Principles of Social and Political Theory* (1951) has been a search for end-oriented state, or the good at which the state should aim; whereas the concern for A.J. Ayer : *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) has been to set forth the verification criteria according to which the meaning of a proposition is assured by its method of verification, or if a proposition is not amenable to verification by empirical demonstration, it is meaningless. Again H. J. Laski's *A Grammar of Politics* contains statements and propositions regarding what the state ought to do; whereas T.D. Weldon's *Vocabulary of Politics* (1953) presents an extreme expression of the logical positivist position in regard to political theory. Thomas L. Thorson's *Logic of Democracy* aims to show that there is a middle way between the extreme's of Weldon's subjectivism on the one hand and transcendental objective values of a writer like Plato on the other. A much more rigorous approach is to be found in *Political Argument* by Brain Barry; a work examining the nature of political evaluation and the role of principles, combining sophisticated analytical philosophy

with the refined analysis of economics and games theory. The classical philosophy of history as contained in the theories propounded by St. Augustine, have received trenchant attacks in *The Poverty of Historicism and Historical Inevitability*, written by Karl Popper and Sir Isaiah Berlin respectively. T. H. Green's *Principles of Political Obligation* offers a complex account of the concept of political obligation; whereas S.I. Benn and R. S. Peters in their valuable work *Social Principles and the Democratic State* prefer to expound the principle of equality; and others have laid emphasis on the commitment to concepts such as freedom, property, majority rule, consent, law, liberty, morality, and so on. One can, therefore, say that since the interests, emphases, and commitments of political theorists have been different, political theory has never been able to acquire an agreed shape, or a specific mould; and it should not struggle to have one.

Again, a bewildering maze of theoretical styles in the contemporary period have introduced the worst kind of blockage in the realm of political theory, so much so that its arena has become dim, hazy and overlapped. The tradition of Chicago school has declined; so has gone underneath the debris the critical theory of Frankfurt school, the radical sociology of C. Wright Mills, the symbolic interactionism of G.H. Mead, and philosophy of pragmatism of John Dewey. The fanfare with which structural-functionalism dominated the scene during 1940's and 1950's, witnessed its downfall before the rise of conflict-theory alternative. The conflict-theory (1956) was little more than a mirror image of structural-functionalism with little intellectual integrity of its own. The upsurge of Peter Blau's exchange theory (1950's), and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis (focus on actors, actions and interaction) proved short-lived. In 1960's and 1970's, there has been a boom in creative sociology, which includes phenomenological, ethnomethodology and existential theories.

The scientific political theory has been going through a crisis of unprecedented magnitude in this century, and is still in the midst of it. Its foundations, methods, uses, strength and limitations, even its wisdom are being questioned. Its marked trend towards methodological awareness and scientific value relativism have not been able to verify ultimate principles of right and wrong, of just and unjust. Its lack of clarity on objectives has been its creeping evil. Its scientific relativism has been branded as a kind of 'obvious absurdity'. Its revolvers can be roughly grouped into two - "those who have tried to get around scientific relativism without refuting it, and those who have attempted to refute it."9 The first group has been called as 'professional escapes', and some of its writers have taken typical routes of refuge in religion, assumptions, reference to general agreement, constitution,

traditions, and the history of political ideas; whereas others have chosen to escape into the fields of biology, psychology, and psychoanalysis, or refer for knowledge of values to intuition. The second group consist of those writers who have been impassioned, impatient, and even outrightly refuted scientific value relativism. The attempts to knock down scientific relativism have generally taken one of several distinct paths. One writer has rejected the methodological distinction between facts and values, and that scientific method cannot lead to absolute statements on the hierarchy of values. The second has attacked it from the angle of inconsistency, and that its principles, standards, criteria, and generalizations are merely 'procedural means'; they are no more than 'intellectual instruments' in our inquiry. The third says that scientific judgment, is, in ultimate analysis, always a moral judgment. The fourth view is that of NeoThomists who urge us to return to the scholastic concept of science, which includes supra-empirical and supra-rational kinds of wisdom. Its leading exponent has been the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain. He demands : "What misery it is for the mind to reduce science to the type of empiro-logical science, i.e ., the physico-mathematical sciences and the sciences of phenomena." There 'must' be such a non-empirical science, he exclaims, some knowledge in which the intellect is 'on the inside'. He laments that metaphysics has been wrongly ousted from science, and speaks of the 'mystery of abstract intuition'. This call for the reinclusion of metaphysics in science has also been echoed by Eric Voegelin (not a Thomist). He calls for a 'restoration', of political science, and for its 'retheorization', through a revival of the attempts made by the Greek philosophers and the medieval Christian scholars to provide an ontological description of the order of values, "the theoretical orientation of man in his world, the great instrument for man's understanding of his own position in the universe." This aim, he argues, cannot be reached by scientific method, as such, we should free ourselves from the positivistic approach. The fifth considers that, at least in cultural questions, one should renounce the insistence on 'scientific dignity'. The sixth claims that truth can be found through intuition, which is the true knowledge, or 'inward seeing'. Contrary to the position taken by 'revolvers' of scientific method, there is the stand in favour of scientific method. This endless wrangle over the pros and cons of the scientific method has introduced a worst dilemma in political theory.

