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The Idea of a Political System and the Orientation of Political Research

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Essentially, in defining political science, what we are seeking are concepts to describe the most obvious and encompassing properties of the political system. The idea of a political *system* proves to be an appropriate and indeed unavoidable starting point in this search. Although there is often uncertainty about the unity of political science as a discipline, most students of political life do feel quite instinctively that research into the political aspects of life does differ from inquiry into any other, sufficiently so to constitute a separate intellectual enterprise. These students have been acting on the unexpressed premise that the phenomena of politics tend to cohere and to be mutually related. Such phenomena form, in other words, a system which is part of the total social system and yet which, for purposes of analysis and research, is temporarily set apart.

In the concrete world of reality not everything is significantly or closely related to what we call political life; certain kinds of activity are more prominently associated with it than others. These elements of political activity, such as governmental organizations, pressure groups, voting, parties, and other social elements related to them, such as classes, regional groupings, and so forth, all show close enough interaction to be considered part of the political process. They are, of course, part of the whole social process and therefore are part of analytical systems other than the political. But they do show a marked political relevance that is more than purely accidental or random. If they were accidental there would be little point in searching for regularities in political activity. The search for recurrent relationships suggests that the elements of political life have some form of determinate relation. The task of research is to discover what these are. In short, political life constitutes a concrete political system which is an aspect of the whole social system.

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We must recognize, as I have intimated, that ultimately all social life is interdependent and, as a result, that it is artificial to isolate any set of social relations from the whole for special attention. But this artificiality is imposed upon political scientists by the need for simplification of their data. Since everything is related to everything else, the task of pursuing the determinants of any given relation would be so vast and ramifying that it would defy any tools of investigation available either to the social or physical sciences. Instead, political science is compelled to abstract from the whole social system some variables which seem to cohere more closely than others, much as price, supply, demand, and choice among wants do in economics, and to look upon them as a subsystem which can be profitably examined, temporarily, apart from the whole social system. The analytic or mental tool for this purpose is the theoretical system (systematic theory). It consists, first, of a set of concepts corresponding to the important political variables and, second, of statements about the relations among these concepts. Systematic theory corresponds at the level of thought to the concrete empirical political system of daily life.

It is now clear why an initial step in developing systematic theory must be an inquiry into the orienting concepts of the system under investigation. If the object of such theory is to identify all the important variables, some criteria are required to determine relevance or importance. We require some knowledge at the outset about the kind of activity in general that we describe as political before we can examine political life more closely to identify its components. Without some guide to the investigator to indicate when a variable is politically relevant, social life would simply be an incoherent wilderness of activities.

At first sight, to be sure, and, for that matter, even upon closer examination, political science does not seem to possess this systemic coherence. There seem to be no broad variables common to the whole discipline; instead there seems to be a large number of heterogeneous fields. For the sake of illustration we might notice that the list of doctoral dissertations in progress at any one time seems to be made up of a fantastic agglomeration of subjects.

A search for unity out of this variegated manifold does indeed tax one's ingenuity. Throwing up their hands in defeat when confronted with such heterogeneity, some political scientists have ventured the opinion that this is the great weakness of their discipline: it lacks the intrinsic unity necessary to make a science.

One thing, however, is certain. Political scientists are not interested in all kinds of facts in the world. Some process of selection does take place. Quite instinctively, if only as a result of slavish adherence to their training, they turn their attention to a kind of fact that differs radically from the kind other social scientists usually study. For example, a political scientist, if he is wise, does

not attempt to voice a professional or authoritative opinion on the relation of the breakdown of family life to personal insecurity common in modern society, or on the relation of fluctuating price levels to depressions. His interest leads him to focus on other matters related to these and yet distinctively apart. However diffuse political science may appear to be, there can be no doubt that "political" refers to a separable dimension of human activity.

The origins of this separable interest lie buried in the differences that distinguish all the social sciences, each from the other. This means that in order to appreciate fully the individuality of political science, and its systemic character, we must turn for a moment to the broader question of the historical and logical reasons for the separation of the various social sciences into independent fields of study. This will provide the clue essential for the discovery of the major orienting concepts implicit within political research.

The Divisions among the Social Sciences

To telescope into a few brief phrases the evolution of the social sciences towards their present excessively specialized state cannot do justice to its complicated, tortuous nature. Over the past twenty-five hundred years the central body of knowledge about social matters has undergone a complete transformation. At one time this knowledge was unified and largely undifferentiated, and it was the proper topic for discussion by any articulate person who wished to contribute his share to an understanding of society. Today, in contrast, the original body of unspecialized knowledge has gradually been reduced in quantity and scope by the divorce from it of the separately organized contemporary social sciences. From an era, several centuries ago, of integrated, unified knowledge, we have today arrived at a period of extreme specialization. The weight of all empirical knowledge has become too heavy for any one person to carry and too intensive for any one scholar to digest and develop in creative research.

