

What's 'Political' About Political Science?

A reflexive revolution seems recently to have engulfed the discourse and discipline of political science on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ For the first time in a long time, political scientists and those no longer quite so happy to embrace the 'science' designation, debate the very nature of their subject matter and the claims they might legitimately make about it.

This debate is both descriptive and prescriptive. For, it refers not only to the practices and habits of political science as a discipline but also to the revisions to such disciplinary conventions that a sustained reflection on the nature of the 'political' and on the claims we might legitimately make about it suggests. In Europe, where this debate has perhaps been rather more explicit and long-running, controversy has tended to focus around the very definition of the legitimate terrain of political inquiry (see for instance Leftwich 1984a) and, more recently, the challenge posed to the political science and international relations mainstream by the distinctly post-positivist agendas of constructivism, critical realism, post-structuralism and postmodernism (for a flavour see Booth and Smith 1995; Hollis and Smith 1990b; Marsh and Stoker 1995). In recent years, however, the debate has been joined by the North American core of the discipline (see, for instance Almond 1990; Der Derian 1995; George 1994; Green and Shapiro 1994; Lapid and Kratochwil 1995; Wendt 1999).² Thus, American political scientists, just as much as their European counterparts, are currently embroiled in a host of fundamental debates, disputes and controversies over the discipline's legitimate concerns and what might be taken to constitute "minimal professional competence" within the discipline' (Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 6).

This return to fundamentals has invariably been occasioned by one of three tendencies: (i) the rejection of the 'malestream' mainstream by feminist scholars (see, for instance, Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996a); (ii) the challenge posed to the ascendancy of rational choice theory and behaviouralism in political science by neo-statist and neo-institutionalist perspectives (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985; March and Olsen 1984, 1989; Skocpol 1979; Steinmo, Thelen and Longstreth 1992;

for a review see Hall and Taylor 1996); and (iii) that posed to neo-realism and neo-liberalism in international relations theory by both constructivism and more radically 'reflectivist' or postmodernist positions (see, for instance, Adler 1997; Ashley 1984; Campbell 1992; Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989; Ruggie 1998; S. Smith 2001; Tickner 1993; Walker 1993; Wendt 1992, 1999). This contestation of the mainstream has served to problematise a series of quite basic and fundamental issues on which the principal protagonists remain, and are likely to remain, divided and with which this volume is principally concerned. These include: (i) the nature of political power and the techniques appropriate to its analysis; (ii) the relationship between political conduct and political context (more conventionally, structure and agency); (iii) the respective significance of behavioural, institutional and ideational factors in political explanation; (iv) the relationship between the political world and the ideas held by political actors about that political world (more conventionally, the relationship between the material and the discursive); and (v) the nature of political time and the understanding of social and political change.

It is with two yet more fundamental issues, however, that I am principally concerned in this chapter. They relate to the nature of the 'political' that forms the focus of our analytical attentions (the 'political' question) and the status of the claims we might make about such a subject matter (the 'science' question). The former involves us in posing some quite basic questions about the nature of the political world itself – its essence (if it might be said to possess one), its boundaries and the constituent units out of which it is comprised. The latter is certainly no less significant, raising the question of what we have the potential to know about the (political) objects of our enquiry and the means by which we might come to realise that potential.

These are, arguably, the most two most basic questions of all for political analysts. For, what kind of discipline, we might ask, lacks a clear sense of its terrain of enquiry and the means appropriate to adjudicate contending accounts of what occurs within that domain? Yet, to point to the logical primacy of such issues is, of course, not to suggest that they have always been accorded the attention such a fundamental nature might warrant. Nor is it to suggest that they have been accorded equal attention.

Despite the paltry interest it has attracted over the years, of the two, the question of the nature and scope of the political is logically prior. For the degree of confidence that we might have in the knowledge we acquire of our subject matter (our answer to the 'science' question) depends, crucially, on what we choose that subject matter to be (our answer to the 'political' question). In short, the claims we might make

of our subject matter are conditional upon the nature of that subject matter. It is, then, with the concept of the 'political' that we must begin.

Yet, before doing so, it is important to introduce the terminology in which such debates tend to be conducted.

Ontology and epistemology: the 'political question' and the 'science question'

From the outset it is important to puncture the veil of impenetrability which invariably accompanies the philosophy of the social sciences, the language of ontology, epistemology and methodology in particular. In the philosophy of the social sciences, what we have thus far termed the political question is referred to as an *ontological* issue; what we have thus far termed the science question is referred to as an *epistemological* issue. Both, as we shall see, have *methodological* implications.

