Human, Social, and Political Sciences Tripos
2019-20

POL1: 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. And since everything in politics is mortal, it concludes by contemplating the question of how democracy itself may end.

TEACHING

LECTURES

Michaelmas 2019 (Thursdays and Tuesdays at 10, from 10 October until 5 December)

Introduction to the Course (10 October)
Christopher Brooke

1. Hobbes and the problem of order I (15 October)
David Runciman

2. Hobbes and the problem of order II (17 October)
David Runciman

3. Constant and modern liberty I (22 October)
David Runciman
4. Constant and modern liberty II (24 October)
   David Runciman
5. Weber and political leadership I (29 October)
   David Runciman
6. Weber and political leadership II (31 October)
   David Runciman
7. Hayek and economic liberty I (5 November)
   David Runciman
8. Hayek and economic liberty II (7 November)
   David Runciman
9. Fanon and the imperial modern state I (12 November)
   David Runciman
10. Fanon and the imperial modern state II (14 November)
    David Runciman
11. MacKinnon and the state and women I (19 November)
    David Runciman
12. MacKinnon and the state and women II (21 November)
    David Runciman
13. The creation of the American federal republic I (26 November)
    Christopher Brooke
14. The creation of the American federal republic II (28 November)
    Christopher Brooke
15. Democratic society and democratic adaptability I (3 December)
    Christopher Brooke
16. Democratic society and democratic adaptability II (5 December)
    Christopher Brooke

**Lent 2019**
17. Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power I (16 January)
    Christopher Brooke
18. Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power II (21 January)
    Christopher Brooke
19. Parties and voters: democracy's bads or the democratic political solution? I (23 January)
    Christopher Brooke
20. Parties and voters II: democracy's bads or the democratic political solution? (28 January)
    Christopher Brooke
21. Representative democracy and material prosperity I (30 January)
    Christopher Brooke
22. Representative democracy and material prosperity II (4 February)
    Christopher Brooke
23 Representative democracy and the class distribution of wealth I (6 February)
Christopher Brooke

24 Representative democracy and the class distribution of wealth II (11 February)
Christopher Brooke

25: Communism I (13 February)
David Runciman

26 Communism II (18 February)
David Runciman

27 Self-rule (20 February)
David Runciman

28 Self-rule II (25 February)
David Runciman

29 Human agency and political freedom I (27 February)
David Runciman

30 Human agency and political freedom II (3 March)
David Runciman

31 The end of democracy I (5 March)
David Runciman

32 The end of democracy II (10 March)
David Runciman

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, with at least four of these pieces of work being 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 revision classes in the Easter Term to help students prepare for the examination. The classes run for two weeks. Students will be divided into four or five groups (depending on the total number enrolled in the course).
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 A

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 for Hayek is the individual prior to the state?
5. Why for Fanon should colonized people abandon the European model of the state?
6. Why was MacKinnon so pessimistic about women’s agency under the liberal state?

Section B

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 C

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. Can representative democracy survive the challenges of twenty-first century politics?
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


Annabel Brett and James Tully, eds. Rethinking the foundations of modern political thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chs. by Richard Tuck and Kinch Hoekstra.


Suggested essay question

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

Suggested non-essay-based 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


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


**Suggested essay question**

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

### 7-8 Hayek and economic liberty

**SET TEXT:** Friedrich Hayek, The road to serfdom (London: Routledge, 1986).


Roland Kley, Hayek’s social and political thought (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1995).


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?

9-10: Fanon and the imperial modern state


Other works by Frantz Fanon

Frantz Fanon, Black skin, white masks (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008)


Frantz Fanon, Alienation and freedom (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), part IV.

Further reading


Denean T. Sharpley-Whiting, Frantz Fanon: conflicts and feminisms (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997)


Further watching

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

11-12: MacKinnon and the state and women


Other works by Catharine A. MacKinnon

Further reading
Feminist Philosophy Quarterly, special issue on Toward a feminist theory of the state after 25 years: essays by Natalie Nenadic, Susan J. Brison, Elena Ruiz & Kristie Dotson, and Clare Chambers, together with a reply by Catharine A. MacKinnon: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq/vol3/iss2/.
Clare Chambers, Sex, culture, and justice: the limits of choice (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008).

Suggested essay question
What for MacKinnon were the main challenges facing the development of a feminist theory of the state?
13-14: Representative democracy and the creation of the American republic


• Ross Harrison, Democracy (London: Routledge, 1993), ch. 5.

