Anthropology, Culture and Society

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Social and Cultural Anthropology

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lead to permanent changes in the power relations of society. The French Revolution is often cited as an example of such a change: after this momentous event in European history, the privileges of the nobility and royal family were eventually replaced by formal principles of equality and democracy.

As this chapter has suggested, albeit mostly indirectly, there may be quite varying notions within a society about justice, good and bad and, ultimately, what the world looks like. Societies, in other words, are internally differentiated, not only in economic and political terms but also in cultural terms. Yet certain fundamental values are usually widely agreed upon, whether they are tacit or explicit. Even people who seem profoundly oppressed frequently support the dominating ideology, even if it may be said to contribute to their oppression. Any ideology attempts to make a certain perspective on society appear 'natural'; if it succeeds, people will perceive their own place, and the dominant hierarchy, as natural. This was the basic mechanism Marx had in mind when he wrote that the ruling ideas of society are the ideas of the ruling class.

The distinction between actor perspectives and systemic perspectives is indispensable when we look at inequality and differentiation, and both caste and class systems can be studied profitably through a conscious switching between the two perspectives. One is born into a caste and/or a class; the caste or class structure is a systemic property, but each actor relates to his or her position of relative power or powerlessness in an independent, unpredictable way. It is therefore necessary to grasp the duality of social process – it is simultaneously the product of agency and the objective condition for agency – in the study of power. This is shown in the next chapter.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Louis Dumont: *Homo Hierarchicus*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980.
Kathinka Frøystad: *Blended Boundaries: Caste, Class, and Shifting Faces of 'Hinduness' in a North Indian City*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2005.
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: The Modern Reader 1968 [1848].

11 POLITICS AND POWER

Politics is parasitical on other social relationships.
— *M.J. Swartz*

Politics is linked with power; both the power that people exert over each other, and the ways in which society wields power over people by imposing institutionalised constraints on their agency – constraints ranging from property taxes and traffic rules to torture and genocide. However, politics also has to do with the prevention of lawlessness and insecurity; that is, it concerns law and order, the implementation of the rights of persons, conflict resolution and social integration.

Politics can be identified analytically in all societies, but by no means all societies that anthropologists have studied have political institutions distinct from other societal realms, or even emic concepts that might easily translate as 'politics'. In modern state societies, it may seem relatively easy to delineate what is politics and what is not. Political science, developed to study politics in such societies, deals with the formal political institutions; with a legislative assembly, local administration, voting patterns and other aspects of society recognised as political. In non-industrial societies, it may be far more difficult to single out politics as something distinct from the ongoing flow of social life. In industrial or postindustrial society, we think of politics as something they *have*; a specialised set of institutions. In societies with no centralised state, the political system may rather be seen as something intimately woven into other aspects of existence. Very often in stateless societies, kinship and religion are in practice indistinguishable from politics. That institutional differentiation which is characteristic of modern societies is absent in many others (Godelier 1975). This implies that it would often be fruitless to look for identifiable political institutions which could be compared with, say, parliaments or city councils. Instead, political anthropologists have to look for the political decision-making mechanisms – they must find out where and how the important decisions are being made, who is affected by the decisions, what rules and norms govern political action, how hegemony is challenged, and what possible sanctions the rulers of society dispose of.

A central problem in classic political anthropology, which was largely developed by 'the British school' from the 1930s to the 1960s, was simply the naïve but pertinent question of how stateless societies were at all integrated: why they did not just fall apart due to lack of a central authority, how they

managed to resolve conflicts and how peace was maintained. Today, following decolonisation and the emergence of the postcolonial state in the South, many studies in political anthropology instead focus on the relationship between the state and local communities, often showing how inhabitants of such communities resist dominance from the state (e.g. Kapferer 1988; Scott 1999) or how the state seeks to dominate populations through drawing on cultural notions widespread in the population (Wolf 1999; Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005).

Although complex modern societies are also dealt with here, this chapter takes politics in stateless societies as its point of departure and discusses how chiefs and 'big men' acquire their positions of authority, how the inhabitants of uncentralised, 'acephalous' societies resolve conflicts with no courts or judicial apparatus, and how power can be seen as the prize in political games. Seen from the vantage-point of a modern state, it may seem as though the political integration of tribal peoples like the Nuer, the Pathans and the Yanomamö is extremely tenuous and fragile; the fact is that many of these groups have revealed a remarkable structural stability, which has lasted longer than most European polities have existed, although they are now to varying degrees integrated into the state and capitalist economy.

Some political anthropologists emphasise how different societies are integrated (systemic perspective). Others instead stress how individuals make strategies to promote their interests (actor perspective). In this chapter, it will become clear why both kinds of perspectives can be useful. The empirical material discussed illuminates the tension between agency and social structure, as well as the differences between kinship-based politics and politics based on formal institutions.

POWER AND CHOICE

Since the study of power is essential to political anthropology, the concept of power must be discussed briefly. One of the oldest and still most influential definitions of power is that of Max Weber, who wrote that it 'is the ability to enforce one's own will on others' behaviour' (1978 [1919]); that is, the ability to make someone do something they would otherwise not have done. According to Weber, people have power over each other. Other concepts of power, including those inspired by Marxist scholarship, would also include structural power; that is power relations embedded in the division of labour, the legislative system and other structural features of society. It immediately seems to make sense to talk of 'systemic' or 'structural' power in many contexts: the obeying of norms and implicit rules may easily be seen as a form of structural power – it is not easy to tell *who* it is that forces me to hold the fork in my left hand and the knife in my right. However, if we include any action dictated by cultural convention in our definition, power risks becoming diluted and synonymous with conventions, norms and, ultimately, culture. It may therefore be fruitful, in the realm of political anthropology at least,

to follow Weber in distinguishing between power, authority (*Herrschaft*) and influence, the latter being a 'milder' form of power presupposing tacit acquiesence. Authority, in Weber's view, is taken for granted and needs no justification, while power proper can potentially be challenged and therefore must be defended.

