

THIRD EDITION

# INTRODUCTION TO **POLITICAL THEORY**



JOHN HOFFMAN AND PAUL GRAHAM



## Introduction to Political Theory

*Introduction to Political Theory* is a text for the twenty-first century. It shows students why an understanding of theory is crucial to an understanding of issues and events in a rapidly shifting global political landscape. Bringing together classic and contemporary political concepts and ideologies into one book, this new text introduces the major approaches to political issues that have shaped the modern world, and the ideas that form the currency of political debate.

*Introduction to Political Theory* relates political ideas to political realities through effective use of examples and case studies making theory lively, contentious and relevant.

This updated third edition comes with significant revisions, which reflect the latest questions facing political theory, such as the French burqa controversy, ethnic nationalism and the value of research from sociobiology. Accompanying these debates is a wealth of new and thought-provoking case studies for discussion, including (consensual) sadomasochism, affirmative action and same-sex marriage. A new chapter on difference has also been added to complement those on feminism and multiculturalism.

The revised glossary, revamped website for further reading and new streamlined layout make *Introduction to Political Theory*, third edition, the perfect accompaniment to undergraduate study.

**John Hoffman** has taught in the Department of Politics, University of Leicester since 1970. He is currently Emeritus Professor of Political Theory, having retired at the end of September 2005. He has written widely on Marxism, feminism and Political Theory, with his most recent book being *Citizenship Beyond the State* (2004). He is currently working on John Gray and the problem of utopia.

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A Companion Website is available at [www.routledge.com/cw/hoffman](http://www.routledge.com/cw/hoffman)

This is an outstandingly clear, accessible yet sophisticated introduction to political theory, primarily aimed at those new to the subject, but containing more than enough to engage and challenge even the most experienced politics undergraduate. The case studies – substantially updated since the second edition – highlight excellently how political theory can be applied in practice.

**Dr Mike Gough**, *University of East Anglia, UK*

Whether we know it or not, say Paul Graham and John Hoffman, we are all political theorists because our actions are guided by ideas. And they're right. The issue is not so much whether we should do political theory, but how to do it better – and this book is an excellent place to start. The third edition of this marvellous text has been fully updated with lively case studies, designed to bring the full range of classical and contemporary ideas and ideologies to life. Advanced high school students, and university students coming to political theory for the first time, will appreciate this thorough introduction to the conversation that is political theory – and will relish being made to feel that they are participants in it, and not just spectators.

**Professor Andrew Dobson**, *Keele University, UK*

# Introduction to Political Theory

Third edition

John Hoffman and Paul Graham

This edition published 2015  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN  
and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Hoffman, John, 1944–

Introduction to political theory/John Hoffman and Paul Graham. — Third edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4082-8592-3 (pbk.) — ISBN 978-1-138-84109-3 (hardback)

— ISBN 9781315732985 (e-book) 1. Political science. I. Graham,

Paul. II. Title. Proudly sourced and uploaded by [StormRG]

JA71.H6133 2015 Kickass Torrents | TPB | ET | h33t

320.01—dc23

2014030102

ISBN: 978-1-138-84109-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-408-28592-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-73298-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon

by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon

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# Preface to the third edition

This is the third edition of Hoffman and Graham, *Introduction to Political Theory*. The first and second editions were published by Pearson Longman in 2006 and 2009 respectively. The book has established itself as a major text in many universities across the world and we have taken into account the valuable responses we have received. It is often argued that the rise of the Internet and 24-hour television with multiple channels has reduced the attention span of university students. This has not been our experience. Many students are keen to invest time in working through difficult texts and sometimes complex arguments. We have written the third edition with this audience in mind.

As with the previous editions we start each chapter with a case study. We take the view that students new to political theory have already engaged in political theorising even though they may not be aware of it. If you have ever had an argument about who should have the right to vote, whether recreational drugs should be legal, if minority groups should get preferential treatment in the university application process or whether ‘hate speech’ should be prohibited, then you have already done some political theory. By the end of a course in political theory students should be better able to organise their arguments, paying attention to the coherence of those arguments and the extent to which they match up to empirical reality.

Although the case studies used in the first two editions are still relevant we have refreshed many of them. This reflects the fact that popular debate moves on. For example, in the chapter on freedom we have replaced the discussion of smoking bans in public places with a discussion of (consensual) sadomasochism. While smoking bans still raise important issues about harm and consent (discussed in Chapter 2), because they are now so widely used there is little discussion of them in the media. Other case studies may have more regional appeal. Capital punishment is something of a ‘non-issue’ in Europe but of central importance in the United States. Nonetheless, even for European students, whether the state should execute people illustrates more general arguments about punishment (these are discussed in Chapter 7).

One chapter dropped from the second edition (Chapter 21: Difference) has been restored. We took the view that difference was central to debates over feminism (Chapter 14) and multiculturalism (Chapter 15).

We have streamlined the presentation of each chapter by eliminating the use of most boxes, too many of which simply distract from the flow of the argument. The website has also been overhauled. On it you will find many weblinks and other resources.



The text is aimed at a university audience, but we hope that (high) school students – especially those who aspire to study politics and international relations at university – will find it interesting and challenging.

*Paul Graham*  
*John Hoffman*

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Andrew Taylor, Emma Chappell and Charlotte Endersby for all their help on the third edition of this book – the first to be published by Routledge. We are also grateful for the support received by Morten Fuglevand and David Cox on the first two editions, which were published by Pearson Education.