The contradictions and controversies in political theory have abundantly increased during the post-war period. Vigorous challenges to the legitimacy of its theoretical enterprise have been issued, but simultaneously claims that it is the legitimate enterprise have been insistently proclaimed. One school speaks of the 'demise' of political theory; another

proclaims its 'revival'; the third styles behaviouralism as one of the most important developments in political science; the fourth characterises behaviouralism as simply a 'mood' rather than a precisely defined mode of inquiry; the fifth advocates that most vital knowledge is philosophical and that the central concern in political theory is the moral evaluation of political power; the sixth posits that value free political theory is hardly possible and accuses behaviouralists of concentrating on pseudopolitics while neglecting real politics; the seventh argues that the analogy between the social and the natural science is erroneous; the eighth believes that the social sciences are not so much in need of new research techniques as of convictions based upon principles; the ninth strikes that the quest for methodological purism and its subsequent 'credo of relevance' are outdated and that there is need to resurrect normative political theory; and the tenth prefers to locate the durable dimensions of political theory in the analysis of propositions and concepts. Added to it, are the endless fascinations in political theory. Plato's fascination is 'Philosopher King', Aristotle's ideal is the 'Best Practicable State', Hobbes upholds undiluted sovereignty, Locke satisfies himself with a limited government based upon consent, Rousseau's noble savage ends up in general will and popular sovereignty, and the Marxists' ultimate aim is a stateless and classless society. Despite its hoary antiquity, political theory has hardly been able to evaluate Aristotle's 'political animal', the mythical 'economic man' of the classical economists, or the equally imaginary 'reasonable and prudent man' of the lawyers, or the 'natural man' of the contractualists, or the 'alienated man' of the Marxian school, or the 'disenchanted man' of the technological age. It seems that political theory all along has been used like a blank cheque. It has become encrusted with all sorts of ideals, ideologies, propositions, concepts, models and operational theories. It not only encompasses an extremely broad spectrum of information, concepts and doctrines, terminologies of every age, but also includes histories of political thought, methodologies, perception of institution and the formulation of new categories. There always have been, are now, and probably ever will be, a number of opposing theoretical systems in political theory, each one claiming that it makes more sense than the others, and often terminating in either quibbles, or acrid discussions, or erudite generalities. It is full of half assimilated or heavily cultivated ideologies and, sonorous or seductive phrases; and few realize exactly what are the realities beneath the divergent view points; its potential value depends on the user and his use of it. It is difficult to frame a coherent pattern, beneath a panoply of complex varieties and riddles of political theory.

### **Conclusion**

Moreover, the present age is one of crisis and revolution in economics, in politics, in the social

order, and in the mind of the individual. The traditional and 'given' things are rejected as outmoded, irrelevant to the needs of the time. It is sad to record that the traditional values, morals, beliefs, rules and methods are being looked with an awry eye. As such, ours has become an unphilosophical age, where the ideas and ideals formulated by long-dead writers have been vastly neglected. One is dismayed to see that in the contemporary theory, nothing comparable to Stocism has appeared as the intellectual and moral cement of a new society and polity. The mankind is still in a dissolving mood. Man today has been uprooted, the foundation of life are quaking beneath his feet, and man regards himself as dragged along in the wake of events which, when in a more sanguine mood, he had hoped to guide. There is in the climate of the modern world "a sense of impending disaster, a rootlessness of the person, a pervasive tenseness which points to certainties dissolved and emotional centers displaced." The uneasiness that exists today or what Lewis Mumford speaks about "the invisible breakdown in our civilization", the "erosion of values, the dissipation of human purposes, the denial of any distinction between good or bad, right or wrong, the reversion to sub-human levels of conduct", 10 are to a great extent, due to the fact that we are not living up to our moral capacity; we have been starving our purposes, developing our appetites, hopes turned towards sublunary things, "instead of with the big ideas on which our lives and freedom depend." The melancholy truth about the course of world history is that we are well along 'the road to disintegration', because of 'deterioration of personal, political and social morals'. If we wish to avert the decay and doom of our civilization, what is needed is a reemphasis on the study of the wondrous world of ideals in its quintessence. A philosophically illuminated political theory, in conjunction with other disciplines, could in the opinion of the author, "play a central role in personal integration and social reconstruction and stability", for "any improvement in practice will issue indirectly from it." Only a political theory worthy in thought could be even more useful in action. As has been well observed by John Robinson, "the task of the generation now in rebellion is to reassert the authority of morality over technology", and political theory alone could help to see both how necessary and how difficult that task is going to be. Of course, there are some who are urging that "political theory must once again be viewed as that form of knowledge which deals with what is general and integrative to man, a life of common involvements." And some would argue that 'value theory' is, today, in a shambles. One student of contemporary political thought sums up the situation by remarking that to attempt the justification of ultimates leads "to a bottomless morass". The tragedy is that we have thrown overboard the sweet and honeyed lore of philosophy and values, and in its place are trying to implant a lurid technical jargon, which is at its best a pale and ghastly substitute. Devoid of the lushy font of traditional philosophy,

political theory today, is enmeshed in a jungle of statistics, quantification and methodologies. It has lost its former gloss; the traditional greats are considered as 'rascals'; contrary to it a new shine or lustre in intellectual style is rarely visible. The neo-phrases and neo-idioms have been constructed with such a great rapidity that they seem lifeless; and the condition of modern political theory is like a bird attempting to fly with its plumages torn. The craze for professional and specialized political theory relevant to society, has been pushed to such an extreme degree that political theory has lost its 'conscience'. In its fondness for detachment and ethical neutrality, it has become inhuman and political passion has been huddled in slumbers. It has even become 'captive' of methodologies and techniques, and the great slogan that 'substance must precede the technique' seems to be faltering. As such, an unprecedented identity crisis is sweeping over political theory and its vistas and mapping paths are shrouded in a tangle of confusion. This identity crisis has considerably shaped the intellectual styles in political theory.

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