The differences between ways of conceptualising power correspond to the differences between actor-oriented and systemic perspectives. The great challenge of all social science, one might say, consists in trying to do justice to both.

Do people, when all is said and done, act under some form of coercion, or are they free to choose their course of action? In a sense, both statements are correct. We choose our actions, but not under circumstances of our own choice. If you live in a capitalist society and are penniless, you cannot choose to invest in the Taiwanese electronic industry. One cannot easily choose to dethrone and replace the chief in a society where political offices are hereditary, and a Tiv woman cannot buy herself a plot of land as long as Tiv customary law states that only men have land rights (see Chapter 12).

On the other hand, actors make choices whenever they can. It may be beyond my ability to buy a factory, but I can choose between depositing my salary in my bank account or spending it on expensive Norwegian beer. And although it was impossible for the Saloio women (Chapter 9) to achieve formal political positions, they were able to exert considerable influence or power through informal channels.

This implies that virtually all humans have some potential power or influence, however narrow their field of autonomous action. However, this resource, like all others, is unequally distributed. We should further be aware that power is a problematic phenomenon to explore comparatively, since the peoples we study may lack concepts corresponding to our concepts of power.

POWERLESSNESS AND RESISTANCE

The reverse of the coin, powerlessness, is also an important aspect of social life. It is not the same as a modest amount of power, but should rather be conceptualised as the absence of the ability to exert power. 'Muted' groups (Chapter 9) are powerless in this sense. Because of lack of communication channels, lack of organisation or similar poverty in resources, they are prevented from promoting their interests in efficient ways. In Michel Foucault's terms, powerless groups are subjugated by the dominant discourses of society: the ways in which everyday language structures the world and confirms a set of values (see also Chapters 14 and 15).

The sociologist Steven Lukes (2004) has suggested that power be studied at three levels. First, it can be identified in decision-making processes, that is, where decisions are actually being taken. This is the simplest perspective on power, which focuses on factual, observable events. Second, power can also be studied by looking at non-decisions; that is, all of those political

issues which are dealt with within the political system but which are not addressed explicitly.

The third level on which power can be studied, which Lukes argues is often ignored by social scientists, is that including 'muted' or powerless groups, whose interests never even reach the level of negotiations. Such interests lack a voice in public life; they are marginalised and made invisible. This kind of perspective on power has been common in feminist scholarship and also in research on indigenous populations. Research on muted groups has nevertheless also shown that such groups, apparently powerless and marginalised, often develop their own strategies to increase control over their own existence. James Scott (1985) has thus shown how poor peasants may maintain a fairly high level of autonomy by systematically sabotaging impositions from the authorities. The notion of resistance in Scott's work on peasants in South-East Asia subsequently became fashionable in anthropological studies of a wide range of phenomena. Scott defines the 'weapons of the weak' like this:

> Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on.... They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks ... (Scott 1985: xvi)

Historical studies of slavery in the Americas (see, for example, Lewis 1983), moreover, reveal that similar strategies were widespread there as ways of retaining some autonomy under conditions of extreme oppression.

IDEOLOGY AND LEGITIMATION

Unless they rule through sheer terror and violence or threats of such, as many political regimes do, the powerholders in any society must in one way or other justify or legitimate their power. Among the Mundurucú, the men justify their power vis-à-vis the women by referring to myths describing how they gained control over the sacred trumpets. In Hindu society, the Brahmins may justify their power by referring to ascribed statuses and sacred texts, while in parliamentary democracies the legislating assemblies may refer to the 'will of the people' as embedded in election results when they initiate unpopular policies.

It is common to assume that power discrepancies in non-industrial societies follow tradition and ascribed statuses, whereas achievement is more important in industrial societies. This point of view has been criticised from several perspectives. First, it is not true that achievement counts for everything in industrial societies: social background and family networks may be extremely important in maintaining a particular power structure there, just as in non-industrial societies. Second, there are also great differences within the vast and inaccurate category of non-industrial, or 'traditional', societies in this regard.

The ascribed/achieved distinction may nevertheless be an important one in the comparative study of politics, provided we do not link it categorically to specific societal types. This dichotomy is rather an aspect of every political system. How important are personal qualities and individual agency in various political systems, we may then ask, and how important are those aspects which are hereditary and follow ascription?

The idea that all individuals in modern democracies have the same opportunities to achieve power is often regarded as an ideological (mis)-conception. Similarly, notions regarding what is 'for the common good' are often seen as expressions of ideology. In a more general vein, we may state that political authority rests on ideological legitimation: it must be justified. If the justification is accepted by the population, we may, following Weber, talk of legitimate authority.

Like power, culture and other core concepts, ideology is a difficult word to define. For now, we will adopt the suggestion that ideology is that aspect of culture which concerns how society ought to be organised; in other words, it concerns politics, rules and the distinction between right and wrong. Ideology is a normative kind of knowledge: it may be implicit or explicit, and it may be challenged.