We continue to find working together on this book a stimulating and enjoyable experience. Both of us are committed to making political theory more accessible and lively and have tried to write a book that is stimulating, provocative and interesting.

## John Hoffman

I would like to thank the publishers of the *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, for permission to draw upon entries submitted to this project. I am also very grateful to Edinburgh University Press for permission to use material that has also been submitted to a *Political Glossary* dealing with political theory, and to Sage Publications Ltd. who have kindly allowed me to draw upon *Citizenship Beyond the State* that appeared last year.

I have been supported by my partner, Rowan Roenisch, and my son, Fred, and daughter, Frieda. All three have encouraged me in the project.

## Paul Graham

I would like to express my gratitude to my parents, Douglas and Heather Graham, for their support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Buckingham University for providing a new – and stimulating – environment in which to work and for all the students at Buckingham, and at my previous university – Glasgow – who have taken my courses in political theory.

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# Introduction

## What is political theory?

By political theory we do not mean simply the study of the state, for politics is far wider than the state. It takes account of activity that focuses on the state – like parties, for example, which in liberal democracies are not part of the state, but seek through elections to become the government. Nor is politics simply about activities that focus on the state. It is about conflict, and conflict occurs at every level of society – between nations and states, within trade unions, businesses, families, churches. There can even be conflict within an individual – whether to go swimming or fishing – and this too is politics although not a particularly profound example of it. However, the overall point is important. Politics is about conflict and its resolution, and resolving conflicts of interest occurs in all societies, at all levels.

Students of politics often believe that politics can be studied without theory. They take the view that we can focus upon the facts without worrying about general ideas, but we should never underestimate just how important theories and theorists are to politicians. For example, Ben Barber tells us in his website (<http://www.benjaminbarber.com/bio2.html>) that he was an informal adviser to President Bill Clinton between 1994 and 1999 because of his ‘ability to bridge the worlds of theory and practice’, which was reflected in his role as informal outside adviser. Tony Blair relied heavily upon Anthony Giddens, and Mrs Thatcher was greatly influenced by Frederick Hayek whom she later knighted. David Cameron, the current British prime minister, gave his members of parliament advice on what they should read over the summer, and the novels of Kingsley Amis and Ian McEwan were turned to by the press after the atrocities of the attack on the twin towers in New York known generally as 9/11. Theorists are not only important to politicians: our notions of common sense and human nature are heavily infused with the views of thinkers we may never have actually heard of. Students of politics often identify with the concept of a chaotic state of nature – a world before the state – of the seventeenth-century political theorist Thomas Hobbes because his somewhat gloomy realism strikes them as profound and meaningful.

## Theory and action

The truth is that in everyday life we are guided by notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, so that everything we do is informed by concepts. Politicians

are similarly guided. It is not a question of *whether* political animals follow theory, but a question of *which* theory or concept is supported when they present policies and undertake actions. We can argue as to whether the British prime minister or the president of the United States acts according to the right political concepts, but it is undeniable that their actions are linked to theory. Humans in general cannot act without ideas: indeed, it is a defining property of human activity that we can only act when we have ideas in our head as to what we should do.

In discussing ideas about the state or democracy or freedom in this book, we are talking about ideas or concepts or theories – we use the terms interchangeably – that guide and inform political action. Some courses are presented as courses in political *philosophy* and we feel that philosophical questions such as the nature of truth, will, determinism, etc. play a crucial role in our argumentation, but we prefer the term ‘theory’ because it seems less daunting to many students, and it seems less abstract. However, we do not see any substantive difference between theory, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other.

As for theory and ideology, here the difference is more tangible. Ideologies seek to persuade, theories to expound and explain, and in a way that encourages the reader to think for themselves. Of course, there is overlap as well: ideologies are arguably more persuasive if the theory they draw upon is rigorous and accurate, but the two have different roles to play. It is vital that readers should feel encouraged and stimulated to form their own views, using logic, evidence and rigour to present their case. A student may feel, for example, that the invasion of Iraq was justified as a way of removing an evil and oppressive dictator: what is vital is that this view is not simply expressed as an opinion, but is backed up with evidence and thoughtful argument. It is important that views are not put forward simply because it is felt that they will please peers or tutors.

In the concepts presented here, the state is particularly important in Part 1 and readers should tackle this topic at an early stage. It is a great pity that theory is sometimes presented as though it inhabits a world of its own: as though it can be discussed and analysed in ways that are not explicitly linked to practical questions and political activity. This is, indeed, something this book seeks to address.

## Theory as abstraction

We accept that all theory by definition involves abstraction. The very words we use involve a ‘standing back’ from specific things so that we can *abstract* from them something that they have in common. To identify a chair, to use a rather corny example, one needs to abstract the quality of ‘chairness’ from a whole range of objects, all of which differ in some detail from every other. Take another example. The word ‘dog’ refers both to particular dogs and dogs in general. If we define a dog as a mammal with four legs, it could be said that a dog is the same as an elephant. So our definition is too abstract. We need to make it more particularistic. A dog is a four-legged mammal with fur. But does this mean that all dogs are poodles? Such a view is too particularistic: we need to argue that ‘dogness’ is more abstract than just being a poodle.

