INTRODUCTION: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INFORMAL POLITICS

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A PERSPECTIVE, DEFINITIONS, AND EXAMPLES

Politics is, in Harold Lasswell's elegantly spare definition, "Who gets what, when, how."[1] At the expense of its elegance of parsimony, we might embellish it a little as: "Who gets what, when, how, and at whose expense." The last phrase is added to make it explicit that politics is concerned with the distribution not only of the benefits derived from the use or consumption of goods and services, but also the costs required for their production and supply. The "what" here is to be understood as primarily a public, as opposed to private, good or service. Since, however, who gets a public good or service, how, and at whose expense critically affects who gets a private good or service, how, and at whose expense, we would leave the "what" in Lasswell's original formulation alone.

We adopt this broad and open-ended definition of politics rather than David Easton's well known but more restrictive definition: "authoritative allocation of values."[2]

As we will attempt to explain in this introduction and the chapters that follow, we believe, for both ontological and epistemological reasons, that any allocation of the costs and benefits of the production, distribution, and consumption of public goods and services – whether authoritative or questionable, legitimate or illegitimate, legal or illegal, overt or covert – is fundamentally political and therefore a proper subject for investigation by the political scientist. As we shall see, insistence on the authoritativeness of a political allocation would lead to a narrowly state-centric view of politics and limit the scope of our investigation unnecessarily and unjustifiably narrowly, leaving many of the most interesting and important issues of real-world politics outside of that scope. As another author notes, "Politics is everywhere, and not just in the hands of governments."[3]

1 Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936).
2 David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 129.
3 Ken Booth, "75 years on: Rewriting the subject's past – reinventing its future," in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski, eds., *International Theory: Positivism & Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 337.

By comparison, our broader definition leads us to pay attention to the diverse and complex ways in which politics occurs in a variety of social organizations and groups in addition to the state. Such organizations include "labor unions, churches and sects, professional societies, business and trade associations, fraternal organizations, recreational clubs, civic service associations, political parties, social welfare councils, communes and other 'collectivist' organizations," as David Knoke suggests, or "state, empire, leopard-skin chief, moiety elder, etc.," as a contributor to an international encyclopedia of sociology put it.[4] We also believe, as we will argue later, that excessive emphasis on and preoccupation with the "authoritative" character of a political allocation would lead to false and misleading distinctions between state-level politics on the one hand and both infrastate-level (domestic) and suprastate-level (international) politics on the other. It is our view that politics is politics, driven by a common logic and dynamics and falling in similar and comparable, if not identical, forms and patterns at all three levels.

The "who, when, and how" of politics are determined not simply by the balance of power obtaining between actors, whether individuals or organizations, but also, and often more effectively, by an existing set or sets of rules. A rule is, by definition, a prescription for some types or forms of behavior and proscription against others. An internally coherent set of rules applicable to a large but specific and bounded functional area – such as economy, religion, and education, or a large segment of such an area, such as banking, priesthood, and higher education – is called an *institution*. There are thus economic, religious, and educational institutions, and so there are also banking, ecclesiastical, and higher educational institutions. Politics, too, is governed by a variety of political institutions, such as constitutional, legislative, administrative, judicial, electoral, party, interest group, and so on. Within an effectively institutionalized area, a political actor may defy or ignore a relevant institution at his or her own peril. To survive, not to mention thrive, within a given institutional setting, an actor had better abide by and adapt to its rules.

Some rules and institutions are deliberately created by an established authority – either a king, emperor, "leopard-skin chief, moiety elder," or a popularly elected president or parliament – to apply, at least in principle, to all actors in the relevant area or areas. Such rules and institutions are explicit, definite, and usually written. We define the kind of politics that is governed by such rules and institutions as *formal*. Just as often, however, rules and institutions are not deliberately created by an established authority, but

4 David Knoke, "The political economies of association," *Research in Political Sociology: A Research Annual*, vol. 1, p. 212; Michael Mann, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of Sociology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1984), p. 290.

instead they simply evolve as "conventions and codes of behavior."[5] Politics governed by such informal rules and institutions is what is meant here by *informal* politics. This is the kind of politics described by Douglas Pike in his chapter on Vietnam as "interpersonal activities stemming from a tacitly accepted, but unenunciated, matrix of political attitudes exisitng outside the framework of legal government, constitutions, bureaucratic constructs and similar institutions."

