

REDEFINING POLITICS

People, Resources and Power

Adrian Leftwich

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POLITICAL SCIENCE



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By

ADRIAN LEFTWICH

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Adrian Leftwich
August 1982

Map 1





Map 1 (continued)



Introduction and background

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*¹

I

Thus wrote Dickens, more than a century ago, to describe the condition of France and England during the uneasy years before the French Revolution of 1789. Great technological and social change has occurred since then, but it is still reasonable to argue that most societies in the modern world remain characterized by that tension between hope and crisis which Dickens captured so well.

It has been common practice over the centuries for princes, politicians and priests to hold out hope to us - on certain conditions. They often point backwards to a golden age (which seldom existed), and they point forward to the promise of a new one, if only people would work harder, tighten their belts, exercise restraint in their wage demands, pray more, do what they are told, or generally show respect for the wisdom of their elders and leaders, and the rightness of their policies. Promises of this kind may help to keep hope afloat in troubled times. But it is difficult to have much faith in them when even the most casual glance around the world shows how frequently our societies are punctuated by crisis after crisis, how little our leaders appear to understand about their origins, and how impotent or unserious they are in tackling their causes.

The forms which these crises take today are depressingly familiar. In the industrial societies they include inflation, unemployment, industrial conflict, the decay of inner cities, urban violence, ecological and nuclear hazards, and a series of killer epidemics - heart disease, cancers and death through accidents. In the Third World, the crises are often more stark. They include gross poverty, widespread malnutrition, the outbreak of massive famines, the growth of

swollen shanty towns, sharp inequalities between rich and poor, and unequal trading relations with the industrial world. In the middle of all this, authoritarian civil and military governments often circulate in a vacuum of absolute poverty.²

Around the world, people are deeply concerned about these matters, though understandably the focus of their immediate concern tends to be on the problems of their own particular family, village or town. Next to wanting these problems to be eliminated, people seek desperately for an understanding of their causes. They want to know why these things happen and what can be done about them. Some people take refuge in fatalism ('these things are sent to try us'); others find religious explanations convincing and perhaps even reassuring (it is the wrath of the gods); or they attribute some of the problems to the accidents of nature, or to 'the government', or 'the unions', or the international recession, or the Russians or Japanese, or some distant theory, like 'monetarism'.

There may be elements of truth in bits of some of these views. But the central argument of this book is that all major social problems of this kind cannot be attributed to bad luck, natural causes or Acts of God. They can be traced to the *politics* of our societies, or the relations between them. Now 'politics' is usually misunderstood to refer to the activities of politicians, parties, parliaments and governments, and all the dreary bickering and bargaining associated with them. That is *not* what is meant here. Politics, as it will be defined in the next chapter, refers to a much wider and much more important range of activities, found in all human groups, institutions and societies. Whatever we do, or wherever we work, we are constantly engaged in politics. The purpose of this book is therefore to specify what these activities are, and why they are political. But because of the conventionally narrow usage of the term, that involves 'redefining politics'. The essence of the book, therefore, consists in elaborating that redefinition of politics, illustrating it with as many different examples as possible, and showing how the approach can be put to use in other contexts.

It would be naive in the extreme to believe that a book of this kind can have any direct impact on the resolution of the problems which occur in modern societies. But I hope that the broad introductory framework which is used here will enable readers to think about the politics and problems of their own societies and institutions in a different light. If this, in turn, enables them to act in ways which are appropriate for attacking the causes of those problems, so much the better.

II

But why is such a book necessary, and why an introductory book? After all, there is a constant flow of learned articles, journals and books that is almost overwhelming. There has been a massive expansion of knowledge in the social

and natural sciences. Specialist research proliferates in almost every field, and it gets more specialized.

These facts highlight a central issue. The 'data explosion' and the advanced specialization which has occurred are themselves symptoms of a problem for which this book seeks to provide one kind of answer. For specialization is also fragmentation. And while great advances have been made within particular disciplines, this has not been matched by comparable attempts to integrate some of this progress into wider frameworks of understanding about our societies and their politics as a whole.

This specialization is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the division between the natural and social sciences. One result is that most people now think of and study the 'social' and 'natural' worlds as if they were utterly distinct. The imprint of this fragmentation has been stamped on almost every school syllabus and university degree course.

This specialization, even *within* the social sciences, would leave the founding fathers - like Adam Smith, Comte, Marx, Weber and Spencer - profoundly depressed. Their commitments were to develop understandings of societies as wholes, and to trace the principles and forms of their evolution and structure. However, a brief survey of some of the central preoccupations of the main disciplines within the social sciences will indicate just how far removed they have become from those concerns.

Broadly speaking, 'the economy', the 'social system', and the 'political system' are usually conceived of as if they were more or less autonomous spheres of activity in human societies. That is certainly how they are usually studied, and this is reflected in the conventionally rigorous separation of the disciplines of Economics, Sociology and Politics (or Political Science, or Government), and their main concerns.