The point is that we are abstracting all the time, whether we like it or not! This is the only way to understand. Thus, in an analysis of the war in Iraq, we might use a whole host of abstractions to make sense of what we see: ‘war’, ‘violence’, ‘law’, ‘armies’, the elusive ‘weapons of mass destruction’, etc. Particular things are injected with a conceptual dimension, so that references to ‘democracy’ or ‘terrorism’ (for example) reflect interpretations as well as physical events.

Political theory, however, seems rather more abstract than, say, an analysis of the Iraq War, because it considers the notion, for example, of ‘violence’ beyond any particular instance, asking what violence is in every circumstance that we can imagine. This apparent remoteness from specific instances creates a trap and gives rise to a pejorative use of the term abstract. For thousands of years, theorists have believed that the abstraction is somehow independent of reality or, even worse, that it creates reality. Because we cannot act without ideas, the illusion arises that ideas are more important than, and are even independent of, objects. We can, therefore, talk about democracy or the state, for example, without worrying about particular states or specific kinds of democracies. Understandably students may find it bewildering to be asked ‘what is power?’ or ‘what is democracy?’, without this being related to, for example, the power which Mao Zedong exerted over the Chinese people before he died in 1976 or the question of whether the inequalities of wealth in contemporary Britain have a negative impact upon the democratic quality of its political institutions.

We believe that this link between theory and recognisable political realities is essential to an understanding and appreciation of the subject. What gives concepts and theories a bad name is that they are all too often presented abstractly (in the pejorative sense). Thinkers may forget that our thoughts come from our experience with objects in the world around us, and they assume that political thought can be discussed as though it is independent of political realities. It is true that a person who is destitute and asking for money in the street is not necessarily conscious of whether they are acting with freedom and what this concept means; but it is equally true that a theorist talking about the question of freedom may not feel the need to relate the concept of freedom to the question of social destitution. It is this act of abstraction that makes many students feel that theory is a waste of time and is unrelated to the world of realities. What we are trying to do in this book is to show that general ideas can help rather than hinder us in getting to grips with particular political events.

## The distinction between facts and values

One of the common arguments that aggravates theory’s abstractness (unless otherwise stated, we will use the term abstraction in its pejorative sense) arises when people say that theory is *either* empirical *or* it is normative. In fact, it is always both. Facts and values interpenetrate, so that it is impossible to have one without the other.

Are facts the same as values? To answer this, we turn to a concrete example. It is a fact that in Western liberal societies fewer and fewer people are bothering to vote. George W. Bush was elected US president in 2000 in a situation in which only

about half of the electorate turned out to vote. This fact has an implicit evaluative significance because, historically, democracy has implied participation, and this fact suggests either that Western liberal societies are minimally democratic, or that the notion of democracy has to be revised. The implicitly evaluative dimension of this fact is evidenced in the way it is challenged, or at least approached. It might be said that low voter participation is only true of *some* Western liberal societies (the USA in particular), and it might be said that voting is not the only form of political participation that counts – people can participate by joining single-issue organisations such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International.

The point about facts is that they are generally agreed upon, and can be verified in ways that are not particularly controversial. They are accepted much more widely than explicit value judgements. Evaluation, on the other hand, refers to the relationships that are only implicit in the fact. Thus, the interpretation of the fact that fewer and fewer people in Western liberal societies vote, raises the question of why. Does the reason for this arise from a relationship with poverty, lack of self-esteem, education, disillusionment or is it the product of a relationship to satisfaction? The explanation embodies the evaluative content of the fact much more explicitly, since the explanation offered has obvious policy implications. If the reason for apathy is poverty, etc. then this has very different implications for action than an argument that people do not vote because they are basically satisfied with what politicians are doing in their name.

Therefore, we would argue that although facts and values are not the same, they are inherently linked. In our view, it is relationships which create values, so that the more explicit and far-reaching these relationships, the more obviously evaluative is the factual judgement. The fact that the earth goes round the sun is not really controversial in today's world, but it was explosively controversial in the medieval world, because the notion that the earth was the centre of the universe was crucial to a statically hierarchical world outlook.

The idea that facts and even ideas can be value-free ignores the linkage between the two. Not only is this empiricist view (as it is usually called) logically unsustainable, but it is another reason why students may find theory boring. The more you relate political ideas to political realities (in the sense of everyday controversies), the more lively and interesting they become. David Hume (1711–76) argued famously that it would be quite rational to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger (1972: 157), but we would contest this scepticism. Reason implies the development of humans, and this is why political theory matters. Of course, what constitutes the well-being of people is complex and controversial but a well-argued case for why the world should be preserved and its inhabitants flourish, is crucial for raising the level of everyday politics.

## The contestability thesis

As we see it, all theories and concepts are contestable. By contestable, we mean controversial so that we note that all theories are either challenged or at least open to challenge. Even the notion of freedom that we might think everyone subscribes to, can be contested by a religious fundamentalist on the grounds that it involves

disrespect for God. To take another example, democracy is contestable because some identify democracy with liberal parliamentary systems that already exist such as the British or French or Indian systems, while others argue that democracy implies a high level of participation so that a society is not democratic if large numbers are not involved in the process of government.

There is a more specialist use of the notion of ‘contestability’, associated in particular with a famous essay by Gallie (1955: 188–93). Gallie argued, first, that only some political concepts are contestable (democracy was his favoured example) and that when concepts are essentially contestable, we have no way of resolving the respective methods of competing arguments. We can note the rival justifications offered (they are mere emotional outpourings), but we cannot evaluate them in terms of a principle that commands general agreement.

