

## Lecture 1 – Politics, Boundaries and Principles (American Government and Politics)

<p>Introduction:</p>	<p>It probably makes some sense to say something today about what the class is and isn't about. As a class that proposes to introduce the subject of politics and American Government, that means saying something about what politics is as a phenomena that can be studied, and hence as a field of study in its own right – one distinct from other fields such as economics or anthropology.</p> <p>The field of politics, that is, the study of politics is quite old, and we can go back to the Ancient Greeks – to Plato and Aristotle, to trace some of the fundamental questions of politics and how questions of politics have been thought about. But how did the Ancient Greeks think about politics and what were the important questions they concerned themselves with?</p>
<p><b>Ancient Greece, boundaries and political community.</b></p>	<p><b>For the Ancient Greeks, politics started out with boundaries</b> – with recognition of place – their place within the region of Attica and within the Peloponnesian region. For those Greeks who lived within the city-state of Athens, the city was the primary boundary of importance. <b>The city or polis</b> (the etymology of which connotes a wall) was the center of life and the center of political life. Walls, or boundaries, whether real or artificial, separate some things from other things – separate some people from other people. Within the city lived the Athenians (actually, some Athenians lived outside the actual wall that once existed around the city), but outside the political boundary that was Athens, lived savages.</p> <p>Thus, the polis was not only a place to live, it was a part of one's identity and a place where one was a member –</p>

	<p>one with certain freedoms – but also certain obligations and duties.</p> <p><b>Thus, for the Greeks, boundaries mattered in politics.</b> They delineate those who are members of a political community and who therefore share something in common, from those who are not a part of the political community (and who, in today’s world, are likely a part of a different political community).</p> <p>What we will want to worry a great deal about in this class is the question of <b>what is it that creates the polis or the political community – what holds it together and keeps it together over time? Is it geographic boundaries, legal boundaries, ethnic boundaries or national boundaries?</b></p>
<p><b>What is politically or morally significant about such boundaries?</b></p>	<p><b>But what is it that is political, or even morally significant about such boundaries?</b> It might be reasonably argued that many, if not most, geographic or political boundaries can be understood as arbitrary in the worst possible way. While they clearly delineate a place (and even here there are many points of contestation – the South China Sea, for example, or Kashmir, for another example), they don’t always very clearly or very cleanly delineate people or groups of people – though some do more generally and some better than others. How these boundaries might have been formed might be of some historical interest and limited political interest as well, but the drawing of lines is on the one hand rather mundane stuff – though on the other hand, the drawing of lines has also often involved oppression and destruction of peoples.</p> <p>What is significant about such boundaries is that they serve to delineate not just peoples, but the states people live in.</p> <p>For his part, Carr is going to want to insist that <b>cultural boundaries matter</b> – but not just any kind of cultural</p>

	<p>boundaries but rather – those <b>normative and conceptual boundaries</b> that give shape to <b>political culture</b>. Thus, <b>the boundaries the political theorist or political philosopher wants to worry about are the boundaries that we erect because of our ideas, understandings, and interpretations of the world and each other.</b></p> <p>If it makes sense to think <b>about cultural boundaries as political boundaries</b>, then perhaps it also makes some sense to think about questions of political legitimacy and justice <b>as involving the question of what kind of political morality gives shape to the political culture.</b></p> <p><b>But let’s return to the boundaries of that entity called the state, for the moment...</b></p>
<p><b>The Modern Nation-State – Territory and Sovereign Authority</b></p>	<p><b>Today, the modern state can be identified as that which delineates one political community from another.</b> It does so by way of something called <b>sovereign authority.</b></p> <p>After the long Thirty Years’ War of the early to mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe and the passing of the heyday of <b>Divine Right</b>, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 established a new understanding of political authority.</p> <p><b>Sovereign authority derived from the way in which states:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Claim a territory and a people as its own, and,</li> <li>b. Claims itself as the ultimate authority over that territory and those people.</li> <li>c. Finally, these claims hold, it is argued against all others (mostly other states, or groups within the state) who might challenge that authority.</li> </ol> <p>Therefore, the notion of sovereignty can be said to establish a kind of <i>de facto authority</i> (as opposed to</p>

morally-legitimate authority) in the state. Together, **sovereign authority can be stated as the legitimate right of a state to command obedience of the political community defined by the state.**

For the Greeks, the state (or city-state) and the **authority** inherent in that state was accepted as **legitimate** regardless of how the boundaries of the state came to be defined – whether by war or by conquest. Since then, the question of authority (the claim of the right to rule) has played a significant role in questions of politics. In particular, the question of **political authority** raises the questions of **political legitimacy** and **political obligation.**

- a. Given that those in sovereign authority claim the right to rule over and command the obedience of those living within the state, **what legitimates that right?** In other words, what **reasons** do we have to suppose that such a claim should be accepted?
- b. If there is reason to think that the claim is fallacious or otherwise faulty, what obligation do the people of the state have to obey?

Combined, the two questions work to raise theoretical questions about how political boundaries are **justified** and why they ought to be respected, but they also raise significant questions about what it means to be a member or a **citizen** of a state and what other considerations go along with that.