Although there seem to be groups in every society which are relatively powerless, there tends to be widespread acquiescence in the values a society is based on – even among the people who seem to be losing out because of them. Many Marxist theorists, including Marx himself, have described this phenomenon, whereby people seem not to be aware of their own good, as 'false consciousness'. Because of considerable power disparities in society, the powerful are able to promote their own world-view much more efficiently than other groups and to give it an air of 'naturalness', thereby making deeply ideological notions part and parcel of the taken-for-granteds of society.

The notion of false consciousness has an immediate appeal. It seems likely that oppressed groups do not know their own good; otherwise they would have revolted, would they not? On the other hand, it is far from easy for an anthropologist, an outsider to society, to argue convincingly that a group is the victim of delusions of which its members are not themselves aware. On which grounds can researchers claim that they know the 'objective interests' of a group better than they themselves do?

It is rarely necessary for an anthropologist to take a stance regarding the issue of false consciousness. In comparative studies of political systems, it is in principle irrelevant whether the anthropologist thinks the group is 'right' or 'wrong' in its world-view and ideology. Above all, the anthropological study of politics is concerned with showing how political systems function and how people act or are prevented from acting within them, as well as indicating the relationship between ideology and social practice. It should nevertheless be kept in mind that actors rarely see the full context and consequences of their acts, and that an analytical task of anthropologists consists in working this out.

INTEGRATION AND CONFLICT IN KINSHIP-BASED SOCIETIES

Because of Evans-Pritchard's classic study of political organisation among the Nuer of the southern Sudan (1940), this nomadic people was for decades virtually a paradigm case in the study of politics in stateless societies. We shall therefore look at the political dynamics of the Nuer, writing in the ethnographic present, in some detail.

The Nuer are cattle nomads with an economic livelihood as well as an ecological environment reminiscent of the Fulani. Not only do cattle form an important part of their economy, they are also central in Nuer myth and symbolism.

Although the Nuer live in small local communities, every individual has ties of solidarity tying him or her to other people scattered over an enormous territory. Each has obligations and commitments towards his or her patrilineal kin; but is also tied to other groups.

First, a Nuer is a member of an agnatic lineage. Several lineages together form a sub-clan, and several sub-clans form a clan. This principle – the division of clans into equivalent sub-clans and lineages at several levels – is called 'segmentation'. From a male Nuer's perspective, loyalties and commitments generally decrease with growing genealogical distance (see Figure 11.1).

A different principle for dividing up Nuer groups is the territorial one, which usually corresponds roughly to kinship; at least Nuer men tend to live near their close male relatives. Although not everyone who lives in a Nuer village belongs to the same clan, each village is associated with a clan in roughly the same way as European nation-states are associated with ethnic groups.

Ego   Brothers   Cousins   More remote
                                                 agnates
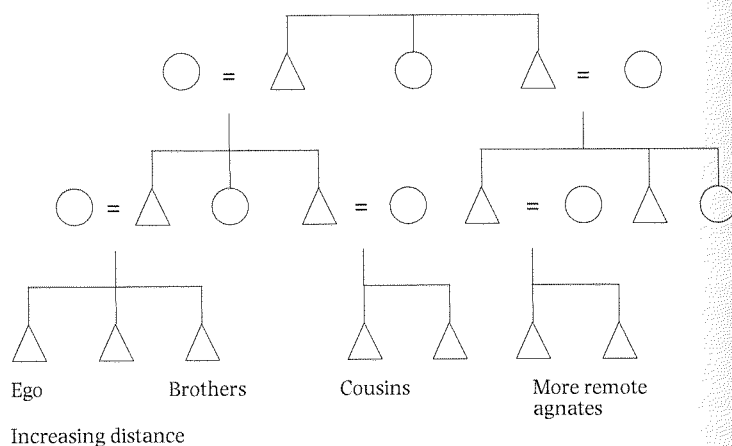
Increasing distance

Figure 11.1   Degrees of genealogical distance in a patrilineal system
(Sisters and female cousins are not included in ego's generation.)

In addition to these overlapping principles for belongingness – agnatic kinship and place of residence – each Nuer man has obligations towards his age-mates: the men with whom he was initiated , as well as his affines (members of clans into which his siblings and himself have married) and possible trade partners. These cross-cutting ties, which create complex systems of loyalties that cannot be reduced to mere concentric circles, reduce the danger of feuds between lineages. The local community is recruited through agnatic kinship, matrilateral kinship and affinality (Gluckman 1982 [1956]). If a man becomes entangled in a blood feud based on agnatic kinship loyalties, he thus runs the risk of having to direct his revenge towards his nearest neighbour and collaborator. Many Nuer therefore try to avoid open conflict with other lineages as far as possible.

Despite the mitigating effects of this mechanism, feuds occasionally do burst out among the Nuer. The cause may be disagreement over bridewealth, suspicion of cattle theft or murder. A feud may last for years, occasionally flaring up in violence, and one reason for its prolonged character is the existence of ties of mutual obligations between the feuding groups.

SEGMENTARY OPPOSITIONS

Because of the political commitments entailed by kinship among the Nuer, conflicts rarely involve only two people. Usually, they would at least be helped by their closest agnatic kin. In larger conflicts, such as murder or disagreements over grazing rights, the kin group is united at a higher level. The general principle is 'myself against my brother; my brother and I against our cousins; our cousins, my brother and myself against our more distant agnates' and so on, until one reaches the level of the whole Nuer tribe, which is united against the Dinka, the traditional arch-enemy (with whom the Nuer nonetheless appear to have fairly recent common origins; see Newcomer 1972; Southall 1976). Interestingly, during the wars in Sudan, pitting 'Arabs' from the North against 'Africans' in the south, the Nuer and Dinka have periodically united at a yet higher level of segmentation against the Muslim government of the Sudan.

