Human, Social, and Political Sciences Tripos
2018-19

POL 1: The modern state and its alternatives

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This paper seeks to understand the practical and imaginative foundations of modern politics and the reaction and resistance to them. It is structured around set texts. These texts are not there to be analysed as texts per se but to be considered for the arguments they contain. We have chosen these texts for this paper not because they represent a canon but because they engage with some of the fundamental questions of modern politics.

The paper begins with the modern state. The modern state is a historically contingent political phenomenon but it has become the predominant basis on which political authority and power are constructed across the world today. Where there is no modern state, there tends to be civil war or occupation by other states. Where modern states are ineffective, politics is unstable and sometimes violent, and governments struggle to manage the economy. But the modern state also is a site of violence and an instrument of power that has been used at times to inflict vast suffering on those subject to its coercive capacity at home and imperial reach abroad. The question of how the exercise of power by the modern state over its subjects can be legitimated is a perpetual one in modern politics, and the answers to it have been deeply politically contested.

The first modern states were monarchies. From the late 18th century onwards, there was in Europe and the United States a move towards what we now call representative democracy. Representative democracies have been more historically precarious than modern states and there remain alternatives to this form of government. The idea that the modern state under conditions of modern commerce leads necessarily to representative democracy has been disproved by historical experience of, especially that outside Europe and North America. As an idea representative democracy appears to offer equality, liberty and self-rule. But representative democracy also frequently disappoints in practice as it rarely does realise these values and the goods it promises frequently clash with each other. The second part of the paper looks at the contingent historical origins in the United States and the political implications of representative democracy as it spread as a form of government. It seeks to unpack the paradoxes of representative democracy as a form of government that rhetorically invokes the ‘rule of the people’ and the pursuit of the common good and yet gives power to those who are elected to office by seeking votes, and to consider its relationship to the conditions of material prosperity and the distribution of wealth.

The final part of the paper examines the coherence and persuasiveness of a number of political critiques of the modern state and representative democracy and the nature of disagreement in politics. It considers the critique made by Marx of the democratic modern state as the product of capitalism, Gandhi’s rejection of the violence and alienated sovereignty of modern politics in search of a return to a soul-based civilisation, and Arendt’s desire to return politics to its place as a meaningful sphere of free human action. It concludes by contemplating the nature of political disagreement itself in relation to human nature and the problems of modern politics.

TEACHING

LECTURES

Michaelmas 2018  (Thursdays and Tuesdays at 10 with a second lecture at 4 on Tuesday 9 October)

Introduction

1  Hobbes and the problem of order I
Helen Thompson

2. Hobbes and the problem of order II
Helen Thompson
3. Constant and modern liberty I  
Helen Thompson

4. Constant and modern liberty II  
Helen Thompson

5. Weber and political leadership I  
Michael Kenny

6. Weber and political leadership II  
Michael Kenny

7. Schmitt and the nature of the political I  
Glen Rangwala

8. Schmitt and the nature of the political II  
Glen Rangwala

9. Hayek and economic liberty I  
Michael Kenny

10. Hayek and economic liberty II  
Michael Kenny

11. Fanon and the imperial modern state I  
Glen Rangwala

12. Fanon and the imperial modern state II  
Glen Rangwala

13. The creation of the American federal republic I  
Helen Thompson

14. The creation of the American federal republic II  
Helen Thompson

15. Democratic society and democratic adaptability I  
Helen Thompson

16. Democratic society and democratic adaptability II  
Helen Thompson

**Lent 2019**

17. Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power I  
Helen Thompson

18. Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power II  
Helen Thompson

19. Parties and voters: democracy’s bads or the democratic political solution? I  
Helen Thompson

20. Parties and voters II: democracy’s bads or the democratic political solution?  
Helen Thompson

21. Representative democracy and material prosperity I
Helen Thompson

22 Representative democracy and material prosperity II
Helen Thompson

23 Representative democracy and the class distribution of wealth I
Helen Thompson

24 Representative democracy and the class distribution of wealth II
Helen Thompson

25: Communism I
Glen Rangwala

26 Communism II
Glen Rangwala

27 Self-rule
Glen Rangwala

28 Self-rule II
Glen Rangwala

29 Human agency and political freedom I
Michael Kenny

30 Human agency and political freedom II
Michael Kenny

31 The persistence of politics I
Michael Kenny

32 The persistence of politics II
Michael Kenny

SUPERVISIONS

Director of Studies will organise supervisions. The paper organiser will provide a list of supervisors for them to use. Students should have three supervisions in each of the Michaelmas and Lent terms. They should complete a piece of work for each supervision, at least four of these pieces of work should be essays. For two of the supervisions supervisors can set alternative written work, which could be, for example, an exercise based on the reading. An example of what such an exercise could be is given under the Hobbes reading.