**Political Legitimacy:  
Two approaches**

In Polity, we're going to encounter two basic ways of justifying political association – one associated with the social contract tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, and ideas about human nature. (i.e. if human nature, as suggested by our empirical observations is “x” and “x” is

perhaps a less than desirable trait (or morally obnoxious to us) or “x” prevents human beings from living together amicably, then the state may be justified to regulate or suppress those aspects of “x” that are the cause of human conflict.

We can compare this kind of justification for the state with a more modern rationale for why we might give the state our allegiance and accept its authority.

We can think about the question of **political legitimacy** as a question about why states exist and what sorts of things states do.

If it can be suggested that states form for good reasons, and do things that people find useful and valuable, then at least, initially, some **practical or pragmatic** reasons (as opposed to moral reasons) might exist to grant a state our **allegiance and obedience**. To say this is to suggest that states promote certain objectives, create certain conditions, or pursue certain ends that all people should find valuable (regardless of moral persuasion), perhaps because they are also things individuals or groups of persons might have difficulty providing for themselves.

**That is, states, we might claim, solve certain practical problems that people have when it comes to living together.** What are some of these problems?

One traditional way to think about this question – one way political thinkers have thought about this problem, is to imagine how people would live together without the order and stability brought about by the of the state. (This gets into the discussion in Chapter 1 of Polity).

We might suppose such a condition to be less orderly and less stable than a condition in which authority prevails – what we might call a **condition of anarchy**. Anarchy is not all madness and mayhem necessarily, but theorists

	<p>who thought about such a condition, imagined it to be a <b>pre-civil</b> and sometimes a <b>pre-social</b> condition, a state of nature where authority doesn't exist to adjudicate and police conflict, help promote conflict, or help mobilize and organize the resources of society to aid people in the living of their lives. We might certainly see it as a condition of <b>uncertainty</b> and for that reason alone we may see it as something we would like to avoid.</p>
<p><b>Politics, Conflict, Pluralism and Justice</b></p>	<p>In other words, the question of living together necessarily invites the problem of how those lives are lived given that people typically don't always agree about such matters. <b>W/hen disagreement erupts, people need to find some way to adjudicate, or at the very least, learn to live with such disagreement.</b></p> <p>This is the problem of <b>pluralism</b> – the fact that society is comprised of any number of groups, each who have their own <b>comprehensive vision of the good life (that is, the good life, for these groups is shared by normative and ontological understandings that other groups simply may not share – or may even detest and find repugnant)</b>. Free societies might be said to be naturally <i>productive of</i> such diversity and pluralism – regardless, pluralism seems like an existential fact in most of the world – but it is a particular problem for <b>pluralist states</b>.</p> <p><b>The groups who share in these comprehensive visions would like to realize this vision for themselves and members of their group, it also makes sense to worry about the resources or social goods, identified by the group, which would allow them to realize this vision for themselves.</b></p> <p>Such concerns raise the issue of <b>justice</b> – or rather, <b>social justice</b> – the question of how society is organized to preserve whatever values those in the society hold – whether it be liberty or equality, or both. Likewise,</p>

societies are governed according to a set of rules, and most political societies have systems in place to police, adjudicate, and punish those who break the rules of society. We can call this **retributive justice**. Likewise, a part of social justice is what we might call **distributive justice** – the question of how a society distributes the goods or resources of society – things like jobs, education, food, water, heart transplants, leisure, etc.

**It was the question of justice, in fact, which was at the center of Plato’s thinking about politics.** In particular, Plato wondered what the just state was and how it might be created and sustained. And so the question of politics and what that question involves, comes full circle. People want to live good, fulfilling lives, and given that most people in the world attempt to do that within the confines of states, the question of the just and legitimate state retains its central place in the study of politics.

But it is the key concepts of **boundaries, community, sovereignty, authority, legitimacy, obligation, citizen, power, order, liberty, equality, and justice**, that help us move forward in the discussion of what the state should be, what the state should do, how it should be organized, and how it can be constrained in ways that promote justice as opposed to tyranny, oppression and domination.

To make sense of and make judgments about those questions, we need to think first about politics and only then about government. To take up the question of politics is to ask about what ideas or ideals can give shape to a relationship between people and the state which is able to make social life reasonably orderly and peaceful and which can mediate those relationships before they become violent.

**What about government, current**

Nothing much has been said about **government** or about **current events** in this discussion of politics. We’ll have some occasion to discuss these issues on a limited basis.

**events, policy-making?**

For many, what politics is about is simply what happens in government or what is in the news with regards to debates in Washington D.C., or perhaps the politics of state politics, the local school board, or city hall. All of that surely has *something* to do with politics, but in order to have a better idea what those matters have to do with politics, one needs to start the study of politics with some thinking about the foundational themes inherent in any study of politics, one that hopes to answer the timeless questions that continue to inspire thinking about this core human institution. That is, to ask what is politics, is something akin to asking what it means to be a human being living together with other (we want to think) human beings.