Human, Social, and Political Sciences Tripos
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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 the fundamental questions of modern politics as it historically emerged and was reflected upon by political thinkers and they do so in ways that can be lectured upon and written about for supervisions as part of a student’s first-year experience in Cambridge.

The paper begins with the modern state. The modern state is the predominant basis on which political authority and power are constructed across the world today to try to avoid disorder. 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 time in history to inflict suffering on those subject to its coercive capacity at home and imperial reach abroad.

Within modern states, representative democracy has become the predominant form of government in the world. As an idea it excites because it appears to offer equality, liberty and self-rule, but it 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 origins of representative democracy, through the experience of the United States. It seeks largely, although not exclusively, through the American experience of democracy to unpack the paradoxes of representative democracy as a form of government that rhetorically invokes the ‘rule of the people’, the apparent historical success of representative democracy, and 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 capitalist state, Gandhi’s rejection of the violence and alienated sovereignty of modern politics in search of a return to a soul-based civilisation, and Nietzsche’s assault on the moral civilisation that had produced democratic ideas and the subjugation of the individual reach for greatness. It concludes by contemplating the nature of political disagreement itself in relation to human nature and the problems of modern politics.

The predominance of western thinkers in this paper reflects the fact that the most distinctive institutional features of modern politics – the modern state and representative
democracy - and the political discourses they generated originate largely in the West. A serious qualification to that claim in regard to the modern state can be made in the case of China, but there is no comparably teachable Chinese political text that compares to Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, or Weber’s essay ‘Politics as profession and vocation’. We have chosen those non-western thinkers included in the paper - Fanon and Gandhi – because they forcefully express in their writing the cost in human suffering in South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia of the unwanted first encounter with modern states through subjugation to European imperialism and offer diametrically opposed political alternatives to ending it.

The representative democracy section of the paper is focused on the United States because the origins of representative democracy in part lie there and because the *Federalist papers* and the anti-Federalists’ response provide a conceptual framework for thinking about the ongoing historical experience of one democracy and the predicaments democracy has generated. Of course, there is much that could be said about other democracies too – and other countries will be discussed in the lectures and can be drawn on as examples in essays – but having one country that runs through the section allows reflection upon how different questions within democracy play out over time.

**TEACHING**

**LECTURES**

**Michaelmas 2017**

1. Hobbes and the problem of order I  
   David Runciman

2. Hobbes and the problem of order II  
   David Runciman

3. Constant and modern liberty I  
   David Runciman

4. Constant and modern liberty II  
   David Runciman

5. Weber and political leadership I  
   David Runciman

6. Weber and political leadership II  
   David Runciman

7. Schmitt and the nature of the political I  
   David Runciman
8. Schmitt and the nature of the political II
David Runciman

9. Hayek and economic liberty I
David Runciman

10. Hayek and economic liberty II
David Runciman

11. Politics and violence I
David Runciman

12. Politics and violence II
David Runciman

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 2018

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 distribution of wealth I
Helen Thompson

24 Representative democracy and the distribution of wealth II
Helen Thompson

25: Communism I
David Runciman

26 Communism II
David Runciman

27 Self-rule I
David Runciman

28 Self-rule II
David Runciman

29 Morality as historical creation I
David Runciman

30 Morality as historical creation II
David Runciman

31 The persistence of politics I
David Runciman

32 The persistence of politics II
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, 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.

Student 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 four 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. Does radical political change depend on the use of violence?

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. Was Gandhi right that the price of the democratic modern state is too high?

15. If we live in a moral world we ourselves create, what politically follows?

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: 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: 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: Political leadership


• Raymond Geuss, History and illusion in politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch 1 (sections 3, 6).
• Jan-Werner Müller’s Contesting democracy: political ideas in twentieth century Europe (New Haven: Yale University Press, ch 1).

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 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 Economic liberty


Suggested essay question

Why for Hayek was state planning the road to serfdom?

11-12: Politics and violence


On violence and civil war

*Suggested essay question*
Is violence self-defeating as a political strategy?

**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**


- John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge,*The fourth revolution: the global race to invent the state* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2014), Parts 2 and 3.

Note this reading is set in relation to looking at Tocqueville’s arguments about democratic singularity as a form of politics around adaptability.

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


**Secondary reading on Tocqueville**
Alan Ryan, *On politics: a history of political thought from Herodotus to the present* (London: Allen Lane 2012), chapter 20

**Suggested essay question**

Does democracy adapt as well as Tocqueville supposed?

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


Gerry Mackie, ‘Schumpeter’s leadership democracy,’ *Political Theory* vol. 37, no 1, 2009, pp. 128-153.

Inside democratic politics
Suggested essay question

Is representative democracy the rule of professional politicians?

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


*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 create prosperity?

**23-24: Representative democracy and the distribution of wealth**


Martin Gilens, ‘Affluence and influence’

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhCatZYaAG


Francis Fukuyama, ‘The future of history; can democracy survive the decline of the middle class?’ Foreign Affairs, January/February 2012.


Ferdinand Mount, The new few: or a very British oligarchy (London: Simon and Schuster 2012)


Suggested essay question

Is representative democracy now the rule of the rich?

25-26: Communism


• Hannah Arendt, The promise of politics (Schocken Books, 2003), pp. 70-80.

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


Also at: [http://www.orwell.ru/library/reviews/gandhi/english/e_gandhi](http://www.orwell.ru/library/reviews/gandhi/english/e_gandhi)


**Suggested essay question**

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

**29-30: Morality as historical creation**


• Immanuel Kant, *Kant: political writings*, ed. by H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.41-53, 93-130, 132-135. (Kant provides an entirely different way of thinking about morality to Nietzsche.)
Other writings by Nietzsche

Secondary reading on Nietzsche
Tracy Strong, *Politics without vision: thinking without a banister in the twentieth century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), chapter 2.
Giles Fraser, ‘On the genealogy or morality parts 1-8’ at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/27/religion-atheism

*Suggested essay question*

Was Nietzsche right that morality is a historical creation?

**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
• Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).


*Suggested essay question*

Either:
Is partisanship an inevitable feature of democratic politics?

Or:
Why is political disagreement so intractable?

*Further reflections*

We can learn about politics in different ways and we encourage you to read beyond the academic literature. To start you thinking, we suggest you might try: Gore Vidal’s novel about the beginnings of the American republic, *Burr*; Michael Frayn’s play about the political life of the former West German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, *Democracy*; 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, *The Secret Agent*, and his novel about the price of utopian politics, *Under Western Eyes*; and Ursula La Guin’s very different kind of critique of the aspiration to utopian politics in *The Lathe of Heaven*.