This form of organisation is called a system of segmentary oppositions. Evans-Pritchard describes it like this:

A tribal segment is a political group in opposition to other segments of the same kind and they jointly form a tribe only in relation to other Nuer tribes and adjacent foreign tribes which form part of the same political system, and without these relations very little meaning can be attached to the concepts of tribal segment and tribe. (1940, p. 147)

The largest units – the tribes – thus only exist when they are in conflict with other tribes. It is thus through conflicts that the Nuer are integrated politically at various levels.

In a segmentary political system, the reach of the political community is flexible and depends on the scope of the conflict. If the Nuer had aristocratic

lineages or even a king, the situation would naturally have been different. A necessary condition for segmentation is the equality, or equivalence, of the segments at each level: lineage A corresponds to lineage B, clan X to clan Y, and so on. It is therefore impossible to state unambiguously which group a Nuer belongs to: group membership is conditional on the situation.

One answer to the question of why the Nuer are not perpetually in conflict with one another – since the potential for conflict is ample and no central government or legislative system exists – is the presence of cross-cutting ties. However, they also have an institution reminiscent of a court of justice in the 'leopard-skin chiefs' (also known as men of the earth), who are not chiefs in the ordinary sense but who are generally respected as neutral intermediaries in situations of conflict. The leopard-skin chief listens to both parties and makes what he deems an appropriate settlement. However, there is no formal system of sanctions forcing people to follow his advice.

The leopard-skin chief usually comes from a small lineage and is thus considered a 'neutral' go-between in situations of conflict. However, he may often have acquired considerable wealth in cattle as payment for his services, and therefore has to be seen as a political actor, and an important one at that, although he is officially placed outside the political conflicts. This kind of ambiguous position, being outside and inside politics at the same time, is not unusual for religious leaders.

Like the Yanomamö (Chapters 5 and 7), the Nuer are primarily integrated through kinship, and they reproduce political stability both through shared descent and through alliances with other kin groups, thus reflecting the duality of kinship described in earlier chapters. Unlike the Yanomamö, as we have seen, they are organised in a segmentary way, which means that they have potential for corporate political action on a larger scale than the former. It should nevertheless be pointed out that we have dealt with both peoples in the ethnographic present, and in fact that the Nuer have for many years been fighting the Sudanese government, while the Yanomamö have, largely successfully, negotiated with Brazilian and Venezuelan state authorities over land rights. While thousands of Nuer live as refugees in the United States and elsewhere (Shandy 2007), Yanomamö leaders have appeared on international television and have participated in global conferences for indigenous peoples. It is thus no longer entirely accurate to state that the limits of the Yanomamö polity can be drawn at the point where it is no longer possible to organise a larger number of people along kinship lines.

The notion that one's loyalty is connected to many concentric circles which are activated in different situations is not only relevant to the study of stateless societies, but can also be applied to contexts in modern complex societies. The French nationalist leader Jean-Marie Le Pen once presented his own loyalties as a set of segmentary oppositions, stating that he preferred his daughters to his nieces, his nieces to his neighbours, his neighbours to people from other parts of France and so on. In general, politics in complex societies may often be illuminated through models of segmentary oppositions. Every citizen belongs

not only to the nation or the ethnic group – in different political situations both larger and smaller groups may be capable of demanding one's loyalty. In Europe of the European Union, one might add, citizens can similarly be Barcelonians, Catalans, Spaniards and Europeans in different situations. Here, too, the principle of conflicting loyalties applies, since European citizens are also, for example, environmentalists, jazz lovers or lesbians.

ASCRIPTION VERSUS ACHIEVEMENT

Melanesia includes New Guinea and many other smaller islands to the east, including the Trobriands. The border between Melanesia and Polynesia is conventionally located at Fiji; Polynesia consists of a great number of islands in the southern Pacific, covering a vast area from New Zealand to Hawaii. Melanesia is an enormously diverse area regarding language and culture, while Polynesia, which was peopled much more recently, is more homogeneous. Although the Melanesia/Polynesia boundary is frequently contested in the academic literature, it will serve us well here as a general division.

Traditional Melanesian societies are generally autonomous village units integrated on the basis of kinship (Sahlins 1963; Knauft 1999). There are tendencies of segmentation, but it is rare for the groups to form alliances at a higher level than that of the village. In other words, they are by and large politically integrated at the village level. The political leaders of Melanesian societies are characteristically 'big men', individuals who have acquired power because of their personal qualities.

Polynesian societies are different. Many of them have traditionally developed states with hereditary, royal leadership. In Hawaii, New Zealand (Aotearoa in Maori) and elsewhere, there were professional armies, tax collectors and bureaucrats. This kind of division of labour was rare in Melanesia.

Leadership in Melanesia depends on personal achievement. Within every village, there is competition between men who wish to become 'big men'; who aspire to make decisions on behalf of the village and wish to be respected and powerful. Such a status is acquired through the exchange of gifts with a large number of people, thereby creating ties of mutual obligation with as many persons as possible. A 'big man' should therefore have many relatives and several wives as a starting-point for his networking. When an established 'big man' dies, a new group of younger men will start competing to build similar positions.

Traditional Polynesian societies were ruled by feudal landlords rather than by 'upstarts'. The leaders belonged to royal or aristocratic lineages (in most Melanesian societies all lineages are equal), and the authority of the king was seen as the will of the gods. The surplus produced by the farmers was sufficiently large for the aristocrats not to engage in manual work. When a chief died, his position was immediately filled by a younger kinsman. Contrary to the Melanesian system, power in this system is thus institutional and not individual.