This implies that evaluation is only possible on matters about which we all agree. Such an argument stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of politics, for politics arises from the fact that we all have different interests and ideas, and the more explicit the difference between us is, the more explicit the politics. It therefore follows that a political concept is always controversial and it cannot command general agreement. Where an issue ceases to be controversial, it is not political. In this case differences are so slight that conflict is not really generated. Let us assume that chattel slavery – the owning of people as property – is a state of affairs which is so widely deplored that no one will defend it. Slavery as such ceases to be a political issue, and what becomes controversial is whether patriarchal attitudes towards women involve a condoning of slavery, or the power of employers to hire and fire labour gives them powers akin to a slave owner. We think that it is too optimistic to assume that outright slavery is a thing of the past, but it is used here merely as an example to make a point.

All political concepts are inherently contestable since disagreement over the meaning of a concept is what makes it political, but does it follow that because there is disagreement, we have no way of knowing what is true and what is false? It is crucial not to imagine that the truth has to be timeless and above historical circumstance, but this rejection of ahistorical, timeless truth does not mean that the truth is purely relative. A relativist, for example, might argue that one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. This would make an ‘objective’ definition of terrorism (to pursue our example) impossible.

To argue that something is true is not to banish all doubt. If something is true, this does not mean that it is not also false. It simply means that *on balance* one proposition is more true or less false than another. To argue otherwise is to assume that a phenomenon has to be one thing or another. Philosophers call this a ‘dualistic’ approach. By dualism is meant an unbridgeable chasm, so that, in our example, a dualist would assume that unless a statement is timelessly true, it is absolutely false. In fact, to say that the statement ‘Barack Obama is a good president’ is *both* true and false. Even his most fervent admirers would admit (we hope!) that he is deficient in some regards, and even his fiercest critics ought to concede that he has some positive qualities.

Take the question of freedom, as another example. What is freedom for Plato (427–347 BC) differs from what freedom is for Rousseau (1712–78), and freedom for Rousseau differs from what we in the twenty-first century normally mean by freedom. So there is an element of relativity: historical circumstances certainly affect



the character of the argument. Still we can only compare and contrast different concepts of freedom if we have an absolute idea as to what freedom is. The absolute notion of freedom refers to some kind of absence of constraint, but this absolute idea can only be expressed in one historical context rather than another, and it is this context which gives an absolute idea its relativity. As a consequence, there is *both* continuity (the absolute) *and* change (the relative).

There is a distinction between the absolute and the relative, but not a dualism, for we cannot have one without the other. The same is true of the distinction between the general and the particular, and the subjective and the objective. In our arguments in this book we strive to make our ideas as true as possible – i.e. we seek to make them objective, accurate reflections of the external world – but because they are moulded by *us*, and we live in a particular historical context, an element of subjectivity necessarily comes in.

What we think of freedom today will necessarily be refined by the events of tomorrow. We are only now becoming aware of how, for example, sexual orientation affects the question of freedom, and there is understandable concern about increasing freedom for people with disabilities. Health, physical and mental, also affects freedom, and all we can say is that our conception of freedom will inevitably alter in the future, but the change that will take place is not without its continuity with past concepts. Freedom is still an absolute concept, although it can only be identified in relative form.

The contestability thesis must, in our view, be able to address not merely the controversial character of political concepts, but how and why we can prefer some definitions in relation to others. Otherwise the thesis becomes bogged down in a relativism that merely notes disagreements, but has no way to defend preferences. A belief that post-war elections in Iraq would advance democracy is not an arbitrary assertion: it is the argument that can be defended (or challenged) with evidence and information to establish how much truth it contains.

## The structure of the book

In our view, a work on political theory should address itself to the kind of issues that politicians and the media themselves raise, and which are part and parcel of public debate. In the first part of this work we seek to investigate the classical concepts. We start with these because these are the ones that readers are likely to be more familiar with, if they have already read some political thought, and they represent the ‘staple diet’ of courses on political theory. Hence we deal with these concepts first. We aim to explain even the older ideas as clearly as possible so that those who have had no contact with political theory at all will not feel disadvantaged.

Of course, the fact that these concepts are traditional does not mean that our treatment of them will be traditional. We seek to make them as interesting and contentious as possible, so that readers will be stimulated to think about the ideas in a new and more refreshing way. We aim to combine both exposition and argument to enable readers to get a reasonable idea of the terrain covered by the

concept, and to develop a position on the concept, often in opposition to the one we adopt. The fact that this work is written by two people means that differences will manifest themselves in the way that ideas and ideologies are analysed. We think that this will benefit the reader since they will see, at first hand, how it is impossible for two individuals to agree about everything, and some readers might be able to note that certain chapters were drafted by one of us and differ from the others.

The ideas that we deal with are interlinked so that, for example, the argument about the state (and its problematic character) has a direct bearing on democracy. It is impossible to discuss the issue of citizenship without, for example, understanding the argument about justice. Of course, it is always possible to choose to present ideas differently. In some texts, for example, sovereignty is dealt with as a separate topic. In making sense of ideas and ideologies, it is crucial to say something about the key thinkers and the key texts. Our biography boxes in the website seek to show the background and wider interests of key thinkers. And within each chapter we cross-reference other relevant chapters so as to emphasise the linkages between thinkers and ideas.