In no small degree this trend towards specialization has been imposed by the historical accumulation of knowledge to which we are heirs. Until the eighteenth century, the moral sciences, as the social sciences were then known, possessed greater unity than diversity. So broad was the range of subject matter with which the moral philosopher dealt that he was truly a universal student of society. But with the increase in the rate of research by the beginning of the nineteenth century, economics, through the efforts of Adam Smith, and sociology, in the work of Auguste Comte, began to pry themselves loose from the main body of social thinking. Psychology, too, had by that time made some progress in separating itself from philosophy. And by the end of the century, anthropology, inspired by the work of the Scottish school at an earlier period, emerged from its swaddling clothes.

Of all the areas of social life, politics was the first to win the concentrated attention of men. The overwhelming interest of the ancient Greeks centered in the nature of the political system; Plato's interest in human nature, for example, and in problems of education and other matters stemmed from his concern for the *polis* as a whole. Since an understanding of political life was thus the source of inspiration for the study of society, it might have been expected that political science would be one of the first to break away from the main body of moral philosophy. But the truth is that it was the last. Only after the other well-recognized social sciences had drifted away from the general body of knowledge, leaving a residue composed essentially of politics and general philosophy, did the growing weight of political data finally force political science as well to branch out on its own.

Thus the purely physical need for a division of labor helps to account for the distinctions among the social sciences. This fact, however, cannot be used as a means for explaining the genuine deep-going differences in the data of these sciences.

It is in the logic of the situation that each separate, distinct, and vital set of questions posed leads to the discovery that the answer involves the pursuit of ramifying paths of related knowledge. All the social sciences may well have a common body of theory,[1] and the paths of the social sciences may cross and may be the same at some points for short distances. But each social discipline works out its own pattern or system since its motivating questions lead it to a different proximate goal, although the ultimate purposes to serve human needs are the same.

Political science, too, arose in this way. The body of data which compose it grew up in response to some key questions, the answers to which men thought would help in the amelioration of their collective lives. These key questions set the initial orientation of political research. The knowledge, therefore, that it is the motivating questions that distinguish the social sciences helps us to understand the subject matter of political science itself. It leads us to search for these questions, which, strangely enough, are not easily discovered. Although men who are political scientists have no doubt about the fact that they are political scientists—after all, they were trained as political scientists or they are paid by political science departments, a matter of no small importance—there is some doubt about why the congeries of subjects they discuss properly fall within the scope of politics or constitute variables within a concrete political system.

Lack of awareness, and where awareness does exist, of agreement, about the major orienting concepts of political research is an index of the fact that this discipline is coming late into the field as a social science. Men will always

1. T. Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory Pure and Applied*, chap. 3.

differ about the reasons for their activity, but there does seem to be less agreement in political science than in most of the other social sciences. The task of the rest of this section and the next will be to identify the basic questions in search of an answer to which men have turned to the study of the distinctively political aspects of human activity. In this way we may be able to unearth a few integrative concepts that serve to identify the major characteristics of the political system.

The Concept of the State

Although there is little agreement on the key questions which orient political research, in the course of history two main schools of thought have developed. One directs itself to the study of political life by asking what are the nature and characteristics of the state; the other, by asking what can be understood about the distribution and use of power. We must examine the extent to which the question of either school leads to a gross frame of reference revealing the most general and characteristic properties of political life.

The weight of the discussion here will be that neither the state nor power is a concept that serves to bind together political research. Each has some merit but also has distinct shortcomings. It could be argued, of course, that political science ought to confine itself to something called the state or it ought to display an exclusive interest in power. To do this, however, would be to attempt to create a new field in the pattern of its designer. No such attempt will be made here since there is no evidence that political science shows any inherent limitations in its present focus to prevent it from answering the kind of question it really asks. In the next section I shall suggest that this question is: How are values authoritatively allocated for a society? Hence, an attempt at total revision would be needless and gratuitous.

The opinion is broadly held that what draws the various divisions of political science together is the fact that they all deal with the state. "The phenomena of the state," reads an elementary text, "in its varied aspects and relationships, as distinct from the family, the tribe, the nation, and from all private associations or groups, though not unconnected with them, constitute the subject of political science. In short, political science begins and ends with the state."[2]

This description is deceptively simple. The truth is that it achieves greater success in confusing than in clarifying since it immediately begs the

2. W. Garner, *Political Science and Government* (New York: American Book, 1928), p. 9. See also R. G. Gettell, *Political Science* (rev. ed., New York: Ginn, 1949), p. 19: "Since political science is the science of the state, a clear understanding of what is meant by the term 'state' is important."

question as to the characteristics of the state. And to anyone who is familiar with the infinite diversity of responses to this question, the suspicion must indubitably arise that it succeeds in substituting one unknown for another; for the unknown of "political science" we now have the unknown of the "state."