Formal politics is unquestionably very important. Decisions made and actions taken by recognized authorities tend to be not only very visible and easily known to most members of the organization concerned, but they are also effectively enforceable. Moreover, such politics also tend to become well institutionalized and impersonal, with set rules and procedures applied consistently across issues and actors. This type of politics is widely known and applauded as one under "the rule of law." The Civil Rights Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1964 dramatically changed the allocation of educational and employment opportunities available to American blacks, as compared to whites. The Equal Employment Opportunities Act passed by the Japanese Diet (parliament) in 1985 had considerably less dramatic but nonetheless very significant impacts on the allocation of employment and promotion opportunities for Japanese women, as compared to Japanese men. A formal decision made by a labor union's executives for or against striking a company may critically affect the allocation of profits or losses between the company's management, stockholders, and employees, as may a decision by the management for or against negotiating a compromise with the union.

Without underestimating, much less denying, the obvious importance of formal politics in the lives of both individuals and organizations, however, we argue that informal politics that is not governed by general and impersonal rules and procedures set by formal authorities is no less important. Often equated with the "rule of man," as opposed to the "rule of law," this type of politics is nearly universally suspect and often condemned as arbitrary, unfair, or corrupt. Besides, the workings of such politics tend to be sporadic, erratic, and invisible, making them much harder than formal politics for outsiders to observe in detail, describe accurately, and explain coherently. Nonetheless, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence of the ubiquitous presence and pervasive influence of informal politics in both the scholarly literature and journalistic accounts of politics in wide-ranging societies and organizations.

The chapters that follow will present such evidence from several East Asian societies in considerable detail. Here, let me cite just a few illustrative

5 Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 4.

examples from writings on Japanese politics. In a now classic text on the Japanese Diet, Hans Baerwald took pains to emphasize the wide gaps that separated formal institutions and actual practice in Japan's parliamentary politics.[6] In a best-selling book published two decades later, one of the most prominent and shrewdest insiders of that politics, Ichiro Ozawa, echoes Baerwald's observation by declaring that institutions based on the Japanese constitution and other laws are only formal (*tatemaejo no*) sets of rules that have little to do with actual practice.[7] For example, Diet resolutions that have no constitutional basis are often used to block controversial government actions, because, while a statute may be revised by a majority vote, under the customary rule a Diet resolution may be revised or repealed only by a unanimous vote.[8] Likewise, while the Budget Committee of either house is in session, no other standing committee of that house may meet; questions asked from the floor during a meeting of a Diet committee are answered not by ministers but by senior officials of various ministries, and so on.[9]

Informal politics is as pervasive, if not more so, in the Japanese world of law itself, according to Frank Upham. Detailed case studies of the politics of environmental protection, civil rights movements, and industrial policy lead him to conclude that legal informality overwhelms formal processes of litigation in Japan:

> Meetings may be scheduled and public testimony received, research commissions formed, reports published, elaborate plans of action drafted and approved by competent government officials, and concrete action urged by powerful ministries; but nothing in the process will rise to the level of a legally cognizable act that could become the object of litigation challenging the process as a whole or any step therein.[10]

FORMAL POLITICS AS STATE-CENTRIC POLITICS

Despite the prevalence of informal politics and the widespread recognition of the phenomenon in the literature, formal politics has been treated by most social scientists as the normal and orthodox form of politics, while informal politics, such as factionalism and cronyism, is often treated as if it were an abnormal and deviant form. This is probably because most social scientists

6 Hans H. Baerwald, *Japan's Parliament: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 121–126.
7 Ichiro Ozawa, *Nihon kaizo keikaku* [A plan for reforming Japan] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993), p. 56.
8 Ibid., pp. 42–43.
9 Ibid., pp. 63, 79.
10 Frank K. Upham, *Law and Social Change in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 22.

associate politics exclusively or nearly exclusively with the state. They understand by politics, as Max Weber put it, "only the leadership, or the influencing of the *state*," or, as the authors of a popular introductory political science textbook put it, activities that are "centrally, even though not exclusively, concerned with the state . . ."[11] This singular concentration on the state as the arena or matrix of politics is not surprising, considering the facts that the state is a political organization par excellence, that politics is far more extensively and effectively formalized in the state than in any other type of organization, and, above all, that the modern state is accorded sovereign power and status.