**Part 1 – Classical ideas (state, freedom, equality, justice, democracy, citizenship, punishment)**

**Part 2 – Classical ideologies (liberalism, conservatism, socialism, anarchism, nationalism, fascism)**

**Part 3 – Contemporary ideologies (feminism, multiculturalism, ecologism, fundamentalism)**

**Part 4 – Contemporary ideas (human rights, civil disobedience, political violence, difference, global justice).**

In what order should the concepts be read? This is a difficult question to answer in general terms because the reader may want to read the concepts in the order in which they are presented in the lectures they are attending. Another way of reading the book might be to select concepts in couples so that the chapter on the state is read with the chapter on punishment, and the chapter on justice is read with the chapter on global justice, and so on. It might be thought that the newer ideas relate more specifically to political controversies, and of course it is true that recent debates have raised these questions acutely, but the classical ideas have not lost their relevance.

All the ideas, whether contemporary or classical, are treated in ways that relate them to ongoing controversies, and show why an understanding of theory is crucial to an understanding of political issues. We hope that you find the chapters both helpful and entertaining. Political theory is hard work, but it can also be fun.

## Questions

1. Is it possible to devise political concepts that have no normative implications, and are thus value-free in character?
2. Can one make a statement about politics without theorising at the same time?
3. Should political theory embrace or seek to avoid controversy?
4. Do teachers of political theory make practical political judgements?
5. Is the use of logic and the resort to factual evidence ethically neutral?

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- Hoffman, J. (1988) *State, Power and Democracy* Brighton: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
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# Part 1 Classical ideas

## What is power?

As indicated in the Introduction the structure of the book is as follows:

Part 1	Classical ideas (Chapters: 1: state, 2: freedom, 3: equality, 4: justice, 5: democracy, 6: citizenship, 7: punishment)
Part 2	Classical ideologies (Chapters: 8: liberalism, 9: conservatism, 10: socialism, 11: anarchism, 12: nationalism, 13: fascism)
Part 3	Contemporary ideologies (Chapters: 14: feminism, 15: multiculturalism, 16: ecologism, 17: fundamentalism)
Part 4	Contemporary ideas (Chapters: 18: human rights, 19: civil disobedience, 20: political violence, 21: difference, 22: global justice).

In introducing the concepts of the state, freedom, equality, justice, democracy, citizenship and punishment here, we need to find an idea that underpins them all and, indeed, politics in general. In our view, this is *power*.

We are always talking about power. Do ordinary people have any? Do prime ministers and presidents have too much? Do people decline to vote because they feel that they have no power? The question of power inevitably merges into the question of authority. Is might right? Are those who have power entitled to exercise it? When we raise questions like these, we are in fact asking whether power is the same as, or is different from, authority. No one can really dispute the fact that after Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq (2003), the US had power, or considerable power, in Iraq, but does that mean that it was entitled to exercise this power? The critics of US policy argued that it lacked authority. Does this mean that it was frustrated in its exercise of power?

It is not difficult to see that when we talk about power and its relation to authority, we are also implicitly raising issues that have a direct bearing on the classical concepts of Part 1.

## The link with other concepts

The definition of the state that we will adopt is that of the famous German sociologist, Max Weber (1864–1920), who defined the state as an institution claiming a monopoly of legitimate force. How does the notion of ‘legitimate force’ connect to the notion of power? Is the use of force the same as power? We will try to argue that while the two ideas sound similar, in fact power requires compliance, whereas force does not. Of course, it is easy to think of examples where the two come very close to one another. In the proverbial case of the person with a gun who demands your money or life, you have a ‘choice’ in a technical sense, but the ‘power’ exercised involves a threat of credible force, so that in reality your choice is illusory. In this case we would prefer to speak of coercion rather than power.

One of the most frequently debated topics is the question of whether force can be legitimate, and by legitimacy we mean force that has been authorised and limited. Clearly a soldier or a member of the police can use force, and usually this force has been authorised by parliament and, therefore, ultimately by those who can vote and hold parliament accountable. Does this make the force legitimate and, thus, an act blessed by authority? And if the act of state force is authoritative, in whose eyes does it have authority? Those who are subject to this force (let us say protestors in a demonstration that is deemed to get out of hand), or those who are not part of the demonstration and approve of the action of the police? These are difficult questions, and we introduce them here in order to show why in a discussion of the state, it is important to involve questions of power and its relation to authority.

Consider the question of freedom (or liberty). We usually think of a person being free if she can exercise power, thus changing herself and her surroundings. But if freedom is defined ‘negatively’, it may simply mean that you are free when no one deliberately interferes with you. Being free in this case is merely being left alone, not actually exercising power. On the other hand, if freedom is defined ‘positively’, it relates to a person’s capacity to do something, so that, for example, freedom of speech is concerned with the power of a person to speak his mind, not the restrictions that may be placed on someone’s right to do so. When does a person’s freedom become an act of power that should be accepted or tolerated, and when should it be curbed? Clearly, a person who had no power at all, could not (say) smoke, but should smoking be banned from public places on the grounds that it is a form of power that is harmful? It is impossible to discuss these issues and the famous argument raised by the British liberal thinker, John Stuart Mill (1806–73), without having some kind of idea about power and authority and that is what Chapter 2 of this book sets out to do.