For instance, Economics is mainly concerned with how choices are allegedly made in the allocation of scarce resources in societies, or institutions within them. Economists have developed some very sophisticated mathematical techniques for measuring things, like the costs and benefits of different actions on 'the economy', or on firms and institutions within it. But their often highly abstract models of 'the economy' generally assume that it is a field of activity which can be more or less isolated for both analysis and treatment. Usually, therefore, the so-called 'non-economic' factors are viewed as 'external' to the workings of 'the economy' which remains very closely identified in much academic Economics with the competitive market economy and the ubiquitous forces of supply and demand.

Sociology, on the other hand, has come to be associated broadly with the study of 'social institutions' and 'social structure', which includes such groups as the family, sex-groups and classes. It is concerned in general with their interactions and with various theories about their origins, behaviours and forms. The changing attitudes and relations between such groups often form the core of discussion about social change. These considerations are

supplemented by the analysis of customs, values, norms and ideologies, and their place in sustaining social structure or in promoting or reflecting social change.

Finally, the discipline of Politics is still today largely concerned with two main areas. The first is 'government', in a rather formal sense, and with associated constitutional issues and political processes, narrowly defined. These include political parties and movements, elections, rival policies, and the formal administrative processes of decision-making within the 'political system'. These concerns reveal one of the major antecedents of the discipline, which is constitutional history and law. The second is philosophy, and especially that branch of it called political philosophy. This accounts for the other main preoccupation of the discipline, the study of political theory, philosophy and ideology, often concerned with such matters as 'rights', 'freedom', 'justice', 'obligation', 'liberty' and 'power', but also with such concepts as 'class', 'élites', 'bureaucracy' and 'the state'. This is usually done through the study of the texts of major political theorists.

Such brief accounts do not, of course, do justice to these disciplines and their achievements to date. Moreover, there are areas where the concerns of the disciplines do overlap, and where some productive 'interdisciplinary' work takes place. Geographers, anthropologists and economic historians, especially, have also contributed important insights to the understanding of our own and other societies. None the less, it is true to say that the social sciences in general remain characterized by specialization and hence fragmentation.

The limitations of this become particularly clear when one considers concrete problems in modern societies, such as unemployment in the industrial societies on the one hand, and rural poverty in the Third World on the other. The harder you think about these issues, the more difficult it is to identify them as strictly economic, social or political in their causes or consequences. And the closer you get to analysing them, the more it becomes apparent that they cannot be explained satisfactorily from *within* any one of the disciplines mentioned above. In both instances, as will emerge more fully in later chapters, there are complicated relationships between, for example, the control, ownership and use of *economic* resources (like capital, factories or land), the distribution of *political* power and decision-making authority between various *social* groups (such as boards of directors, shareholders and unions; or between 'high caste' landlords and 'low caste' or 'untouchable' landless peasants, as in parts of rural India today, for instance).

In short, if one is concerned to explain the causes of such problems, it is essential to start by recognizing the relatedness of these kinds of factors in most problems which face human societies. But to undertake an analysis of these requires a framework which can identify what these factors are, and also provide a means of tracing the relations between them. Such a framework must therefore be interdisciplinary in character, and it cannot by definition arise from any one of the specialist disciplines within the social sciences as presently

constituted. One reason for this book, therefore, is that it offers such an introductory framework of analysis - or a way of looking at things - before specialization begins.

III

There is a second reason why such a book is necessary.

The mass media today are major sources of information, impressions and opinions about the world. What we see and read is often dramatic. But in general the media contribute very little to our *understanding* of what they report. There is the obvious trivialization and personalization of what is loosely called 'politics' - 'Prime Minister attacks Opposition Leader', or 'President accused by Senate', or 'New Split in National Executive'. This sort of reporting reaches its peak at election times when the media mount football-like coverage of the events. Opinion is offered by former politicians (rather like former football players), by professional commentators (like their equivalents who live off football), and by various academic experts operating 'swingometers' or recalling some spectacular comparison from Grimsby at the turn of the century. Moralism and scoring of debating points, not analysis, pervade the electoral atmosphere and likewise the discussion of problems. Trying to trip up Cabinet Ministers or their opponents, by confronting them with statements they made in previous years, seems to be the dominant preoccupation of the commentators and interviewers. But what does one learn from all this about the causes of the central issues at stake, or their possible consequences?

In the heady rush for up-to-the-minute reporting, the media subject us to a ceaseless barrage of generally undifferentiated news items. Today, these include strikes and industrial disputes; details of national and international economic performances; wars and famines; pollution; the rise and fall of governments or *juntas*; 'political unrest', and so forth. But the fact of the matter is that the media rarely attempt to explore the deeper causes which underlie these happenings. So, they provide no real *explanation* for them. In general, they report these kinds of things almost as if they were apparently inexplicable, unconnected and random happenings which erupt without cause or context in the open plane of human societies, now here, now there.