It is in many respects unfortunate that what are, in fact, simple and intuitive ideas should be referred to in a language which is far from immediately transparent and accessible. Nonetheless, this is the language in which much political analytical debate is now conducted and it is important that we familiarise ourselves with it before we proceed.

Ontology, is, literally, the science or philosophy of being.³ As a first step in the process of clarification, this may not seem like progress. Rather more illuminating is Norman Blaikie's definition. Ontology, he suggests, 'refers to the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social [or, by extension, political] enquiry makes about the nature of social [or political] reality – claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with one another' (1993: 6). Ontology relates to *being*, to what *is*, to what *exists*. One's ontological position is, then, one's answer to the question: what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated? Alternatively, what exists that we might acquire knowledge of? However put, this is a rather significant question and one whose answer may determine, to a considerable extent, the content of the political analysis we are likely to engage in and, indeed, what we regard as an (adequate) political explanation. Thus, for 'ontological atomists', convinced in Hobbesian terms that 'basic human needs, capacities and motivations arise in each individual without regard to any specific feature of social groups or social interactions' (Fay 1996: 31), there can be no appeal in political explanation to social interactions, processes or structures. For 'ontological structuralists', by contrast, it is the appeal to human needs and capacities that is ruled inadmissible in the court of political analysis. Similarly, for those convinced of a separation of appearance and reality

– such that we cannot ‘trust’ our senses to reveal to us that which is real as distinct from that which merely presents itself to us *as if* it were real – political analysis is likely to be a more complex process than for those prepared to accept that reality presents itself to us in a direct and unmediated fashion.

A great variety of ontological questions can be posited. Adapting Uskali Mäki’s thoughtful (and pioneering) reflections on economic ontology (2001: 3) to the political realm, we might suggest that all of the following are ontological questions:

What is the polity made of? What are its constituents and how do they hang together? What kinds of general principles govern its functioning, and its change? Are they causal principles and, if so, what is the nature of political causation? What drives political actors and what mental capacities do they possess? Do individual preferences and social institutions exist, and in what sense? Are (and of) these things historically and culturally invariant universals, or are they relative to context?

Yet the ontological questions with which we will principally be concerned are the following:

- The relationship between structure and agency (the focus of Chapter 2)
- The extent of the causal and/or constitutive role of ideas in the determination of political outcomes (the focus of Chapter 6)
- The extent to which social and political systems exhibit organic (as opposed to atomistic) qualities (in which the product of social interaction is greater than the sum of its component parts)

and, most fundamentally of all;

- The extent (if any) of the separation of appearance and reality – the extent to which the social and political world presents itself to us as really it is such that what is real is observable.

The crucial point to note about each of these issues is that they cannot be resolved empirically. Ultimately, no amount of empirical evidence can refute the (ontological) claims of the ontological atomist or the ontological structuralist; neither can it confirm or reject the assumption that there is no separation of appearance and reality.⁴

Epistemology, again defined literally, is the science or philosophy of knowledge.⁵ In Blaikie’s terms, it refers ‘to the claims or assumptions made about the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of reality’ (1993: 6–7). In short, if the ontologist asks ‘what exists to be known?’, then the epistemologist asks ‘what are the conditions of acquiring

knowledge of that which exists?'. Epistemology concerns itself with such issues as the degree of certainty we might legitimately claim for the conclusions we are tempted to draw from our analyses, the extent to which specific knowledge claims might be generalised beyond the immediate context in which our observations were made and, in general terms, how we might adjudicate and defend a preference between contending political explanations.

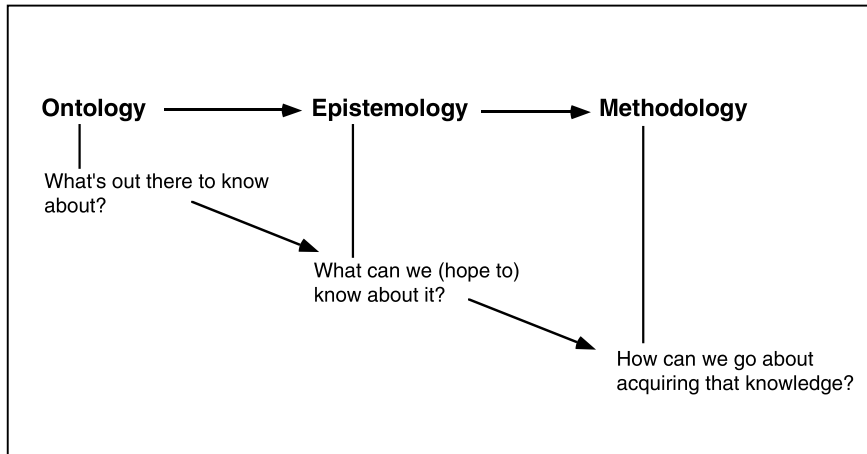
Methodology relates to the choice of analytical strategy and research design which underpins substantive research. As Blaikie again helpfully explains, 'methodology is the analysis of how research should or does proceed' (1993: 7). Thus, although methodology establishes the principles which might guide the choice of method, it should not be confused with the methods and techniques of research themselves. Indeed, methodologists frequently draw the distinction between the two, emphasising the extent of the gulf between what they regard as established methodological principles and perhaps equally well-established methodological practices. For our purposes methodology is best understood as the means by which we reflect upon the methods appropriate to realise fully our potential to acquire knowledge of that which exists.

