The Idea of the Political:
Boundary, significance, agency

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The observation that there is no consensus among scholars on what is entailed by the domain of the political[1] is a measure not of the inadequate attention paid by these scholars to the task of defining the terrain, of identifying what is to be included and what excluded,[2] but is instead a reflection of the wider matrix of human life. This latter viewpoint sees the controversy as the product of a 'word' in which has been invested the hopes, aspirations, frustrations, and beliefs of individuals, groups, classes, and nations.[3]

It is also a recognition of the changing nature of political discourse where, for example, a different emphasis is placed on the word in different historical periods. During Classical Greece, for example, political discourse was largely philosophical while during the Roman period it was largely legal. In the current period the emphasis has been on the explanatory and the scientific. The controversy on what the word entails is hence vibrant and many layered since the social and linguistic space that the word occupies has to be controlled because it is through such control that the world can be fashioned. The word political is hence a political word.

To discuss the 'idea of the political', this paper will be divided into three sections. The first section will look at the idea of a 'boundary' which separates the political from the non-political, a separation which constitutes the first stage in the subsequent exercise of inclusion and exclusion. The second section will discuss the relationship between the activity of ascribing 'significance' and the word political. It will be argued that looking at the idea of significance will help us map the topography of the word. The third section will look at the aspect of 'agency' and the political. Here the question of the extent of the agent's involvement, seen in terms either of support or opposition to things considered political, will be addressed.

'Boundary' and the political

Rather than use this article to make my own substantive statement on

what the word political entails, as is the general expectation when one ventures into this debate today, I shall, indeed, be a little old-fashioned and attempt the traditional exercise of unpacking the word to see what it contains. I expect that in the unpacking I will be able to locate general clues, of a formal kind, which show what is common between the various conceptions of the political. This clarificatory exercise is prompted by my impression that in the current discourse there are too many entities being described as political and that this multitude of descriptions has resulted in considerable confusion about the domain of the political. This, I believe, involves as much of an engagement with the big issues as does the substantive statement on the political but since it is at the metatheoretical level its involvement is not so easily recognized.

The first point to be noted here is the distinction between the words 'political' and 'politics'. The former is an adjective, whereas the latter is a noun. I shall discuss only the former since the concern, in this issue of the journal, is primarily with the former. As an adjective it is derived from the noun but like all adjectives it has only a dependent or qualifying status or existence.[4] A brief survey of the Encylopedias of political institutions and political thought,[5] shows that there is no entry with only the word 'political'. The first entry, for example, is 'political attitudes' showing the adjective followed by a noun. It continues in similar fashion through a list of entries where the adjective 'political' is used to qualify a string of nouns such as behaviour, communication, institution, power, rhetoric, parties, etc. Common to all the nouns is the adjective 'political' suggesting that all of them have a common quality or property.

Further, while the adjective 'political' is used with a large variety of nouns from different domains of life, for example, a political novel, a political dress, a political gesture, a political institution, a political relationship, etc., it is not, and cannot be, used with any and all nouns. You cannot, for example, have a 'political sky', or a 'political train' (you could have a political name for a train such as the August Kranti Rajdhani) or a 'political computer'. If some nouns, therefore, merit the qualifier and others do not then there is some property or quality specific to the noun that merits the adjective, a property which the others do not have. The existence of this 'property of the political' suggests the existence of a boundary.

It is apparent from the foregoing that all the nouns within the boundary possess the property of being 'political' which those outside the boundary do not have. Of those inside, some have 'more' of the property while others have 'less'. Those nouns which have 'more' belong

to certain domains of life, e.g., press, parliament, etc., whereas those which have 'less' belong to other domains, e.g., family, sport, etc. There is therefore a continuum along which nouns can be located with one end of the continuum being 'less' political and the other being 'more' political. The existence of this continuum is agent dependent, in that it is linked to the beliefs and biography of the agent, who could be either an individual, group, community, or nation. Boundaries change with context for one agent in different periods, for different agents in the same period. An examination of the constitution of the continuum, in terms of the discourse of the agent, would show that the 'political' nouns cluster around certain domains with some clusters again being considered more political and others being considered less.