It is central to the argument of this book that such events are neither random nor inexplicable. They *can* be explained if they are understood in terms of the *politics* of the societies in which they occur. But such a view in itself rests heavily here on a distinct notion of what politics is, a notion which is more inclusive, every-day and comparative than the conventional scope and meaning of the term as used in the discipline of Politics. Many students of politics, and most people in their daily lives, recognize this intuitively: that politics is much *more*, and much more *important* than the goings-on of politicians or parties or government. But the discipline of Politics has let them down in not clarifying how such intuitive understandings may be made analytically sharper and

explanatorily effective. And that is also why it is necessary to redefine politics, so that people may use such a conception in conjunction with their own experiences to make sense of what they see around them, and to act upon that accordingly.

IV

The central task of this book may seem an ambitious one, and the general argument may at first appear unusual. For this reason, the contents are arranged in the following way.

Part One is concerned to outline the argument and illustrate it with examples from very different societies and problems. Thus, the first chapter redefines politics and shows why it is such a universal activity in human societies. The second, third and fourth chapters show the character of politics in unfamiliar societies: hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari; the now extinct empire of the Aztecs in Middle America, before the Spanish Conquest; and the Pastoral Maasai in East Africa. But politics is found also in institutions which are sometimes smaller than whole societies, and sometimes greater than them. So chapter 5 shows how the framework can be put to work in analysing the politics of villages, a typical university department and a large global institution, the World Bank. It is also central to the argument here that many of the problems which societies experience can be attributed to their politics, and that the approach of the book can help to explain these. Thus, chapter 6 looks at some such problems: the extraordinary 'cattle-killing' episode amongst the Xhosa people in South Africa in 1857; the development of the disease pellagra in Europe from the seventeenth century; and some famines in Africa and Asia in modern times.

Part Two is concerned with politics in contemporary societies. However, an understanding of their politics requires awareness of their historical relations with each other, for there are few societies today which have been unaffected by the expansion of Europe from the end of the fifteenth century, and the legacy of global relations that it has left us with. Chapter 7 provides that background. In the light of that, chapter 8 examines the politics of societies in the Third World. At this point in the argument it will be possible to turn back from the concern with unfamiliar societies and unusual problems to focus in chapters 9 and 10 on politics in Britain, as an example of an industrial society, using the same framework that has been applied throughout.

Part Three offers some conclusions which draw together the lessons from this redefinition of politics, and show what implications there might be for the discipline of Politics.

The book is aimed at two categories of readers. The first is an undergraduate audience, mainly in the social sciences and especially Politics, but I hope that it may interest others. The second category of readers is that much larger public who may be concerned with the kinds of issues mentioned in this Introduction

and who seek a way of interpreting them. Because the scope is large and the examples both diverse and unusual, there is the danger of some oversimplification. At other times the argument and detail may be hard going, but I have tried to avoid jargon wherever possible and to strive for clarity. Moreover, because the central argument surfaces again and again in each chapter, there may be some repetition. I have tried to keep this to a minimum but have not wanted to eliminate it entirely, since these themes of the argument are what is really important.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Redefining politics: the argument

I

Most people feel that 'politics' has very little to do with them. It is a world which appears removed and distant from the activities through which they live their daily lives. Politicians are often regarded as people engaged in unpleasant squabbles for power, who manoeuvre and jockey for position and advantage, and they are viewed with a mixture of resigned contempt or humorous mistrust.

The way in which the media treat politics has helped to shape such a view and acts daily to confirm it. The discipline of Politics, moreover, serves to sustain this by one of its mainstream occupations. This is its focus on largely constitutional affairs, parties, voting, elections and the institutions of government, mainly in the so-called 'advanced' societies, or where there is a 'state'. Indeed, some specialists in the discipline argue that there are societies where there is simply no politics.¹

The central thesis of this book is that such a focus is misguided, and is quite unhelpful in understanding the world and its problems. The argument here flows from a very different definition of politics from the conventional one. This first chapter therefore sets out to define what that is and to illustrate this redefinition in some preliminary ways.

So, what is politics?

II

Politics consists of all the activities of cooperation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about obtaining, using, producing and distributing resources in the course of the production and reproduction of its social and biological life. These activities are not isolated from other features of social life. They everywhere influence, and are influenced by, the distribution of power and decision-making, the systems of social organization, culture and ideology in a society, as well as its relations with the natural environment and other societies. Politics is therefore a defining characteristic of *all* human groups, and always has been.

Politics is found in families, groups of kin or 'tribes'; in villages, towns, regions, nation-states or associations of them; and, in the modern world, on a global basis. It occurs also in formal institutions, such as churches, factories,

bureaucracies, universities and clubs, as well as political parties, trade unions, women's groups, chambers of commerce, parents' associations, *mafia* and armies, and in all the complex relations between them. It may also occur in informal organizations, such as bus queues, football crowds, people meeting for the first time on a camp site, or children inventing and playing games. The way people use and distribute resources - their politics - also helps to explain the problems which occur within or between societies, institutions or groups, whether it be unemployment, war, famine, disease, overcrowding or various forms of conflict.