H. Storing, What the anti-Federalists were for: the political thought of the opponents of the constitution (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
David Waldstreicher, Slavery’s constitution from revolution to ratification (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010).
George William van Cleve, A slaveholders’ union: slavery, politics and the constitution in the early American republic (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

The continuing constitutional debate
J. Zvesper, 'The separation of powers in American politics: why we fail to accentuate the positive', Government and Opposition vol. 34, no. 1 (1999), pp. 3-23.
**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.)


**Slavery, race, and Native Americans**

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 The idea of democracy, David Copp, Jean Hampton and John E. Roemer, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).


Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Schapiro, Politicians don’t pander: political manipulation and the loss of democratic responsiveness (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).


Suggested essay question

Do voters choose bad policies?

21-22 Representative democracy and material prosperity


Francis Fukuyama, *The origins of political order: from prehuman times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile, 2011), parts IV and V.


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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhCatZYsAqI)


*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


• Gandhi, ‘Gandhi’s political vision: the pyramid versus the oceanic circle’ in Gandhi, Hind Swaraj and other writings, Anthony Parel, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
• Lawrence Freedman, Strategy (Oxford: Oxford University Press), ch. 23.
• George Orwell, ‘Reflections on Gandhi’ in George Orwell, Essays (Harmondsworth: Penguin 2000).

Suggested essay question

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

29-30: Human agency and political freedom


• Patricia Owens, Between war and politics: international relations and the thought of Hannah Arendt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

• 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 end of democracy


Francis Fukuyama, *Political order and political decay: from the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy*, (London: Profile, 2014).
Francis Fukuyama, ‘The future of history: can liberal democracy survive the decline of the middle class?’ *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 1 (2012).

Suggested essay question

What is the most plausible scenario about the death of representative democracy, and how plausible is it?

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 *The Secret Agent* about political idealism and terrorism at the beginning of the twentieth century; and Ursula Le Guin’s very different kind of critique of the aspiration to utopian politics in *The Lathe of Heaven*. 
APPENDIX A: Past Tripos papers

What follows are the 2019, 2018, and 2017 POL1 Tripos papers. Please note that the syllabus is revised each year, and so a small number of questions (e.g. Q4, Q16) do not correspond to topics on this 2019-20 paper guide. In all cases, the rubric is the same: 'Candidates must answer three questions. Questions should be chosen from at least two sections.'

2019

SECTION A

1. Why for Hobbes is civil war always worse than a tyrannical sovereign?
2. What for Constant made the conjunction of the modern state and ancient liberty so dangerous?
3. What kinds of politicians are needed in the modern party system according to Max Weber?
4. Why for Schmitt is it necessary for the state to make distinctions between friends and enemies?
5. What role did Friedrich von Hayek envisage for the state in a society which respects the principle of economic liberty?
6. According to Fanon, why does the European model of the state not serve as an inspiration for the post-colonial world?

SECTION B

7. Was Hamilton justified in thinking that the American constitution "ought to be preferred" to democratically-passed laws when they appear to clash?
8. Was Tocqueville right to say that in the United States the republic has "deeper roots" than the Union?
9. Can a "popular will" be manufactured by politicians?
10. Do policies decided in democracies necessarily harm people?
11. Is material prosperity enhanced by democratic government?
12. Has democratic politics become oligarchic?

SECTION C

13. Can the modern state be anything other than a device for administering the common affairs of the bourgeois class?
14. Is Gandhian 'self-rule' a solution to contemporary problems such as criminal violence and environmental catastrophe?
15. Under what conditions can political freedom be established, according to Hannah Arendt?
16. What can we learn from Jonathan Haidt about the nature of political disagreement in contemporary democratic societies?
2018

SECTION A

1. Why did Hobbes believe that life without a state was more dangerous than life with a state?
2. How did Constant understand the relationship between public and private life in a modern state?
3. What for Weber were the most important qualities of responsible political leadership?
4. Why did Schmitt believe that decision-making was the essence of politics?
5. Why did Hayek see state planning as such a threat to personal freedom?
6. Is it possible to control the violence of the state?

SECTION B

7. Does the American constitution offer an effective means of containing the problem of factions?
8. Does democracy require a socially united society?
9. Can the people ever rule in democracy?
10. Does democracy sacrifice good policy outcomes to partisanship and irrationality?
11. What does the form of government in modern politics explain about national economic outcomes?
12. How far does political influence in representative democracy turn on income and wealth?

