FORMS AND MODELS OF GOVERNMENT

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Keywords: Aristocracy, Capitalism, Communism, Constitutionalism, Democracy, Interventionist State, Liberalism, Minimal State, Modernity, Monarchy, Oligarchy, Polity, Process-oriented politics, Republicanism, Social contract, Socialism, Timocracy, Tyranny, Utilitarianism.

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Summary

Persisting definitions of regime "types" are found in the writings of the ancient Greek thinkers. Plato and Aristotle spoke of democracy, of oligarchy, of aristocracy, of tyranny. What they meant when they used these words is similar to the meanings that we give to them. However, their judgment, their approval or disapproval, is different from contemporary responses. "Democracy", in spite of its various theoretical and practical forms, is today the unchallenged term of approbation and approval for any government. However, it receives approval not because it is the most "just" form of government. At the beginning of the third millennium, government is measured not by its ability to direct society towards a grand design, a community goal. Today, the ideal of politics is that of "process" rather than "goals", with the governmental system being judged according to its ability to allow individuals in society to pursue private ends. This typifies the "liberal" view of the world. On the other hand, the rule of the few, "oligarchy", is ever present. Under the cloak of a democratic vocabulary, oligarchical domination, and resistance to it, is a perpetual theme in all regimes, in societies of unequal individuals, and in a world of unequal societies.

1. Introduction

In its broadest sense, government is institutionalized authority, organized to direct the larger society towards goals devised by the political actors. This perspective has many implications, four of which must ever be borne in mind.

(a) If, as Robert Michels argued, all organizations produce "oligarchy", then all government is the domination of society by an elite, even those called "democratic." In consequence, one might abandon all other models of government except the

"necessary" oligarchy. This need not be passive acceptance of domination. One can take the position of that radical supporter of the American and French Revolutions of the eighteenth century, Tom Paine, who defined government, even at its best, as a necessary evil—the necessary rule of the many by the few, in order to establish stability in society. As such, government must ever be controlled by constitutional arrangements and the vigilance of the citizens. Other advocates of freedom have insisted upon a rejection of all models of government. This position is usually called "anarchist", meaning that there should be no rulers; and it rejects all government, with the possible exception of direct democracy. Government here is seen to be a problem rather than a solution. The contemporary American anarchist and self-styled "social ecologist", Murray Bookchin, is one example of the view. In the context of the global ecological crises, Bookchin argues that the socioeconomic and political structures of modern States, whatever their supposed differences, must all be destroyed and replaced by a "direct democracy" of non-hierarchical socialist communities. However, whether or not we choose to accept the inequality which is associated with government, we must acknowledge the constructs of power, which are found in varying degrees in all States past and present, under whatever names and claims with which they choose to associate themselves (see *Power Structures, Anarchism, Ecologism*).

(b) Governments do not exist in isolation from the societies over which they rule, and from which they claim obedience. The values and beliefs of the larger society will condition the character of government and its purposes. This was seen as early as the fifth century BCE, by Plato. In his *Republic* he sought to show that the character of the government of a state would reflect the moral character of the society—the mixture of "rational", "spiritive" and "appetitive" elements in the souls of the population. In more modern terminology, the "political culture" of a society, the generally accepted attitudes of the bulk of the population concerning the character and purpose of political power, will always play a role in the nature of government and its capacity to make and enforce policies. The relatively peaceful collapse of the communist regimes of Europe between 1989 and 1991 is persuasive evidence of this political reality. The model of government must reflect the values and expectations of the population, or be tenuous. To emphasize the power of government over society is to ignore the demonstrated fact that governments need the "voluntary obedience" of the bulk of society if it is to persist. Without a "legitimacy" grounded in this form of authority, even the most coercive regimes have been shown to have feet of clay. A relatively small revolutionary force might take over—as happened in Cuba in 1959. A government may even fall without a shot being fired—as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1989. At a less dramatic level, certain laws will be ignored and be ineffective —as happened in the US, when the federal government tried to enforce the prohibition of the production, transport and sale of alcohol between 1918 and 1933. And today, what person under the age of 50 in North America has not smoked some marijuana? (See *Public Opinion and Mass Media*.) Wise governments, whatever their nomenclature, whatever the model to which they aspire, must formulate policies that reflect the character and needs of their populations. To the degree that societies differ, so will the policies of governments differ, even when they share the same title of "democracy", or "communist", or whatever. All governments must pay attention to diversity in society, the numerous similarities and differences between different identifiable groups—considered under

such terms as "pluralism" and "class structure." Governments develop policies to contain or to resolve such differences, and in so doing determine their own character, often contradicting apparently their proclaimed self-definition. Thus, for example, many of the policies of the British government in Northern Ireland after 1970 contradict the supposed respect for the "rule of law," usually regarded as central to a representative democracy. Similar considerations may be taken in relation to the policies of the US and Canada towards Japanese-Americans during Second World War, and the current policy of the Japanese government towards its residents/citizens of Korean origin. (See *Human Rights*.) Governments conform not to their abstract "model," but to the contingencies of policymaking in unique situations.

(c) Governments do not simply respond to populations, they are also a product of the personalities and capacities of their leaders. Without suggesting for a moment a "subjectivist" theory of history or the State, there can be no doubt those who hold political power do much to determine the character of government. We note that the government by Communist Parties in Europe after the Second World War was determined by the Soviet model of politics and economics. That model was to a large extent a product of the designs of Josef Stalin. Stalin constructed a Soviet model of government, and that model became the standard for all nations "liberated" from German occupation by the Soviet Army in 1944–1945. Whether or not this was an authentic structure of "model" as defined by the ideologists of socialism and/or communism has been a question of continuous debate. The point is that, in the history of many political systems, we can find examples of what Hegel called "world-historic" individuals, whose responses to the exigencies of the time placed their personal stamp of the character of their governments and society. (See *Socialism and Communism, Communist System.*) (See *political culture, Trotskyism, Stalinism, communist bloc, revolution, political power, the State, social change*.)

All of this might lead one to conclude that each government must be studied in and for itself, each government being unique, whatever its supposed "form" or "model". From there, we move on to the field of comparative politics, seeking out similarities and differences, taking care not to confuse nomenclature with the circumstances surrounding historical situations and the use of political concepts at that time. After all, even Hitler included the word "socialist" in the name of his political party.

Nonetheless, students of politics and government have always sought to collect governments under "descriptive" categories. From an academic or scientific viewpoint, this has been driven by a desire to enhance comprehension of a multiplicity of variables, by developing what might be called a political shorthand.

The variety in governmental forms is brought down to usable size for ease of description and analysis. On the other hand however, "value-free" and "objective" political writers have tried to be in describing governmental forms, there has almost invariably been a "prescriptive" element, a moral position in their choice of governmental categories or models. Various "typical" or "ideal" types of government are described, they are judged as good or bad, better or worse, and then specific historical government forms are praised or condemned according to how they compare with these ideal types. This all began in ancient Greece.

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Biographical Sketch

Professor J. Frank Harrison received his doctorate from the University of Durham (England) in 1970. His main field of expertise was political theory, but he has also been engaged in the study of Soviet and (since 1991) Russian Politics, and his publications have included work in both of these fields. His main research in political theory has been on the development of anarchist thought. His books include *The Modern State: an Anarchist Analysis* (Black Rose Books, 1984), and an edition of the writings of Chinese dissidents, *Out of Tiananmen Square* (Black Rose Books, 1991).