Equality and justice rest upon ideas of ‘rightness’. Some people see a conflict between equality and freedom on the grounds that redistributing wealth through high taxation prevents individuals from being rewarded according to their merits. The state has too much power and the individual too little. This, it is argued, undermines the authority of the state: people pay their taxes because they have to, not because they want to. Egalitarians, on the other hand, link equality with justice, and argue that everyone should be treated equally. We should aim to spread power so that one person or group cannot tell another individual or group what to do, and governments should implement policies that move in this direction. People have

the same rights, and therefore exercise similar power. Bill Gates, the billionaire owner of Microsoft, has rather more power than Josephine Bloggs who cleans his office or Wilhelm Peter who removes some of the millions of emails that Bill Gates receives every day. Is this just? Equality and justice rely, as we have already commented, upon the question of rightness, and can it be right that some individuals have so much more power than others?

Indeed, one definition of democracy is the ‘power of the people’. Historically, the objection to democracy was precisely that the wrong kind of person would exercise power, and nineteenth-century liberals like Lord Macaulay feared that democracy would enable the poor to plunder the rich. On the other hand, left-wing critics of liberal democracy complain that the right to vote does not in itself give a person power to influence the course of events and that material resources must be available to people if they are to exercise power. The authority of liberal democracy rests upon equal rights rather than equal power so that the notion of power is indissolubly tied to debates about democracy.

The same is true with the concept of citizenship. Being a citizen gives you power. But does it give you enough? Is the housewife a citizen? She may have the right to vote and stand for parliament, but at the same time she may feel compelled to do what her husband tells her, and have limited power over her own life. Nancy Hartsock, an American academic, wrote a book entitled *Money, Sex and Power* (1983). Yet one of the most central questions in the debate about citizenship is whether the unequal distribution of resources distorts the power that people exercise. Are we already citizens or can we only become citizens if resources are more evenly spread both within and between societies? It is not difficult to see why the question of power, how we define it, identify it and analyse it is central to this (as to other) classical political idea.

### Power and authority: an indissoluble link?

Power, as defined here, is a social concept. By this we mean that power is concerned with human relations and not with the mere movement of inanimate objects.

Power and authority are often contrasted. The police have power (power comes from the barrel of a gun, the former Chinese leader Mao Zedong is supposed to have said) whereas the late Queen Mother in Britain had authority (she inspired love and warmth – at least among some). A simple definition to start with would be to argue that power involves dominating someone or some group, telling them what to do, whereas authority is concerned with the rightness of an action. A person has to be pressured into complying with power, whereas they will obey authority in a voluntary way.

Alas, things are not so simple, because power and authority always seem to go together. This problem particularly bothers Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great French eighteenth-century thinker (1712–78). On the one hand, might can never be transformed into right, since ‘force is a physical power; I do not see how its effects could produce morality’ (1968: 52). On the other hand, Rousseau famously insists that people must obey the law. The social contract would be worthless unless it could ensure that those who refuse to abide by the general will must be constrained

to do so. Dissenters must, in that most celebrated of phrases, be ‘forced to be free’ (1968: 64).

Power and authority contradict each other, and yet there is an indissoluble link between them.

Our problem can be presented as follows:

<b>Power implies</b>	<b>Authority implies</b>
constraint	consent
force	morality
subordination	will
dependence	autonomy

This is the problem of the ‘two levels’. Power and authority appear to exclude one another, but they are never found apart.

### **Does a broad view of politics help?**

It might be argued that the problem of power and its relationship to authority is not a serious one. All we need to do is to point to a state that rests purely on power, and one that rests solely upon authority, and the problem is solved!

But April Carter in her *Authority and Democracy* concedes that in the political sphere, ‘authority rarely exists in its pure form’, and she says that even a constitutional government, acting with great liberalism, would still lack ‘pure authority’ since, as she puts it, such a government ‘relies ultimately upon coercion’ (1979: 41, 33). Political authority (defined in statist terms) is paradoxical – a contradiction in terms – since no state, however benevolent, can wholly abstain from the use of force. Pure authority turns out to be a pure abstraction, at least as far as politics is concerned, and Carter demonstrates that rigorous definition and common sense cannot avoid the problem of paradox. Power and authority may be mutually exclusive, but it seems impossible to effect a clean divorce.

This is why Barbara Goodwin in her *Using Political Ideas* (1997) argues that the attempt to distinguish rigorously between power and authority is ‘doomed to failure. In any normal political situation, and in every state institution, they co-exist and support each other’ (1997: 314). It might be objected that politics is far broader than the state, and involves social relations between individuals. Surely here, at least, we can find a sharp separation between power and authority.

Taylor, who is interested in anthropological material on stateless societies, argues that a society without any form of coercion, is ‘conceivable’ (1982: 25), and the New Left theorist, C.B. Macpherson (1911–87), takes the view that in a simple market model in which every household has *enough* either to produce goods and services for itself or to exchange with others, then we have an example of cooperation without coercion – or, in our terminology, authority without power. But it could be objected that the market mechanism constrains and Marx argues

under capitalism, ‘the dull compulsion of economic relations’ subordinates the labourer to the capitalist (1970: 737). Even the independent producers of commodities suffer what Marx calls ‘the coercion exerted by the presence of their mutual interests’ (1970: 356).