The sovereignty of the state has been "a defining element" of the Eurocentric international order since the seventeenth century.[12] The conception of the sovereign state was in fact inherent in the process through which the modern state was created in early modern Europe, in the age of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). The absolutist state in early modern Europe established its authority by conquering and, to a large extent, absorbing all other types of organization, such as the guild, estate, and, above all, church, that had not only enjoyed extensive autonomy but maintained effective control of large territories and populations in medieval Europe. The Catholic church in particular had exercised strong secular as well as religious power and competed with the medieval empire until the rise of the modern state.[13] The latter's claim to sovereign status gave birth to "a vision of the state, or rather of the crown, as a 'public' authority standing for some general principle or interest over and above the myriad 'private' interests which made up society."[14] This process coincided with the emergence of the concept of the "political," a concept that had not existed before the thirteenth century. The absence of the concept accounts, to an important extent, for the autonomy and power of the pope vis-à-vis kings and emperors in medieval Europe. The simultaneous births of the concepts of the sovereign state and that of the political in the history of Western thought thus lies behind the close bond between the two concepts in contemporary political science writings.

The absolutist state of seventeenth-century Europe has since evolved into the modern democratic state. The American and French revolutions of the

11 For the quotation from Weber, see H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 77; and for the second quotation, see Roland J. Pennock and David C. Smith, *Political Science: An Introduction* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 8–9.

12 Gidon Gottlieb, *Nation Against State: A New Approach to Ethnic Conflicts and the Decline of Sovereignty* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993), p. 19.

13 John Breilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 46.

14 Ibid., pp. 50–52.

eighteenth century played a catalytic role in this evolutionary process. Throughout Western Europe and North America, and increasingly in other regions of the world, the process has involved the supersession of monarchical sovereignty by popular sovereignty. It has not, however, involved any significant decline in the formal power and prerogatives of the state as such, whether internally or externally. The contemporary state has in fact become "the standard form" of political organization at the expense of all other forms and standards, and it attempts "to regulate a far greater sphere of human transactions in far greater detail than its predecessors ever attempted."[15]

The expansion of the power of the state has been underpinned by the increasingly universal belief that the state, and the state alone, can provide public security and advance public interests for a people in the modern world. Many peoples outside of Europe, including all in Asia, have adopted both the concept and the standard institutions of the modern state modeled on the European sovereign state, thanks either to imposition by colonial rulers or to imitation by Asia's own elites.[16] Wherever it is found, the contemporary state claims and exercises the sovereign right not only to allocate public goods and services but, more importantly, to set authoritative rules, criteria, and standards for the allocation of values. It is the central vehicle for the delivery of *bonheur public* in the contemporary world.[17]

Despite its vaunted status and reputation, however, the state is a notoriously slippery concept that is subject to diverse and often mutually contradictory interpretations. In his famous definition, Weber identified it as "a system of order (that) claims binding authority" over all of its members and their actions.[18] A more contemporary definition identifies it as a set of institutions endowed with coercive power and control of a territory within the boundary of which it monopolizes rule-making and rule-enforcement authority.[19] Either definition, however, permits the creation of a virtually infinite variety of states: They may be large or small, strong or weak, independent or dependent, monarchical or republican, democratic or autocratic, liberal or authoritarian, religious or secular, national or ethnic, unitary or federal, ad infinitum.

15 Robert H. Jackson and Alan James, "The character of independent states," in Robert H. Jackson and Alan James, eds., *States in a Changing World: A Contemporary Analysis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 4, 5.

16 Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 285.

17 Laura Balbo, "Family, women, and the state: Notes toward a typology of family roles and public intervention," in Charles S. Maier, ed., *Changing Boundaries of the Political: Essays on the Evolving Balance Between the State and Society, Public and Private in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 202–203.

18 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich; trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al. (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), Vol. 1, p. 56.

19 John A. Hall, "State," in Joel Krieger, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 878.

As Easton once put it, the state thus serves as "a symbol for unity . . . a myth," rather than as a tool of a scientific investigation.[20] It should therefore be treated as "a conceptual variable," as J. P. Nettl suggests,[21] and examined, as Timothy Mitchell argues, "not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make up such structures appear to exist."[22] In other words, the modern state is more an ideological product than an empirical phenomenon. It may be created, transformed, or destroyed almost at will by its members, its leaders, its friends, or its enemies. A single unified ethnic state of Germany or Korea may be divided into two rival ideological states; a single unified multinational Soviet or Yugoslavic state may be divided into multiple separate ethnic states; two rival ideological Korean or Chinese states may be united someday into single national states; a part of a binational Canadian state might be turned into a separate national state. "Stateness" is thus a matter not only of degree but of will, faith, and strategy.

