Traditional Political Theory and Modern Political Theory

Traditional theory or approach in political science is a normative or an imaginative approach to politics. It emphasis on “what ought to be” rather than “what is” and is based on historical and ideological underpinning. In this case, scientific methods are not in their analogies but mere imaginations and intuitions. They are also referred to as idealists. Traditional approach are utopian, idea driven and are based on historical facts.

As you are well aware, Political theory is a sub-field of political science. Unlike other sub-fields of political science, political theory does not model its approach to knowledge on the natural sciences. The modern political approach on the other hand, is scientific or behavioral approach to political issues. The use of facts and figures are very paramount (paramount: dominant), as they base their analogies on “what is” and not “what ought to be” like in the traditional theory. Scholars are realists who see issues as they are through scientific observations before coming up with conclusions. Modern approach deals with scientific methodologies and sees political issues how they really are without being biased. Political theorists see their field as among the humanities and as drawing from other humanities, such as the disciplines of ethics, history, linguistics, cultural anthropology, and other relevant fields. Dear students do keep in mind that Political philosophy is also known as political theory but it must also be understood that Plato (Republic), Hobbes (Leviathan), and Marx (in the entire body of his work), are example of political philosophers while Machiavelli, James Madison, and Isaiah Berlin are examples of political theorists.

What then is Contemporary Political Theory?

We can simply define contemporary as living or occurring at the same time and theory is a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained. Therefore, Contemporary political theory is the ideas that explain political issues occurring during the same time or at this time period. The subject of contemporary political theory cover topic and issues like Behaviouralism, Post- Behaviouralism, Decline and Resurgence in Political Theory, Neo-Liberalism: Libertarian and Communitarian, Neo-Marxism Contemporary Debates on Orientalism, Existentialism, Multiculturalism, Rawls Theory others. According to David Held, contemporary political theory involves four distinct tasks: Firstly, it is philosophical, i.e. it is concerned with the normative and conceptual framework; secondly, it is empirical, i.e., it is concerned with the problem of understanding and explanation of the concepts; thirdly, it is historical, i.e., it is concerned with the examination of the key concepts of political theory in historical context; and finally, it is strategic, i.e. it is concerned with an assessment of the feasibility of moving from where we are to where we might likely to be. It is only through
the combination of these elements that the central problems of political theory can be solved.

The Emergence of Contemporary Political Theory in Historically Context
Now there has been a revival of interest in political theory in the late 1970s particularly in USA and Europe. During this time of renaissance there emerged a kind of clash of values and the changes in the humanities and social sciences. At the end of Second World War, the re-emergence of Europe, and other factors such as crisis in the ideologies of socialism and Marxism had brought about new political ideas and ideologies.

Also from Marxism or socialism to liberalism or democracy they all stand challenged and new powerful social movements occurred seeking to redraw the issues in political theory. During the era of domination of behaviouralism, political theory was overpowered by political science. Theory was denied the status of a legitimate form of knowledge and inquiry.

Though the hold of empiricism did not last long, yet it left an enduring legacy in the development of political and social sciences particularly in North America in the form of ‘scienticism’. The encouragement for the regeneration of political theory came from many sources. While a number of thinkers challenged the whole model of what is science, there were others who felt that there are distinctive problems of understanding the social sciences and social issues which could not be grasped by the model of a unified science.

As a result of the great debates, a number of important innovations in the study of political theory followed which culminated into a broad understanding of contemporary political theory. This was how contemporary theory has to emerge in the course of history.

Distinctive Features of the Contemporary Political Theory
The following are the distinctive features of the contemporary political theory:

1. An important feature of empirical theory was its break with history. Contemporary political theorists believe that political theory must not be disassociated from history. Political theory has once again been renewed as history of political thought.

2. All knowledge about human activities involves interpretation and the interpretation can lead to different conclusions. Hence the idea of political theory being neutral and value-free is wrong.

3. Political understanding cannot escape the history of tradition. Knowledge is a part of the tradition and the process of understanding aspects of the world contributes to our self-understanding. However, the process of self-understanding is never complete. ‘History does not belong to us but we belong to History’. There is no final truth. As such there can be no such thing as ‘the only correct or the final’ understanding of the political phenomena. The meaning of a text on political theory is always open to further interrelations from new perspectives.

4. Political theory is concerned with conceptual analysis. This involves seeing political theory as a systematic reflection upon the meaning of the key terms and concepts like sovereignty, democracy, right, liberty, justice etc.
5. There is a revival of normative element. Contemporary political theory is concerned with the systematic elaboration of the underlying structure of our moral and political activities, as well as examination and reconstruction of the principal political values such as justice, liberty, common good, community living etc.

6. Theory is concerned with both abstract theoretical questions and particular political issues. This is due to the belief that consideration of political concepts without detailed examination of the condition of their realization may not be able to bring out the actual meaning of the concept. Political theory should be problem-oriented and should probe issues like democracy, market, equal opportunities in such contexts. Political theory is a theoretical aspect of political science, trying to construct a theory on the basis of observation.

