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Concerning Disputes About the Definition of Politics

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Summary

In the contemporary world the word „politics” is understood in various ways, provoking a great deal of controversy. It can denote one of the most noble forms of human activity, but it may, however, denote a morally suspect activity with the mundane interests of particular individuals or social groups at its basis, arising out of egotism, everyday arrogance or the desire for power. This article implies that the multiplicity of occurring definitions and descriptions of politics can be reduced to two ways of defining it. The difference between them is the reversal of aims and means. The acquisition and maintenance of power, which in the former classical model of the definition of politics, was only a tool to achieve the common good, in the latter model becomes the aim of politics, whereas the common good, which in the former model was the aim of politics, in the latter model it is reduced to a tool for gaining and maintaining power. This article argues that the correct understanding of politics is the classical definition, in which politics is the realisation of the common good of a given political community, and that the concept of politics typical of the views of Niccolo Machiavelli

and Max Weber not only does not serve the common good of the whole community, but also omits the truth about the personal nature of humankind, treating people purely as objects and not as people who are self-possessed and self-determined.

Introduction

In the contemporary world the word „politics” is understood in various ways, provoking a great deal of controversy. It can denote one of the most noble forms of human activity, whose aim is the service of another human being, realised by activities undertaken for the common good of the whole community. It may, however, denote a morally suspect activity with the mundane interests of particular individuals or social groups at its basis, arising out of egotism, everyday arrogance or the desire for power. It seems that, in these times, this latter pejorative sense of the word „politics” is gaining in popularity, whereas few people still believe in the definition of politics as service to another human being. The dominance of the pejorative sense of the term „politics” is considered to be the expression of the objectification of attitudes towards the genesis and social role of politics. On the

one hand, politicians themselves, having concentrated more and more on the issue of gaining and maintaining power, are to blame for this state of affairs. On the other hand, blame can equally be levelled at representatives of political science who, when undertaking research, are most frequently influenced by the ideas of Max Weber (Weber 1946, p. 78)¹ and who reduce politics to the striving after the exercise of power. This way of defining politics is repeated by authors of set text books at various stages in the educational process, resulting in the fact that this definition is being seen more and more frequently as being binding, correct, obvious and natural. The dissemination of such a definition of politics, reducing it to activities aimed at the acquisition and maintenance of power, leads by its very nature to the fact that politicians, in their political work, concentrate more on themselves and their rivals than on the community entrusted to them and on its problems. In addition, this behaviour evokes a negative attitude towards politics amongst members of the community and results in people treating these activities as ones that they should defend themselves against and ones that should be limited. So, is this dominant contemporary definition of politics the right one? Is it possibly only one of the forms of the pathology of political life and a deviation of the whole field of politics? These doubts mean that the question concerning the essence and correct definition of politics still remains relevant. Answering this question should enable

¹ „Politics means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state” (for the full text, see pp. 77–128. Originally a speech „Politik als Beruf” at Munich University, 1918, published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblodt, Munich).

us to differentiate politics from everything else that hides behind its banner, but is not politics in the strict sense of the word.

Attempts to define politics

The word „politics” comes from the Greek in which πολις [polis] is a local society appropriately organised to the customs and laws based on the cultivated traditions which hold it together. The Greek equivalent of the term „politics” was the expression τα πολιτικά πραγματά. It defined everything which relates to the collective life of people limited within a given political community (state). Since life within such a community also encompasses relations with other communities, the word „politics” refers to activities linked to these activities as well. Their aim is always the common good, in other words the good of the individual living together with others within a specific political community. Latin borrowed the word πολιτικά, which in the form „politica” meant the same as the Greek τα πολιτικά πραγματά. Alongside the term „politica” in Latin the term „res publica” and „civitas” began to be used. In time the word „politica” entered into the vocabulary of various languages (Liddell, Scott 1940). From modern times this word in these languages started to have a distinctly ambiguous nature. On the one hand it expressed a positive meaning relating to the concern for the common good. On the other hand, there was also a negative meaning relating to reducing politics to the fight for power by utilising all available means. In Polish the definition of the word politics matches both these meanings: politics is „the activity of state power, the rule of government in social, economic, cultural, military and other areas relating to the internal affairs of

the state or to relations with other countries, as well as the mutual relations of class and social groups”, but it is also „the activity of a class, social group or party determined by specific aims and objectives, with the aim of gaining and maintaining state power” (Szymczak 1979, p. 785–786).