In a classic article, Marshall Sahlins (1963) compared the two systems. It appears that they reach their respective critical points in very different – some would say opposite – ways. The egalitarian, achievement-oriented Melanesian system makes it possible for enterprising individuals to obtain power by forging interpersonal ties of reciprocity with other people. When a man wants to expand his area of influence, he has to start giving presents to strangers, sometimes in villages other than his own. During the first phase, he will get nothing in return: it takes time to build up confidence. Moreover, this kind of enterprise is risky for the 'big man'. In many cases his own kin and co-villagers will eventually begin to grumble about giving him gifts without receiving enough in return, since he invests the surplus 'abroad' in a bid to expand his sphere of influence. In some cases this kind of situation may lead to the downfall of the 'big man': he might be deposed, killed or chased from the village.

The problem immanent in the Polynesian order is of a different kind, but this system also carries germs of instability. Gradually the professional state bureaucracy grows larger; thus the taxes must be increased and there is a risk of reaching a point where the burden on the taxpayers becomes so heavy that they revolt against the aristocracy.

These two contrasting examples reveal an important difference regarding the level of political integration. The Melanesian system is kinship-based, egalitarian and characterised by equality and achievement, although it may be less individualistic than Sahlins assumed (Knauft 1999: 144). The Polynesian system, by contrast, is hierarchical and ascription-based, founded on differences between the aristocratic and commoner lineages. The Melanesian system collapses when the principle of equality is not taken care of sufficiently, while the Polynesian order folds when the institutionalised hierarchy is no longer capable of legitimating itself.

An important difference concerns the ability of the respective societal types to accumulate economic surplus. The swidden agriculture practised in Melanesian societies did not make it easy to produce much more than the requirements for subsistence, while the irrigation technology developed in some of the larger, volcanic Polynesian islands made it possible to support a class of full-time soldiers and bureaucrats. If such a large surplus had been generated in a Melanesian society and had been channelled in the direction of a 'big man' and his family, one might well conclude that the outcome could have been a political system of the Polynesian type. Indeed, Sahlins remarks (1963; see also Keesing 1981), there were tendencies in some Melanesian societies, such as the Trobriand Islands, towards the development of hereditary, ascription-based political power and thereby a firm distinction between aristocratic and commoners' lineages. The necessary condition for such a development is the production of a surplus sufficient to make a division of labour possible where a segment of the population does not need to engage in agricultural work at all. These 'transitory' cases may point to some of the preconditions for the development of a state.

This comparison reveals differences in legitimation as well as limits to the number of people who can be integrated into different kinds of polities: it appears from Sahlins' analysis that the centralised Polynesian system was able to integrate many more people than the egalitarian Melanesian one. It possessed powerful means of coercion in the form of soldiers supported materially by agricultural surplus; and it had a class of professional administrators similarly fed. The Polynesian system described by Sahlins (and, admittedly, criticised by later scholars for being simplistic; see Sand 2002) could be seen as a case of what Claessen and Skálník (1978) have spoken of as 'the early state', which, as Skálník (1992) has later remarked, serves to nuance the simplistic dichotomy often invoked between 'state societies' (that is, 'ourselves') and 'stateless societies' (that is, 'the others').

POLITICS AS STRATEGIC ACTION

So far in this chapter, politics has been analysed from a largely systemic point of view. Although the focus has to some extent been on remarkable individuals, such as 'big men', the underlying question has been: how are societies integrated? Let us now raise a different question, namely: how do actors go about maximising political power?

It may be convenient to distinguish between two complementary definitions of politics. First, politics can be defined as agency; as the establishment of authoritative decisions involving the exertion of power. Second, politics may be seen as a system, in which case the word refers to the circulation of power and authority in a society. If the first definition is used, politics appears as competition between individuals or groups. In Bailey's view, thus, the rules that create a political system concern 'prizes, personnel, leadership (teams), competition and control' (1969: 20). If the second definition is used instead, the ultimate purpose of politics lies in its integrative power.

In the discussion of the Melanesian 'big man', it became clear that individual motives of fame and personal gain among 'big men' indirectly create political cohesion in Melanesian communities. If we were to apply such a perspective consistently, we would give the impression that 'societies' do not exist as anything other than the unintended consequences of a mass of strategic actions. Simultaneously, of course, actors have to lay their strategies within a system (or society) which places constraints on their course of action. This duality of social life has been discussed earlier; we will now examine its relevance in the study of political processes.

The Pathans of Swat valley in north-western Pakistan are cereal farmers (Barth 1959). A tiny minority of the population, the Pakthuns, own virtually all of the land, while the majority of the rest of the population are their tenants. The Pathans are patrilineal, and all formal political power is vested with men. Only sons can inherit from their fathers, but all sons have rights of inheritance, unlike in societies where the eldest son (primogeniture) or the youngest son (ultimogeniture) inherits the family property. There is a

desperate shortage of land, and, at the time of Barth's research, the most important political issues in Swat valley concerned competition over land rights. In such disputes, lineage segments may appear as political corporations. Unlike the Nuer, however, the Pathans do not usually align themselves with close agnates, but rather with distant ones. The reason is that, because of the rules of inheritance, the Pathans' plots of land border those of their close agnates and so they compete to expand into each other's land. The Pathans thus align themselves with distant agnates, whose plots are far away and therefore uninteresting, against close agnates. In this way, 'politics makes strange bedfellows' in Swat valley. (Brothers, however, do not compete for land: the norm of fraternal solidarity is stronger than the drive for expansion.)