Further, while in principle there is widespread agreement amongst those involved in the debate on the idea of the political, about the existence of a boundary which separates the political from the non-political, there is considerable disagreement about where that boundary should be and what specifically should be included and excluded. Similarly, on the question of clusters, there is disagreement about where on the continuum to locate certain nouns. Should they be towards the 'more' end or towards the 'less' end? There is even disagreement on whether it is valid to talk of clusters at all, an argument that can be derived from the post-Modernists who regard all nouns as having a unique political identity.[6] What can be retrieved, however, from this debate on the ontology of the 'political', which has the potential of sliding down the slippery slope of relativism, is that a boundary exists which separates the political from the non-political. This separation becomes possible because of the 'property of the political'.

The above recognition, that any discussion of the 'boundary' is accompanied by disagreement, shows that the adjective 'political' has a dual ontological status.[7] It has both an empirical connotation, in that it refers to a set of relations which have consequences that are empirically testable, and it has normative overtones in that it considers these relations and these consequences significant. From the standpoint of some normative principles, which all political theories have,[8] these relations and consequences are regarded as either commendable or condemnable, as those needing to be endorsed or decried. These contrasting judgements stem from the different conceptions of the 'good society' that underlie the various theories.[9] Much of the controversy about the word political stems from this dual ontological status. I shall discuss this in more detail in section three when I look at the relation

between 'agency and the political'.

As regards the normative aspect, the contestation is understandable, since, beyond a point, there can be no resolution of the dispute between God and the Devil.[10] As regards the empirical aspect, however, greater agreement than at the normative level is possible, since settling the disputes requires the presentation of evidence in favour or opposition of the hypothesis under review. If still there is disagreement, in other words, if the limits to full agreement still exist, it is because of the theory impregnatedness of this evidence. Starting from the pre-analytic insight that governs the selection of hypothesis, to the subsequent interpretation of data collected, theory plays a role. Here again the question of 'significance' assumes significance.

'Significance' and the political

The ascription of significance to a word or an activity, to a noun, therefore, has both a 'weak' and a 'strong' provenance. The weak sense concerns the theory impregnation of all data, either at the level of the framing of hypothesis or at the level of the interpretation of data. The strong sense refers to the agent's fixing of himself or herself with respect to the other objects in the world, to the constitution of identity and the construction of meaning within which agency will occur.[11] Therefore, the willingness to ascribe is related again to the agent's conception of significance, seen in terms of either relations or of consequences. Individuals, groups, communities, nations, ascribe significance to nouns, depending on their respective *weltanschuuang*. This varied basis of ascription, since *weltanschuuangs* differ, provides the site for the contest in the public discourse over the word political.

The 'ascription of significance' is hence an important point of entry for those who wish to explain why some nouns merit the adjective political, while others do not. The exercise of investigating why and how such ascription is done leads me to the entangled world of meanings. It is like falling through the well in *Alice in Wonderland* to discover a magical world where things are not what they seem to be, where there is a relativism of meanings and motivations, and where the fixity of one set of meanings and motivations has a limited longevity and is soon replaced by another set.

The world of meaning is a shadowy world, since it has many sources in the life of the agent. These range over many domains from physiology to culture, from personal biography to social context. Individual and

collective histories play a part, in some a bit part in others the lead role. The world of meaning is a fascinating world whose understanding would require one to journey through different terrains. Examining these would help us explain, perhaps to a limited extent, how agents relate to a world in flux, how they replace one set of meanings by another. It would require a certain view of reality.[12] Exploring the moment of replacement would show us that there is a time when the meanings of one set assume greater importance for the agent than the meaning of another. There is in this flux and perhaps because of it a phase of ascendency and a phase of decline of sets of meaning, a point at which one form of recommended agency yields to another because the recommendation changes. This point of transition I call the *threshold point.*