SECTION C

13. Was Marx right to think that the modern state would eventually face a crisis it could not overcome?
14. How did Gandhi understand the connection between modern politics and modern technology?
15. Why did Nietzsche think that democracy was a slavish form of politics?
16. Why is politics so tribal?

2017

SECTION A

1. What for Hobbes was the basis of the sovereign’s authority to rule?
2. What role did Constant think public opinion played in a modern state?
3. Why did Weber believe that politics was a ‘vocation’?
4. Why was Schmitt so adamant that politics should not be confused with economics?
5. How did Hayek believe it was possible to escape ‘the road to serfdom’?

6. Is violence essential to modern politics or inimical to it?

SECTION B

7. Is the separation of powers the guarantee of liberty which the Federalists supposed?

8. Is democracy a set of political rules, or a social commitment of its citizens?

9. Can politicians manufacture opinion in democratic politics?

10. Can democracy escape EITHER the deleterious consequences of partisanship OR irrationality?

11. Is economic history on the side of representative democracy?

12. How far does deep inequality of wealth corrode democracy?

SECTION C

13. Is Marx right that the fundamental conflicts of politics transcend the boundaries of the nation-state?

14. Does Gandhi offer a viable alternative to representative democracy?

15. What sort of politics did Nietzsche think was possible ‘beyond good and evil’?

16. Why are political differences so resistant to being settled by facts?

APPENDIX B: Past Examiner’s reports

At the conclusion of the Examining process each year, the Examiner responsible for overseeing the marking of the POL1 paper writes a formal report reflecting on the paper and on how candidates attempted the various questions. The three Examiner’s reports that correspond to the three papers in Appendix A appear below. As with the exam papers themselves, do note that the syllabus changes from year to year, and so some of the discussion that follows is not directly relevant to the content of this year’s paper.

2019

POL1 remains a very popular paper. 151 HSPS candidates took the paper this year, as did 38 in History & Politics, and 9 from other Triposes. The overall standard of the scripts was commendably high. The average mark for the paper was 66 for HSPS candidates and 67 for History and Politics candidates. In HSPS, 21% were awarded a 1st, 72% were awarded a 2.1, with 7% securing a 2.2. The highest agreed mark awarded to a script was 82, the lowest 53.

As usual a handful of topics and themes attracted the most attention, though every question elicited at least one answer (the lowest in the HSPS exam attracted 3 answers, the highest 76 answers). In Section A, the question on Hobbes attracted by far the most HSPS responses (76), with Weber (42) and Fanon (42) also proving popular. The other three questions all attracted a substantial number of responses: Hayek (26), Constant (20), Schmitt (13). In Section B, the most popular question, by a considerable margin, was a thematic one on the general will (42). The question on oligarchy and democracy was answered by 28 candidates, while that on material prosperity and democratic government attracted 22 answers. The other three questions were less popular: Tocqueville and American society (3); harm and
politics (5), and Hamilton and the American constitution (11). Answers in Section 3 were likewise unevenly distributed, with Gandhi attracting the most (42). The question on Arendt was answered by 36 candidates, followed by the moral psychology of Jonathan Haidt (18) and Marxist theories of the state (14).

The best scripts were very impressive, demonstrating an excellent grasp of the materials under discussion, a good understanding of relevant historical and/or political contexts, and the ability to develop a cogent and sophisticated line of argument. Weaker scripts lacked one or more of these virtues. Some scripts were too short to include enough relevant information to secure a good mark. It is worth stressing that the use of examples – whether historical, contemporary, or even hypothetical – can help to illuminate theoretical arguments, whether Hobbes’s account of Leviathan, Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, Gandhi’s understanding of nonviolence, or Arendt’s conception of the vita activa. The best scripts on these (or similar) topics tended to mix conceptual analysis with some examples. Most scripts that addressed historical topics – and above all the Hobbes, Weber and Schmitt answers – failed to provide enough historical detail to locate the thinkers and their arguments in time. This was true of both HSPS and History and Politics students. Although the examiners are not looking for long and involved discussion of historical context, it is important to recognize what the thinkers were doing when they wrote their texts, and to do that some historical contextualization is necessary. The authors did not write in a vacuum.

Overall, then, this was a good year for POL1. The average standard of the exam scripts was commendable. The majority of students demonstrated a good grasp of the course material, and only a small percentage were awarded 2.2s. The best scripts were a pleasure to read, showing a very impressive level of understanding for this stage in the Tripos.

