Human, Social, and Political Sciences Tripos
2021-22

POL1: The modern state and its alternatives

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**CONTENT**

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, 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. Predominantly using the United States as an example of democratic politics through time, 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 some 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 2021

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. Hayek and economic liberty I
David Runciman

8. Hayek and economic liberty II
David Runciman

9. Fanon and the imperial modern state I
David Runciman

10. Fanon and the imperial modern state II
David Runciman

11. MacKinnon and the state and women I
David Runciman

12. MacKinnon and the state and women 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 2022

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
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. Why for Constant did the material 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 there be politics without violence?
15. Can the polis exist in the modern world?
16. Can representative democracy survive the challenges of twenty-first century politics?
All past exam papers and the examiners’ reports are available on Moodle for Pol 1.

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


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj9IG-093aY.


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.


Further work by Hobbes
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; authority; power; good and evil; 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**

Why for Constant are the possibilities of modern politics circumscribed?

**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.


Further work by Weber
Max Weber ‘Between two laws’ and ‘On suffrage and democracy’ in Weber, Political writings, Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994),

Suggested essay question
What for Weber are the political implications of the ethical irrationality of the world?

7-8 Hayek and economic liberty


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


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

**Further watching**

**Suggested essay question**
Why for Fanon does decolonisation create new human beings?

**11-12: MacKinnon and the state and women**


*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/.


Further work by Catharine A. MacKinnon

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.
• George William van Cleve, A slaveholders’ union: slavery, politics and the constitution in the early American republic (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), part two.

Slavery and the constitution
David Waldstreicher, Slavery’s constitution from revolution to ratification (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010).

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

**Representation**


**Suggested essay question**

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

Or: Did the Federalists create a ‘slaveholders Union’ (van Cleve)?

### 15-16 Democratic society and democratic adaptability


**Democratic adaptability**


**Slavery, race, and Native Americans**


Secondary reading on Tocqueville

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


• Adam Przeworski ‘The minimalist conception of democracy: a defence’ in Democracy’s value, Ian Shapiro, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
• Peter Mair, Ruling the void: the hollowing out of western democracy (London: Verso, 2013), chs. 1-3.


**Inside democratic politics**


*Suggested essay question*

Can representative democracy be anything more than the rule of professional politicians?

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


Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr, ‘Whether party government is inevitable’, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 80, no 4 (1965), pp. 517-542.
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


• Wei-wei Zhang, China horizon: the glory and dream of a civilisational state (World Century 2016), chs 1-3.
• John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, The fourth revolution: the global race to invent the state (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2014), parts 2 and 3.

Francis Fukuyama, The origins of political order: from prehuman times to the French Revolution (London: Profile, 2011), parts IV and V.
Jared Rubin, Rulers, religion, and riches: Why the West got rich and the Middle East did not (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)
Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, ‘Democracy what is it good for’,

Samuel P. Huntington, Political order in changing societies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).


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


Suggested essay question

Was representative democracy the decisive cause of the relative economic success of North America and west European countries?

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


Martin Gilens, ‘Affluence and influence’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhCatZYsAqI


Gary W. Cox, ‘Swing voters, core voters, and distributive politics’ in Political representation, Ian Shapiro et al. eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


Suggested essay question
Can representative democracy avoid being the rule of the rich?

25-26: Communism


On Marx

Socialism after Marx
Donald Sassoon, One hundred years of socialism: the west European left in the twentieth century (London: Fontana, 1997).
Terry Eagleton, Why Marx was right second edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

Further work by Marx

*Suggested essay question*

Why has capitalism prevailed over revolutionary socialism?

27-28: Self-rule


• Pankaj Mishra, *From the ruins of empire: the revolt against the West and the remaking of Asia* (London: Penguin, 2012), chs 5 and 6 and epilogue


*Suggested essay question*

If ‘self-rule’ is impossible in the modern world, what price is paid?
29-30: Human agency and political freedom


Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A reinterpretation of her political thought (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1994).


Further work by Arendt


*For an alternative conception of freedom in modern politics*


*Suggested essay question*

EITHER

What in Arendt's judgement are the conditions that make politics possible?

OR Does politics make possible a shared freedom?
31-32 The end of democracy


https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n17/colin-kidd/in-a-frozen-crouch.
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?