What this brief discussion hopefully serves to demonstrate is that ontology, epistemology and methodology, though closely related, are irreducible. Moreover, their relationship is directional in the sense that ontology logically precedes epistemology which logically precedes methodology.

To summarise, *ontology relates to the nature of the social and political world, epistemology to what we can know about it and methodology to how we might go about acquiring that knowledge*. The directional dependence of this relationship is summarised schematically in Figure 2.1.

To suggest that ontological considerations are both irreducible and logically prior to those of epistemology is not, however, to suggest that they are unrelated. The degree of confidence that we might have for the claims we make about political phenomena, for instance, is likely to vary significantly depending on our view of the relationship between the ideas we formulate on the one hand and the political referents of those ideas on the other (the focus of Chapter 6). In this way, our ontology may shape our epistemology. If we are happy to conceive of ourselves as disinterested and dispassionate observers of an external (political) reality existing independently of our conceptions of it then we are likely to be rather more confident epistemologically than if we are prepared to concede that: (i) we are, at best, partisan participant observers; (ii) that there is no neutral vantage-point from which the political can be viewed

Figure 2.1 *Ontology, epistemology and methodology: a directional dependence*



objectively; and that (iii) the ideas we fashion of the political context we inhabit influence our behaviour and hence the unfolding dynamic of that political context.⁶ These are issues to which we return.

Second, the significance of ontological and epistemological questions for the practice and, indeed, the status of political science can scarcely be overstated. Chief among the ontological and epistemological concerns of this chapter are the nature of the political and the possibility of a science of the political. As their shorthand designation as the ‘political question’ and the ‘science question’ might imply, a political science without a ready answer to both – and hence without a clear sense of what there is to know and what might be known about it – scarcely warrants the label political science.

Moreover, if we put these two questions together we get the question of political science itself: *what is the nature and purpose of political science?* Posed in such a direct and stark a manner, this may well be a rather uncomfortable question to ask. For such a simple and obvious question surely demands an equally obvious and simple answer. In the absence of an intuitively appealing, instantaneous and collective response from the discipline, we might well be advised not to raise such issues, at least in public. But burying our heads in the sand is not a realistic option either, as we are increasingly called upon to justify our practices publicly. As Gerry Stoker notes, ‘the case for setting out explicitly the core features of political science . . . has become increasingly compelling as the outside world increasingly demands evaluations of both

its teaching and research' (1995: 1; cf. Goodin and Klingemann 1996). Whether that task is as simple as Stoker's disarming remark seems to imply is an interesting question, and one which will concern us presently. Suffice it for now to note that while we may well be able to agree on the questions that divide us, the 'core features of political science' remain as contested as ever. Indeed, arguably, they have become if anything rather more contested as an array of authors have felt the need to respond in recent years to the challenge here summarised by Stoker. In so far as the 'core' of the discipline might be identified, it remains remarkably elusive and hardly lends itself towards the type of unequivocal and unambiguous statement that Stoker's challenge would seem to require. While such a state of affairs persists, the best we can perhaps do is to acknowledge, with the appropriate twinge of embarrassment, that it is far easier to identify (and thereby justify) the purpose of a particular piece of political analysis than it is to make the more general case for political analysis which is not so much a distinct mode of enquiry as a collection of often mutually incompatible analytical strategies. For many, this is a deeply worrying and depressing state of affairs; for just as many others, however, it is a sign of theoretical vibrancy and intellectual pluralism (cf. Rule 1997).