What is the state? One author claims to have collected one hundred and forty-five separate definitions.[3] Seldom have men disagreed so markedly about a term. The confusion and variety of meanings is so vast that it is almost unbelievable that over the last twenty-five hundred years in which the question has recurringly been discussed in one form or another, some kind of uniformity has not been achieved. One person sees the state as the embodiment of the moral spirit, its concrete expression; another, as the instrument of exploitation used by one class against others. One author defines it as simply an aspect of society, distinguishable from it only analytically; another, as simply a synonym for government; and still another, as a separate and unique association among a large number of other associations such as the church, trade unions, and similar voluntary groups. For those who ascribe to the state ultimate power or sovereignty within constitutional or customary limits, there are corresponding thinkers who insist upon the limited authority of the state whenever a conflict of allegiance to it and to other associations arises. There is clearly little hope that out of this welter of differences anyone today can hammer out a meaning upon which the majority of men will genuinely, consistently, and constantly agree. When general agreement has sometimes arisen, small differences have usually become magnified and have laid the basis for new and forbidding disagreement. Hence it seems pointless to add a favored definition of my own to those already listed.

After the examination of the variety of meanings a critical mind might conclude that the word ought to be abandoned entirely. If the argument is raised that it would be impossible to find a substitute to convey the meaning of this term, intangible and imprecise as it is, the reply can be offered that after this section the word will be avoided scrupulously and no severe hardship in expression will result. In fact, clarity of expression demands this abstinence. There is a good reason for this. At this stage of our discussion we are interested in concepts that pick out the major properties of the concrete political system. If we were to use the concept of the state with its most widely adopted meaning today, we would find that it has a number of obvious shortcomings for an understanding of the political system. It describes the properties not of all political phenomena but of only certain kinds, excluding, for example, the study of pre-state societies; it stands overshadowed as a tool of analysis by its social utility as a myth; and it constitutes at best a poor formal definition. Let us look at these three defects in this order.

3. C. H. Titus, "A Nomenclature in Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 25 (1931): 45–60.

If political science is defined as the study of the state, can there be said to be any political life to understand in those communities in which the state has not yet appeared? Among the varied conceptions of the state today, the most generally acceptable view accords most closely with that offered by R. M. MacIver. In *The Modern State* he sees the state, in modified pluralist vein, as one association among many with the special characteristic that it acts "through law as promulgated by a government endowed to this end with coercive power, [and] maintains within a community territorially demarcated the universal external conditions of social order."[4] The state is different, then, from other kinds of associations in that it embraces the whole of the people on a specific territory and it has the special function of maintaining social order. This it does through its agent, the government, which speaks with the voice of law. Expressed in most general terms, the state comes into existence when there is a fixed territory, a stable government, and a settled population. In the United States this view, with incidental modifications, prevails in a major part of empirical political research that turns to the state as its focus of attention. The territorial state as we have known it since the Treaty of Westphalia has thus become the prototype from which the criteria for all political systems are derived.

But prior to the seventeenth century, for the vast span of time in which men lived and governed one another, according to this interpretation of the state at least, no state was in existence. At most there was a truncated form of political life. Greece had its city-community, mistranslated today as the city-state; the Middle Ages had its system of feudalities; contemporary exotic communities have their councils, leaders, and headmen. But, by definition, this modified pluralism denies that in these communities there is a fully formed political system. These are transitional political forms, pre-states, or nascent states, and therefore of only passing interest to political scientists since their main concern is presumably with states fully developed.[5]

Not all scholars would agree when or where the state in this sense appears. But whatever the time and place, all preceding kinds of social life are

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4. R. M. MacIver, *The Modern State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 22.

5. "Of all the multifarious projects for fixing the boundary which marks off political from the more general social science, that seems most satisfactory which bases the distinction on the existence of a political consciousness. Without stopping to inquire too curiously into the precise connotation of this term, it may safely be laid down that as a rule primitive communities do not and advanced communities do manifest the political consciousness. Hence, the opportunity to leave to sociology the entire field of primitive institutions, and to regard as truly political only those institutions and those theories which are closely associated with such manifestation. A history of political theories, then, would begin at the point at which the idea of the state, as distinct from the family and the clan, becomes a determining factor in the life of the community." W. A. Dunning, *A History of Political Theories* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), pp. xvi–xvii. See also MacIver, *The Modern State*, p. 338.

considered to have been devoid of identifiable political aspects. One student, for example, pushes back the appearance of the state to a very early period in human history. "The shift to agriculture," he writes, "may have taken place first in the alluvial valleys of the Nile and Euphrates, or of the Chinese rivers. While these rich river-bottoms were enormously productive when cultivated, the surrounding regions afforded meager pasturage. When a pastoral kinship group settled on the land, the State began. The group had already set up a government; it now acquired territoriality."[6] In this view, clearly, it took the establishment of a fixed territory to convert mere social life into political life. Not even the existence of government could inform the social existence of the pastoral kinship group with a political quality. The state being nonexistent in pastoral groups, there could be little subject matter for political research.