The origins of the term „politics” dates back to ancient times. In those days it was seen as the judicious realisation of the common good. This prudence lay in the ability to retain the memory of the past and to undertake a thorough analysis of the present with the necessity of making decisions relating to the future, which would contribute to maintaining or gaining the appropriate good not only for particular individuals, but also for everyone. There was an assumption of having a clear awareness of the idea of good, especially of the idea of supreme good. Since it was considered that this awareness was the privilege of sages, Plato could express the conviction that „Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils, - nor the human race, as I believe, - and then only will this our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day. Such was the thought, my dear Glaucon, which I would fain have uttered if it had not seemed too extravagant; for to be convinced that in no other State can there be happiness private or public is indeed a hard thing” (Plato, *The Republic*, 473 D; see also: Schoofield 2006). While it was considered that virtue was the supreme good of humankind, the task of the state was not only to meet the basic needs of

its people and the establishment of justice which relied on everyone doing his or her own duty, but above all to concern itself with the task of raising good citizens. The idea of politics being subordinate to the realisation of the common good was also common to Aristotle. While analysing ways of governing states, he considered those systems aimed at the common good as good ones and as bad systems those whose aims were to serve the interests of those in government (see: Mulgan 1977; Kraut 2002). St. Thomas Aquinas developed and enriched Aristotle’s concept. He emphasised the fact that politics is not an aim in and of itself, but should serve the fortune of citizens, which, in his view, relies on guaranteeing them the possibility of contemplating the truth: „it is obvious that there is no place for leisure in political activities. But a man wants something besides mere participation in politics, like positions of power and honor; and-since these objectives do not constitute the ultimate end, as was pointed out in the first book (60–72) it is rather fitting that by means of politics a person should wish to obtain happiness for himself and everyone else; happiness of this kind sought in political life is distinct from political life itself, and in fact we do seek it as something distinct. This is contemplative happiness to which the hole of political life seems directed; as long as the arrangement of political life establishes and preserves peace giving men the opportunity of contemplating truth” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, lib. X, lect. 11, n. 4). In all these concepts the aim of politics was defined whichever way you look at it as the common good of a given political community, realised by the exercise of power by those who possess appropriate knowledge and the ability

to differentiate between truth and falsehood and good and evil. In all these concepts power played a significant role, which basically was to seek to organise such a state and establish such a system within it, creating the best possible conditions for people to lead a good and virtuous life. This power was only ever seen as a tool of politics and not its aim: it was to serve the realisation of the common good of a given political community.

It was not until modern times that a different way of formulating political aims arose, mainly as a result of Niccolò Machiavelli (especially Machiavelli 1532). In truth, Machiavelli himself emphasised the fact that politics should serve values such as law and order, the happiness of citizens and peace. Thanks to him the attention of political theoreticians and practitioners was focussed on practical issues relating to the acquisition and maintenance of power. This resulted in politics breaking away from the sphere of morality and reducing it to efforts which were to guarantee power, its stability and effectiveness. These aims were to be realised by power without taking into account either the rules of morality or people themselves. Morality and the eventual good of citizens had a purely instrumental nature here and were treated as only one of many tools for gaining and maintaining power. The Machiavellian concept of politics, recalled and popularised later by Max Weber, has been realised by totalitarian states; it can, however, also be observed in the realia of democratic states, where politics is frequently not treated as an activity aimed at the good of the citizen, but becomes the aim itself, being one of the ways of ensuring a relatively comfortable life or the fulfillment of ambitions. The aim of such a definition of politics is power, and all activities undertaken within it, even

those for the common good, are treated as a means of gaining or maintaining power. Unfortunately, it seems that this has become the dominant way of defining politics in contemporary reality.

Although there are a number of possible ways of defining politics in the political literature available, they all arise out of one of the political perspectives set out here. Politics has been defined as „the study of state aims and the best means (organisation, forms and acts) to achieve them” (Brockhaus 1903, vol. 13, p. 236), „deciding about who gets what, when and how” (Lasswell 1936), „the battle for a rightful order” (O. Suhr)², „the art of leading human groups to order and fulfillment” (Bergstraesser 1965, p. 181), „a person in charge of another person” (Jouvenel 1963), „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” (Crick 1993, p. 21), „social activity, whose aim is the binding regulation of social conflicts about values” (Lehmbruch 1967), „running society based on the possession of power” (Wilkens 1975), „the battle for maintaining or changing the existing conditions” (Krockow 1976, p. 12) or „authoritative allocation of material and non-material values in society by those in government or rulers” (Easton 1965, p. 177). In Polish political science literature, politics has been defined as „the running of affairs of state” (Siemieński 1922, p. 1), „the entirety of forms, ways