For the sake of illustration let us assume that an agent has to choose between two ethical codes, a utilitarian calculus and an ethical imperative. While the choices of most agents are based on a combination of the two ethical codes, there is a point, the *threshold point*, at which those discussions which began as an ethical imperative change into ones based on an utilitarian calculus and vice-versa. This threshold point, which is not adequately appreciated by theorists of social action, is the point at which sticking to the original decision, as in the case of the ethical imperative, is felt by the agent to be too costly in terms of the violence that the obstinate adherence to the value initially chosen does to other fundamental values. In the case of the utilitarian calculus the threshold point is the point at which the strategy of repeated calculation is seen as entailing a loss of self-respect especially since the periodic changes in decision, which the utilitarian calculus entails, results in a feeling of anomie. This is because the absence of a fixed ethical code deprives the agent of a frame of reference from which to define his position in relation to the world. The agent in this latter case feels compelled, by the repeated compromises, to say 'this is where I stand, I can go no further'. The *threshold point* is, therefore, in the final analysis, dependent on the personality of the agent.[13]

'Agency' and the political

While the discussion has, in a somewhat disembodied manner, so far attempted to delineate the topography of the 'political' the discussion henceforth will attempt to show how the ideas of 'boundary' and 'significance' translate into 'agency'. In the preceding discussion I had suggested how and why agents, whether these be individuals, groups,

communities, or nations, invest their beliefs, hopes, expectations, frustrations, and incompetencies in the word political. The word as a result of this investment serves as one of the many spectacles with which agents see the world, with which they plot their own current positions and their subsequent trajectory in relation to this world. Their agency, their choices and decisions, judgements and preferences, emerge from this perception.[14] This domain of agency has aspects of both acceptance and resistance, endorsement and critique, preservation and transformation.

Which brings me back to my earlier discussion of the dual ontological status of the word political. Just as in the case of the word 'social' the word 'political' implies that the nouns to which it is attached are the product of human agency and hence, since these relations and consequences are created, they can be reversed. The important question for agents is, should these relations and consequences be reversed? The different responses show the different politics of the agents. While I recognize that the word has both an empirical and a normative connotation I shall, in this section, limit myself only to the normative connotation.

This normative connotation is what serves as the basis for the commendation or condemnation that we associate with certain nouns, of why we consider certain relations and consequences desirable and others despicable. In arriving at this judgement the agent asks four questions: (i) what is the nature of the relations and consequences? (ii) where do their causes lie? (iii) can they be changed and reversed? and (iv) should they be changed or reversed?

Assuming that there is no difficulty in answering the first three questions we find that we need to pause at the fourth, since it requires us to judge, to measure the world against our picture of that we would like to live in, a condition that Rawls places on any advocacy of a fair and just society. This activity of measurement and judgement finds the agent creating two groups of political nouns, those that require the agent to intervene and change the world, to make the relations and consequences more consistent with the model of a just and fair society, and those that only entail judgement without intervention. This categorization of nouns into two groups of the political, those that require an active response from the agent and those that require only a passive recognition of the existence of these relations and consequences, leads one to make a tautological statement that 'what an agent considers to be political will be determined by the politics of the agent'.

This can be explained best by a simple illustration. Take the case of

wage differentials in a society. These are considered political in the sense that they are the products of human agency and hence can be altered or retained depending on the social choice that is made. Assume that in any society four distinct, mutually exclusive, sets of wage differentials A, B, C, D, can be sustained by the economy of that society. Differential A has a ratio of 1 : 100 between the lowest wage and the highest. Differential B is 1 : 75. Differential C is 1:50 and differential D is 1:25. It is further argued that the higher the level of differential the higher the incentive to produce. It is also argued that the higher the level of differential the higher the level of greed. From the four options available, the option the agent will choose will, therefore, depend on the trade-offs between growth, incentive, and greed that the agent regards as satisfying his/her own conception of a just society. I have introduced the aspect of greed to illustrate that the agent, in addition to having to make choices with respect to distribution of resources and equity, also has to make choices with respect to lifestyles. Hence the complication of choice.