The central point to emphasize at this stage is that the *politics* of societies - *not* their government, but it includes that - is at every level and in every sphere inextricably involved with how resources are used, produced, organized, distributed and redistributed, and by whom and with what consequences. 'Resources' here mean a very wide range of things. They include capital, land, income, labour and other natural resources like rivers and seas. But they also include things that are not always or immediately thought of in this context, such as time, education, status, influence, health and knowledge.

This definition suggests how the notion of politics will be used in this book. But it requires further elaboration.

III

We commonly tend to forget how closely intertwined are the 'natural' and 'social' worlds. It is important to remember that human beings are animals - primates - and are constantly engaged in activities which are at one and the same time natural *and* social, such as birth, marriage and death, and all that goes on before, during and after them. For instance, different systems of marriage can be usefully seen - at least in part - as the *social* means whereby societies organize their *natural*, that is their biological, reproduction. Moreover, everything which we use to sustain our individual and collective lives, that is our 'material culture' - food, energy sources, tools, clothing, dwellings, forms of transport and so forth - is derived from some part of the natural environment. Human beings have constantly been engaged in organizing and reorganizing the social use of these natural resources.

No society, whatever the character of its technology, is able to evacuate itself from this natural environment, or from the effects of its actions upon it. For example, if pastoralists overgraze their pastures, then their herds and they themselves will suffer consequences. Equally, if people in industrial societies pollute their rivers or seas or atmosphere, they may poison themselves or deprive themselves of necessary resources. Societies abuse their environment at their peril. It may seem as if industrial societies have been able to use their advanced technology to insulate themselves from this natural world. This is an illusion. A falter in the supply of their massive energy requirements, upon which such societies depend, would quickly bring about a collapse in the whole

edifice of industrial urban life and would rapidly throw their agricultural systems into chaos.

The starting-point, therefore, for the analysis of politics in societies must be this conception of the human species as animals, engaged in these simultaneously natural and social activities of production and reproduction. In the course of these, they adapt more or less successfully to their natural and social environments, and they innovate more or less effectively in relation to the problems and opportunities encountered in the process.

IV

How has this come about?

It is a pity that social scientists (with the important exception of some anthropologists) pay so little attention to the work of archaeologists.² For the emergence and history of politics is directly bound up with the evolution of the human species over the last 4 million years. There are still vast gaps in our knowledge. But recent interdisciplinary work on this incredibly complex question has shown more clearly than ever before that the long evolutionary history of the human species goes back, from the emergence of modern *homo sapiens sapiens*, about 50,000 years ago, through a series of prior *homo* species, to *homo habilis*, about 3 million years ago; and that the major evolutionary step, the emergence of *homo erectus*, occurred about one-and-a-half million years ago, almost certainly in East Africa. From there, our ancestors spread to the Middle East, Europe and Asia. And the first human migrants reached Australia by about 50,000 years ago, and the Americas, via the Bering Straits, about 30,000 or 40,000 years ago.

Then, from about 10,000 years ago, small groups of people first started to tend crops and domesticate animals in a number of different places - the 'neolithic revolution'. Resources - land, crops, water, animals, pasture and metals - came to be used and distributed in new ways. New forms of productive activity followed. Since then, the history of the species has been characterized by an astonishing variety of societies, and a growth in population from an estimated 10 million in 8000 BC to about 300 million at the time of Christ to the present figure of approximately 4000 million.

For nearly 2 million years, until the neolithic revolution, hunting and gathering in various forms and in an increasing variety of places characterized the life of the *homo* species, from *homo erectus* to *homo sapiens sapiens*, and continues today in a few parts of the world. During this long history, major technological innovations were achieved, for example in stone tool-kits, wooden spears, hand-axes and - crucially - in the use of fire. People made shelters, produced protective clothing and decorative ornaments, and began to build burial sites for their dead. Cooperation in the course of work enabled people to do new things, and to do old things in new ways, and hence helped to establish the central principles of social organization which, in turn, facilitated the

hunting and gathering of food, and the sharing of it at a home base or camp, as well as other productive activities. People working in groups could fell trees and place them across streams or gullies as bridges; nets could be constructed and game could be flushed into them by organized hunting parties; rock traps in rivers and at the coast could be set up to catch fish. In the course of all this, language, music, art and ritual emerged.

How was this achieved?

There are many features which have progressively defined and distinguished human beings from other species in the course of our evolution, which help to explain this. These include our physiological and especially neurological constitution, the use of language, and the capacity for non-conditioned learning and problem solving. But most important for the present argument is the fact that the history of our *physical* evolution as a species has gone hand-in-hand with our *social* history. For human beings are only found living in societies, and this social character of our existence also helps to explain the achievements. It is as important as our biological evolution. Indeed, the two, the natural and social history of the species, are inseparable.

