WHAT IS POLITICS? Towards an ‘understandable’ and ‘acceptable’ meaning

Politics, politika in the language of contemporary Ilokano, Ibaloi, Tagalog and other Filipinos, traces its roots from

\[\text{politic (adj.)} \text{ modeled on Aristotle's } \text{ta politika} \text{ --"affairs of state," from politique (Middle French 14c.) "political," from Latin politicus "of citizens or the state, civil, civic," from Greek politkos "of citizens or the state," from polites "citizen," from polis "city." (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2012)}\]

In day-to-day conversations among different groups of people (i.e., teachers, students, bystanders, public utility vehicle drivers, some Igorot elders, religious sects, etc.), the usage of the term ‘politika’ may mean many things. Perhaps you have heard, read, or might have uttered, ‘narugit ti politika’ or ‘marumi ang politika’ (lit. translation: politics is dirty). Is it so? Or are you (and maybe most of us) referring to politico or politicians (like the senator, governor, barangay captain) who might have been rumored to be corrupt, or involved in bribery, or masterminded the killing of a political rival, or amassed unimaginable amount of money from illegal activities? Hence, we may ask: “Is politika or politiko dirty?”

If you have heard some elders in your community conversing during wakes or delivering some kind of talk (“bilin”—advice) during weddings, you might have overheard comments like: “Nalaing sisya ay manpolitika” (lit. translation: He’s good at politics); “Politiha kari etan a esel” (lit. translation: That talk is politics). Is the term ‘politics’ as used in this context the same in meaning as used in the preceding paragraph above? Here is a simple story narrated to me by my brother:

\[\text{Nunta kasal nen Margie chi ili tayo, kaman-istorya era sot enkedahay. Kuwan nu sahey, ‘En-aharak koma niman a davi nem man- nepnep met!’ Sebat nu karait to: ‘Sing to?Eg met man-uchan. Eg met mannikis pay? Ebayyag a ninemmemnem cha no nganto e piyan na esden no inkawan da nu pilmiron nan-asel. I piyan ton esden gayam, ‘angken eg da en-ahad tep paramay regla nen kadwya to.’ Kuwanet nu mantet-tetneng: Ara! Politihya gayam etan. (lit. translation: During the wedding of Margie in our hometown, a group of elders were telling stories. An old man said: ‘I would like to go home but there is a heavy downpour.’ Surprised, his companions reacted: ‘How can that be? It is not raining. It’s not even drizzling.’ It took a while for the other elders to understand what the old man meant by his statement. What the old man was trying to convey is that, ‘there is no sense of going home because his wife is menstruating.’ Those listening to the conversation of the old men commented: ‘Ara![expr.] That [talk] was all politics. ) (J. Sagandoy, personal communication, June 10, 2012)}\]

So, which politics then are we attempting to understand? Is it the politics in the context of the phrase, “narugit ti politika” or the politics in the comment, “Ara! Politihya gayam etan.”

For sure, politics is not new to many of us. Perhaps, some of you are indifferent to politics because it is something not interesting. Certainly, others may argue that politics is not their cup of tea. Now, if you detest being with politicians because of the popular image that they project (i.e., liars, greedy, corrupt, having no conscience), you are not alone. Here is a story of a former barangay captain who, after serving one term, decided not to be re-elected despite the prodding of his constituents.
There’s one barangay captain who said that he no longer wanted to be reelected because of things that people say against him. For instance, one day, after receiving his honorarium, he went to buy milk fish and cooked it. While he was frying the fish, someone incidentally passed by [his house]. The passerby commented: ‘Umm, the Kapitan’s viand smells good. That’s his pilferage.’ Although the Kapitan was not irked by what he heard, he realized that people have a bad notion about politicians. Hence, when his term was over, even if his friends were persuading him to go for reelection, he decided not to run for office again. He claimed that it is better to work as contractor of some projects so people would not think that he is stealing the community’s money [taxes]. (J. Sagandoy, personal communication, June 10, 2012)

Politics, indeed, elicits varied opinions among varied groups. From Aristotle, a Greek philosopher who wrote the book(s) *Politics* to the very ordinary man on the streets, ‘politics’ has evolved in its usage and meaning.

At this point, I would like to present selected ideas (definitions or descriptions) of politics, which might expand our understanding of the term. Let us start with Aristotle.

Aristotle did not write a dictionary definition of the term politics, but his exposition of the *polis* (Greek word for city from which we come up with terms like politics or policy) in his book *Politics* gives us an idea of how politics work.