² O. Suhr was a German politician as a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). He served as the Governing Mayor of Berlin (i.e. West Berlin) from 1955 until his death. Quote from O.H. von der Gablentz (1965), *Einführung in die Politische Wissenschaft*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Köln, p. 14.

and methods of the legal and effective realisation of power by the state” (J. Muszyński, *Polityka i nauki polityczne*, in: Bajan 1976, p. 10–11), „activity put forward by the decision-making centre of a formalised social group (organisation) aimed at realising set aims with the help of specific means” (Opalek 1986, p. 238), „the planned and organised striving after the acquisition and maintenance of power – the aspiration matching specific human activities” (Ryszka 1981, p. 12–13), „the judicious realisation of the common good” (Krapiec 1998, p. 5), „a group of activities undertaken by a decision-making centre, aimed at achieving intended aims with the help of appropriately selected means” (Chmaj, Żmigrodzki 1998, p. 20) and also as „the aspiration to realise social aims, utilising (or aspiring to utilise) the instruments and the authority of the state” (Opara 2005, p. 45).

In each of the above quoted attempts to define politics, politics has, directly or indirectly, been described by indicating its aims and the tools used to achieve them. Whereas in the views relating to the classical concept of politics, power is only an essential tool for realising the common good of citizens, in the modern Machiavellian concepts it is not the common good of citizens but the exercise of power that becomes the essential aim of politics. In these concepts the exercise of power itself, by becoming the overriding aim of politics, pushes the common good to the role of a tool used to gain and maintain power. Thus it seems that the multiplicity of occurring definitions and descriptions of politics can be reduced to two ways of defining it, as set out here. The difference between them is the reversal of aims and means. The acquisition and maintenance of power, which in the former classical model of the definition of politics, was only a tool to achieve the

common good, in the latter model becomes the aim of politics, whereas the common good, which in the former model was the aim of politics, in the latter model it is reduced to a tool for gaining and maintaining power. Thus, the confusion between aims and means in the understanding and defining of politics lies at the root of the contemporary dispute concerning the definition of politics, in which the classical concept competes with the modern one.

In the face of this outlined dispute about the definition of politics, the question is which of these ways of defining it is the correct one. Politics is a human issue, a specific form of human activity, having its roots in human nature and it should fundamentally serve people. An adequate view of the nature of politics requires a proper diagnosis of human nature. The role of political reflection concerning human nature in resolving the dispute about the definition of politics is invaluable. It seems that the key to a proper understanding of politics and a way of resolving the outlined dispute between the classical and modern definition of politics rests on undertaking an honest philosophical analysis of the previous understanding of humankind, of the greatest significance being the fact that humankind consists of social beings and people.

Politics and the truth about the personal nature of human being

In the history of philosophical thought the truth about the personal nature of human existence has quite frequently been examined. In Poland one of the most detailed views is the analysis to be found in the works of Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II), especially in his published work *Osoba i czyn* (Wojtyła

1969)³, and in the works of Mieczysław Albert Krapiec (especially in Krapiec 1974)⁴. The truth about the person emerges from one's internal experience as an active subject. In this experience the person is seen as the doer of his or her own acts as well as someone who is nothing more than the sum of their own actions. In the classical current of philosophy such features of personal existence as the ability of intellectual cognition, freedom and love can be noted. These features show the uniqueness of humankind and its transcendence with respect to the world of all nature. Thanks to it, people are beings who shape themselves as it were from within and constitute themselves as the source of their own actions. Karol Wojtyła expresses this truth, stating that „a person is namely someone who possesses themselves and, at the same time, someone who is only possessed exclusively by themselves” (Wojtyła 1985, p. 132) and as a consequence of this self-possession a person can say about themselves that „by self-determination each person controls themselves, exercising this specific power in relation to themselves, which nobody else can exercise or execute” (Wojtyła 1985, p. 133). In social life a consequence of this is the subjectivity of truth and the affirmation of the completeness of human existence and dignity. The subjectivity of truth denotes that each person has the right to insist on another person undertaking or abstaining from certain actions. The completeness of a human being relies on the fact that it is the

highest form of inviolability, which is not supplemented by social life. This means that a person is worth more than society and that society is for the person rather than the person being for society. Thus, the better society is, the better it serves the person. The dignity of human beings manifests itself not in the fact that humankind can be explained by a group of various relations linking it to nature or society, but in the fact that humankind itself is the aim of all possible conduct, whether that be of particular individuals or of the whole of society, as expressed in the old maxim according to which humankind should only ever be treated as as the end in itself and not as the means.⁵

Being a human being means people are also social beings, born to a life in a community. This is not only a question of choice, but of necessity. People need to live in a community or, in other words, people cannot live without a community. Whilst undertaking an analysis of the communal nature of human existence, it is worth paying attention to its two dimensions: on the one hand, in the case of healthy, strong and fully able individuals, community life is the environment in which they can fully develop and achieve perfection; on the other hand, when individuals are faced with certain difficulties which they cannot cope with by themselves, and in the case of individuals who are by nature weak, inadequate or for some reason disabled, life in a community is where they can expect support and help. Thus, community life ensures individuals not only the best

3 Translated into English as *The Acting Person* (1979) by A. Potocki, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht.