Nonetheless, while generalised answers to such discomfoting questions may be difficult to reach at least in any consensual fashion and while, for many, attempts to establish standards of 'minimal professional competence' within the 'discipline' are part of the problem and not the solution, there is much that can be gained from thinking aloud about such issues. Indeed, if the community of political scientists and political analysts is to establish in its own procedures the type of informed and democratic dialogue that it so frequently espouses for others (Dryzek 1990; Giddens 1994; cf. Cohen and Rogers 1995; Habermas 1993, 1996), it is precisely to such fundamental foundational and procedural questions that it must attend. While we will no doubt continue to be divided by our answers, it is important that we consider what we can and should legitimately expect of political analysts. Can we aspire to 'science' and, if so, what precisely does that aspiration entail? Is there a radical separation between the subject matter of the natural and the social 'sciences' which might qualify the extent to which social and political analysts can make 'scientific' claims? Are there costs of modelling the analysis of the political upon the natural sciences? And, if so, do they more than outweigh the benefits? Are the questions that *can* be answered objectively or scientifically the most interesting and compelling ones? These are the themes of this chapter. They serve as points of departure for the argument to follow.

Specifying and respecifying the political

Quite clearly, and despite the various claims made about the disciplinary nature of political science, there are no definitive nor for that matter even commonly accepted answers to such questions. The nature of political analysis is, like the focus of its attentions, profoundly value-laden, profoundly contested and above all profoundly political. It is, then, not that surprising that with few rare exceptions, political analysts have tended to shy away from the question of the nature of politics or of the political itself (for notable exceptions see, for instance, Arendt 1958; Crick 1962; Duverger 1964/6; Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 7–9; Lasswell 1936/50; Leftwich 1984a; Morgenthau 1948).⁷ Thus, rather than justify, defend or even render explicit the conception of the political appealed to within political analysis, the tendency has been to proceed on the basis of an implicit and unquestioned conception of the legitimate terrain of political inquiry.

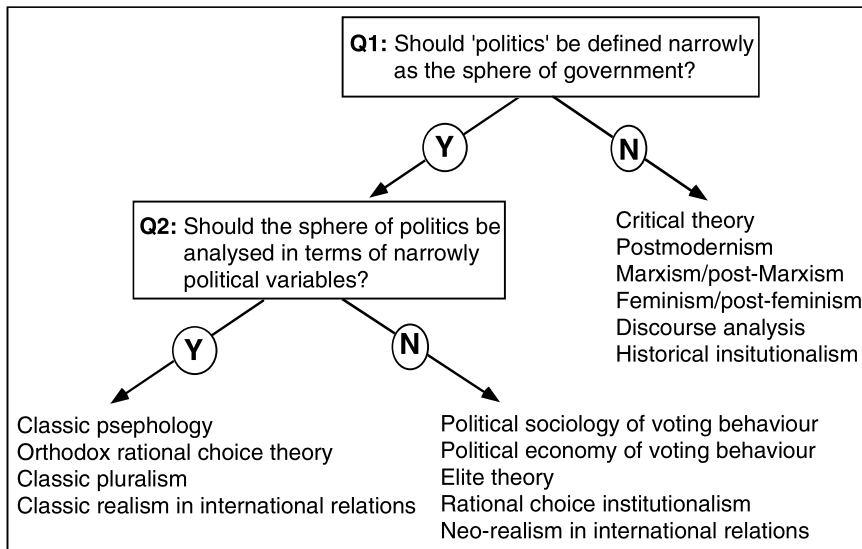
Where the concept of ‘politics’ or, more usefully perhaps, the ‘political’ has been rendered explicit this has remained very much on the margins of the discipline. It has usually taken the form of a challenge to the parochialism and formalism held to characterise a political science ‘mainstream’, in particular by feminist scholars (Benhabib 1996; Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996a; see also Leftwich 1984a). Through a rather protracted and attritional process, such criticism has in recent years begun to scratch the surface of a previously tightly guarded and policed disciplinary core, facilitating the emergence of a more interdisciplinary, even post-disciplinary analysis of the political – an integral part of a more integrated social science.

If the conception of the ‘political’ within political science has still to attract significant attention, the same is certainly not true of ‘science’. It is no exaggeration to suggest that hundreds of books and thousands of articles have been written on the (more or less) scientific status of knowledge claims made within the social ‘sciences’, the imperative to be ‘scientific’ and, indeed, the very nature of ‘science’ itself.⁸

That the ‘political’ has given rise to a paltry smattering of interest while the ‘scientific’ has generated a remarkable profusion of literature, at least among more reflexive political analysts, might suggest that the two questions are in fact rather unrelated. Yet further reflection would suggest otherwise. For, by and large, those with the most narrow, restrictive and formal conceptions of politics are the most attached to the label ‘science’ and most likely to acknowledge no qualitative difference between the subject matters of the natural and social sciences (see Figure 2.2).