But what about social examples that not only avoid the state, but do not involve the market either? What of the relationship between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient? Are these not spheres in which we *can* (although do not always) witness the kind of respect that is essential for authority but which excludes power? However, J.S. Mill raises a problem that calls this analysis into question. In *On Liberty* Mill champions the right of the individual to think and act freely. In his argument he contrasts the physical force of the state to what he calls ‘the moral coercion of public opinion’ (1974: 68). Morality itself is seen as constraining, and we would contend that the very notion of a relationship subverts the idea that power and authority can be spliced apart. If all relationships are governed by norms (i.e. morality) of some kind, how then can any relationships be free from pressures of a constraining kind?

## Negative and positive power

We have assumed that power and authority are contrasting concepts. But a distinction is often made between power as a negative and power as a positive concept. This, as we will see, has important implications for the concept of authority.

Power is *negative* in the sense that it relates to my ability to get you to do things that you otherwise would not do. The negative view of power is associated with the liberal tradition, and centres around the capacity of the individual to act freely and take responsibility for his actions. It is a notion deeply rooted in our culture, and, in our view, forms a necessary part of any analysis of power. People who exercise power, can and should be punished (or helped) when they exercise this power in ways which harm others or, indeed, irreversibly harm themselves. By this latter point, we mean a situation in which people cannot change their minds because, as with serious self-abuse, or taking addictive drugs, it is too late. This notion emphasises the differences between people and their conflict of interests. Each individual is separate, and we are all capable of exercising negative power.

In contrast, power is deemed *positive* when it is expressed as empowerment. Empowerment occurs when one person helps (‘empowers’) themselves or another, or when a group or community enables people to develop. Contrary to what people may think, the notion of power as negative is a modern one while the ancients took the view that power was always expressed positively within communities. The idea of power being exercised to strengthen our relations with others is a very old one.

Positive power is seen as the ability to do things by the discovery of our own strength – a capacity, a power *to* – as opposed to negative power which is seen as a power *over* – a domination. The conventional view sees power in negative terms, linked to the state, and force or the threat of force. Elshtain distinguishes between *potestas* – which relates to control, supremacy, domination – and *potential* – which relates to ability, efficacy and potency, especially that which is ‘unofficial and sinister’ (Elshtain, 1992: 117).



However we distinguish them, it is impossible to separate negative and positive power in an empirical sense. It is clear from Lukes's commentary that positive power broadly corresponds to what has sometimes been called authority, and negative power expresses the conventional view of power. Defining power in a way which separates out logically the negative from the positive, does not resolve the power/authority problem, and, like power and authority, negative and positive power always go together. It is impossible to think of a relationship in which one exists without the other.

## Negative and positive power as a relationship

The reason why negative and positive power cannot be divorced is that all relationships contain both. It is true that earlier notions of power were predominantly positive in character, but the problem, historically, is that this power has in practice been repressively hierarchical: the power of fathers, of lords, of priests, of kings. Positive power has been exercised in the past by people who claim (somewhat implausibly) to be acting on behalf of everyone else – men acting on behalf of women and children, lords for their serfs, priests for parishioners, sovereigns for subjects.

As liberals rightly object, 'negative power' is smuggled in through the back door. The holders of positive power see themselves as chastising others for their own good. The master may imagine that he is acting in the slave's interests – but when the slave is thought of as an individual, then things seem rather different. Power must be both positive and negative. It is important that we do not reject the individual focus of negative power, but seek to build upon it. We must come up with the proposition that if I am to exercise power as an individual, then I must allow you to exercise power as an individual. In other words, to sustain negative power, it must be exercised in terms of a *relationship* – or positively – so that I exercise power in a way that enables you to exercise power.

Power implies mutuality – but it can only be mutual if it is both positive and negative. If it is positive 'on its own', as it were, it stresses unity at the expense of separation, the community at the expense of the individual, so that (as liberals suspect) it becomes oppressive and hypocritical. Positive power exercised 'on its own' is as one-sided as negative power when the latter is conceived in an abstract manner, because when negative power is exercised on its own, separation is expressed at the expense of unity. One individual exercises power in a way that prevents another from doing the same.

If the notion of 'negative' power is crucial for a person's freedom and individuality, it is not enough. 'On its own', it presents power in what is sometimes called a 'zero-sum game', i.e. I have power because you do not. I exercise power *over* you – if I win, you lose. I am separate from you, and therefore my power differentiates me from you. Normally when people think of power, they think of power in negative terms.

Why is this notion a problem? It assumes – as its classical liberal roots reveal – that individuals can exist in complete isolation from other individuals, whereas in fact, as any parent can tell you, we only acquire our sense of individuality (and

thus separateness) in conjunction with others. Logically, if each person is to exercise power, then this negative power must take account of the right of each individual to be the same as everyone else. In other words, power can only be consistently 'negative' if it also has a social, positive and what we want to call a 'relational' attribute.

### Three-dimensional power and the problem of power and authority

Lukes argues that power can be divided into three dimensions. The one-dimensional view identifies power as decision-making, the two-dimensional view argues that power can be exercised beyond the decision-making forum as in a situation where certain issues are excluded from an agenda and people feel that their interests are not being met. Three-dimensional power arises when people express preferences that are at variance with their interests: they support a system through a consciousness that is 'false'.

Lukes's argument is that the first dimension is highly superficial. He is sharply critical of Dahl's defence of power as decision-making in *Who Governs* (1961) on the grounds that those taking decisions may not exercise decisive power at all. The second dimension is an improvement but still confines itself to observable activity: we have to be able to show that groups outside the decision-making forum are consciously exercising power, while three-dimensional power is deemed the most subtle of all. People do not protest precisely because they are victims of a power system that creates a phoney consensus, and those exercising power (like the media or educational system) may do so unintentionally. An example of three-dimensional power could be taken to be the Great Leap Forward in China that was supported by many who believed that through their heroic willpower the arrival of a communist society would be hastened. They certainly did not want the famine that followed.