Common sense alone, however, would compel us to deny this restriction upon political inquiry. The literature on contemporary nomadic groups, for example, suggests that the strife within a migratory tribe for control of its movement and resources is exactly similar to what we would consider political struggle. Similarly, the investiture conflict in the Middle Ages was as highly charged with politics as any dispute today. And there is also a growing awareness that too little attention has been paid to the anthropological data about political life among primitive and nonliterate peoples. Where there is any kind of organized activity, incipient as it may be, there, what we would normally call political situations, abound. Thus even if we could reach agreement to adopt as our meaning for empirical research the most general definition today given to the concept of the state, it must still fall short of providing an adequate description of the limits of political research. By definition it excludes social systems in which there can be no question that political interaction is an essential aspect.

The historical origins of the term further help to explain both the difficulties we have with its meaning today and its unsatisfactory nature as an orienting concept. The truth is that the concept was originally less an analytical tool than a symbol for unity. It offered a myth which could offset the emotional attractiveness of the church and which later could counteract the myths of internationalism and of opposing national units.[7]

As a concept the state came into frequent use during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It appears in Machiavelli's *The Prince* although at that

6. E. M. Sait, *Political Institutions* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938), p. 131.

7. Ibid., pp. 88–89; George H. Sabine, "State," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), vol. 14, pp. 328–32; R. Kranenburg (transl. by R. Borregaard), *Political Theory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 76–77; C. J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1941), chap. 1; F. Watkins, *The State as a Concept of Political Science* (New York: Harper, 1934); H. Finer, *The Theory and Practice of Modern Government* (London: Methuen, 1932), 2 vols., vol. 1, chap. 1.

time it usually referred to officials of government or to the government itself, not to the political aspects of the whole community. Although it was not until the nineteenth century that the term developed its full mythical qualities, in the interval it served the growing needs of nationalism as against the universal claims of the medieval church and the particularistic competition of the local feudal powers. It was especially vital as a symbol to combat the emotional appeal of the church. The varied ecclesiastical institutions, officials, and governing bodies could be personified and crystalized in two words, the church. The growing national territorial governments required a similar emotionally imbued concept, and they found it in the happy notion of the state. Men need not serve a government, a king, or an oligarchy; they could pledge their loyalties to a unity as transcendental and eternal as the church itself. Leaders and rulers may come and go, but the state is everlasting and above mundane dispute. Secular authority could thus hope to draw men's allegiance with all the force of religion without depending wholly upon religion for its emotional appeal.

The state concept became a crucial myth in the struggle for national unity and sovereignty. Its very vagueness and imprecision allowed it to serve its purposes well. Each man, each group, and each age could fill the myth with its own content; the state stood for whatever one wanted from life. But however diverse the purposes imputed to the state, it symbolized the inescapable unity of one people on one soil. By the nineteenth century the struggle of nation against church had been largely resolved in favor of the former, but new problems in the form of international conflict arose. In giving an ideological basis for the kind of national sovereignty with which we are familiar, the concept of the state now reaches the height of its political utility. Each state can claim the ultimate loyalty of its members as against a class or an international society because it, the state, in some mystical way now represents the supreme virtues.[8]

Bearing in mind the actual history of the political use of the concept, it is difficult to understand how it could ever prove to be fruitful for empirical work; its importance lies largely in the field of practical politics as an instrument to achieve national cohesion rather than in the area of thoughtful analysis. We can, therefore, appreciate the difficulty into which we must fall if we attempt to treat the concept as a serious theoretical tool. And yet, for want of a superior set of guiding concepts, this is exactly what large numbers of practicing political scientists do attempt.

This brings us to the last of the three shortcomings mentioned earlier: the inadequacy of the state concept for depicting in general terms what it is the political scientist studies that distinguishes him from other social scientists.

8. C. J. Friedrich, "Deification of the State," *Review of Politics* 1 (1939): 18–30.

The concept falls short of a satisfactory kind of definition. It defines by specifying instances of political phenomena rather than by describing their general properties.

Basically the inadequacy of the state concept as a definition of subject matter stems from the fact that it implies that political science is interested in studying a particular kind of institution or organization of life, not a kind of activity that may express itself through a variety of institutions. For this reason, the use of the state concept, as we saw, could not explain why political scientists ought to be interested in forms of social life, such as nonliterate and exotic societies, in which the state, at least as defined by modified pluralism, does not exist. No one could deny that political science is indeed interested in the state, as defined here, as one type of political institution. But it is equally apparent that political research today, stimulated by the knowledge made available by social anthropology, has begun to accept the fact that societies in which the so-called state institution is nonexistent afford excellent material for a general understanding of political life.