This suggests, again, a directional dependence between the epistemo-

Figure 2.2 *Alternative conceptions of the political in political analysis*



logical and the ontological. Yet we need to proceed with some caution here. Directional dependence there certainly is; but that directional dependence is not determinant. Ultimately one's epistemology is not reducible to one's ontology. What this means, in more practical terms, is that we should resist the temptation to jump too swiftly to the conclusion that whether one can conceive of the practice of political analysis as scientific or not is in turn ultimately dependent upon the conception of the political – a narrow conception of the political sustaining a claim to a scientific epistemology that a more inclusive conception might not. Nor, indeed, should we uncritically accept the converse – that a belief in the unity of method between the natural and social sciences (naturalism) necessitates a narrow specification of the political. There are at least two good reasons for this.

First, the consequences of so doing are to create a powerful temptation to sacrifice a more integral and inclusive conception of the political (such as that proposed by feminist critics of the mainstream) on the altar of the scientific imperative. Moreover, as we shall see, there may be good reasons for rejecting both *naturalism* (in Bhaskar's terms 'the thesis that there are or can be an essential unity of method between the natural and social sciences' (1989: 67)) and *positivism* (the view that the methods of the latter should be modelled on the former since the natural sciences provide a privileged, indeed the *only* access to neutrality and objectivity – in short, 'truth'). Accordingly, there is no reason to

suggest that a more restrictive specification of the political will liberate us from the 'limits of naturalism' (Bhaskar 1979).

Whatever the reasons, then, for the characteristic affinity between a restrictive view of the political and a positivistic view of scientific method, they are not based on logical correspondence. More plausible, perhaps, is that they are bound up with a certain professionalisation of 'knowledge' (and the pursuit of knowledge) within the 'discipline' and the academy more generally. Here we might note the vested interest bound up in rigidly policing disciplinary boundaries and the rhetorical authority conjured in the 'scientific' claims that positivism might sustain. When we note, further, that a rigidly specified disciplinary core almost necessarily entails a narrow conception of the discipline's subject matter and that claims to positivism are only likely to be taken seriously if accompanied by the confident proclamation of naturalism, then the relationship between professionalisation and a narrowly political and rigidly scientific conception of the discipline would appear somewhat more than merely contingent. There may be obvious reasons for this. Put simply, if one wishes to preserve and defend a disciplinary core and to see that continuing resources are available for the analysis of its content, it is likely to prove instrumental to specify narrowly one's subject matter and to claim for its analysis scientific status.

In this context, it is surely telling to note that outside of the political science mainstream (or, as some would have it, the political science 'malestream'), the concept of the political is rarely held synonymous with the realm of formal government. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that it is *only* within the political science mainstream (and even here only in certain quarters) that such a narrow specification of the political retains many enthusiasts.

The tarnished authority of science?

In assessing the reasons for the contemporary reappraisal of the content and status of political analysis, one final factor is also relevant. Interestingly, and as a growing number of commentators have noted, 'science' is not quite all that it once was; its rhetorical authority tarnished somewhat in a society characterised, for many, by a proliferation of 'high-consequence risks' with which scientific 'progress' itself appears directly implicated.⁹ Consequently, the softening of naturalist and positivist claims in recent years and the corresponding broadening of the concept of the political may reflect, as some have suggested, a certain re-evaluation of the utility to be gained by constructing political science in the image of its previously more esteemed big brother.¹⁰ As an explanation for the re-evaluation of the scientific content of political analysis

this would certainly appear more plausible than any more profound change of heart on the part of a discipline that has always been characterised, as much as by anything else, by its pragmatism.¹¹ What is clear is that, for the first time in a long time, the question of political science has become admissible again in the court of political analysis.

