History of Political Thought

Code: SSC 2039

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Contents

General Information

Overview

When considering modern political issues it is often instructive, and sometimes humbling, to realize that many such issues have deep historical roots. For as long as human beings have been living together in societies, questions concerning how these societies should be organized have been asked. The answers that historical writers have given to these questions are still relevant today and still inform current political and academic thought. By investigating the questions philosophers were grappling with and how they sought to answer them, we may perceive more acutely the questions facing our societies and find out how we might answer those questions.

We will study important texts by 8 seminal political thinkers from several periods in history: Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith, and Hegel. Our aim will be to understand the particular problems they were seeking to solve and how or whether they did so. Although the main texts we will use are historic, the methods we will use are analytic, focusing on content rather than context. We will also read several modern texts which take up themes from these historical texts. By applying the tools acquired in COR1004 to these texts, we will be able to come to terms with them and apply historical insight to current issues.

Objectives

The course has 3 overarching objectives:

- To provide students with a basic overview of the development of political thought in the Western tradition.
- To teach students how to apply the techniques of analytic philosophy- as developed in the prerequisite course- to historical texts.
- To discover the relevance of historical texts for contemporary political issues and contemporary social science.

Literature

The course book, containing selections from historical texts, is:

Cahn, S, Political Philosophy, OUP, Oxford, 2005/2011/2015 (All 3 editions are acceptable- Page numbers are indicated for all editions)

In addition to the historical texts, we will consult several pieces of modern literature that take up themes from the historical texts in an E-reader.

Prerequisites

COR 1004 Political Philosophy

Assessment

There will be 2 take-home exams. The first exam will count for 33% of the final grade while the second exam will count for 67% of the final grade. Students will be provided with a list of at least 6 questions, and are required to answer 3 questions. Exams will be graded according to the standard UCM criteria, interpreted for the context of this course:

- Purpose: Does the answer have a clear thesis that is well-supported? Is the thesis supported by cogent arguments which are properly grounded in the historical texts? Does the answer show awareness of interpretative and argumentative complexities, and does it negotiate them with a sense of commitment?
- Structure: Does the answer build up in a coherent way? Is an appropriate structure laid out, and does the paper stick to it? Does it establish a conceptual understanding of the pertinent aspects of the texts, and use it in a disciplined fashion to arrive at the answer?
- Research: In the context of this course, it is not essential to engage with literature outside of the readings. The central question is how well you are able to extract the conceptual relationships from the texts and use them to answer the question at hand. Does the answer display a clear understanding of the material under consideration?
- Mechanics: How well does the answer observe the style conventions of the tradition of political philosophy used in this course? How clear and rigorous is the argument? How unambiguously are ideas formulated? How clearly are the connections between them articulated?

For a grade of 6, a paper must display basic comprehension of the material discussed and an indication of a thesis. For a 7, a paper must show detailed understanding of the material under consideration and the arguments used in that material, as well a clear thesis statement that is argued for. For an 8, the paper must use the material and arguments discussed to support the thesis in question. 9's demonstrate their particularly ambitious theses with particular ingenuity and resourcefulness, transcending the material under consideration. 10's advance the state of that of political philosophy. During the course we will discuss in detail what good philosophy in this particular field is, and how to write a good paper.

Attendance, Extra Assignments and Resit Policy

Students must attend a minimum of 9 of the 11 meetings. Students who have attended 8 meetings may apply for an extra assignment according to UCM procedures. Students who attend 7 meetings or less will fail the course.

Students whose final grade is below 5.5 may take a comprehensive resit examination. This examination will replace their entire grade.

Course Provider

The course coordinator, who may be contacted for any reason and at any time, is:

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Schedule

	Meeting 1	Meeting 2
Week 1	1. Introduction 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 1 - Plato on Justice	1. Post-discussion Ass. 1 - Plato on Justice 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 2 - Plato & The Good
Week 2	1. Post-discussion Ass. 2 - Plato & The Good 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 3 – Aristotle's Constitutions	1. Post-discussion Ass. 3 – Aristotle's Constitutions 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 4 – Machiavelli
Week 3	1. Post-discussion Ass. 4 – Machiavelli 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 5 – Hobbes's State of Nature	1. Post-discussion Ass. 5 – Hobbes's State of Nature 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 6- Locke on Property 3. Introduction Take-home Exam 1
Week 4	No Class	1. Hand in Take-home Exam 1 2. Post-discussion Ass. 6 -Locke on Property 3. Pre-discussion Ass. 7 – Locke: Government and Consent
Week 5	1. Post-discussion Ass. 7 - Locke: Government and Consent 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 8 – Rousseau: The General Will	1. Post-discussion Ass. 8 - Rousseau: The General Will 2. Pre-discussion Ass. 9 – Adam Smith & The Invisible Hand
Week 6	1. Post-discussion Ass. 9 - Adam Smith & The Invisible Hand 2. Pre-Discussion Ass. 10 – Hegel & History	1. Post-Discussion Ass. 10 – Hegel & History 2. Revision/Questions 3. Introduction Take-home Exam 2
Week 7	No Class	Hand in Take-home Exam 2

Assignments

Assignment 1 – Plato on Justice

John Rawls famously declared that "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions"[1]. But there are many conceptions of justice. Some think that it consists in giving people what they are owed. Others think it is giving people what they deserve. These are certainly intuitively appealing conceptions of justice, but upon closer analysis they might prove less attractive. Another approach might be to draw an analogy between the state and the human body. Just as health is the first virtue of the human soul, so too is justice the first virtue of the state. So if we understand what health is for the soul, we will have an idea what justice is. This is the approach Plato takes.

But of course, for any conception of justice, the question remains why we should behave according to that conception; why should we behave justly? After all, being just often requires considerable sacrifice and can leave us very much worse off than those who are willing to violate the requirements of justice. So, provided you can get away with it, it makes no sense to behave according to the requirements of justice. Refuting skepticism of the sort is always difficult. However, with Plato's definition of justice in hand, we might yet find a way of convincing even the most hardened skeptic to accept that he should behave justly.

Literature

Excerpts from *Republic,* in the Cahn book (Books 1-4) (1st edition: 31-79 / 2nd edition: 31-85 / 3rd edition: 31-79)

Rawls, J, *A Theory of Justice,* 2nd ed., Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, Section 86.

[1] John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 3.

Assignment 2 – Plato & The Good

We all have an idea of what we want from our governments. Almost everyone would agree that we want our governments to deliver economic growth, good schools and hospitals, low crime rates, good infrastructure, clean air, international peace and security, effective and generous welfare programs and, if possible, dancing in the streets. Achieving these goods requires great intelligence, technical skill and virtue. The politicians that are elected in Western democracies are, more often than not, lacking in these qualities. With leadership like that it is hardly surprising that our societies are not as good and well-developed as they might be. To be successful societies, we need to have as our leaders the wisest and most skilled individuals in society, and they should be free to do what they believe to be necessary to attain results. If we really want the goods, we must give up democracy in favor of the rule of the excellent, the philosopher kings.

Literature

Excerpts from *Republic* from the Cahn book (Books 5-9) (1st edition: 80-128 / 2nd edition: 85-149 / 3rd edition: 79-136)

Speech by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Senior Minister, to the national trade union congress at the Singapore Conference Hall on 19 July 1996.

Assignment 3 – Aristotle's Constitutions

If power corrupts, and it probably does, then any form of government, concerned with exercising power, must be liable to corruption. This means that any type of regime, no matter how it is organized, can turn bad. Even Plato's Philosopher Kings might lose their virtue. However, not all regimes corrupt in the same way, and are equally likely to do so. Perhaps it is possible to design a system of government that is less likely to corrupt than all the others. This is an important matter, as choosing the wrong constitution can have disastrous consequences. If we want to avoid decay and degeneration we should consider our constitutional arrangements carefully. Luckily, Aristotle gives us a systematic overview of possible constitutions and their pros and cons, especially regarding how likely they are to corrupt.

Literature

Excepts from *Politics* from the Cahn book (1st edition: 129-168 / 2nd edition: 175-224 / 3rd edition: 165-222)

Schumpeter, J., Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, in *The Democracy Sourcebook*, ed. Dahl, R., Shapiro, I., & Cheibubm, J., Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2003, pp. 5-11.