The major drawback of the state concept is thus revealed. It does not serve to identify the properties of a phenomenon that give the latter a political quality. At most, the state concept is usually just an illustration of one kind of political phenomenon, a comprehensive political institution. However, since there are periods in history when such states did not exist, and perhaps the same may be true in the unknown future, the state is revealed as a political institution peculiar to certain historical conditions. Presumably in order to understand the full scope of political research, it would be necessary to specify in equal detail the kind of institutions to be studied in social systems from which the state is absent. The point here is that in practice the field of political science is usually described by the least desirable and least meaningful kind of definition, denotation.

As long as political science is characterized as the study of the state, it must remain at the level of enumerating or denoting the various kinds of institutions which it examines. Once we ask, however, just why political science studies the kind of institution often called the state together with other institutions in societies where states are acknowledged to be nonexistent, we have a means of discovering the connotative meaning, that is, the general properties of any political phenomenon. We find that we are looking for a kind of activity which can express itself through a variety of institutional patterns. Since new social conditions call forth new kinds of structures and practices for the expression of this activity, the precise mechanism, whether it be an organizational pattern called a state or some other kind, is always a matter for empirical investigation. A general description of this activity, for the moment indifferent to its particular institutional pattern, would indicate the properties that an event must have to make it relevant for political science. To say,

therefore, that in asking "what is the nature of the state?" political science is drawing attention to the core of its subject matter, is at best to mistake a part for the whole and to attempt to describe the properties of an activity by a single, even if important, instance.

The Concept of Power

Although the state concept as such has seldom been directly attacked or rejected, it has come in for oblique criticism from a long line of writers who see that the characteristic of political activity, the property that distinguishes the political from the economic or other aspect of a situation, is the attempt to control others. In this view the motivating question behind political research is "who holds power and how is it used?" It is true that most political scientists who adopt the power concept continue to speak of the state and seldom go so far as to argue that there is an intrinsic hostility between the two ideas in an empirical context. Nevertheless, the idea of the state usually recedes into the shadows of their empirical research and plays little part in their conclusions.

The obvious merit of the power approach is that it identifies an activity, the effort to influence others. *Prima facie* this makes it superior to the institutional description of political life as the state. Any activity that is characterized by the general property of being able to influence others immediately acquires political relevance. Therefore, we have here at least a connotative definition. In spite of this and in spite of the prevalence today of the conviction that power lies at the heart of political research, my conclusion will nevertheless be that the idea of power, as it has been employed until quite recently, has failed to provide a rounded description of the gross subject matter of political science.

Because the power concept has in the past been associated with doctrines that asserted the limitless power of government, students have traditionally adopted a deep suspicion towards this approach. Where a social philosopher has adopted the idea of power as central to his thinking, as in the case of Machiavelli or Hobbes, it has usually seemed to imply abusive coercion on behalf of the coercer. It has therefore appeared that this view of the central problem of politics must always carry with it a certain misanthropy towards life. Where political life seemed to be reduced to a mere struggle for power, all the noble aims which the philosophers have depicted as the matrix of life seemed to crumble.

In spite of these unhappy associations of the power approach, however, some contemporary students of political science have succeeded in rehabilitating it as an orienting concept. They have discerned in it an activity which would lend itself to scientific study and which might cover the whole field of political life. Their great merit has been that they have made the power

approach more respectable in the United States than it ever had been. They have converted it from a street urchin to an irreproachable child of the age. Indeed, it has become respectable enough today for courses on power to be offered in the universities and for widely used texts, such as *Politics Among Nations* by H. J. Morgenthau, *American Politics* by P. H. Odegard and E. A. Helms, *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups* by V. O. Key, and *A Study of the Principles of Politics* by George Catlin, to use power as the central theme around which to weave their facts about political life.

Despite this latter-day, hard-earned popularity, however, for a reason not difficult to find, the power approach must fail to convince us of its merits as an adequate, initial identification of the boundaries of political research. The reason for this is that power is only one of the significant variables. It omits an equally vital aspect of political life, its orientation towards goals other than power itself. Political life does not consist exclusively of a struggle for control; this struggle stems from and relates to conflict over the direction of social life, over public policy, as we say today in a somewhat legal formulation. Some attention to the work of Harold D. Lasswell,[9] one of the most articulate architects of power theories, will point up the merits, inadequacies, and necessary modifications of an attempt to describe the limits of political science predominantly in terms of power relations.

Lasswell is a serious student of power relations, and perhaps in recent times, together with other members of the so-called Chicago School, he has contributed more than any other individual to the popular diffusion of this approach in the United States. He sees political science as an "autonomous" discipline and "not merely applied psychology or applied economics."[10] He describes it initially, not as the power process, but as "the study of changes in the shape and composition of the value patterns of society."[11] However, since the distribution of values must depend upon the influence of the members of society, political science must deal with influence and the influential. Integral to his thinking, therefore, is the conclusion that the major concepts guiding political research must be values and power. In its broadest perspective the task of political research is to show the interdependence between the two: how our values affect the distribution and use of power and how our location and use of power act on the distribution of values. Or as he phrased it in the happy title of his well-read little book, political science concerns *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How.*

9. Particularly in H. D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936), and with A. Kaplan in *Power and Society.*

10. Lasswell and Kaplan, *Power and Society,* p. xviii.

11. H. D. Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935), p. 3; see also Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, chap. 1; *Power and Society,* pp. xii and 240.