The nature of politics, the nature of the political

Although they can agree on little else, there is at least some unanimity within the discipline that political analysis is concerned essentially with the analysis of the processes and practices of politics.¹² Yet, as we shall soon see, this covers a multitude of differing perspectives, and a wide diversity of often mutually incompatible approaches to the political. Definitions of the legitimate terrain of political analysis range broadly, from 'politics is what the government does' at one end of the spectrum to 'the personal is the political' at the other. Thus political analysts differ widely over the relevance of extra-political factors (the economic, the social, the cultural) in political analysis. Some, for instance, insist that a political science worthy of the name must resolutely privilege the political (constructing political explanations of political phenomena) while others favour a more avowedly multi-dimensional approach (compare, for instance, Easton 1979; Keohane 1986; Moravcsik 1997, 1998; Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979; with Grofman 1997: 77–8; D. Marsh 1995; Vasquez 1998; Wendt 1999). And this, it should be noted, is to put to one side their equally diverging views on the nature of the political itself.¹³

In turning our attention to the scope and range of the political we can usefully distinguish between a series of closely related (if not quite interchangeable) conceptual dualisms often associated with the delimiting of the political (see also Hay and Marsh 1999a). These are summarised in Table 2.1.

For those who wish to delineate strictly the sphere of political inquiry, the focus of political analysis is generally specified by the first term of

Table 2.1 *Delimiting the Political*

<i>Political</i>	<i>Extra-political</i>
Public	Private
Governmental	Extra-governmental
State	Society

each conceptual pairing. Politics (big 'P') is concerned with the public sphere, the state and the sphere of governmental activity because politics (little 'p') occurs only in such arenas. From such a perspective, the personal is certainly not political – *by definition*. Moreover, with respect to all but the first dualism, the processes by which, say, trade unions select their leadership and formulate strategy are again not political – *by definition*. Such a focus, narrow as it is, has a certain obvious appeal in specifying precisely a subject matter.¹⁴ Nonetheless, such a definition has serious and potentially rather disturbing consequences. To be fair, few authors have sought to defend such a rigidly formalistic understanding of the limits of the political. Nonetheless, analyses which confine themselves in practice to the narrowly political analysis of narrowly political variables abound.¹⁵

To begin with, it is important to note the deeply normative (and, in any lay sense of the term, 'political') content of this boundary question. This suggests an interesting comparison with other arenas in which the boundaries of the 'political' are contested. The call to restrict the realm of the political has become extremely familiar in recent years, occurring with increasing regularity in the rhetoric and practice of public policy reform since the 1980s. This raises an interesting question: is the populist cry to 'take the political out of' . . . sport, the economy, the domestic sphere, and so forth, so very different from the theoretical attempt to delimit tightly the political realm? Suffice it to note that party political attempts to circumscribe the scope of the political have in recent years tended to be associated with the neoliberal and libertarian right. They have been expressed in terms of the desire to restrict, or further restrict, the realm of government from the overbearing influence of a Leviathan, and in so doing to remove from public scrutiny and accountability an area of social regulation. It is no huge leap to suggest that there may be similar consequences of a restrictive *conceptual* definition of the political. For, if we are to conceive of political analysis as one means (albeit, one means among many) of exposing political practice to public scrutiny, then to restrict one's definition of the political to the juridico-political (that most narrowly and formally constitutive of the state) is to disavow the democratic privilege afforded political analysts.

Two points might here be made. First, to restrict the analysis of the political to that conventionally held to lie within the sphere of formal politics (that associated with the state, the Government and the process of government narrowly conceived) at a particular context at a particular moment in time is to exclude a consideration of the mechanisms, processes and, above all, struggles and conflicts by which the 'political' comes to be thus understood. It is, in short, to treat as immutable, given

and *apolitical* our fluid and contested conceptions of the legitimate scope, scale and penetration of government and the state within the private sphere, civil society and the economy. It is to deprive the political analyst of the conceptual armoury to interrogate the processes by which the realm of the political is both specified and respecified. A political analysis that restricts its field of vision to that formally (and legally) codified as such is, in this respect, complicit in the exclusions which such a formal politics sustains. It is perhaps not merely a science *of* the state, but a science *for* the state. This, as we shall see in Chapter 5, is an argument frequently made of pluralist and neo-pluralist perspectives.

Beyond 'malestream' political analysis: the feminist challenge

This suggests a second parallel line of critique, associated in particular with contemporary feminist scholarship. Stated most simply, to insist that the political is synonymous with the public sphere is to exclude from political analysis the private arena within which much of women's oppression, subordination and, indeed, *resistance* occurs. It is, moreover, to dismiss as apolitical (or perhaps even *pre-political*)¹⁶ all struggles, whether self-consciously political or not, on the part of women which do not manage to traverse the public-private divide. For it is only in so doing that they can thereby register themselves as 'political'. More fundamentally still, it is to exclude from consideration the processes by which the historical and contemporary confinement of women to a predominantly 'private' existence centred upon the family and domestic 'duty' have been sustained, reproduced and, increasingly, challenged (Elshtain 1981; Pateman 1989; Young 1987; for a useful review see Ackelsberg and Shanley 1996). It is, in the most profound way, to deny the possibility of a feminist political analysis.

