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 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 questions of war and peace and to conditions of material prosperity—and, since everything in politics is mortal, Section B concludes by contemplating the question of how representative democracy itself may come to an end.

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, Schmitt’s distinctive understanding of the political, Fanon’s argument about the liberation of colonial territories, and MacKinnon’s exploration of the position of women under the liberal state.

**TEACHING**

*Lectures*

Michaelmas 2023

1. Hobbes and the problem of order I
   Helen Thompson

2. Hobbes and the problem of order II
   Helen Thompson

3. Weber and political leadership I
   Glen Rangwala

4. Weber and political leadership II
   Glen Rangwala

5. Constant and modern liberty I
   Helen Thompson
6 Constant and modern liberty II
Helen Thompson

7. Hayek and economic liberty I
Christopher Brooke

8. Hayek and economic liberty II
Christopher Brooke

9. Arendt and the nuclear age I
Christopher Brooke

10. Arendt and the nuclear age II
Christopher Brooke

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

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

13. Democratic society and democratic adaptability I
Helen Thompson

14. Democratic society and democratic adaptability II
Helen Thompson

15. Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power I
Christopher Brooke

16. Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power II
Christopher Brooke

Lent Term 2024

17. Representative democracy and material prosperity I
Helen Thompson

18. Representative democracy and material prosperity II
Helen Thompson

19. Representative democracy and the liberal peace I
Glen Rangwala

20. Representative democracy and the liberal peace II
Glen Rangwala

21. The end of representative democracy I
Glen Rangwala

22. The end of representative democracy II
Glen Rangwala

23: Communism I
Christopher Brooke

24. Communism II
Christopher Brooke
25. Self-rule I  
Helen Thompson

26. Self-rule II  
Helen Thompson

27. The nature of the political I  
Glen Rangwala

28. The nature of the political II  
Glen Rangwala

29. The modern imperial state I  
Glen Rangwala

30. The modern imperial state II  
Glen Rangwala

31. The modern state and women I  
Christopher Brooke

32. The modern state and women II  
Christopher Brooke

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 Weber is political leadership mired in tragedy?
3. Why for Constant did the material circumstances of modern politics prescribe the limits of modern politics?
4. Why for Hayek is the individual prior to the state?
5. Is Arendt right to think that human freedom is threatened by the mechanisation of the modern world?

Section B

6. How far is the separation of powers in the American constitution an effective remedy for the problems of republican government?
7. If Tocqueville was right and democratic success rests on adaptability, is democracy now failing?
8. What, if anything, is democratic about the electoral competition for power in modern states?
9. Does representative democracy sustain economic development?
10. Can representative democracy be the guarantor of peace?
11. Can representative democracy survive the challenges of twenty-first century politics?

Section C

12. How far was Marx’s vision of politics anti-political?
13. Can there be politics without violence?
14. Why for Schmitt is it necessary for the state to make distinctions between friends and enemies?
15. Why for Fanon should colonized people abandon the European model of the state?
16. Why was MacKinnon so pessimistic about women’s agency under the liberal state?

All past exam papers and the examiners’ reports are available on Moodle for Pol 1.
REASING 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


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: Weber and political leadership


• Raymond Geuss, History and illusion in politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 1 (sections 3, 6).
• David Runciman, Politics (London: Profile, 2014), pp. 33-47.


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


Further work by Weber

*Suggested essay question*

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

5-6: 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?
7-8 Hayek and economic liberty


Robert Skidelsky, ‘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: Arendt and the nuclear age


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


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


Further work by Arendt


*Suggested essay question*

To what extent does advanced technology transform politics?

**11-12: Representative democracy and the creation of the American republic**


**Slavery and the constitution**


**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)?

**13-14 Democratic society and democratic adaptability**


**Democratic adaptability**


**Slavery, race, and Native Americans**


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

Suggested essay question

Is the strength of American democracy its capacity to make ‘repairable mistakes’?

15-16: Representative democracy and the competitive struggle for power


- Peter Mair, Ruling the void: the hollowing out of western democracy (London: Verso, 2013), chs. 1-3.

John Dunn, Western political theory in the face of the future, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch. 1.


**Inside democratic politics**


**Suggested essay question**

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

**17-18 Representative democracy and material prosperity**


- Wei-wei Zhang, *China horizon: the glory and dream of a civilisational state* (World Century 2016), chs 1-3.


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


*Suggested essay question*

Was representative democracy the decisive cause of the relative economic success of North America and western Europe?

**19-20: Representative democracy and the liberal peace**


**Contemporary examples**


**Critical approaches**


**Suggested essay question**

Are liberal democratic states different from others when it comes to matters of war and peace?

**21-22 The end of representative 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?

**23-24: Communism**


**On Marx**

**Socialism after Marx**
Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx was right*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

**Further work by Marx**

**Suggested essay question**
Why did the bourgeoisie win the class war?

**25-26: 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
• James Tully, ‘On the significance of Gandhi today,’ Perspectives on Gandhi’s Significance Workshop [https://www.uvic.ca/socialsciences/politicalscience/assets/docs/faculty/tully/tully-ghandi-today.pdf](https://www.uvic.ca/socialsciences/politicalscience/assets/docs/faculty/tully/tully-ghandi-today.pdf)

*Suggested essay question*

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

**27-28: 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?

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**29-30: 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?
31-32: The modern 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/.


Clare Chambers, Sex, culture, and justice: the limits of choice (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008).


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?