The title of this book represents his most general conception of the subject matter of political science and was offered as such by the author himself. "Those who accept the frame of reference here proposed," he wrote in his preface to this book, "will share common standards to guide future intellectual effort." In terms of the actual problems that were explored in this work, however, the title appears somewhat overambitious. It does not really mirror the contents lying between its covers. It bears the promise that the author will discuss how social values are distributed in society—when it is and how it is that certain groups get more or less of socially valuable things. In fact, however, it is devoted to exploring the sources of power held by a political elite. Its focus therefore is not on the way values are distributed but on the way the elite, which has power, uses it to acquire the desirable things of society, such as safety, income, and deference. The book is primarily an inquiry into the means the elite uses to arrive at and survive in the seat of power. If political science is devoted to the study of changing value patterns, as Lasswell maintains, this study must be interpreted as describing only a small part of the whole process. It is restricted to revealing the role of the minority that holds power.

Contrary to general belief, therefore, this work on *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* does not in itself provide a general framework for the study of political life. It is a vehicle not for the investigation of the whole political system but only for determining the power and characteristics of one social formation, the elite. The book is devoted, therefore, to an examination of the composition of the elite and the conditions and techniques of its existence. The fact is that under exactly the same title one could write a volume making the antithetical assumption—that the masses dominate over policy—and then go on to explore historically the composition of the various masses and the conditions and techniques surrounding their survival and change. Such a work would provide no more comprehensive a framework than a study of the variables influencing the power of the elite.

In short, the elitist theory is only a partial scheme of analysis helping us to discern the sources of power over values of certain groups but presenting us with little data about the power of others. It centers only on one problem, however crucial it is today: the tendency in mass societies for power to concentrate in the hands of a minority. It assumes that this oligarchic tendency in the political system eternally prevents the diffusion of power beyond the governing group. Aside from the validity of such a theory and its insight, the point here is that all it provides is a narrow-gauge synthetic theory.

This narrow-gauge theory, however, has been interpreted by most political scientists to mean that Lasswell conceived the whole subject matter of political science to be the struggle for power. And, in fact, until the publication of *Power and Society,* the emphasis of Lasswell's research was weighted

so heavily on the power side, that it was justifiable to draw the inference that he thought power stood alone at the heart of political research. In *Power and Society,* however, Lasswell and his collaborator undertake the broader task suggested in *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* of exploring the total configuration of power in relation to values. The authors write that "the political act takes its origin in a situation in which the actor strives for the attainment of various values for which power is a necessary (and perhaps also sufficient) condition."[12]

We shall see in the next section that even this attempt, unique with Lasswell, to describe political science as the study of the distribution of values is unsatisfactory. It describes all social science rather than political science alone; this helps to explain why in recent years he has broadened the scope of his own research to cover all the social sciences, the policy sciences, as he is fond of calling them.[13] However, from the nature of his early work and of his influence as a teacher and author, power appeared to be the central datum of political science. In retrospect we can see this to be a misconstruction of his conception of the nature of political life, but in terms of his impact on American political research, we can say that until recently he appeared to have adopted an exclusively power orientation.

In contrast to Catlin's and others' use of the power concept, Lasswell's yielded immediate and promising results within the limits of his elitist interpretation of the location of power. It offered greater opportunity for fruitful empirical research largely because he consciously defined the field so as to invite concrete investigations. It stimulated an interest in the characteristics of governing groups, their skills, class origin, subjective attitudes and personality traits, and the instruments, such as goods, practices, violence, and symbols, that they use in arriving at and surviving in the seat of power. It led Lasswell to inquire, from a concurrent interest in psychoanalysis, into the personality types that arrive, an inquiry that brings out sharply the emphasis in our culture on power as a driving motive. It thereby broke new ground in the study of political leadership. The use of the power concept helped to tie together what seemed like miscellaneous data about the operation of various political pressure groups and about the tactics of politicians. These data could now be viewed as contributing towards a theory of power.

But in spite of these obvious merits, Lasswell does not provide us with a satisfactory minimal orientation to political phenomena. He argues that all power relations, wherever they may exist, are automatically an index of the

12. Lasswell and Kaplan, *Power and Society,* p. 240.

13. See, for example, his *Power and Personality* (New York: Norton, 1948), esp. chap. 6; and D. Lerner and H. D. Lasswell, *The Policy Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951), esp. chap. 1.

presence of a political situation. For him the hierarchical arrangement of relationships within a criminal band or in a respectable fraternal club both testify to the existence of political life there. The realization of this implication when politics is described as power, pure and simple, reveals the excessive breadth of the definition. Not that Lasswell was wrong in maintaining that political science is and ought to be interested in these phenomena, but he was misleading when he failed to point out that political scientists are not concerned with them for their own sake. The definition is too broad, for political science is not interested in the power relations of a gang or a family or church group simply because in them one man or group controls the actions of another. It might be necessary, to be sure, to devote time to such a comprehensive examination of power situations in order to develop a generalized theory of power. This theory would be very helpful to the political scientist, but by the nature of his task he directs his attention not to power in general but to political power.