4 M.A. Krapiec gave rise to the Polish School of Classical Philosophy. Its founders considered it essential to preserve the European tradition of practicing philosophy as a counter-balance to the prevailing assumptions of Marxist ideology.

5 This Maxim constitutes the essence of the practical imperative in the philosophy of Kant: „Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as means” (I. Kant, *Grundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed A. Wood (2002), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 47).

possible conditions for their personal development, but also the most appropriate conditions to survive periods of danger and weakness.

A person's dependence on the community relates to every dimension of human existence. Not only is it conditioned by the dependence of people for their purely biological existence, but by the lack of their independence and self-sufficiency in every other area of their internally complex nature. Since people are psychological and physical unities, a condition of their personal development is their biological development, basically satisfying the biological needs of the human body. However, even in this purely biological sense, it is only possible thanks to the care and support of the community. In order to satisfy biological needs during childhood, everyone is reliant on the help of those closest to them, particularly parents and carers. Only in time, thanks to living within a community, the child learns to recognise its needs and with the passage of time can satisfy them independently.

Intellectual development is another plane of the personal development of people. It seems that the support of the community is indispensable in this area, too. The acquisition and development of language skills lies at the basis of human intellectual development. The typically human world of culture is opened up to people by learning a language. Thanks to language, individuals are introduced to a system of meanings specific to that given culture and emanating from and a way of organizing the world emanating from this system. These in turn shape an individual's personality, preferences and understanding of good. This is accomplished thanks to various processes of socialisation, most influential of which are the family and education. The state

also has a role to play here; its main task is the protection of values essential for the life of a given community and for the maintenance of its cultural heritage. Thus, everything which constitutes the personality of individuals in large measure derives from the social influences arising from a given social background and its culture.

As has been mentioned previously, community life is also the environment in which people can find essential help and protection in difficult, dangerous and threatening situations. It is worth noting that in the life of all individuals the periods during which they are reliant on the help and support of others form the majority: periods of dependence in childhood and youth, losing independence during old age and throughout life when faced with various misfortunes, weaknesses and ill-health. Periods during which individuals can develop creatively and improve whilst living in a community are relatively short. During their lives people are predominantly reliant on the help of others. One way or another, people always remain linked in many various ways to the community and are dependent on it. People's social nature means that the natural context of human life is the community, and they are formed by the community. The community constitutes the environment in which people grow up and in which they are shaped. In it people find the essential conditions for their own development, giving them essential support, as and when the situation requires.

Conclusion

As social beings people need to live within a community, and since they are also individuals, the community life should serve the good of everyone living within

it. A certain degree of organisation is required by this community life, and politics is nothing more than a series of actions aimed at ordering and organising the life of particular individuals within a given political community, so that everyone can find the best possible conditions for their own development. Thus, the correct understanding of politics is the classical definition, in which politics is the realisation of the common good of a given political community, and thus the good of everyone living within it, by the prudent exercise of power in the state. In the light of the truth about the nature of humankind, as people and social beings, the aim of political activity is only ever the good of citizens, whereas the exercise of power is simply the tool of its realisation. The flaw in the concept of politics typical of the views of Niccolò Machiavelli and Max Weber is that politics defined and practised in this manner not only does not serve the common good of the whole community, but also omits the truth about the personal nature of humankind, treating people purely as objects and not as people who are self-possessed and self-determined.

The acknowledgement that politics is an activity aimed at the common good of citizens does not answer the question of what the common good is and what the act of governance is. The divergence of views on these issues is equally immense. Virtue, social order, the satisfaction of citizens, freedom, agreement, peace and democracy have all been acknowledged as being the common good. The following have been acknowledged as examples of the proper act of governance: the raising of citizens, the exercise of force and duress, leading a nation and society, the subordination of self and the maintenance in subjugation of entire social groups, conflict resolution and the

attainment of compromises as well as the fighting of class wars. However, the answer to this question falls beyond the scope of this study.

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