*It is clear that all partnerships aim at some good, and that the partnership that is most authoritative of all and embraces all the others does so particularly, and aims at the most authoritative good of all. This is what is called the city or the political partnership.* (Aristotle, c. 350 B.C.E./1984, p. 35-37)

The partnership arising from [the union of] several villages that is complete is the city. It reaches a level of full self-sufficiency, so to speak; and while coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well. Every city, therefore, exists by nature... and that man is by nature a political animal. He who is without a city through nature rather than chance is either a mean sort (beast) or superior to man (god)...That man is much more than a political animal than any kind of bee or herd of animal is clear...and man alone among the animals has speech...For it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and other things; and partnership in these things is what makes a household and a city...That the city is both by nature and prior to each individual, then, is clear. For if the individual when separated [from it] is not self-sufficient... One who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god. (Aristotle, c. 350 B.C.E./1984, p. 35-37)

It is interesting to note that Aristotle’s *polis* goes beyond our common understanding of what a city is (e.g. Baguio City). Perhaps, when you think of a city, you imagine of tall buildings, crowded markets, entertainment, concrete roads, cars of many sorts. But have you thought of a city as “partnership between and among interdependent individuals”? Such partnership, Aristotle cleverly explains, is made possible because of the nature of man to be “a political animal”—someone who, endowed with reason and speech, participates with
the affairs of the city. By reason of the necessity “to live well,” the villages enter into a partnership, which in turn, propels the city to be “self-sufficient” in want and needs.

Aristotle would further expand the understanding of what the polis is by saying: “a state [city] is composite, like any other whole made up of many parts; these are the citizens [polites], who compose it.” A citizen, Aristotle defined, possesses a special characteristic, that is, “he shares in the administration of justice, and in offices.” (c. 350 B.C.E./2009)

He further writes:

*He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be citizens of that state; and, speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life.* (Aristotle, c. 350 B.C.E./2009, Book III, Part I, par. 3)

To be sure, Aristotle qualified that the citizen he was defining is:

*best adapted to the citizen of a democracy[government of the many]; but not necessarily to other states. For in some states the people are not acknowledged, nor have they any regular assembly, but only extraordinary ones; and suits are distributed by sections among the magistrates.* (Aristotle, c. 350 B.C.E./2009, Book III, Part I, par. 2)

The key idea in being a citizen is ‘participation’ and in the days of the old Athenians, this was direct participation in the general assembly, in which a citizen was accorded the right to express his ideas through open speech and in which, he too, exercised his right to choose. Initially, we could then say that ‘politics is participation’.

The next idea that I would like to present comes from Bernard Crick (1962). Citing Aristotle’s political thoughts, Crick wrote:

*Politics, then, can be simply defined as the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community... The political process [of conciliation] is not tied to any particular doctrine. Genuine political doctrines, rather, are the attempt to find particular and workable solutions to this perpetual and shifty problem of conciliation.* (p. 17)

The key word in the preceding paragraph is the ‘activity’ of ‘conciliation’. Of course, for conciliation to take place there must be some kind of diversity, of plurality, of differences regarding how the world works. The end of conciliation, Crick implies, is not to be of one mind, rather it is for the continuity or survival of the whole community. The activity of conciliation, which is politics, Crick further expounds:

*is a process of discussion, and discussion demands, in the original Greek sense, dialectic. For discussion to be genuine and fruitful when something is maintained, the opposite or some contrary case must be considered or better maintained by someone who believes it.* (p. 28)

Crick argues that “politics is a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence.” It is through politics that free men are given the freedom to act. Without politics, Crick contends, there is no freedom. Crick reiterates:
Politics is simply when they [differing interests] are conciliated—the solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence or coercion, and chooses it as an effective way by which varying interests can discover that level of compromise best suited to their common interest in survival. Politics allows various types of power within a community to find some reasonable level of mutual tolerance and support. (p. 25)

The third idea on politics emanates from Harold Dwight Laswell who, in 1936, wrote a book titled 'Politics: Who Gets What, When, How'—“a work whose title later served as the standard lay definition of politics” (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2012). Laswell, in his the opening chapter of the book, contends that “politics is the study of influence and the influential; the influential are those who get the most of what is there to get.”

The ‘who’ in the book’s title refers to the ‘elite’—who gets the most and ‘mass’—who gets the rest. ‘What’ (is there to get) may refer to available values—classified as deference, income, safety. Available values may also be divided according to ‘skill, class, personality, attitude’. ‘When and how’ refer to the situations and methods involved in the getting and perhaps, maintaining of available values.