Students should have 1 or 2 revision supervisions in the Easter term. Students should write at least one essay from each section of the papers and supervisors are asked to offer supervisions on at least two of the books published since 1960.

CLASSES

There will be classes in the Easter Term to help students to see the connections between the different ideas and arguments examined in the paper. The classes run for two weeks. Students will be divided into five groups.
ASSESSMENT

There will be one three-hour examination. The examination paper will be divided into three sections. Candidates must answer three questions taking them from at least two sections.

SAMPLE EXAMINATION PAPER

Candidates must answer three questions, taking one from at least two sections.

Section 1

1. Why for Hobbes was the freedom the same whether a commonwealth be monarchical or popular?
2. Was Constant right that the circumstances of modern politics prescribe the limits of modern politics?
3. Why for Weber is political leadership mired in tragedy?
4. Why did Schmitt believe that politics was defined by decision-making in exceptional circumstances?
5. Why for Hayek is the individual prior to the state?
6. Why for Fanon should colonized people abandon the European model of the state?

Section 2

7. How far is the separation of powers in the American constitution an effective remedy for the problems of republican government?
8. If Tocqueville was right and democratic success rests on adaptability, is democracy now failing?
9. What, if anything, is democratic about the electoral competition for power in modern states?
10. Are political parties good for politics?
11. Does representative democracy sustain economic development?
12. Who materially benefits from representative democracy?

Section 3

13. How far was Marx’s vision of politics anti-political?
14. Can politics exist without violence?
15. What, for Arendt, are the limitations of philosophical approaches to politics?
16. Why is politics so contested?
READING AND SUPERVISION ESSAY QUESTIONS

The paper is organised around set texts. For any topic you study, you are expected to read and know the set text/s and the reading marked with a bullet point. The supervision essay questions are suggested with those readings in mind. The reading below the marked reading is for those interested in deepening their knowledge in particular areas. There is no expectation that this reading is to be pursued anything other than selectively in relation to individual interest.

1-2: Hobbes and the problem of order


Quentin Skinner, ‘What is the state? The question that will not go away’, http://vimeo.com/14979551

**Suggested essay question**

Why, according to Hobbes, should subjects obey the sovereign?

**Exercise**

Answer each question briefly using a sentence for the definitions in question 1 and several sentences for each of questions 2-6.

1. What did Hobbes mean by each of these terms: the right of nature; the state of nature; the laws of nature; the sovereign; liberty; covenant; commonwealth; a representative; law; mixed government?
2. How did Hobbes distinguish between natural and artificial persons?

3. What for Hobbes is the only distinction between a commonwealth by acquisition and a commonwealth by institution?

4. In what circumstances, according to Hobbes, can subjects disobey the sovereign?

5. What six reasons does Hobbes give for saying that humankind cannot live socially with one another like bees and ants?

6. Why for Hobbes ‘was there never anything so dearly bought, as these Western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latin tongues’?

3-4: Constant and modern liberty


Background to the French Revolution

Constant’s novel exploring the perils of modern liberty

Athenian democracy in practice

Suggested essay question
What challenge did Constant think that modern liberty posed to representative government?

5-6: Weber and political leadership

- Raymond Geuss, History and illusion in politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch 1 (sections 3, 6).

Tracy Strong, Politics without vision: thinking without a banister in the twentieth century (Chicago: Chicago University Press), chapter 3 and interlude.

Suggested essay question

Why, according to Weber, does politics pose specific ethical difficulties?

7-8 Schmitt and the nature of the political


**Further writings by Schmitt**

**Secondary reading on Schmitt**

**Suggested essay question**
How did Schmitt distinguish the political from other spheres of human activity?

**9-10 Hayek and economic liberty**


David Linden and Nick Broten, *Friedrich Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017)
Norman Barry, *Hayek’s Serfdom Revisited: Essays by Economists, Philosophers and Political Scientists on The Road to Serfdom after 40 years* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1984).
Suggested essay question

Why for Hayek was state planning the road to serfdom?

11-12: Fanon and the imperial modern state


Further writings by Fanon
Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and freedom* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), part IV.