In order to expand his fields, a Pakthun needs a large political following: he needs many clients. They can cultivate his fields and can be mobilised as soldiers if need be. Clients and land are thus the main resources competed for. Since there is no arable land not already under cultivation, the competition for clients and land can truly be seen as a zero-sum game: what one actor gains, another loses. Moreover, Barth emphasises, the game is played between individuals, not among lineage segments. Alliances and blocs are formed situationally by individual actors on a pragmatic basis.

More than fifty years after Barth's fieldwork, these tensions and conflicts over land rights are still relevant in Swat valley, but because of the political instability in the region, which borders on Afghanistan, current concerns in the area are chiefly related to the armed conflict between the Pakistani state and the Taliban, which enjoys some support in the region, and with the unrest along and across the border to Afghanistan.

MAXIMISATION OR CLASS STRUGGLE?

Barth's classic study of politics among the Swat Pathans focuses on individual strategies for maximisation: how individuals invest their resources, how they try to outwit each other to maximise value (locally defined as land and clients). In a reinterpretation of Barth's analysis, Talal Asad (1972) argues that the power disparities of the Swat were such a fundamental characteristic of the political system that an analysis which did not take them into account had to be misleading. First and foremost, he refers to the unequal access to land, which keeps a majority of the population in poverty and powerlessness. He also points out that the patron–client system prevents the clients from developing class-consciousness which might lead them to revolt. Since they are themselves divided by loyalty to different patrons, they are unable to organise their interests as a class. Rather than fighting the oppressors, they fight each other.

Asad proposes to replace Barth's individualist theory-of-games perspective with a Marxist analysis focusing on property and power disparities. It is evident that the two approaches raise fundamentally different questions, both of which are relevant to the study of politics but which lead to very different

conceptualisations of the political field. Asad presents a systemic perspective where individual acts become relatively uninteresting since they follow from the systemic parameters; Barth's analysis zooms in on the individual actor's strategies, whereby the systemic form becomes chiefly a result of action. Both interpretations are valid, but the controversy reveals that different analytical approaches imply diverging descriptions of any given society.

THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE

The politics and political culture of complex state societies are dealt with in greater detail later, notably in the context of contemporary cultural complexity in Chapters 16–19. Nevertheless, a few aspects of state politics are considered here, partly to avoid the impression that most societies in the world of the early twenty-first century are stateless. They certainly are not, although the role of the state varies greatly between local communities – from being nearly irrelevant in everyday life to being an imposing presence in most public situations. Some, like Pierre Clastres (1977; see also Graeber 2004), would regard the emergence of the state, and the enforced incorporation of non-state peoples into the state, as the most important watershed in cultural history. The main lesson to be learnt from the examples discussed here, apart from their ethnographic and historical value, lies in the comparative models and approaches to politics they exemplify. Today, the modern state is present and is articulated to varying degrees in local communities nearly everywhere in the world. The general tendency, most textbooks on politics in Third World societies would argue, is for localities to be subjugated to state legislation and surveillance. In Max Weber's famous words (1978 [1919]; cf. Giddens 1985), where it exists the state has a double monopoly on taxation and on the legitimate use of force, although globalisation has reduced the direct power of the state in many realms (Eriksen 2007). It ensures new power constellations and places new demands on its subjects or citizens, and it very often uses force or the threat of force in order to ensure loyalty and obedience among groups that question its legitimacy.

The following example may be interesting as it displays a kind of process rarely studied by social scientists concerned with the state, namely one of progressive liberation of the state from the people.

The Central African state of Congo (Brazzaville), studied by Kajsa Ekholm Friedman (1991, 1994), became independent from France in 1962. It was thinly populated and rich in natural resources. Nevertheless, the country has experienced a nearly continuous economic decline throughout its period of independence; in the early 1990s the state was disintegrating in highly visible ways: schools, hospitals and roads were not being maintained, corruption and nepotism were serious obstacles to bureaucratic efficiency, and the state apparently did nothing to alleviate the misery of poverty-stricken areas. In many ways, the state was absent from public affairs in the country. Yet the

public service was a very large employer, and since the means of production were state-owned, the state had ample funds.

Ekholm Friedman's analysis focuses on two levels: the state organisation, government and its employees; and actors situated in local communities. The state itself, she argues, has liberated itself from the people by ensuring an independent source of income through foreign trade and aid from donor agencies. Unlike the traditional African chiefs, with whom she explicitly compares Congo's contemporary rulers, the latter do not need to ensure the support of the country's inhabitants: they can do without the citizens' taxes and do not require their services as soldiers. Borrowing a metaphor from development sociologist Goran Hyden, Ekholm Friedman compares the Congolese state with a balloon floating above the country.

The state administration is based on patronage rather than meritocracy, with kinship as the most important principle. Thus a few very large extended kin groups control the entire state bureaucracy and are morally required to employ their relatives. As a result, Ekholm Friedman notes, many highly educated Congolese prefer to stay abroad after completing their studies, since they will never get a job with the state.

TACIT ACQUIESCENCE

Why do the people not revolt against such injustice? The answer, in Ekholm Friedman's analysis, lies in their cosmology and local organisation. Because of economic changes and migration, the local clan is no longer able to organise people in corporate groups. Further, Congolese tend to consult witchdoctors, clairvoyants or religious leaders rather than forming trade unions when they have a problem. Indeed, Ekholm Friedman places a great emphasis on the 'magical world view' prevalent in Congo in accounting for the citizens' tacit acquiescence in the excesses of the ruling families, showing how Congolese political movements have rapidly been transformed into religious cults.

