

## History of Political Philosophy - Ancient and Roman Era

What is political science is the study of politics as defined in earlier notes. Such argument would require a follow-up question – what is politics? Politics came from the root word polis. A polis is the term for the Greek city states. The Greeks used the term ‘politikos,’ to describe anything pertaining to the polis (Miller, 1998). Basically, politikos is anything political.

During the ancient times, the government of the polis is the end-all and be-all of all decisions within the same city-state. It is the only dominant political organization. A particular city-state’s leader (or leaders) has the power over anyone and everything within the city. In turn, the city-state represents its citizens in the conduct of its external or foreign affairs.

In the Greek polis, as in the kingdoms of other ancient civilizations, the study of politics came hand-in-hand with the study of history (Smith, 2006). Smith (2006) stated in a Yale University lecture on Political Philosophy that “political science simply was a science of statecraft”.....

Today, however, a political society does not merely refer to the state or to the science of statecraft, instead it is understood not merely the science of government but the study of the dynamics of political power (authority & legitimacy), and its acquisition and application within a polity.

In ancient Greek, Plato envisioned an ideal state (Kallipolis) ruled by guardians with everyone performing their roles in the state according to their training and abilities. His views on *The Republic* are not only significant in political science, but also in other similar disciplines. Socrates is also reputed by some political scientists as the founder of political science. Through Plato’s writings we can see how he asked serious questions on the meaning, purpose and utility of political life. For Smith (2006), “Socrates is the founder of our discipline who asks about the virtues of moral and political life.” His dialogues on the question ‘what is justice’ remain to be one of the most enduring questions in social sciences today.

Aristotle on the other hand, insisted on empirical observation to arrive at a generalization on how government works and on how it should work. Empirical observation is considered as the bedrock of the sciences. Aristotle’s political science is both normative and empirical in this regard.

In Eastern ancient tradition, the works of Confucius & Lao Tze, among other political thinkers proves that “in each historic period and in almost every geographic area” and as long as there is a civilization “we can find someone studying politics and increasing political understanding”. Similarly, Chanakya (350-275 BC), described as someone who had been a professor of Takshashila University and later becoming Prime Minister to Chandragupta Maurya, as one of the earliest known political thinkers, economists and king-makers. Chanakya wrote the *Arthashastra*, which was one of the earliest treatises on political thought, economics and social order. Apparently, his writings on fiscal policies, welfare, international relations, and war strategies, anticipated most European political thinkers on these subjects.

## **Roman Empire-**

While the ancients generally preoccupied themselves with the “what ought to be” in politics. The political scientists of the Roman era concerned themselves with the questions: how the Roman Empire became what it was then, what is the origin of the nations surrounding the Roman Empire, how do they conduct their political affairs. As it can be noticed, they were more concerned with the “what is” of politics. Basically, the Romans took a more positive rather than normative stance, that oriented toward understanding history, understanding methods of governing, and describing the operation of governments. Among the most notable political scientists of the period were Polybius, Livy, and Plutarch. In a way, these writers were the antecedents of the enlightenment thinkers in using the positive-descriptive approach in political science research.

The founders of the city of Rome were said to be the legendary twins Romulus and Remus, Romans would come to identify the origins of their distinctive liberty in the killing of a tyrannical king, generally dated in 509 BCE, by the ancestor of the Junius Brutus who would eventually kill Julius Caesar. The position of king was replaced by two annually elected consuls, the royal council became the Senate, and popular assemblies were established to elect magistrates and pass the laws they proposed.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE) was the most famous man of Roman politics. The writings of Cicero were virtually canonized subsequent to his death as classic models of rhetoric and philosophy. While Cicero adhered to a moderate skepticism in general philosophical matters, he would draw on a number of Stoic ideas in formulating his own ethical and political teachings. Cicero emphasized the Stoic themes of the natural affinity for society and the existence of natural law. At the same time, Platonic themes and models were also important in his political writings.

To be continued... By Dr. Ranjay Reddy

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