And the major organizing activity at the heart of this history of cooperation, conflict, innovation and adaptation in the use, production and distribution of resources has been, and still is, *politics*.

V

It was argued at the start of this chapter that these activities of cooperation and conflict always both influence and reflect the systems of power, social organization, culture and ideology in a society. It is necessary now to indicate what these are. However, it is important at the outset to stress that these 'systems' - as they will be called here for shorthand purposes only - are not separate elements of a society. They are overlapping activities, behaviours, relationships and outlooks which together compose the defining features of a society. Though every society is unique, and always has been, they all share these common and underlying structural features. What are they, and to what do they refer?

First and foremost, at the core of any society, and hence its politics, is a *system of production*. This is constituted by the manner in which it obtains, uses and produces resources, through *work*. Some societies have done this by hunting and gathering; others primarily by subsistence agriculture, or pastoralism. Some are involved in more or less commercialized agriculture and trade; others are mainly industrial producers; and yet others combine a variety of these activities. In each instance, this productive core of the society is characterized by a particular technology, and an associated division of labour.

Secondly, each society has a *system of distribution and redistribution*. This refers broadly to the principles and processes whereby the ownership and control of its major productive resources (land, animals, capital, tools, factories

and so on) are distributed amongst the population. It also includes the way the products and rewards of work (such as food, shelter, income) are distributed and redistributed. Thus, for any given society it is important to establish carefully the pattern of ownership and control of resources, and how they are distributed. Evenly or unevenly? Is a surplus produced over and above what is needed? What happens to it? Is it stored for later consumption, or exchanged? And by whom? How much of what people produce do they keep for themselves? How much of its flows 'upwards' or 'outwards' as tribute, tax or tithes, and to whom? How much of that in turn is redistributed? That is, how much flows 'inwards' and 'downwards' to the community, and in what form? For instance, as roads, services, feasts, education, protection or insurance against lean times? And is this evenly distributed between groups and regions?

Thirdly, all societies have a structure or *system of power and decision-making* which directly determines how decisions are made, and by whom and why, especially about the above matters of production and distribution. There may be a number of decision-making groups, such as family heads, or age-sets, or village leaders, or chiefs, or elected representatives, or landlords or boards of directors, or officials, or wider gatherings of men and women. Do these decision-making circles overlap or conflict and over what and why? Is there wide consultation or are there strict lines of authority? Do some people have more power than others and, if so, why? Is there any correlation between birth and power? Or ownership, wealth and power? Or sex and power? Or achievement and power?

Fourthly, every society has a *system of a social organization*. This refers to many factors. It includes the typical composition of families; are they nuclear or extended, monogamous or polygamous, matriarchal or patriarchal? It also includes the organization of communities into lineages, clans, age-sets, 'tribes' or nations; the typical residential patterns, such as camps, hamlets, villages, estates, suburbs or towns, or a combination of them; it includes any major social divisions which may exist in the society, like castes or classes, or ethnic and cultural groups, and the relations between them; it refers to the patterns of inheritance whereby possessions and wealth are transmitted from one generation to the next; and it also includes the manner in which young and old are cared for, and the way the young are brought up and trained ('socialized') to become adult members of the society. The importance of social organization and structure for politics is considerable. In some societies, for instance, relations by blood or marriage, or membership of a particular clan, may have very important implications for an individual's position in the productive, distributive and power structures of the society. In others, membership of certain clubs, classes, organizations, or the school one attended, may be more important.

Fifthly, and very closely implicated in the above, every society has a *system of culture and ideology*, and sometimes more than one. This covers much more than simply its artistic activities and forms, or the status of its scientific

knowledge, but includes them. 'Culture' in the present sense refers to a very wide network of standardized customs and regular behaviours found in all societies. These include its customs of courtship and marriage, its basic styles of dress, its food habits and taboos, its typical leisure activities, its principles and practices of hospitality, and much more. It is everywhere closely associated with ideology, which includes such things as religious beliefs and practices, myths, values, moral codes, general endorsement of certain ways of behaving, and broad outlooks in terms of which people interpret the world about them. The cultures of most societies have symbols, flags and other outward means whereby their members assert their own identity and distinguish themselves from others. It is of course true that there are some societies, 'plural societies', in which there may be more than one culture. This usually flows from the fact that previously separate societies, or people from them, have been brought together in a single common society, and that the previous cultural differences remain strong. In time, such differences may fade, as a common culture begins to emerge, or as one group adopts the culture of another. This has happened in the USA and some other societies which have been composed of immigrants from a variety of cultural backgrounds, though significant trace elements may of course remain. There may also be important cultural distinctions associated with different classes in a common society, like Britain, which arise out of the divisions of ownership, wealth and labour, and the accompanying differences in income, reward and opportunity. These differences may be expressed in terms of lifestyles, including dress, diet, social behaviours and leisure activities, as well as accents and outlooks. But whether there is a more or less common culture or not, all societies are rich in these features. They enable people within them, or parts of them, to conduct their affairs, since cultures and ideologies form part of that broadly common 'language' of shared behaviours and understandings which make interaction and communication possible within a society, or within segments of it in the case of 'plural' societies.