According to David Held, contemporary political theory involves four distinct tasks:

*Firstly*, it is philosophical, i.e. it is concerned with the normative and conceptual framework;

*Secondly*, it is empirical, i.e., it is concerned with the problem of understanding and explanation of the concepts;

*Thirdly*, it is historical, i.e., it is concerned with the examination of the key concepts of political theory in historical context; and finally, it is strategic, i.e. it is concerned with an assessment of the feasibility of moving from where we are to where we might likely to be. It is only through the combination of these elements that the central problems of political theory can be solved.

Today, this theory has become much popular. Some point you should remember about contemporary political ideologies are: First, these ideologies are created from or by a huge social movement. Second, Equality or democracy is one of the most common parts of these ideologies. Third, these ideologies always challenged different other regulated political ideologies.

The relevance of political theory in contemporary society:

**The Relevant to solving Problems:**
Political Theory is closely related to a number of academic subjects such as history, ethics, sociology, economics and other areas of study. These subjects provide theories and data which political theorists use to construct political theory.

**Knowledge of Our Rights and Duties:**
A democratic government implies popular participation in political processes such as elections. We should know our rights, especially the right to vote. Our knowledge of political theory tells us that Right to Vote is not only a Right but a Duty as well. The voters should choose the best men.

**Political Theory Liberalizes the Outlook:**
By studying political theory, an individual may think more logically about concepts such as equality, liberty and justice. Political theory teaches us to be tolerant of other people's
attitudes or beliefs. Liberty and Equality are not just abstract concepts; these concepts reflect ideals that we should try to follow. An intelligent citizen is committed to liberal ideals and civil liberties.

**Politics essentially is the Art of the Possible:**
Limitations on any government exist and we all can see them. A political system has to function under different kinds of compulsions and constraints. Anything is possible in politics. An understanding of politics can be helpful in appreciating factors which bring necessary changes in the society.

**A Growth in the Reasoning Powers of the Mind:**
A political concept is not merely a matter of faith or belief; it develops through a lot of reasoning. Different ideologies (liberalism, Marxism and socialism) have been subjected to verification and the political thinkers relied on 'facts' and 'practical experience'. Political theory generates a spirit of reasoning, which would help students to make arguments or statements when they participate in debates.

In short, the relevance is that future planning is possible, Conceptualization becomes possible, it Provides knowledge of political reality, it Provides legitimacy to government, the theory is Useful in solving problems, the Conceptual and analytical clarity is obtained, political theory inspire political movement and finally historical understanding makes comparative studies clear and easy.

The dialogue on Political theory is a never ending. Speculation on politics relates to the life and values of men. The goal of political theory interestingly is to enhance our understanding of the social reality and to create conditions for good life. In this context, both traditional or classical and contemporary or empirical theories need to be synthesized (synthesized: combined or produce). Political theory cannot be based purely either on philosophy or science. All issues raised by philosophy must be examined within modes of inquiry at empirical level. On the other hand, the normative issues raised by political science cannot be evaded. For example, the meaning of justice, equality or freedom cannot be explained by science. Similarly, the problems of our times - whether they are racial and ethnic tensions and bigotry, overpopulation, unemployment, decaying cities, corruption, and conflicts between the nations - are such that we need to find their solution. While the political scientists produce more comprehensive explanation of how and why things happen in the world of politics, the task of political philosopher is to relate this knowledge with the big problems of mankind and to inquire into how these can help in enhancing liberty, equality, justice and fraternity in the society and among the peoples.
Contemporary Political Theory: Behaviouralism

2nd Semester,
Unit I: Paper 202 Contemporary Political Theory
MA Political Science & Human Rights,
Indira Gandhi National Tribal University

This topic covers the issues questions on behaviouralism, the Historical reasons/ factors that led to the coming or growth of behaviouralism, Characteristics of Behaviouralism and finally the limitations of Behaviouralism.

First, what behaviouralism? It is indeed very difficult to precisely define Behaviouralism because it has been used as an umbrella by the behavioural political scientists to record their protests, for the rejection of traditional political theory/approach. Even during its hay days, it was quite differently defined by a large number of political scientists.

But if we are to still define Behaviouralism, in short it refers to an orientation/emphasis to the study of political social phenomena which is characterized mainly by empiricism local positivism (A quality or state characterized by certainty or acceptance or affirmation and dogmatic assertiveness) and cross inter-disciplinary interest, interest in sociology, psychology, history etc. Behaviouralism tries to examine the behaviour, actions, and acts of individuals - rather than focusing on the characteristics of institutions such as legislatures, executives, and judiciaries. The striking point of political behaviouralism is that behaviouralists seek to examine the behaviour, actions, and acts of individuals. It is a political approach that change the traditional political theory or approach in terms of objective, quantified approach (approach Express as a number, measure or quantity ) to explain and predict political behaviour. Behaviouralism even claims it can explain political behaviour from an unbiased, neutral point of view.