But how can Lukes prove the existence of a 'latent' conflict, a potential event and a non-existing decision? How can he demonstrate an exercise of power when nothing takes place? The gulf between interests and preferences can, it seems, be demonstrated if it can be shown that with more information people's preferences would have changed, and that interests only come into line with preferences when no further unit of information would cause any further change. Lukes has indicated that at least under some circumstances (for example where partial information leads to people in the town of Gary, Indiana, not campaigning for an air pollution ordinance) power can be exercised which *appears* authoritative. Power and authority seem to go together but in fact the authority is an illusion. Power is being exercised all along.

But has this really resolved the power/authority problem? It certainly points to the way in which unintended circumstances pressure people to do things they otherwise would not have done. But the fact is that the separation remains because when power is expressed in a situation without observable conflict, the authority is simply a propagandist illusion – an idealised mystification of the reality of power. Indeed, Lukes seems to be saying that where people are fully informed, there is

authority; where information is blocked, even unintentionally, there is power. The problem is still not resolved.

## Accounting for the ‘indissoluble link’

Long after liberals rejected the notion of a state of nature in which individuals live in splendid isolation from one another, they continue to write as though individuals can be conceived in the absence of relationships through which they in fact discover their identity.

Constraint is unavoidable since no agent can exist except through a structure: these structures are both natural and social. You have to obey the laws of gravity and you have relationships with your family and friends whether you like it or not. Constraint should not be confused with force, although classical liberals and anarchists use the terms as though they were synonyms. Although we know of many societies that were, or (in the case of international society) are, stateless in character, we know of no society in which there is an absence of constraint. Consensus arises when people can ‘change places’ and show empathy with one another’s point of view, and this necessarily involves constraining pressures. Force, on the other hand, disrupts consensus and relationships, since when force is used, the other party ceases to be a person, and becomes a ‘thing’.

To see how this translates into the argument about power and authority, the following chart can be drawn up:

<b>Power</b>	<b>Authority</b>
Necessity	Freedom
Circumstances	Rational consciousness
Negative power	Positive power
Pressure	Will
Constraint	Autonomy

All relationships involve constraints (power) and entitlements (authority). Remove one side of the power/authority equation, and the other crumbles. Take two diametrically opposed examples by way of illustration. In a master/slave relationship, power is obvious and manifest. Not only are there constraints, but there is also a threat of credible force. But at the same time unless slaves (however reluctantly or under whatever duress) ‘acknowledge’ or ‘accept’ their slavery, then the relationship between them and their masters is impossible, and they will die or escape. Relationships are mutual: being a slave obviously limits your freedom, but so too does *having* one, even if in one case the constraint causes pain and in the other, pleasure. To put the point *in extremis*: slave owners who simply kill their slaves or fail to keep them in service, destroy the basis of their own power. Even the slave, in other words, makes some input in this most repressive of relationships, and it is

this input that gives the relationship its (minimally) authoritative character. In this case, we would want to say that slave owners exercise ‘much’ power and ‘little’ authority.

Let us turn to a relationship at the other end of the political spectrum, that between doctor and patient (or, if you prefer, between teacher/pupil; priest/parishioner, etc.). In this case, it seems that only authority exists, and there is no power. People normally go to the doctor because they want to, and if they accept the advice offered, it is because there is a communication of a persuasive or potentially persuasive kind. Authority predominates, but power also exists. Doctors communicate with their patients by pointing to constraints. If the advice they offer is not taken, highly unpleasant circumstances will likely follow. In these circumstances a person may have as much or as little freedom to choose as in a situation where they are threatened with force, since what choice does a chronically ill person have when told of the need for a dangerous operation, if the alternative is a swift and certain death? In this case, we have a relationship in which there is ‘much’ authority, but there is by no means a complete absence of power.

What has to be excluded from power and authority is the use of force itself, since this makes compliance impossible and is therefore a violation not merely of authority, but of power as well. Obviously the more authority predominates, the better, but even a purely consensual relationship involves some element of constraint.

Let us conclude by giving an example of a member of the police seeking to persuade football supporters, who have been unable to obtain tickets to a match, to go home. Initially, mild pressures would be invoked: ‘it would be a good idea not to hang around but go home’. If this does not work, something stronger might be tried like: ‘I would like you to go home – it would be silly not to’. If this does not work, a command follows: ‘I am ordering you to go home’. Then – a threat: ‘if you don’t go home, I will arrest you’ and Black Marias around the corner are indicated. If the police authority has to actually seize the protestor, then force is used and both power and authority have failed. But the point is that even in the most authoritative statement, power is also implied, and in the sternest expression of power, authority is also present. The two always go together, and unless they are linked, no relationship is possible.

There is therefore a difference between what are conventionally called democratic and authoritarian states. The latter rely far more upon power and the former have much more authority. But the two concepts always go together, even though they are different, and it is a sobering thought that for those subject to force, neither power nor authority can be said to exist.

Power is not merely a crucial but the central concept of politics. It underpins, as we have tried to show, the other ideas that are elaborated in Part 1 and hence it deserves a separate (and fairly extended) treatment of its own by way of prefacing this part of the book.

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