The Illusion of Politics

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If the meaning of a word is to be found in its use, then we surely all know the meaning of 'politics'. We use the term constantly. We have an intuitive understanding about what politics is. If we didn't, how would we be able to deploy the term with such self-assurance? How, without understanding the term, would we be able to communicate about shared and contested issues? We discourse constantly about politics, whether in private, or in the media, in our schools and universities, or in our 'political' institutions – and we surely all know which of our institutions are the political ones. If we want to get serious, careers are made in politics. We join political parties, or we become politicians, or we enrol and study in departments of political science, and read and write textbooks on the topic. How could there be a political science if we did not know what politics is? There are journalists and academics who specialise in politics, journals dedicated to politics, distinct associations and conferences for its study, and thousands of books written and published about politics. Historians research the politics of the past. There is a politics industry. There are commercial companies that analyse and provide data on the topic of politics. Media organisations employ many people to produce programmes dedicated to politics and to political analysis, discussion and debate.

Yet the ubiquity of politics is our problem. For politics and the political is so universal that it is difficult to pin it down. Are there any domains of human living that cannot and are not described as being political, as pertaining to politics? If we try to find some definitive use of the terms 'politics' and 'political' by searching through popular and academic books, newspapers, TV representations, or the discourses on politics on the internet, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that everything is politics or political. We can find representations of the politics of abortion, the politics of hunger, church politics, the politics of sectarianism, political Islam, the politics of universities and university departments, the politics of medieval Japan, the politics of the Roman or the Mughal empires, the politics of slavery, the politics of food, class politics, the politics of caste in colonial and contemporary India, the politics of ancient Babylon, the politics of marriage, the politics of Constitutions, and so on. And we surely know that politics is as ancient as the hills. It is frequently claimed that Confucius and Aristotle wrote theories of politics.

Religion and Political Economy

This apparent universality of the political, its lack of boundaries, seems to place a question mark around its semantic content. If we cannot say what is *not* politics, then how can we give any determinate content or meaning to the term? This lack of boundaries can also be seen in the problem of demarcating a domain of politics from other domains such as 'religion' and 'economics'. If we try to find a clear distinction between politics and religion, we find a history of contestation, but one that only seems to go back to the 17 century – a point to which I return in a moment. We find claims that politics and religion have – or ought to have – nothing to do with each other, yet in contemporary discourse we find many references to the politics of religion, and also to the religion of politics.

And when we pursue that kind of enquiry, we come to find that 'religion' has a similar ubiquity as 'politics', for you can find an endless number of discourses on religion with a similar universality. If you research a wide spectrum of texts, as I have done, you can find that 'religion' covers just about everything, in a kind of mirror-image universality.

The term 'political economy' also points us towards this problem of demarcation. Some universities have departments of politics, some have departments of economics, and some have departments of political economy, as if to fudge the issue. How are they distinguished? This is especially perplexing when one finds books written by

specialists on the politics of economics, as well as on the economics of politics. Add in works on the religion of politics and the politics of religion; or the religion of economics and the economics of religion: we seem to have a dog's dinner of categories. You notice these things when you read outside your normal disciplinary boundaries.

Science and Secular

It is also of interest that all of these can and are described as sciences: viz. the science of politics, the science of religion, and the science of economics. We cannot in practice easily if at all distinguish between the categories on which these putative sciences are based. Yet all of them have their own specialist departments, degree courses, journals, associations and conferences. I suggest that these putatively distinct entities are fictions, or modern myths that legitimate a historically-specific order of capitalist power relations based on private ownership.

Another point is that all these 'sciences', based on concepts so difficult to distinguish and demarcate, are 'secular', in the sense of *non-religious*. Describing a science or discipline as secular reminds us that we have another demarcation problem. If all secular practices and institutions are defined as non-religious and therefore in distinction to 'religion', we need to have some reasonably clear understanding about what we mean by religion to be able to make the distinction in the first place. Without such an understanding, how would we know what 'non-religious' means? This paradox is magnified when we consider that for many centuries 'secular' has referred mainly to the 'secular priesthood' in the Catholic Church, and the priesthood is hardly non-religious in the modern sense. And when the medieval monarchy was described as secular, it did not mean non-Christian or 'non-religious'.

Definitions and Circular Meanings

We thus find that in everyday discussions and debates, and also in the more specialist discourses, we deploy concepts with a largely unquestioned confidence that on further consideration seems unfounded. Speaking personally, I entered academic work through religious studies, also known as the science (or scientific study) of religion, the history of religions, or the plain study of religions. Yet I cannot tell you what religion is, or what the relation between (singular) religion and (plural) religions is. I have made it a point over many years of tracking down a wide range of definitions of religion, and found them to be contradictory and circular. There is no agreed definition of the subject that so many experts claim to be researching and writing about. I suggest this is the situation in politics as well. Attempts that I have read to define politics, for example in textbooks written for students of politics, seem always to be circular in the sense that they define politics in terms of political attributes, just as religions are defined in terms of religious attributes. Attributes are political if they belong in political systems, and attributes are religious if they belong in religious systems.