Feminism, in its concern to interrogate the politics of women's subordination in all the contexts in which it occurs, thus constitutes a profound challenge to the traditional and conservative conception of the political that has tended to dominate malestream political science. Similarly, malestream political science constitutes a fundamental rejection of the very space from which a feminist political analysis might be constructed. In this context it is surely telling to note the response of some liberal political theorists to such attempts by feminists to reclaim for critical social inquiry more generally the concept of the political. This has been to misrepresent fundamentally feminists' call for a broadening of the definition of the political, by presenting it as an invitation for the state to encroach still further into the pristine and pre-political arena of privacy that they identify *beyond* 'the political'. In so doing they betray

their own inability to think beyond their own narrow and formal conception of politics. For, to see politics beyond the realm of the public sphere, as feminists do, is not to invite a colonisation of the latter by the state. As Nancy Hirschmann and Christine Di Stefano note, 'feminism offers a radical challenge to the notion of politics itself and has instigated a redefinition of politics to include things that 'mainstream' theory considers completely non-political, such as the body and sexuality, the family and interpersonal relationships' (1996b: 6). This in no way constitutes an invitation to the state to engage in the formal political regulation of the body, sexuality, the family and interpersonal relationships. Such a reading is made all the more ridiculous when the characteristic antipathy of feminist theorists towards a *patriarchal* state, intimately associated with the subordination of women, is considered (for a variety of views on which, see Allen 1990; Brown 1992; M. Daly 1978; MacKinnon 1985; Pateman 1989).

Revising the political: from politics as arena to politics as process

It is one thing to dismiss the parochial, conservative and perhaps malestream definitions of the political that have tended to characterise traditional and contemporary mainstream political science alike; it is quite another to advance an alternative formulation of politics and the political. Yet feminist scholars, at least in recent years, have not shied away from this task of 'revising the political' (Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996a). Nonetheless, in considering alternative and more inclusive conceptions of the political it would be wrong to give the impression that it is only feminists who have seen the need to reject a rigid legal/institutional definition of politics. As Iris Marion Young notes, it is not only women who are relegated to the realm of the private sphere (1990: 100–1). Consequently, it is not only feminists who sought to acknowledge the politics of the private sphere.

As Adrian Leftwich is surely right to note, 'the single most important factor involved in influencing the way people implicitly or explicitly conceive of politics is whether they define it primarily in terms of a *process*, or whether they define it in terms of the place or places where it happens, that is in terms of an *arena* or institutional forum' (1984b: 10, emphasis in the original). It is clear that for those who would restrict the realm of political inquiry to that of the state, the public sphere or government, politics (a term they prefer to the political) is an arena. Politics is the process of governing, an activity or a range of activities made meaningful, significant and worthy of investigation by virtue of the (formal)

context in which it occurs. The same processes displaced, mirrored or reproduced in other institutional environments are not, by definitional fiat, political. As such, they remain the preserve of other disciplines. The feminist's concern with the patriarchal character of the institution of the nuclear family, for instance, whatever the merits of such a focus, simply lies beyond the realm of political inquiry thus conceived and has no place within such a political science.¹⁷ This, by and large, is the approach adopted by the behaviouralist and rationalist core of the discipline.

By contrast, those for whom the political (a term they tend to prefer to politics) is ubiquitous, occurring (or at least having the potential to occur) in all social contexts in all societies at all points in their history, must clearly reject such a narrow definition of politics as an arena. Political inquiry, within such an alternative framework, is concerned with *process*; more specifically, with the (uneven) distribution of power, wealth and resources. As such it may occur in any institutional and social environment, however mundane, however parochial. As Leftwich again notes, politics thus conceived 'is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private'. It may occur, 'in all human groups, institutions and societies' (1984c: 63).

Yet if this captures the spirit of the contemporary challenge to an institutionally rigid specification of the terrain of political inquiry, then it still leaves largely unanswered the question with which we began – *what is politics?* By now it should come as no great surprise that opinions vary as to its defining essence. Some emphasise violence, though not necessarily *physical* force, concentrating for instance on mechanisms of coercion, persuasion and what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms 'symbolic violence' by which the deployment of physical force is deferred.¹⁸ Others emphasise distributional conflict over scarce resources (though one might argue that in the advanced capitalist North the issue is less one of scarce resources *per se* than of distribution so unequal as to render plentiful resources scarce in certain social locations). Still others emphasise the claim to legitimate authority or the conflict arising from the paucity of human judgement (Moodie 1984).