Finally, no society is static. All are in a constant process of change, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, if only in that their membership is constantly changing, from generation to generation. More significant, rich industrial societies were not always so, and will certainly not always be so. Poor rural societies were not always poor in the way they are today, and may not remain so. That is to say, all societies have a *history* and will always have one. 'History' here refers to a whole legacy of related technological capacities, social behaviours, institutions and ideological outlooks inherited from the past. These are sustained and changed by communities in the course of making and re-making their history through their politics, and this includes their relations with other societies.

VI

The great variety of societies which have existed is remarkable, and is worth indicating here briefly.

Some societies can trace a continuous history going back for a very substantial period - as in the case of China and Japan. By contrast, there are others - like modern Brazil, the USA and New Zealand - which have been established relatively recently, in the course of exploration, conquest and migration, and whose formation has often involved the destruction or incorporation of earlier societies found in those places.

Most of human history has been lived in hunting and gathering societies, some of which have lasted into modern times, and the politics of one of them will be examined in the next chapter. Where societies of herders (pastoral societies) have emerged from these hunting and gathering communities, they have usually been very mobile, moving with their herds between pasturing and watering points. Hence most of them, such as the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa, or the Karimojong and other pastoral peoples of East Africa, have had very loose forms of social organization and decentralized systems of power and decision-making, as will be discussed in chapter 4. A few pastoral societies have developed strong central institutions, complete with courts of advisers, retainers, soldiers and slaves. Perhaps the best-known example of this was the Mongol Empire of central Asia, which reached the height of its power in the early thirteen century under Chingis Khan.

Where more settled agricultural societies have emerged, all round the globe, they too have shown diversity. Some - like the Ibo, on the edge of the great equatorial forests of West Africa - were quite small in scale, and composed of autonomous but related village settlements, which moved from clearing to clearing in the course of their agricultural life. This method of cultivation has evolved widely throughout the world and is known as 'shifting cultivation' or 'slash and burn'.³

Other agricultural societies, too, have given rise to powerful and centralized states or even 'empires', such as those further north in Africa, in the western Sudanic belt, like the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. They were also involved in long-distance commerce with the Mediterranean ports of North Africa and traded gold, ivory, ebony, feathers and slaves in return for salt, copper, dates and figs. These commercial empires sustained large cities of stone, a flourishing art in bronze, pottery and wood, and urban-based communities surrounding the kings and the courts. These cities were fed by the produce of outlying agricultural and pastoral societies over which they ruled.⁴ Similar developments occurred in other settled agricultural societies - notably in Asia - where there were complex imperial systems, supporting emperors and their elaborate bureaucracies on the basis of intensive agrarian production at home and far-flung trade abroad, as was the case in China under successive regimes over the last 2000 years. The case of the Aztecs of Central America (now Mexico) will be discussed in chapter 3. More recently, in Europe, some societies which had once been primarily agricultural turned increasingly to seaborne commerce and came to derive a major portion of their living from it and associated activities, as in the case of the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵

Today, there is a rich mosaic of societies which are involved in complex relations with each other, and the historical background to these relations will be examined later. There are some which are heavily industrial and urban, as in much of Western Europe. There are others which remain primarily agricultural and rural, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. And there are those which combine a changing and variable mixture of agriculture, mining and emerging forms of manufacture and light industry, as in Taiwan, Rumania, Greece and Mexico - and the oil-producing societies of the Middle East.

VII

This variety of societies, arising in the first instance from the core characteristics of their productive systems, has been associated with considerable diversity in respect of the other 'systems' discussed above.

For instance, in so far as the distributive principles and patterns are concerned, there have been some in which important assets like land, water and occasionally factories have not been 'owned' by anyone, but have been controlled or managed by the people who use or work in them. In others, they have been owned by private individuals, companies or the state, or a combination of them. Different legal systems and customs regulate the use and the inheritance of such resources. Many societies have been characterized therefore by considerable equality between people. Others have been - and are - highly unequal as between social groups in terms of such things as access to resources, or income, welfare and rights. This inequality was the case in the classical Graeco-Roman world, in the slave societies of the Caribbean, in imperial China, Tsarist Russia, Dickens's England, and many others. It remains the case in modern Bolivia, El Salvador, Liberia, South Africa, Mauritius and the Philippines, where very small minorities own the bulk of wealth and receive most of the income.⁶

These differences in the productive and *especially* distributive characteristics of human societies have usually been associated with particular features in their systems of power and decision-making. It has in general been the case that the more uneven they have been in distributional terms, the more unequal they have been in terms of their patterns of power and decision-making authority. For instance, in hunting and gathering societies, as well as most pastoral societies, the relatively even distribution of their major resources (land, water, pastures and animals) between sections of the society has been closely associated with community control and management of them. On the other hand, often profound inequalities have been both sustained by and reflected in systems of power which have monopolized decision-making in the hands of the wealthy and have excluded the majority from effective participation in it. This has been the case in some pre-industrial empires (such as in China or Aztec society), in 'feudal' societies (such as in medieval Europe or pre-nineteenth-century Japan), in sharply divided class societies (such as in England in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries), in societies composed of more or less closed castes (as in India), and in societies where major social divisions have existed between colour or 'racial' groups (as in the southern USA or South Africa).