Rephrasing Laswell’s ‘politics’ for today’s consumption, Dye (2002) defined politics as “deciding ‘who gets what, when, and how.’ It is an activity by which people try to get more of whatever there is to get—money, prestige, jobs, respect, sex, even power itself.” Dye further expounds:

The who are the participants in politics—voters, special-interest groups, political parties, television and the press, corporations and labor unions, lawyers and lobbyists, foundations and think tanks, and both elected and appointed government officials, including members of Congress, the president and vice president, judges, prosecutors, and bureaucrats. The what of politics are public policies—the decisions that governments make concerning social welfare, health care, education, national defense, law enforcement, the environment, taxation, and thousands of other issues that come before governments. The when and how are the political process—campaigns and elections, political reporting in the news media, television debates, fund raising, lobbying, decision making in... executive agencies, and decision making in the courts. (p. 3)

To encapsulate what politics is all about, let me present texts lifted from Heywood’s (2007) ‘Politics’. The author defines politics as: (1) the art of government; (2) public affairs; (3) compromise and consensus; and, (4) power.

As the art of government, politics is “the exercise of control within society through the making and enforcement of collective decisions.” As such, “to study politics is in essence to study government, or, more broadly, to study the exercise of authority.” US political scientist David Easton (1979, 1981 as cited by Heywood) contends that “politics encompasses the various processes through which government responds to pressures from the larger society, in particular by allocating benefits, rewards or penalties.” This view of politics, Heywood writes, “offers a highly restricted view of politics,” hence:

Politics is therefore practiced in cabinet rooms, legislative chambers, government departments and the like, and it is engaged in by a limited and specific group of people, notably politicians, civil servants and lobbyists. This means that most people, most institutions and most social activities can be regarded
as being ‘outside’ politics. Businesses, schools and other educational institutions, community groups, families and so on are in this sense ‘nonpolitical’.” (p. 5)

Essentially, therefore, the view of politics as art of government excludes people who are “out” of the government offices and agencies. This view of politics might even be reduced to “party politics”—“restricted to those state actors who are consciously motivated by ideological beliefs, and who seek to advance them through membership of a formal organization such as a political party.”

As public affairs, politics points to “the division between an essentially public sphere of life and what can be thought of as a private sphere.” This view of politics coincides with the notion of ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ as mentioned in politics as art of government. The table below might help us better understand the public-private divide.

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<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The State</strong>: apparatus of government</td>
<td><strong>Civil Society</strong>: autonomous bodies like businesses, trade unions, clubs, families, and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public realm</strong>: politics, commerce, work, art, culture, and so on</td>
<td><strong>Personal realm</strong>: family and domestic life</td>
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Politics as public affairs, Hannah Arendt (1958 as cited by Heywood) argued, “is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction amongst free and equal citizens. It thus gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual.” Arendt’s view; however, is in contrast with by liberal theorists (thinkers who are against ‘political interference’ in private lives). Such liberal theorists prefer civil society over the State on the reason that “private life is a realm of choice, personal freedom and individual responsibility,” hence, they “attempt to narrow the realm of ‘the political’, commonly expressed as the wish to ‘keep politics out of’ private activities such as business, sport and family life.”

Politics as compromise and consensus sees politics “as a particular means of resolving conflict: that is, by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force and naked power.” This view of politics is advanced by Crick (see pages 3-4). To reiterate, this view of politics “is based on resolute faith in the efficacy of debate and discussion, as well as on the belief that society is characterized by consensus rather than by irreconcilable conflict.” Critics, however, say that Crick’s view applies mostly to “western pluralist democracies: in effect, he equated politics with electoral choice and party competition.” Obviously, Crick’s view is not much of help when we try to understand “one-party states or military regimes.”

Politics as power is “both the broadest and the most radical. Rather than confining politics to a particular sphere (the government, the state or the ‘public’ realm) this view sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence.” Adrian Leftwich (2004 as cited by Heywood) says that:

‘politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies’. In this sense, politics takes place at every level of social interaction; it can be found within families and amongst small groups of friends just as much as amongst nations and on the global stage. (p. 10)
Politics as power is emphasized in Laswell’s exposition of politics (see page 4). Heywood, expounding Laswell’s ideas, writes:

*From this perspective, politics is about diversity and conflict, but the essential ingredient is the existence of scarcity: the simple fact that, while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. Politics can therefore be seen as a struggle over scarce resources, and power can be seen as the means through which this struggle is conducted.* (p. 11)

It might be said that politics as power is at the heart of Feminist and Marxist political thoughts. Among feminist circles, Heywood argues, politics has become all too important because traditionally, women have been ‘political outcasts’ in the past. Hence, we often hear and see feminists “fight” or “struggle” with the male-dominated arena of politics. Marxists, on the other hand, conventionally viewed politics as the apparatus of the capitalist state to oppress; hence, the need to “struggle” for power.

References:


*Suggested Reading [foundational politics]:*