Yet the conception of the political which captures most fully the challenge posed by contemporary feminism and critical theory, and arguably the most inclusive, is that which conceives of politics as power and political inquiry as the identification and interrogation of the distribution, exercise and consequences of power. This position is well expressed by David Held and Adrian Leftwich,

politics is about power; about the forces which influence and reflect its distribution and use; and about the effect of this on resource use

and distribution; it is about the ‘transformatory capacity’ of social agents, agencies and institutions; it is not about Government or government alone. (1984: 144)

Yet arguably even this merely displaces the problem. For politics is defined in terms of power; and power itself remains unspecified. Suffice it to say that there is no more contested concept in political analysis than that of power. As I shall argue in Chapter 5, political science is divided by a common language – that of power. Clearly, however, only certain conceptions of power are compatible with the spirit of Held and Leftwich’s remarks. Indeed they allude to a specific conception of power in their tangential reference to Anthony Giddens’ notion of power as ‘transformatory capacity’ (1981: Ch. 2). Such a conception might be further specified in the following terms.

Power . . . is about context-shaping, about the capacity of actors to redefine the parameters of what is socially, politically and economically possible for others. More formally we can define power . . . as the ability of actors (whether individual or collective) to ‘have an effect’ upon the context which defines the range of possibilities of others. (Hay 1997a: 50)

Yet there is at least one obvious objection to such an integral and universal conception of politics. This is well articulated by Andrew Heywood, ‘one danger of expanding “the political” to include all social institutions . . . is that it comes close to defining everything as politics, thus rendering the term itself almost meaningless’ (1994: 25–6). Though superficially attractive, this is, I think, to confuse and conflate a conception of *politics as an arena* on the one hand and *politics as a process* on the other. Were one to advance a conception of politics as a locus, site or institutional arena and then suggest that this arena were universal, Heywood’s comments would be entirely appropriate. We would merely have emptied the term ‘politics’ of all content, effectively dispensing with the distinction between the political and the extra-political. Yet to suggest that politics *as process* has the potential to exist in all *social* locations, since all social relations can be characterised as relations of power (making them potential subjects of political inquiry), is neither to insist that we must see politics everywhere, nor that such social relations are exhausted by their description and analysis in political terms. It is to suggest that political analysis avails us of the opportunity to interrogate power relations in any social context without either suggesting that we could or should reduce our analysis to that. Nor is it to suggest that viewing specific social relations in terms of political categories (of power and domination, etc.) will necessarily further our

inquiries. To suggest that all social relations have political dimensions is to open to scrutiny the power relations that pervade social institutions, without in any sense denying the economic and cultural processes with which they are articulated. Though all social relations may also be political relations, this does not imply that they are *only* political relations, nor that they can adequately be understood in such terms. It is useful – indeed, I would suggest essential – to be able to consider relations of domestic violence for instance as political relations. To suggest that they are exhausted by their description in such terms, however, would be to present an analysis that is both grossly distorting and wholly inadequate. The political is perhaps then best seen as an aspect or moment of the social, articulated with other moments (such as the economic or the cultural). Though politics may be everywhere, nothing is exhaustively political.

Science, politics and ethics

If there is much at stake in political scientists' attempts to specify the terrain of legitimate political inquiry, then there is certainly no less at stake in adjudicating the claims that political analysts might make of this subject matter. Yet, as noted above, while the former has prompted comparatively little explicit attention, the 'science question' has provoked almost incessant and intense controversy. Opinions again range widely. In so far as these can be arrayed along a spectrum – and it is to distort somewhat the complexity of the issues at hand to suggest that they can – this ranges from (i) those who would like to construct political science in the image of the 'hard' and value-neutral physical sciences, via (ii) those who deny the neutrality of the latter and wish to 'reclaim' a conception of 'science' liberated from the conceptual shackles of positivism and feigned value-neutrality, to (iii) those happy to leave the fundamentally tarnished concept of science to such natural scientists as would wish to embrace it while openly acknowledging the essentially normative and value-laden nature of social and political analysis and the ethical responsibilities this places upon the analyst. A number of issues are involved here which it is useful to unpack in terms of a series of key questions:

- Q1 What does it mean to claim that a statement or theory is scientific? What is science?
- Q2 Are scientific claims theory- and/or value-neutral?
- Q3 Can there be an essential unity of method between the natural sciences and social/political inquiry (the basis of *naturalism*)?