Broad features of social organization have varied widely too. As mentioned above, the caste system in India has established groups between which it has been extremely rare and difficult for people to move, and it has been decisive in affecting the use, control and distribution of resources. In the industrial capitalist societies, the often sharp divisions between classes have both expressed and influenced their politics, and do so on an ever-increasing scale in many other parts of the world. At the heart of class distinctions are differences between social groups in terms of their ownership and control of resources, and their access to power and opportunity in the society.

Even where class divisions are strong, or emerging, there may none the less be a broadly common culture which all people share, as in Italy or Lesotho. But the social composition of some other societies - such as Trinidad, Belgium, Ireland, Uganda and Sri Lanka - has been marked by a 'plurality' of cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups or regions, which have sometimes become locked in conflict with each other. Such conflict seldom arises *only* from the fact that there may inevitably be some suspicion and tension between peoples whose daily behaviours and customs differ. They arise more commonly from the often uneven distribution of resources, power, rewards and opportunities between such different communities in the same society. This too is of critical importance in shaping politics in such societies.

The diversity of the systems of culture and ideology in human societies is also remarkable, and may be illustrated with a few examples. Marriage is a central feature in the culture of all societies. More or less complicated rules influence who you can and cannot marry, and they regulate the rights and responsibilities of spouses to each other, their families and their kin. They also govern important aspects of resource distribution in and between families. In some societies, marriage is not simply a relationship between two individuals, but is a much more complex affair linking families, kin and even villages. Accordingly, it is common for marriages to be arranged, as in Pakistan and areas of Mediterranean Europe. Elsewhere, polygamy is the standard and preferred practice, as in many parts of Africa and the Islamic world. Polygamous marriages usually give rise to large families, which is not the case with polyandrous marriage (that is, one wife and a number of husbands). This can be very important in agricultural societies where family labour is important, and the more of it the better. In such societies, children contribute in many ways to the productive activities: they collect wood and carry water, they help with the livestock, and undertake many household chores - such as looking after their younger sisters and brothers - and they may provide valuable labour in the fields, especially at harvest times. Moreover, where there is no such thing as a 'national insurance' scheme, they provide the main form of security for parents in old age. All over the world, the general pattern of marriage has been for both

polygamy *and* family size to decrease as new productive systems (often involving greater mechanization) have evolved, where the general levels of material welfare have increased, and where private insurance schemes or social security provisions for old age and ill-health are established by the community through the market or the state.⁷ In short, patterns of marriage, as central aspects of culture, are not separable from the broader productive and distributive features of societies, and hence their politics.

Religious beliefs and practices are also central for culture and are significant politically. The variety of myths and stories which different societies have used to account for their origins and aspects of their histories testifies to the creative imaginations of human beings in their search for meaning and explanation. The Hurutshe (in Southern Africa) traditionally believed that all people (and their cattle) came from a hole in the ground, while the Maasai in East Africa claimed that God gave them their cattle by letting them down on a bark rope from the sky. The Aztecs believed in a vast assembly of gods, who controlled and influenced almost everything, above all the rising and setting of the sun. Aztec daily life was punctuated with various kinds of sacrifices to these gods. The G/wi hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari have a conception of two higher beings, N!adima (who is good and created the universe, though no one really knows why) and G//amama (who is evil). With the help of N!adima, as well as various medicines and dances, they believe they can frustrate the evil intentions of G//amama. Some Christians both believe and teach that the world and all living things were created by God in seven days, that Christ was the Son of God - born of a virgin - and will come again. While they pray to these divinities to guide and protect them in peace and war, many African peoples believe that the spirits of their ancestors (the 'shades') can be far more influential in the affairs of living people, for good or for bad. Even in apparently 'secular' societies in the industrial world, religious beliefs, practices and priests constitute a steady background to daily affairs. There are christenings of babies, marriages in church, the burial of the dead, blessings at the launching of ships. Armies go to war with chaplains, and religious remembrance ceremonies are held to commemorate those killed in battle. In recent years, millions of people have travelled long distances to see the Pope, even in some societies of Eastern Europe which are officially hostile to religion. In Moscow one may still see people (usually the more elderly) making the sign of the cross as they file past Lenin's tomb.