The key tents of behavioralism have been a) study of Human Behaviour b) Empirical Scientific Methods of Research (base on experiment and observation rather than theory) c) Interdisciplinary focus d) Scientific theory building (Making sense. It is building model or theory about how thing work).

Historical reasons/factors that led to the coming or growth of behaviouralism
After the Second World War there was deep dissatisfaction with the nature, scope, methods and conclusions of the traditional Political Science and the methods of
investment of traditional political science. This turned into a revolution in the 1930 first in the USA. This revolution was characterized as the Behavioural Revolution or Behavioural Approach or Behaviouralism. The late development of political science as an autonomous academic discipline in American Universities too was another factors for the growth. Not only these, there are numbers of other forces that contributed to the development of Behaviourism.

Robert Dahl, analysed these factors i.e rapid development of Behaviourism in USA believed at least “five specific inter-related, quite powerful stimuli were the factors.” These stimuli are:

1) Work or Social Scientists Particularly the Ideas and Efforts of Charles Merriam,
2) Migration or Several European Sociologists and Psychologists to the USA,
3) The work done by Social Science Research Council (SSRC),
4) Impact of Second World War,
5) American Philanthropic Foundation. In fact, all these factors, coupled with many others, of course, came to function in the decade of 1954s.

**Characteristic of behaviouralism**

In order to know the characteristics of Behaviouralism lets see the views of David Truman, and David Easton.

David Truman defines political Behaviouralism as the science of political behaviour. He wrote that

"Where political behaviours means all “those actions and interactions of men and groups which are involved in the process of governing...... At the maximum this conceptions brings under the rubric of political behaviour any human activity which can be said to be a part of governing.”

From this it is clear that Behaviouralism stands for two features:

1. Research must be systematic, and
2. Research must place primary emphasis upon empirical methods.

**David Easton identified eight major characteristics of Behaviouralism:**

1. *Regularities*. Meaning that there are discoverable uniformities in political behaviour
2. *Verification* meaning that validity of generalizations must be testable, in principal by reference to relevant behavior.
3. *Quantification* meaning recision in the recording of data and the statement of findings requires measurement and quantification, not for their own sake, but only where possible, relevant and meaningful in the light of other objectives.
4. **Value.** It means “Ethical evaluation and empirical explanation involve two different kinds of proposition that for the sake of clarity should be kept analytically distinct.

5. **Techniques.** “Means for acquiring and interpreting data cannot be taken for granted. They are problematic and need to be examined self-consciously, refined and validated.

6. **Systematization.** Research ought to be systematic, that theory and research are to be seen as closely inter-twined part of a coherent and orderly body of knowledge.

7. **Pure Science.** The application of knowledge is as much a part of the scientific enterprise as theoretical understanding.

8. **Integration.** Recognition of this inter-relationship help to bring political science back to its status of earlier centuries and return into the main fold of the social sciences.

On the basis of these description of the characteristics and assumptions of Behaviouralism it is now clear that Behaviouralism study politics as an aspects of human behaviour in a framework of reference, common to other social sciences and prescribes the use of empirical research, mathematical-statistical-quantification techniques of data collection and analysis with the purpose of building a scientific theory political behavior.

**Criticism of behaviouralism**

There is criticism of behaviouralism. Let’s see the main points of criticism.

1. That human behaviour as the object of study is bound to be problematic and even fruitless.
2. Human behaviour cannot be observed and stated in empirical generalizations.
3. Behaviouralism makes political science dependent upon other social sciences, particularly Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology.
4. Behavioural advocacy or study of facts to the exclusion of values it’s neither possible nor desirable, nor even can it be useful.
5. The differences among the behaviouralists have tended to reduce it to a congeries of several views, both related and unrelated from one another.
6. That scientific method, particularly as used in natural sciences cannot be applied to social sciences, particularly political science.
7. Behaviouralists were obsessed with methods and techniques and that they failed to concentrate upon the substance of politics.
8. That behaviouralism reflected a bias in favour for liberal democratic system since empirical research can be really possible only in such system.
9. Behaviouralists in their passion for ‘Scientism’ have created a ridiculous complicated jargon.
10. The ‘value-neutralism’ preached and practiced but the behaviouralists were destined/heading direction to make it a less-relevant theory of human political behavior.

11. The behaviouralists also failed to make real headway towards the professed objective of theory-building. They remained lost in TRIVIAL (*insignificant*) research and failed to come to grips with the brute realities of politics.

Despite behaviouralism has limitations and points of criticism, it cannot be denied that Behaviouralism has played heuristic role (guided investigation) in the development of the discipline. It successfully focused attention upon the limitations of the traditional approach. The behaviouralists can legitimately claim credit for inducing, popularizing and improving the scientific method of social science research and the use of statistical and mathematical techniques in discipline.