What Lasswell and, in fact, many power theorists neglect to clarify is the distinction between power in general and power in a political context. In fact, even though they do not distinguish verbally between these two different aspects of power and insist upon power in general as the central phenomenon of politics, in their practical research their natural predisposition toward political questions quite logically leads them to emphasize the political aspects of power. An inquiry into the characteristics of this aspect will compel us to modify their conception of the limits of political science.

Neither the concept of the state nor that of power in general offers a useful gross description of the central theme of political research. The task of the next section therefore, will be to explore suitable concepts for identifying in broad outline the major political variables.

The Authoritative Allocation of Values for a Society

Because political science has historically set for itself the task of understanding what social policy ought to be, how it is set and put into effect, its general objective must be to understand the functioning of the political system. We have in the concept of authoritative policy for a society a convenient and rough approximation to a set of orienting concepts for political research. It provides us with the essential property of that complex of activity, called political, that over the years men have sought to understand.

But this is only the first step on the way to discovering the focus of political research. We must inquire into the meaning of the three concepts used in this description: policy, authority, and society. We shall examine them in this order and in the process we shall be led to rephrase the description slightly. In the end, I shall suggest, convenience for purposes of actual re-

search dictates that political science be described as the study of the authoritative allocation of values for a society.

To look at the first of the three concepts just mentioned, what do we mean when we talk about policy? The essence of a policy lies in the fact that through it certain things are denied to some people and made accessible to others. A policy, in other words, whether for a society, for a narrow association, or for any other group, consists of a web of decisions and actions that allocates values. A decision alone is of course not a policy; to decide what to do does not mean that the thing is done. A decision is only a selection among alternatives that expresses the intention of the person or group making the choice. Arriving at a decision is the formal phase of establishing a policy; it is not the whole policy in relation to a particular problem. A legislature can decide to punish monopolists; this is the intention. But an administrator can destroy or reformulate the decision by failing either to discover offenders or to prosecute them vigorously. The failure is as much a part of the policy with regard to monopoly as the formal law. When we act to implement a decision, therefore, we enter the second or effective phase of a policy. In this phase the decision is expressed or interpreted in a series of actions and narrower decisions which may in effect establish new policy.[14]

If the law directs that all prices shall be subject to a specified form of control but black markets take root and the appropriate officials and the society as a whole accept their existence, the actual policy is not one of price control alone. It also includes the acceptance of black markets. The study of policy here includes an examination of the functioning and the determinants of both the legal and the actual policy practices. Similarly, if the formal policy of an educational system forbids discrimination against Negroes but local school boards or administrators so zone school attendance that Negroes are segregated in a few schools, both the impartial law and the discriminatory practices must be considered part of the policy.

If we are to orient ourselves properly to the subject matter of political research, therefore, it is important that we do not narrowly construe social policy by viewing it only as a formal, that is, legal, decision. It is possible, of course, to interpret policy as the "apportionment of rights and privileges"[15] by law. But this is only one of the ways in which a policy expresses itself, and from the point of view of empirical research, the legal description of policy cannot be allowed to consume the whole meaning. Therefore, in suggesting that political science is oriented to the study of policy, there is no intention to

14. H. Simon, D. Smithburg, and V. Thompson, in their *Public Administration*, elevate administrative practices to a central place in political research. See also F. M. Marx, ed., *Elements of Public Administration* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946), ad hoc.

15. P. H. Odegard and A. E. Helms, *American Politics* (New York: Harper, 1947), 2nd ed., p. 2.

mistake its subject matter for the kind of legal construction prominent until quite recently. I am suggesting rather that political science is concerned with every way in which values are allocated for a society, whether formally enunciated in a law or lodged in the consequences of a practice.

It would be manifestly erroneous to urge, however, that political science attempts to understand the way in which society allocates all its values. Political science is concerned only with authoritative allocations or policies. This is the reason why Lasswell's intention, as we saw in the preceding section, to describe political science as the study of the distribution and composition of value patterns in society must be considered far too broad. We set this matter aside at the time, but we are now ready to return to it. We can see now that political scientists have never been concerned with so extensive a problem, nor for that matter is Lasswell himself in most of his own practical research.

If political science sought to explore the total value pattern of society it would have to embrace all social science. The reason for this is that all social mechanisms are means for allocating values. The structure and processes of society determine the social statuses that we have and the roles that we perform; these in turn enable us to acquire certain benefits or rewards not available to others. Our economic statuses and roles, for example, help to determine the economic benefits that we get in the processes of production and exchange. Similarly our class, educational, religious, and other institutions help to distribute unequally other advantages available in a society.[16] Every other set of institutions helps in one way or another to distribute the values in a society.