But the role of religious ideas has often had a more directly important place in politics. In many societies, notions similar to that of the 'divine right' of kings and queens have historically acted to sustain inequalities in the distribution of both resources and power. Right into contemporary times, princes, prime ministers and presidents have liked to be closely identified with the church, and especially its senior officials. In many societies, the top members of the religious hierarchy (the 'Lords Spiritual' in Britain for instance) are often enmeshed with 'the Establishment'. The converse is sometimes also true: in some of the predominantly Roman Catholic societies of the Third

World (in Latin America and the Philippines for instance) radical priests have joined forces with revolutionary groups, arguing that it is their Christian duty to help the poor and oppressed.

The broader ideologies of some societies encourage people to believe that it is good and proper to try to 'get ahead' and 'better themselves' in material or social terms, and hence promote highly competitive behaviours in business, sport and individual advancement. Very elaborate 'economic' theories and government policies are often built on the assumption that such behaviour is not only 'natural' and 'morally' right but also efficient, and that people respond best to incentives and rewards. In other societies, such aspirations and behaviours have been regarded with the deepest disapproval, and even contempt, for they are thought to foster aggression, conflict and inequality, and hence disrupt the well-being of the community.

There has, thus, been a great variety of ideologies and theories in human societies. Today many contrasting ones often compete directly with each other in the same society, from the Moonies to the Marxists. It is important to see all these as being *not* merely the selfish, simplistic or sophisticated babble of narrow, sectional interests - though some clearly are. Ideologies are very complicated.⁸ They act in many ways. They provide a broad interpretative framework, or *way of looking at the world*, or particular aspects of it. Moreover, ideas and values which may at first sight appear to be purely 'moral' or 'ideological' guides to conduct and action in practice turn out to represent diverse proposals of different interests and groups as to how resources should be controlled, produced and distributed. Ideologies, in short, arise out of the politics of a society and usually have far-reaching implications for it.

It is tempting to explore any of these 'systems' illustrated above in isolation from each other. This is often what the specialist disciplines in the social sciences tend to do. But if one is concerned to analyse the *politics* of a society, this must be resisted. It is absolutely crucial that the *structure of the relations* between these features be kept at the centre of analysis. For instance, to separate the question of the use, production and distribution of *resources* from the question of the use and distribution of *power* is to empty politics of its real content. Likewise, as some of the brief examples above will have shown, the influence of the systems of social organization, culture and ideology on politics - and vice versa - can be far-reaching. The great variety in the politics of human societies has everywhere represented varying combinations of these underlying structural features.⁹ To understand the politics of a society, therefore, always requires a firm grasp of the relations between its past and its present, between internal and external factors, between its history and its structure.

VIII

Those who argue that there are some societies in which there is no politics suggest that it is an activity found only in 'quite complicated societies'.¹⁰ Such

as view rests of course on a much narrower conception of politics than the one being used here. Ultimately the difference of approach comes down to different definitions, but the justification for the present definition is that it helps to make sense of a wide variety of comparable activities which may be identified in all human societies. Moreover, my claim here is that politics is an activity found within and between even smaller groups and institutions in societies, from families to factories. It would be as well to offer some preliminary examples to illustrate this.

There is politics in the family in all societies, for all families obtain, use, produce and distribute resources such as food, income, space, time and labour. It is both a fascinating and legitimate topic of political enquiry to try to find out how this is done within individual families, or generally in a society, or comparatively between them. For instance, in some families decisions have to be made between, say, going on holiday or redecorating the kitchen. How is this done, and what influences the outcome? Elsewhere family labour needs to be organized for many different purposes - perhaps to clean the house or the car or to mow the lawn; or to prepare fields for sowing, or weeding, or harvesting the crops. Alternatively, how is food obtained and distributed? In many societies, including our own, there is evidence to show that the distribution of the food within the family may sometimes be uneven: males may get the better quality and larger quantity of food, or dishes they prefer. Why? There may be disputes over the use of family income, such as for 'housekeeping' money or pocket money. In polygamous families, in many parts of Africa, for instance, tensions may arise amongst wives, or between them and their husband, over unequal treatment, or treatment which is inappropriate to their respective statuses - perhaps with regard to the placing of their huts, or their plots or domestic property. All this is politics. An understanding of any particular instance will require a careful analysis of the relations between the *internal* systems of power, social organization, culture and ideology of the particular family, which will of course be strongly influenced by the wider general patterns of politics in the society.¹¹

Consider some other examples. Anyone who works in an institution or organization - whether explicitly 'political' in the conventional sense or whether a factory, school or bureaucracy - will immediately recognize that many of its cooperative activities and disputes are fundamentally concerned with how resources should be used, and by whom and for what purposes. That's politics. The same is true of discussions in local tennis clubs or bowls clubs as to whether savings or loans should be spent on building more courts or greens, or on a new clubhouse. In villages and local communities there is a vast range of activities which require the organization of cooperation through politics. In many agricultural societies in Asia, Africa and Latin America there are communal labour arrangements whereby people help each other to clear land, plant crops and harvest them. Everywhere, people formulate and present plays, dances and festivals; they invent games and the rules for playing them; they