

Review of *Politics; why it matters* by Andrew Gamble, 2019, Polity, London by Victoria Honeyman, University of Leeds.

With the arrival of Corona virus, politics has never seemed less important. Gone are the days of Brexit, where politics was everywhere. Now, medicine is the vital field, and observers of politics are just visible at the periphery of news coverage. This book arrived as social distancing began, and many academics, me included, were beginning to wonder whether our skills and specialisms count in a life-and-death situation. This book makes a compelling case that we all need to hear – that politics always matters and that we, as the analysts and observers of that system, are important within society and within academia more generally.

This short book guides the reader through the political process, from the identification and management of basic needs through to how politics can be aspirational and help to improve the world. Gamble begins with a harsh truth recognised by us all – politics has a bad reputation but is also fascinating. He argues it is often viewed as ‘an endless drama of character and circumstances, and this is what drives news agendas all over the world’ (p.3). But Gamble argues that the personalities in politics are not a fundamental part of political life. While he does not refer to politicians as the Kardashians of politics, that is the point he is making. People have a lack of faith in politics and a desire to disengage with it, and Gamble argues that this encourages people to engage with the personal rather than policy. When those politicians fail or disgrace themselves, the public turn their backs and argue they are all the same. However, as we know, ignoring world events, or even domestic issues, does not make them go away or allow life to continue without change. Instead, damage can be done, to individual lives and to nations, meaning however unpleasant it may be, the world has to look into the abyss and try to fight the evil which emerges from it, evil which can be seen everyday in places like Syria and Yemen.

Gamble focuses initially on five basic questions, the answers to which have driven the development of politics across the world. These focus on the basic questions which political scientists often grapple – how do you establish order, who should rule, who gets what, how do you stop states fighting and who are your friends (and enemies)? Gamble answers these questions by focusing on different events, different time periods and different individuals to demonstrate the universality of the issues at stake, with many states failing to learn the lessons of their predecessors and attempting to reinvent the political wheel. What is impressive within this book is not just Gamble’s extensive knowledge of a huge number of different political systems (including his knowledge of Ancient History) but also his relentless optimism and belief that things can get better, that politics can ultimately lead to peace and prosperity if everyone just behaves themselves. It is a very British approach to political science, and one I find comforting.

Gamble then turns his attention to ‘what is the point of studying politics?’ (p.63). This is a question than many of our students might have asked, but for many academics, the answer is that we love our subject, that it speaks to us in a way which other academic studies don’t. Gamble goes beyond this and considers whether we are all searching for truth. It brought to mind the scene in Indiana Jones, where Professor Jones argues that archaeology is the search for fact, and those pursuing truth should go to a philosophy class. Gamble is acutely

aware of this, although his reference is a more literary *Alice through the Looking-Glass* rather than Steven Spielberg (p.65). He argues that language has infinite interpretations so truth is hard to find, leading to the boom in fake news. If it sounds like it could be true, many will believe it. So how can fact be established? As we know, positivists are convinced that fact can be found in empirical research and the ability of different researchers to replicate experiments and results. Gamble, like many within the academic field, argue that scientific rigour is important to our field of study, within confines, and that too much navel gazing and obsessing over our methods can be hugely damaging. 'When a discipline like politics or international relations becomes concerned primarily with its own methods, and its practitioners with commenting upon each other's work rather than trying to find out something new about what is happening in the world, it starts to lose touch with what should be its main rationale' (p.80). Gamble concludes this chapter by briefly considering the approaches of Oakeshott, Hayek, Carr and Keynes, demonstrating that even the most brilliant of minds see the world through different lenses and create different solutions to political problems. Perhaps politics is not just about the academic pursuit of 'truth' after all. Perhaps, that *is* best left to philosophy and instead political scientists have to reconcile intellectual thought and argument with beliefs and feelings, which often defy logical explanation.

In his final chapter, Gamble asks if we should be optimistic or pessimistic about the future. While giving the reader apply reasons for pessimism, Gamble remains optimistic and this is the real strength of his book. He argues that despite war, famine, hardship and environmental damage, human beings have accomplished great things. He points to the substantial recovery of the ozone layer, driven by a global ban on CFC's as a demonstration of how politics can bring people together and generate successful outcomes (p.104). His argument is simply this – without politics, the world will fall apart, so refusing to be part of the solution is an abdication of responsibility. 'Simply shrugging our shoulders and concentrating on looking after our own immediate interests is beguiling, but also a betrayal.' (p.117) He concludes by pointing to those within NATO and Europe who wish to tear down the achievements of the post-war era, arguing that it is the responsibility of us all to resist the desire to destroy rather than build, and *that* is why politics matters (p.120).

Most academics spend the time they have for reading delving into their specific area of interest. For us, politics is our bread and butter, a passion we have turned into a profession. Rarely do many of us stop to consider why what we do matters, or why politics is so crucial to the wider world. This book tackles that question, and it is not an easy or simple answer. It shows the reader how fallible we all can be, how elusive "truth" and "fact" are, but also the crucial service we provide. By studying politics and commenting on the world, be it the world we live in or the world hundreds of years ago (as Gamble is keen to include historians within list of political critics and analysts), we are cutting through the fluff, through the personalities, to the heart of the issues. That is a difficult, thankless task, but we all do it in our own way, and this book is a celebration of those who love politics for all its flaws, and seek to advance its study.