But none of these modes for allocating desirable or undesirable things need be authoritative. Political science can learn much from the other social sciences because they are all interested to some degree in how institutions distribute what we consider to be advantages or disadvantages. I am suggesting, however, that political research is distinctive because it has been trying to reveal the way in which values are affected by authoritative allocation. We must inquire, therefore, into the characteristics that lend the color of authority to policies. This brings us to the second of the three concepts just mentioned.

Although the literature is replete with discussions about the nature of authority,[17] the meaning of this term can be resolved quickly for our purposes. A policy is authoritative when the people to whom it is intended to apply or who are affected by it consider that they must or ought to obey it. It is obvious that this is a psychological rather than a moral explanation of the term. We can

16. P. Sorokin, *Social Mobility* (New York: Harper, 1927).

17. For a discriminating bibliography see Simon, Smithburg, and Thompson, *Public Administration*, pp. 571–72.

justify its use in this way because it gives to the term a meaning that enables us to determine factually whether a group of people do in practice consider a policy to be authoritative.

I do not, of course, intend to argue that political science ought to or does ignore the moral aspect of authority; a later chapter will deal with the necessary moral foundations of all political research. However, my point here is that the grounds upon which a person accepts a policy as authoritative can be distinguished from the actual acceptance of the authority of the policy. Acceptance of a policy may flow from a number of sources: moral, traditional or customary, or purely from fear of the consequences. Thus when Congress passes a law, we may consider this formal expression of policy to be authoritative because we agree with its immediate desirability or even with the moral premises out of which it stems. Normally, of course, if we accept a law that we dislike, we do so because in our hierarchy of values the maintenance of a constitutional system may take priority over disobedience to any one policy. Conceivably, however, we could reject this moral premise as the reason for agreeing to the authority of the policy; acceptance might flow simply from a desire to conform, fear of coercion, or total indifference and apathy.

For many purposes, examination of the grounds for accepting the authority of policy might be vital. For purposes of identifying the subject matter of political research, however, whatever the motivations, a policy is clearly authoritative when the feeling prevails that it must or ought to be obeyed. In the present context, therefore, authoritative will be used to mean only that policies, whether formal or effective, are accepted as binding.[18]

It is a necessary condition for the existence of a viable society that some policies appearing in a society be considered authoritative. But a moment's reflection will reveal that political science is not initially and centrally interested in all authoritative policies found in a society. For example, the members of any association, such as a trade union or a church, obviously consider the policies adopted by their organization authoritative for themselves. The constitution and by-laws of an association constitute the broad formal policy within the context of which members of the organization will accept lesser policies as authoritative. Minorities within the group, while they remain as members, will accept the decisions and practices of the group as binding, or authoritative, for the whole membership.

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18. In one of his penetrating asides, Max Weber has expressed this idea neatly. "When we inquire as to what corresponds to the idea of the 'state' in empirical reality," he observes, "we find an infinity of diffuse and discrete human actions, both active and passive, factually and legally regulated relationships, partly unique and partly recurrent in character, all bound together by an idea, namely, the belief in the actual or normative validity of rules and of the authority-relationships of some human beings towards others." E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch, *Max Weber on the Methodology of Social Sciences* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), p. 99.

In organizations that are less than society-wide we have, therefore, the existence of a variety of authoritative policies. And yet, in spite of the fact that for the members of the organization these policies carry the weight of authority, it is at once apparent that political science does not undertake to study these policies for their own sake. Political science is concerned rather with the relation of the authoritative policies, made in such groups as associations, to other kinds of policies, those that are considered authoritative for the whole society. In other words, political research seeks first and foremost to understand the way in which values are authoritatively allocated, not for a group within society, but for the whole society.

The societal nature of policy is therefore the third conception helpful in isolating the subject matter of political research. We must, however, clarify the meaning of this a little further. In suggesting that policy is of central interest when it relates to a whole society, I do not intend to imply that every policy, to be societal in character, must apply in its immediate consequences to each member of a society. Clearly, policy is selective in its effects, however generally it may be stated. The point is that even though a policy, such as an income-tax law or regional legislation like the TVA Act, may take away or give to only a part of the people in a society, in fact the policy is considered to be authoritative for all. To put this in its legal form, a law as executed may affect the activity of only a few persons in a society, yet in a constitutional political system it will be considered legal and binding by all. This is simply a particular way of saying that where a society exists there will always be a kind of allocation of values that will be authoritative for all or most members of a society even though the allocation affects only a few.

My point is, in summary, that the property of a social act that informs it with a political aspect is the act's relation to the authoritative allocation of values for a society. In seeking to understand all social activities influencing this kind of allocation, political science achieves its minimal homogeneity and cohesion.