Duncan Bell

2018

178 undergraduates in HSPS, 38 in History & Politics and 13 in other Triposes were registered to sit this paper. The quality of the scripts was generally good as was their presentation: 38 achieved Firsts and the average was 65. Most were easily legible; ‘separation’ was the only word that was repeatedly misspelled.

Most candidates chose at least one question from Section A. The question on Hobbes attracted by far the most responses (86), that on Weber (78), Constant (29), Violence and Power (27), Hayek (22), and Schmitt (9).

In Section B, Q9, ‘Can the people ever rule in democracy?’ was the most popular (53 responses), followed by Q7, ‘Does the American constitution offer an effective means of containing the problem of factions?’ (34), Q12 on the political influence of income and wealth in representative democracy (27), Q11, ‘What does the form of government in modern politics explain about national economic outcomes’ (23), Q8 ‘Does democracy require a socially united society?’ (11), and Q10, ‘Does democracy sacrifice good policy outcomes to partisanship and irrationality’ (8).

In Section C, Q14, ‘How did Gandhi understand the connection between modern politics and modern technology?’ dominated (with 50 responses), followed by Q15 ‘Why did Nietzsche think that democracy was a slavish form of politics?’ (28), Q13, ‘Was Marx right to think that the modern state would eventually face a crisis it could not overcome?’ (26), and Q16, ‘Why is politics so tribal?’ (8).

The average mark for each of the questions was between 64 and 68. The most interesting essays genuinely engaged with the questions and the issues they raised, demonstrated careful reading of the primary texts and relevant literature, referred to them succinctly and precisely, and revealed further reading. Those essays provided specific pertinent political examples or illustrations to bolster their argument, which was made clear from the onset. They were well-structured and balanced, flowed well to the end and the argument was evenly sustained throughout.

The attractiveness of questions from Section A did not mean that candidates knew the primary texts. All too few candidates seemed to have read them. In some cases, Hobbes or Constant’s very own and most famous pronouncements were attributed to the lecturer for POL1; thus Professor Runciman became the author of the description of life in the state of nature ‘as nasty, brutish and short’. Many of the answers on
Hobbes consisted of disproportionately long descriptions of his account of the state of nature thereby leaving little time to reflect on life in civil society and its specific character. Only one candidate reflected on Hobbes’ view of the relationship between states and violence between states. Too few answers on Weber assessed the relative importance of the qualities of responsible political leadership. Many answers on Hayek lacked specificity. Too many answers to the question of state violence gave what was deemed to be Arendt or Fanon’s treatment of the subject rather than answering the question using these or other relevant authors. All too often, it was not clear what controlling the violence of the state might be taken to mean.

Similar comments might be made about many of the answers to the questions in Section B and C. What could be understood by a ‘socially united society’, ‘the people ever ruling’, ‘good policy’ or ‘irrationality’ was not explained in a number of scripts. Answers to Qs 11 and 12 were often little more than a precis of one or two key texts on the subjects, and these were not always accurate. The answer to the question on Gandhi required a specific assessment of his views of modern technology and politics and of his view of their interconnection. That on Nietzsche called for more than a summing up of his view of Christianity and morality. Answers to Q16 needed to probe the various ways in which politics might seem tribal and the ways in which it might not.

This said, there were some exceptionally good scripts; indeed, some exceeded even the highest expectations one might have of first year undergraduates. Beautifully written, they showed their authors to have benefitted from the lecture series as a platform from which to explore the literature and the issues for themselves, thereby enabling them to respond to the questions in a nuanced and informed manner, but also a personal and distinctive one.

Sylvana Tomaselli

2017

POL1 was again a popular paper this year, though numbers were slightly down on 2015 and 2016: in the end 161 students sat the examination, including eight PBS and Economics students who borrowed the paper. As in previous years, we adopted a practice of open double-marking, with the first marker blind-marking the script and the second marker acting as a moderator. I am grateful to the assessors, Evaleila Pesaran and Paul Sagar, for taking on this task and for turning around a large number of scripts so quickly and efficiently.

The range of material covered in POL1 makes it a challenging paper, and as usual students performed at a variety of different levels. There were 16 first-class marks (10%), 121 upper seconds (75%), 23 lower seconds (14%) and one third (1%); the highest mark awarded was 75 and the mean mark for all candidates was 63.9. As in previous years, the rule requiring students to choose questions from at least two of the three sections did not prevent them clustering around a few core thinkers. In general, those candidates who stuck to the familiar topics of Weber, Hobbes, and Gandhi (which between them accounted for more than 40% of all answers) did less well than those who ranged more widely. It is not always in students’ best interest to shy away from what appear to be the most challenging questions.