The colonialist state and the subject of politics

Suggested essay question
How for Fanon do our existing political institutions embody illicit forms of domination?

13-14: Representative democracy and the creation of the American republic


H. Storing, *What the anti-Federalists were for: the political thought of the opponents of the constitution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981).


The continuing constitutional debate

Francis Fukuyama, *Political order and political decay: from the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy*, (London: Profile, 2014), chapters 33-44.


Colin Campbell, ‘Clinton’s encounter with the separation of powers’ *Government and Opposition* vol 36 no 2, 2001.

Representation


Suggested essay question
Are representation and the separation of powers the ‘republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government’ that Madison supposed?

15-16 Democratic society and democratic adaptability


(Note (i) Tocqueville’s chapter on ‘the probable future of the three races that inhabit the territory of the United States’ has been added to the set text; (ii) this initial reading is set in relation to looking at Tocqueville’s arguments about the claim that democracy is a singularly adaptable form of politics. In answering students can draw on Tocqueville’s arguments about American racial politics and democracy.)


David Runciman, ‘Can democracy cope?’ *Political Quarterly*, vol 82, no 4, 2011, pp. 536-545.


The Economist, ‘What’s gone wrong with democracy?’ *The Economist*, 2014


Slavery and race


Secondary reading on Tocqueville


Suggested essay question

Is democracy adaptable to change?

17-18: Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power


Inside democratic politics


*Suggested essay question*

What follows if representative democracy is the rule of professional politicians?

19-20 Parties and voters: democracy’s bads or the democratic solution to politics?


• John Ferejohn, ‘‘Must preferences be respected in a democracy?’’ in David Copp, Jean Hampton and John E. Roemer (eds.), *The idea of democracy* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).


Harvey Mansfield, ‘‘Whether party government is inevitable’’ *Political Science Quarterly*, 1965, vol 80 no 4.

Paul J. Quirk and Joseph Hinchcliffe, ‘‘The rising hegemony of mass opinion,’’ *Journal of Policy History* vol 10 no 1, 1998.


*Suggested essay question*

Do voters choose bad policies?

21-22 Representative democracy and material prosperity


M. Mandelbaum, *The ideas that conquered the world: peace, democracy, and free markets in the twenty-first Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002)


David Landes, *The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so rich and some so poor* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).


*Suggested essay question*

Does representative democracy explain the historical divergence in the prosperity of countries?
23-24: Representative democracy and the class distribution of wealth


Martin Gilens, ‘Affluence and influence’
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhCatZYsAqI
Francis Fukuyama, ‘The future of history: can democracy survive the decline of the middle class?’ *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2012.
Daron Acemoglu et al, ‘Democracy, redistribution and inequality,’ NBER Working Paper Series 19746, 2013. Available at:
<http://www.nber.org/papers/w19746.pdf?new_window=1>

*Suggested essay question*
Is representative democracy now the rule of the rich?

25-26: Communism


Further Marx writings


On Marx


Socialism after Marx


Suggested essay question

Does socialism rest upon an illusory optimism about the possibilities of politics?

27-28: Self-rule


**Suggested essay question**

If ‘self-rule’ is impossible in the modern world, what price is paid?

**29-30: Human agency and political freedom**


Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (eds), *Hannah Arendt and the meaning of politics*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 263-296.

Philip Baehr and Philip Walsh (eds), *The Anthem companion to Hannah Arendt* (London: Anthem Press).


**Suggested essay question**
What, in Arendt’s judgement, are the conditions that make politics possible, and what are its distinctive properties?

31-32 The persistence of politics


This text covers two themes: partisanship and democratic politics and the intractability of political disagreement. There are two suggested essay questions.

**On partisanship and democratic politics**


**On the intractability of political disagreement**


*Suggested essay question*

Either:
Is partisanship an inevitable feature of democratic politics?

Or:
Why is political disagreement so intractable?

*Further reflections and reading*

We can learn about politics in different ways and we encourage you to read beyond the academic literature. To start your thinking, we suggest you might try: Gore Vidal’s novel about the beginnings of the American republic, *Burr*; Joe Klein’s novel about Bill Clinton’s first election campaign, *Primary Colours*; Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel, *The Leopard*, about the collision of the new Italian state of the Risorgimento and the insistent particularities of Sicily; Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, about a Nigerian village subject to western imperialism; Joseph Conrad’s novel about political idealism and terrorism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Ursula La Guin’s very different kind of critique of the aspiration to utopian politics in *The Lathe of Heaven*. 