David Kertzer writes:

Whether looking at historical accounts or at the world today, one is most struck not by the rebellions of the oppressed who rise up to destroy the political system that exploits them. Rather it is the overwhelming conformity of the people living in such societies that is most impressive. (1988, p. 39)

Kertzer accounts for this situation by emphasising the role of rituals and ideology in making the social order appear natural and inevitable; his term for this is 'mystification' (see also Chapter 14). It is doubtless true that dominant discourses and habit-memory (see Chapter 6), instituted through bodily practices and commemorative ceremonies in Connerton's phrase (1989), are often important legitimising instances. However, the curious feature of the Congolese situation is that the state, unlike the Polynesian chiefdom, does not seem to exploit and oppress its citizens: it simply ignores them.

It should also be noted that tacit acquiescence is not a universal phenomenon. Not least in South and Central American countries, social movements and peasant revolts aiming at the establishment of a more just political and economic order have been widespread, and have sometimes been successful in changing the social order and dominant power relations (Gledhill 2000). In Asian societies too, including China, India, the Philippines and Vietnam, powerful social movements organising peasants have been, or are, politically important. Perhaps the comparative lack of success of such movements in many African countries can be accounted for through Ekholm Friedman's study? Her work reveals a state which is both strong and weak; it fails to mobilise people, but is tightly organised and controls a great deal of wealth. Indeed, Ekholm Friedman concludes that the changes in Congo, both at the state level and in local communities, represent some of the least well-functioning combinations of modernity and African tradition conceivable. The inhabitants fail to organise their interests politically; the clan has ceased to function as a network channelling jobs, political organisation and social security; but the newly emancipated individuals have no abstract labour market to turn to. The state administration, for its part, legitimates and reproduces its power through kinship organisation, but it has severed the traditional ties of mutual obligations that the aristocratic lineages used to have with their subjects.

Yet another strategy is revealed in David Graeber's work on the Tsimihety of north-western Madagascar. Graeber describes them as 'masters of evasion' (2004: 55) and argues that this ethnic group, numbering around a million, largely successfully negotiates its relationship with the modern Malagasy state on its own terms, refusing subordination. Describing the Tsimihety as anarchists, Graeber describes their politics as a 'conscious rejection of certain forms of overarching political power which also causes people to rethink and reorganize the way they deal with one another' (2004: 56).

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Many contemporary societies are less peaceful than the disintegrating Congo Brazzaville studied by Ekholm Friedman (where, incidentally, ethnic violence has since broken out) or the Tsimihety. One society associated with violent politics for several decades was Northern Ireland.

Allen Feldman (1991), writing about paramilitaries and militants in Northern Ireland during 'the Troubles' (which lasted from the late 1960s until the peace treaty of 1998), is concerned with the ways in which people are conditioned to committing violence; to using their bodies as tools for a cause, risking death in the act. Feldman scarcely discusses the large-scale political aspects of the conflict, but focuses narrowly on the experiences and narratives of those most immediately involved: the paramilitaries. His monograph 'is about the instrumental staging and commodification of the body by political violence' (Feldman 1991, p. 8), and shows how the political

subject is created 'within a continuum of spaces consisting of the body, the confessional community, the state, and the imagined community of utopian completion: United Ireland or a British Ulster' (1991, p. 9).

Long quotations from paramilitaries of the militant Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) support the author's argument about the ways in which the body is being turned into an object or an instrument; the vocabulary developed to talk about bodies, living or dead, is particularly striking. Euphemisms for killing, including 'to do [someone]', 'to knock his cunt in' and 'to fill him in', are frequently used in their narratives. Important, concerted forms of resistance developed in prison further indicate the importance of the body as political instrument, and Feldman thus analyses 'the Dirty Protest' (refusal to wash), 'the Blanket Protest' (refusal to wear the prison uniform) and the recurrent hunger strikes. These ways of circumventing the prison's control over the inmates' bodies, which is evident in frequent beatings and in intimidating forms of physical surveillance, through objectifying one's own body in illegitimate ways, are seen, following Foucault, as ritualised acts of collective resistance whereby each individual inmate – especially in the case of hunger strikes – gives his individuality to the community and relinquishes control over his own body. The dramatised contrast between Loyalist and Republican, between Protestant and Catholic, is thus brought to a climax not only through the violent acts, but also through the hardships and humiliations experienced in prison.

Feldman, it should be noted, does not purport to explain the conflict in Northern Ireland; but he gives an understanding of why some of the inhabitants have committed themselves to violent action. He analyses political violence as a result of particular bodily experiences codified through an antagonistic political ideology. In this way, violence, which has in recent years become a central focus for anthropological theorising (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003), becomes understandable. In relation to the earlier discussions about agency and structure in politics, it should also be noted that Feldman's model encompasses both dimensions in its focus on the socially conditioned body – which simultaneously expresses aspects of the person and of the social system. Political violence takes many forms. The marginalisation and muting of large groups through terror, torture and massacres has been dealt with by Michael Taussig (1984), who writes about the many silent, powerless victims of colonialism and postcolonial state violence in South America. Political violence as civil war has been analysed in a study of Sri Lanka by Bruce Kapferer (1988), who shows how the image of the demonic Tamil is created and nurtured by Sinhalese nationalists who draw strategically on particular interpretations of ancient Sinhala myths and sacred texts to support the view of Tamils as devils. In a study of Hutu refugees from Burundi in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki (1995) shows, on the basis of detailed informants' narratives, how particular images of the past amalgamate into a 'mythico-history' emphasising enmities and deprivations in relation to the other main ethnic group in the region, the Tutsis. In a similar vein, but using a different

kind of material, Peter van der Veer (1994) describes how militant Hindus in India developed a certain interpretation of the past in order to justify strong anti-Muslim sentiments, culminating in the Ayodhya riots in 1992–93. (Later, particularly in Chapter 17, the appropriation of the past for political purposes is discussed further.)