In Section A, the most popular question was on Weber, which received 70 answers, closely followed by Hobbes (69), with Hayek (24), Constant (23), violence (14), and Schmitt (9) markedly less popular. Although there were some strong answers on these thinkers, many candidates were wrong-footed by the specificity of this year’s questions. On Hobbes, for instance, weaker candidates simply rehearsed Hobbes’ rationale for leaving the state of nature without discussing the relationship between authority and power (a distinction which Hobbes, admittedly, sometimes collapses) or the specific nature of the covenant. On Weber, the best answers used the concept of ‘vocation’ to interrogate the meaning of ‘Beruf’ and Weber’s complex attitude towards full-time politicians, but others became bogged down in a generic discussion of the ethics of conviction and responsibility. Most of the candidates who answered on Hayek were able to rehearse his basic arguments, but only a few had much to say about how he thought the ‘road to serfdom’ could be avoided, or about the tensions between his constitutionalism and his belief in spontaneous order. Constant answers fell into the same trap: those that were able to say something specific about public opinion did well, but many were not.
The answers on violence and Schmitt tended to be somewhat stronger than other Section A answers: indeed, the average marks for these questions were the highest on the paper. Students who were able to adjudicate between Fanon and Arendt and to challenge the simple binary proposition of the violence question did well; so too did those who pointed out that Schmitt subsumed economics into politics. The broad normative terms of the violence question sit rather uncomfortably with the narrower textual focus of other topic in this section, and there might be a case for moving it to Section C in future years.

Answers to Section B were less sharply clustered than in other sections, with Schumpeter and the economic history question each attracting 36 takers. 28 candidates answered on democracy and inequality, 20 on the Federalists and the separation of powers, 11 on Tocqueville and 11 on partisanship. Some students seem to have been confused by the fact the Tocqueville and Schumpeter questions were not more clearly signalled, but the more common problem was a tendency to regurgitate supervision essays irrespective of the question. The best answers on the separation of powers looked at both the Federalists’ intentions and the subsequent historical record; likewise, the strongest answers on Schumpeter thought seriously about what it would mean for politicians to ‘manufacture’ opinion (though no one mentioned the difficulties this creates for rational choice theorists). Few candidates saw that the Tocqueville question was a fairly straightforward invitation to discuss the relationship between democratic values and democratic institutions. As in 2016, the question on partisanship was answered very poorly, with only one or two candidates managing to see how Caplan and Rosenblum’s arguments could be applied to the question.

The questions on economic history and democracy and inequality were quite capably done, though many students launched into formulaic answers without picking up on the strength of the causal claims: what does it mean for economic history to be ‘on the side of representative democracy’, or for democracy to be ‘corroded’ by inequality? Too many candidates gave predictable run-throughs of Why Nations Fail and assumed that ‘inclusive political institutions’ could simply be equated with representative democracy. Better responses made a more serious attempt to interrogate the question, brought other thinkers into the discussion (such as Przeworski and Olson), and made more careful and focussed use of empirical detail. Likewise, strong answers to the inequality question (of which there were several) thought carefully about what it might mean for democracy to be corroded, questioned whether representative democracy had even really been based on material equality, or talked about how institutional design could help contain the influence of the very wealthy.

Almost half the answers to section C were on Gandhi (63 answers), but Haidt (28), Nietzsche (21), and Marx (19) also attracted reasonable numbers of takers. The spread of marks here was relatively large, with a number of very strong answers (especially on Nietzsche and Marx) but also some weak efforts by candidates who were running out of time or caught out by a limited grasp of the texts. The Marx and Gandhi questions seem to have been seen by candidates as fairly safe bets, but those who reproduced their supervision essays were inevitably penalized. Better candidates thought hard about how ‘the fundamental conflicts of politics’ have been shaped by national states, and how far Gandhi’s critique of western civilization was matched by a positive political vision. The Nietzsche question was a difficult one, and candidates tackled it in very different ways. The best answers used the text to discuss Nietzsche’s attitude to equality, democracy, and popular sovereignty, sometimes drawing on Hugo Drochon’s recent work, but many retreated to a basic discussion of the genealogy of morals. Answers to the Haidt question were also highly variable, though most candidates were able to deploy the core readings to reasonably good effect. The most interesting answers brought other set thinkers such as Weber and Schmitt into the discussion, and asked whether a technocratic consensus based on ‘facts’ is really so desirable.

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