I suggest that the perceived self-evidence of politics as a meaningful category derives from an inherent ambiguity – and in this it is a mirror-image to religion. On the one hand, the term 'politics' generally simply means 'power' or 'contestations of power', and since power is probably one of the few universals in human relations we can see why it might appear intuitively convincing. However, on that understanding, it is difficult to see what is *not* about politics, because it can surely be argued that all human relations have always been about contestations of power. We gain such ubiquity at the expense of meaning. Surely, political science has a more specific and determinate meaning than power studies?

Locke and the Politics-Religion Binary

Our sense that there is a more determinate nuance seems justified when we discover that the term 'politics' has a specific genesis in the English language in the 17th century. Though we can find a few (probably very few) references to 'politicians' in Elizabethan drama, 'politics' is even rarer, and it is difficult to find a sustained discourse on politics as a distinct domain of human action earlier than John Locke's late-17th century distinctions, developed in his *Treatises on Government*, between 'man in the state of nature' and 'political society'. Here Locke explicitly distinguishes between man in the state of nature and political society on the one hand; and also between politics and religion on the other. In his religion-politics binary, Locke links politics to the outer, public order of the magistrate and governance, and religion to the inner, private relation of the individual to God. (What he means by 'god' is itself a

conundrum, for the evidence is that, like Newton, he was a heretic, either a Unitarian or a Socinian. 'God' is another of those endlessly contested categories. If you try to define 'religion' as 'belief in god', you find yourself in another infinite regress of contested meanings).

It seems significant that this politics-religion binary is a modern, Enlightenment one, because Locke was arguing *against* the dominant understanding of religion at the time. For his own reasons he wanted to reimagine 'religion'. When the term religion was used at all (rarer than today) it meant Christian truth, and there was no clear sense (despite Locke's claims) that Christian truth was not about power, or that it was separated from governance. Religion in the late medieval understanding encompassed all domains of rational living and legitimated a fixed order of hierarchy. There was no separation between 'religion' and 'politics'. The anointed monarch was the sacred head and heart of the Christian Commonwealth, and one could not be 'neutral' towards religion in that sense. What fell outside religion in this dominant sense of Christian truth was not a neutral *non-religious* domain but pagan irrationality and barbarity. Only within the fixed, hierarchical order of the medieval Christian Commonwealth was a rational life offering salvation possible.

In other words, what fell *outside* religion in the dominant sense of his day was not a neutral, universal domain of scientific empirical reason to which Locke was an important contributor, but was still defined theologically and biblically in terms of an anarchic absence of Christian truth, a threat to the totalizing order of God's revelation. Locke was a non-Conformist Protestant, a man of science, and a big investor in land in the New World, particularly Carolina. He rejected the hierarchical, encompassing medieval Christian Commonwealth, in which rights, such as ownership of land, were determined by birth, and which culminated at its apex in the supreme power of the Christian monarch. His privatization of religion implied a private right to land ownership defended by the contractual principles of government. It involved a new concept of free and equal Individuals, and by implication a new concept of markets in land and labour, freed from the controls of the fixed, medieval order. Locke attempted to make way for a public domain of liberty and equality, which he called political society. Locke claimed that he was restoring an original, God-given state of natural rights and reason that had been buried for centuries beneath the distorted doctrines of the established Churches.

Politics, Private property, and Representation

It was especially in his attempt to legitimate new concepts of private property, and the rights of property owners to representation, that Locke needed to completely revise people's understanding of 'religion' and to represent it as a private affair of the inner man (women were not much in the picture), in order to demarcate an essentially different public domain called political society. This new binary found its way into written Constitutions in North America, and is now naturalised in common speech and common sense. Today it seems counter-intuitive to question the reality of politics as a distinct domain of human practice. But his rhetorical construction was deeply resisted. Even the French Revolution did not succeed in formally separating religion (meaning the Catholic Church) and the state until the end of the 19th century. England was an Anglican confessional state until well into the 19th century.

Locke's formulation was thoroughly ideological and had an elective affinity with the growing power of a new merchant class with new opportunities in colonial trade and possessions. This class wanted freedom to accumulate capital and thus freedom from the established ranking of the traditional Christian Commonwealth. Interests in plantations, slavery and the 'empty' lands of North America were a significant part of this new world of opportunities for rational, self-maximising Individuals. Locke's philosophical writings provided the basis for a modern liberal capitalist ideology and a concept of the state as based on contract. This *imaginaire*, arguably as much an invented myth as the medieval Christian ideology of order that it has come to replace, has become naturalised through repeated rhetorical construction until now it seems to be 'in the nature of things'.

I suggest that, whenever we use the term politics with intuitive ease we catch ourselves and ask, in what sense am I using the term? Am I using it in the universal sense of ubiquitous power and contestations of power in all human relations? Or as referring to a specific ideological formation of modernity underpinning a historically-emergent form of private property-ownership and representation of (male) property interests? The elided slippage between the historically and ideologically specific formulation, and the empty ubiquity of 'power' as a universal in all human

relations, lends the term its illusory quality of intuitive common sense.

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