**The Nature of Political Thought**

First it is important to note that political thought, political philosophy and political theory are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing.

Philosophers, scholars, statesmen, and people have generally over the ages critically engaged the idea of politics. As is known, politics is central to our lives and a lot of the things we do. Politics affects us all. For this reason, Aristotle describe human beings as “zoon politikon,” which means political animal. He is convinced that it is only the gods and beasts that have nothing to do with politics. Harrold Lasswell has defined politics as “Who gets what, when and how.” Inherent in the idea of politics is not just the idea of resource control but also the idea of conflict. This is so because at no time is there enough resources to attend to the needs of man. The wants of humans are insatiable. And sometimes conflict of interest breaks out in the attempt to meet these needs and wants. This is suggested in Thomas Hobbes’ political idea when he suggests that the selfish nature in the state of nature makes humans to experience war of all against all.

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Thinking about politics is as old as politics itself. And although in some communities, their political ideas are not documented, they have political thoughts which have influenced the kind of institutions they run politics with. This suggests that political thought is not just Western in nature, but that we may also speak of African Political Thought, Chinese Political Thought, Arab’s Political Thought/Islamic Political Thought and so on. However, our preoccupation here is the study of Western Political Thought. Over the years, different style and approaches have been used in producing political thought. Dedication has been given to “explaining institutions and practices, give advice to rulers, defend values and principles, or criticise the world in which these thinkers have found themselves. The works of political thinkers will reveal that they have focussed on discussing the institutions of government, law-making, and the exercise of coercive power, or the character of the society or people. Political thought has, however not always been taught as “political thought alone” for it can be found in ethics, sociology, anthropology, theology and metaphysics. The field of political thought is a hybrid discipline comprising of philosophy, history, practical political consideration, and science. All these have one way or the other influenced what we now have as political thought.

Political thinkers, as can be gleaned from above, have focussed on different areas of interest. As David Boucher and Paul Kelly have suggested “Some political thinkers have sought to explain the nature of man as a political animal and the role of politics in an account of human flourishing and well-being…. Others have sought to explain why politics, though necessary, is secondary to more important human goals such as seeking salvation and eternal life. … other thinkers have sought to subsume political activity beneath realms of human activity such as ‘society or the economy. In all, reflection has been poured into such issues as the nature of politics, liberty, justice, property, rights, law authority, legitimacy, best form of government, the limits of government, responsibility of the citizens to themselves and government, when government may legitimately be overthrown, freedom and its limits, the origin of the state and so on.

A lot of what we now have as political thought emerged in the histories of philosophy and general literature. Political thought has been defined as “the study of questions concerning power, justice, rights, law and other issues pertaining to governance.” It is has to do with the examination of major texts which examine questions relating to the polity and social order. Political thought has to do with considering how great thinkers have reflected and responded to political challenges of their time and how these political thought can shape the way we address issues in our own time.

Political Thought is also referred to as Political philosophy, which is defined as “the logical and conscious inquiry into the problems of man and society;” and as “the attempt to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good political conduct [through] critical and coherent analysis.” Through the study of political thought, one is able to gain an insight into evaluating the strength and weaknesses of political ideas.

The subject-matter of political thought is THE STATE. Issues relating to the state’s evolution, organisation, and purpose occupy importance places in political thought. When thinkers are able to provided critical answers to some questions regarding the state they are seen as producing political thought. Some of the questions asked in this regard are: What is the state and why should it be obeyed? What ends should it serve and how can it be structured to achieve these ends? What are the proper limits on state authority and when may citizens refuse to obey it? How should the state relate to others in and outside society? What is justice and how best can it be guaranteed? What is the importance of liberty and equity? What is sovereignty and where is it located?

All products of political thought are influenced by: the time the thought is produced; the personality of the thinker; the place(s) and events happening that provoked his thinking. This means that the political thinker is a product of his time, and social and political crises shaping his thought. In producing their works, however, reliance is often on ethical and political considerations. A political thinker’s submission may not be factual, as allusion may be made to some allegory. Often, the political thinker is prescriptive with his/her work rather than descriptive. (s)he says what ought to be rather than what is.

Historically, the Western origin of political thought can be traced to the Greeks, who made the problems of man and the society the object of critical inquiry and systematic study starting from the 5th Century BC. It is not that men were not thinking before this, it is just that the nature of the thinking is characterised by myth, legend, theology and allegory. However, what is now known as Western political thought is not limited to the Greeks as scholars for The United Kingdom, France, United States of America, and other Western societies have over the years made laudable contribution to the field.

**The Importance of Studying Political Thought**

1. The student gets a clearer understanding of some of the concepts we employ in political discourse and how these concepts were developed over the years.
2. The history of political thought provides ethical norms for the evaluation and reform of contemporary political structures and practices. This means that what is learnt in political thought can be used to improve the ideas in current political events
3. Knowledge of political thought provides a basis for understanding political events
4. A knowledge of how history has affected where we are today.
5. Theories can always provide a guide and as such will guide those who make political decisions in their choices.