

The Classics

The great classics were composed by political exiles or by failed politicians like

Plato, Machiavelli, Hugo Grotius, Sir John Fortescue, Hobbes and Locke.

Sometimes

political theory emerged out of a revolution or indication of an impending one. Plato

and Aristotle sought to recreate the magic and pre-eminence of the Greek city state

which were fast fading into the past. Besides Italian unification, Machiavelli focussed

on the various dimensions of the newly emerging commercial society.

Hobbes and

Locke addressed questions relating to the crisis of political authority in times of civil

war.

Sheldon Wolin identifies some principal characteristics of the classical tradition

which can be mentioned as follows:

- It sought to identify politics with the public.
- It aimed at acquiring reliable knowledge about matters concerning the people.
- It laid emphasis on order, balance, equilibrium, harmony and stability.
- It tried to project an ideal form of government.
- It laid stress on comparative studies and dealt with concepts like law, citizenship, justice and participation.
- It was largely ethical in perspective.

The classics in political theory explain politics, its meaning and value.

Besides being

influential, a classic in political theory contains a wealth of information, ideas and

values that cumulatively enriches human thought and action. A great theorist is one

who articulates logically with rigour, insight and subtle nuances of the dilemma of his

age, and dissects the problems that confront the generation to which he belongs.

Every age is characterized by its own problems and dilemmas, and classical works

deal with these situations. But such localism should not be considered as a hindrance

to the essential richness of a classic as demonstrated by Aristotle's politics. It justified

the prejudices of its time (like slavery), but was able to offer brilliant insights into the

basic issues of politics, like stability, revolutionary change, and the importance of

family and property in sustaining the state.