While all four options are political some are more political than the others. This depends on which one the agent considers most significant. While the equality of wages may be more important to some agents, even if it results in a disincentive to work, incentive to produce may be more important to others, even if this leads to greater inequality. Further, the agent may consider it necessary to resist a high wage differential, because of his/her aversion to the greed that it produces, but may accept a lower wage diferential (but a differential none-the-less) even though equality is a consideration, because of the recognition that incentives are necessary for productive work. To choose, therefore, the agent has to establish a boundary of significance. This is the domain of the political.

NOTES

1. Waldo, D., Tradition, Discipline, Profession, Science, Enterprise: Scope and Theory', in F.I. Greenstein and N.W. Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science*, vol 1 (Mass.: Addison Wesley).

2. This suggestion of 'inadequate attention' can be derived from the *NOTE* circulated by the editor of 'The Idea of the Political'.

3. The recent debates in gender, culture, or even environment studies, for example, is reflective of this investment made by different agents. While the protagonists or antagonists may not explicitly recognize, or even concede, that their disagreement is based on their contrasting notions of what is political, this is so as will become apparent when their respective positions are subject to critical scrutiny.

4. Even though adjectives may, in fact, have had their origins in certain nouns, over

time, they acquire an independent status and sometimes even develop a trajectory at variance with the noun. The case of the noun 'community' is a good illustration. Because of the experiences of contemporary Indian politics, where there have been many instances of violent conflict between communities, the adjectival form more in use in political discourse is 'communal', which has a distinct negative connotation in the Indian context, as distinct from the adjective 'communitarian' which has a more positive connotation in the Western context. I am grateful to Alito Siquiera for alerting me to this additional distinction.

5. Bogdanor, V. (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Institutions* (Oxford: Blackwell); Miller, D. (*et al*), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell).

6. This is the suggestion that I have derived from the discussion of post-Modernism by G. Mahajan. 'Reconsidering Post-Modernism: What is new in the old lamp', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Jan. 28, 1995, pp. 45-52.

7. Bernard Williams makes a similar point with respect to the idea of equality when he states that 'the idea of equality is used in political discussion both in statements of fact, or what purport to be statements of fact – that men are equal – and in statements of political principles or aims – that men should be equal, as at present they are not. B. Williams, 'The Idea of Equality', in P. Laslett and W.G. Runciman (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, second series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), p. 110.

8. deSouza, P.R., 'Science, Values, and Democratic Theory', in G. Hermet and H. Trinadade (eds), *The Paradoxes of Democracy* (New Delhi: Gian). In this article I demonstrate how all political theories have underlying them a conception of the good society, which is the basis for the contestation since there are many conceptions of the 'good society'.

9. Arblaster, A. and S. Lukes (eds), *The Good Society: a Book of Readings* (London: Methuen, 1971).

10. Arato, A., 'The Neo-Idealist Defense of Subjectivity' in *Telos*, no 21, pp. 108-61.

11. Taylor, C., 'What is Human Agency?' in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 15-44.

12. The insights of William James seem particularly valuable here. His view will be presented at some length because of the elegence of the statement.

> Reality ... means simply relation to our emotional and active life. The origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real. To call a thing real means that this thing stands in a certain relation to ourselves.

'The word "real" is, in short, a fringe.' Our primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived, as long as it remains uncontradicted. But there are several, probably an infinite number of various orders of, realities, each with its own special and separate style of existence. James calls them 'sub-universe'... The popular mind conceives of all these sub-worlds more or less disconnectedly; and when dealing with one of them forgets for the time being its relations to the rest. But every object we think of is at last referred to one of these subworlds. "Each world whilst it is attended to is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention. Schuetz, A 'On Multiple Realities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol 5, 1945, p. 533.

13. deSouza, P.R., 'The Church and Politics in Goa: Utilitarian Calculus or Ethical Imperative', *Social Action*, vol 44, Jan-Mar 1994, p. 101.

14. How is this investment of hopes, beliefs, etc. done would require a separate study in psychology which I cannot undertake here. It would, I expect, show the uniqueness of the process of endowment in the case of each agent.