In anthropology, the concept of war, a characteristic form of political violence, has – not surprisingly – proved difficult to define comparatively (Descola and Izard 1992) since wars differ greatly in character. A war in the New Guinea highlands, for example, does not necessarily result in many casualties (Knauft 1990), quite unlike the wars engaged in by European states in the twentieth century. Bruce Knauft, further, enumerates as many as six distinct kinds of violence routinely classified as 'Melanesian warfare', ranging from violence between Europeans and Melanesians during colonialism to 'the ongoing local violence of gangs or *raskols*' (Knauft 1996, p. 137).

Human Rights in Anthropological Perspective
In debates over human rights, universalistic and relativistic perspectives may clash. On the one hand, one may argue that human rights are a universal good which should be promoted worldwide, and which should not, therefore, be regarded as the product of a particular kind of society. On the other hand, one may point out that human rights undoubtedly were developed in Europe in modern times, and that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 is therefore anything but universal, but rather a child of modern European social philosophy. If one follows the latter argument, it may be seen as an ethnocentric error to claim that our human rights should be introduced and defended with the same vigour in African and Amazonian societies as in West European ones. According to this kind of logic, every society must be understood in its own terms, since every culture contains its own concepts of justice and rights. According to the first, universalistic line of thought, it would nevertheless be inhuman and arrogant to deny tribal peoples and other non-Europeans human rights only because they happen to have a different history from ourselves. In fact, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement in 1948 about the incipient Declaration of Human Rights, arguing that it appeared to be ethnocentric.

Decades later, an anthropology of human rights has been developing in the interstices between legal and political anthropology, social philosophy and transnational law studies (Wilson 1997; Cowan et al. 2001; Mitchell and Wilson 2003; Goodale and Merry 2007; Goodale 2009). No longer concentrating on the relationship between universalistic and particularistic norms, the bulk of this research investigates ▶

the dynamics of human rights discourses and practices in particular local contexts. Unlike earlier ventures into the field (e.g. Renteln 1990), current research takes as its point of departure not 'the tribal world' but the contemporary world of states and legislative systems. Drawing on his own work in Guatemala and South Africa, Richard A. Wilson (1997) calls for a comparative anthropology of human rights that explores the different ways in which rights discourses and practices are appropriated locally, and which also indicates which kinds of conflicts arise as results of attempts at implementing human rights, often interpreted in divergent ways, in different societies. While much of the contemporary anthropological research on human rights deals with gender issues, violence and 'human security', the substantial literature on minority problems in contemporary Europe is also immediately relevant for anthropological approaches to human rights: the right to cultural identity may clash with individual rights, since minority leaders may overrule claims to autonomy from their members. Group rights may therefore be at odds with individual rights. The 'right to a cultural identity' would then, perhaps, have to be supplemented with 'the right not to have a cultural identity'.

   In 1999, incidentally, the AAA issued a new statement on human rights, stating in no uncertain terms that it 'reflects a commitment to human rights consistent with international principles', adding 'but not limited by them' (quoted from Goodale 2009, p. 102). By this caveat, it is probably meant that cultural identities should still be allowed to flourish in so far as they are compatible with 'international principles'.

What about political violence as such? Do violent events as different from each other as those in Ayodhya, in Burundi and in Belfast have enough in common to merit comparison? Perhaps Feldman's analysis, focusing on the fusion of bodily experience and a powerful demonising ideology, can be useful as a starting-point for comparison (see also Krohn-Hansen 1994, 2009). For it is a sad fact that anthropologists will probably have to try to understand political violence for many years to come, probably forever.

   A note on research ethics may be appropriate here. When doing research on contentious matters, open conflict or even situations of war, anthropologists are not just responsible for their own security, but also that of their informants. Time and again, anthropological research has been appropriated by authorities who do not necessarily have benign intentions towards the ethnographer's people. Since anthropologists are no better equipped than others to predict future developments than others, it can be difficult in this kind of situation to live up to the professional ethical guideline stating that one should 'do no harm'. As Oscar Salemink has showed in a detailed analysis of the interrelationship between ethnography and politics in Vietnam since the

mid nineteenth century, ethnographic findings were often used by colonial (French) or neocolonial (American) powers to control and subdue minorities. Notably, Salemink (1991, 2002) describes how the detailed ethnographic work of the French anthropologist Georges Condominas was used to track down and capture minority leaders. Of course, Condominas could hardly be blamed, but this and similar stories should be read as a call for caution.

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Anthropology is a holistic discipline in the sense that it aims at an understanding of the interrelationships between different aspects of culture and society. Later chapters draw on these preliminary insights into political processes and develop them further. Questions to do with ideology, power and legitimation are returned to, and politics in complex state societies is also explored further. The next chapter, which deals with exchange and consumption, thus integrates perspectives on politics with perspectives on the economy.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Fredrik Barth: *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans*. London: Athlone 1959.
Pierre Clastres: *Society against the State*. Oxford: Mole 1977.
John Gledhill: *Power and its Disguises. Perspectives on Political Anthropology*, 2nd edn. London: Pluto 2000.
David Graeber: *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press 2004.