Similar elements of elusiveness and arbitrariness characterize the boundary and relationship between the state and society. The idea that the two ought to be distinct and separate from each other has prevailed since the eighteenth century in both liberal and Catholic streams of Western political thought, especially in Catholic liberalism.[23] The idea springs partly from the belief that, as Alexis de Tocqueville put it, so as to maintain Christianity "at any cost in the bosom of modern democracies," the priesthood must be "shut up within the sanctuary" rather than allowed to step beyond it.[24] The belief in the separation and dichotomy between public political and private social spheres is a twin to the belief in the separation and dichotomy between a liberal state and Christian society.

In practice, however, the conceptual distinction between the state and society in Western political thought has been steadily eroded by the progressive intrusion of state power into society until the two spheres have been virtually fused. The process reached its peak in the emergence of the welfare state in the middle of the twentieth century. In Great Britain, for example, state power penetrated into wide-ranging areas of what had been considered private domain in the 1950s and 1960s.[25] This development led

20 Easton, *The Political System*, pp. 111–112.
21 Cited in Hagen Koo, "Strong state and contentious society," in Hagen Koo, ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 235.
22 Timothy Mitchell, "The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics," *American Political Science Review* 85:1 (March 1991), p. 94.
23 Alain Touraine, "An introduction to the study of social movements," *Social Research* 52:4 (Winter 1985), pp. 775–776.
24 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Random House, 1945), Vol. 2, Book 2, Chap. 15, p. 156, quoted in Susanne Berger, "Religious transformation and the future of politics," in Maier, *Changing Boundaries*, pp. 122–123.
25 Balbo, "Family, women, and the state," p. 208.

to a blurring of the conceptual and ideological boundary between state and society.

The development also led, belatedly, to the realization that the boundary between state and society is, like the state itself, not an empirical fact but a purely conceptual creation. It is, as Mitchell puts it, "not the perimeter of an intrinsic entity, which can be thought of as a free-standing object or actor," but just "a line drawn internally, *within* the network of institutional mechanisms through which a certain social and political order is maintained," that is, it "*never marks a real exterior*."[26] Many contemporary social issues are then, as theorists of new social movements argue, neither a priori private and non-political nor a priori public and political.[27] There can also be a "space of 'political action within civil society'" that such movements may claim.[28] Civil society thus becomes "a domain of struggles, public spaces, and political processes . . . the social realm in which the creation of norms, identities, and social relations of domination and resistance are located."[29]

The fusion of state and society, however, has always been the part and parcel of Asian, particularly Confucian, theory of politics. As Hagen Koo points out, the two "constitute a moral and ethical unity, inseparable from each other."[30] Moreover, society, and the household in particular, is the model for the state, rather than the other way around, in this theory. A sixth-century Chinese scholar-official, Yan Zhitui, thus observed: "when the father is not kind, the son is not filial, ... The gentleness tempered with severity used in governing the household is indeed like that which is required in governing the state."[31] The tradition has survived to varying degrees in most East Asian societies, including North Korea under Kim Il Sung's rule. Bruce Cummings comments: "In Kim's praxis, like Confucianism, the family unit becomes a model for structuring the state, the ultimate metaphor for organizing everything under heaven, including international relations."[32]

Interestingly, the conceptual fusion and interpenetration between the state and society in Asian societies has not led, as has the conceptual separation between the two in Western societies, to the domination of society by the state. In South Korea, for example, civil society has remained resistant, and

26 Mitchell, "The limits of the state," p. 90.
27 Claus Offe, "Challenging the boundaries of institutional politics: Social movements since the 1960s," in Maier, *Changing Boundaries*, p. 69.
28 Ibid., p. 72.
29 Jean L. Cohen, "Strategy on identity: New theoretical paradigms and contemporary social movements," *Social Research* 52:4 (Winter 1985), p. 700.
30 Koo, "Strong state and contentious society," p. 238.
31 Cited from Arthur F. Wright, ed., *The Confucian Persuasion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 6–7, in Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, pp. 41–42.
32 Bruce Cumings, "The corporate state in North Korea," in Koo, *State and Society*, pp. 212–213.

even subversive and combative, toward the state throughout its history. In fact, this was true even during the Japanese colonial rule. According to Koo, the colonial state failed to eliminate "subterranean networks of resistance movements, peasant and labor organizations, and intellectual circles. . . ."[33] Nor did the Chinese communist state manage to subjugate a defiant society in implementing its key policies. The one child per family policy, for example, was resisted and sabotaged not only by many villagers but also by local cadres of the Chinese Communist Party itself. As Tyrene White points out, many cadres were "villagers first and cadres second," and both violated the law themselves and chose to "interpret the guidelines loosely in line with local people's wishes."[34]

Even if we accepted the state-centric definition of politics, we would thus be compelled to conclude that politics has crossed the boundary between the state and society in modern Western societies, in premodern and modern Confucian societies in East Asia, and inferentially in many others. As we suggested at the outset, however, politics is found not only in the state but in any and every type of organized social group. Competition and conflicts between the state and various social groups within it are also important forms of politics that are played out in "a sphere that overlaps civil society and the state, a sphere where the relationship between the two is fought out."[35]

Nor are we alone in finding "infrastate politics" in a variety of organizations within a state. For example, in a perceptive comment on the nature of politics in many African societies, Naomi Chazan writes: "Politics . . . takes place well beyond the narrower public domain in African nations. Power . . . may legitimately be vested in local social structures as well."[36] According to Lucian Pye, *bapakism*, which refers to a fictive relationship between a father figure (*bapak*) and a circle of "children" (*anak buah*), pervades the Indonesian bureaucracy and "may be a factor in linking together different principal figures along lines which may or may not follow the formal hierarchy of the bureaucracy."[37] Pye also notes that each of the 2,000 or so subdivisions (*jati*) in the Hindu caste system "could handle its own problems of discipline through its respective panchayat, or council of elders."[38] In a provocative study of Japan's industrialization, David Friedman argues that the politics that had significant bearings on its process had little to do with

33 Koo, "Strong state and contentious society," pp. 232, 237.
34 Tyrene White, "Postrevolutionary mobilization in China: The one-child policy reconsidered," *World Politics* 43:1 (October 1990), pp. 67, 70–71.
35 Paul Starr and Ellen Immergut, "Health care and the boundaries of politics," in Maier, *Changing Boundaries*, p. 222.
36 Naomi Chazan, "Patterns of state-society incorporation and disengagement in Africa," in Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), p. 123.
37 Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, p. 306. 38 Ibid., p. 47.

the state but much to do with worker careers, subcontractor coordination, regionalism, and the like."[39] He then concludes: "Ultimately, Japan sustains the idea that we must address politics throughout society if we are to address a country's economic change."[40]

If the concept of infrastate politics is a little hard for some people to grasp, that of suprastate politics should not be. International politics has been as real and as widely recognized a form of politics as state-level politics since long before the Peace of Westphalia. Moreover, both the reality and importance of suprastate politics have vastly increased in the last few decades, as states have increasingly intervened in each other's domestic affairs while more and more suprastate organizations have been formed and come to play roles that are nearly equal, if not superior, to those of individual states as mechanisms for determining "who gets what, when, how, at whose expense" within as well as among states. The United Nations as well as the European Union today enjoy a legal and diplomatic standing among, but increasingly independent of, the individual states of which they consist. In many ways, in fact, suprastate organizations stand above and dictate to many states, if not to the most powerful among them, as may be witnessed from the United Nations' peace-keeping operations, the International Atomic Energy Agency's on-site inspections of local nuclear facilities, the International Monetary Fund's imposition of stringent conditionalities on its loans to member states, and so on.[41] International politics at the end of the twentieth century is thus decreasingly interstate politics and increasingly suprastate politics. Moreover, the distinctions between state-level politics on the one hand and both infrastate-level and suprastate-level politics on the other are increasingly irrelevant in a world where, as Ken Booth puts it, "the global is local and the local is global."[42]

Some authors even argue that the state today is withering away. Alberto Melucci, for example, writes:

> nation-states are extinguishing themselves not because of socialism . . . but because they lose authority; from above, a planetary, multinational political and economic interdependence shifts the center of actual decision-making elsewhere; from below, multiplication of autonomous centers of decision gives "civil society" power it never had during the development of modern states.[43]

39 David Friedman, *The Misunderstood Miracle: Industrial Development and Political Change in Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 17–20, 209–210.
40 Ibid., p. 211.
41 Gottlieb, *Nation Against State*, pp. 18, 39.
42 Booth, "75 years on," p. 330.
43 Alberto Melucci, "The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements," *Social Research* 52:4 (Winter 1985), p. 808.