Assignment 4 – Geneva and Florence: A tale of two cities

> "In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace—and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."
>
> Harry Lime, in "The Third Man"

Two forms of government are Republics and Principalities. The archetypical republic was Geneva, where citizens ruled themselves, free from the domination of anyone. Indeed, in the republic non-domination, *i.e.* not being at the mercy of anyone, is the highest value, because it is thought to be essential to a good life. The archetypical principality was Renaissance Florence, where a glorious Prince ruled his subjects, and led the state to Glory. For all the cruelty, manipulation and dirty tricks that princes need to use to run their states effectively, at least things get done. How could glory be achieved with out it?

Literature

Excerpts from *The Prince & The Discourses*, in the Cahn Book (1st edition: 185-213 / 2nd edition: 256-281 / 3rd edition: 273-308)

Pettit, P., *Republicanism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 80-97.

Assignment 5 – Hobbes's State of Nature & The Hypothetical Social Contract

Many political philosophers throughout the ages have invoked the idea of a state of nature. Such a state of nature presents a picture of how humans lived before there was a society with rules, laws and obligations. From this portrayal of pre-social man, these philosophers deduce how society should be organized. Interestingly enough, political philosophers have very different ideas concerning what such a state of nature would look like. Hobbes argued that the state of nature would be a state of war of all against all. Life in such a stare of nature would be highly undesirable. This assessment seems unduly pessimistic. Human beings often behave with great kindness and generosity, so why should they suddenly behave differently in the state of nature? Hobbes seems unduly negative concerning human nature.

Philosophers typically proceed from the state of nature to a vision of how society should be organized through the device of the social contract. The social contract is an agreement the parties in the original positions make to establish a society, which is characterized by certain rules and regulations. Given his understanding of the state of nature, Hobbes believes the parties will make very specific arrangements. One may wonder whether, if one lived in the state of nature, one would accept the social contract Hobbes proposes and whether that contract yields a society that is any better than the state of Nature we started from.

But how is all of this relevant anyway? These states of nature are imaginary and these social contracts are all hypothetical. They never took place, and contracts that have not actually been agreed to are not contracts at all. They have no binding force over us, and can hardly tell us how to organize our societies. All this theorizing may be interesting, but it is entirely beside the point.

Literature

Excepts from *Leviathan* in the Cahn book (1st edition: 214-242 / 2nd edition: 285-310 / 3rd edition: 312-343)

Dworkin, R., *Taking Rights Seriously,* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1978, pp. 150-159.

Assignment 6 – Locke on Property

You are at the beach and pick up a pebble. Because there are enough pebbles for everyone and all the pebbles are the same anyway, it seems all right for you to put it in your pocket and make it your private property. How could anyone object to that? And if this rule works for pebbles, why not for other things as well? Land, minerals, apples on trees, as long as no-one owns them and you leave enough and as good for others you can make them your own.

We tend to take the idea of ownership for granted. There are very few things we encounter in daily life that are not already owned by someone. We can transfer ownership from one person to another, but there is very little appropriation of un-owned things going on. However, at some point in time nothing was owned. From that state of nature we somehow went to a pattern of initial ownership. The rule above, that you may make something your exclusive private property as long as you leave enough and as good for others, might tell us how one can legitimately go from a world of un-owned things to a world of private property. Of course, a lot hinges on what counts as leaving enough and as good for others. How you interpret that proviso makes a lot of difference for how much private property is legitimized. It might turn out that, actually, the property structure we see today is not justified at all.

Literature

Locke, J., *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5, in the Cahn book (1st edition: 252-254 / 2nd edition: 321-323 / 3rd edition: 370-374)

Nozick, R., *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, New York, Basic Books, 1974, pp. 174- 182.

Assignment 7 – Locke: Government and Consent

Governments claim that we must respect their right to rule and obey their laws. In other words, they claim that we must respect their political authority. While this claim is a very strong and familiar one, it is very hard to justify. Where does the government or its agents get the right to make the laws and why are we obliged to obey these laws? In short, where does political authority originate?

Locke tried to offer an explanation of government authority based on the consent of the people. This seems a promising solution, as it reduces obeying the government to obeying yourself. If the government acts by your consent, you can hardly complain about its actions. Of course, in practice there are many problems with this solution. Nobody ever asked me to consent to the government's power. True, in modern societies we can vote, but it is questionable whether this amounts to me giving my consent to anything the government might do. What if I voted for the loser? Or what if I didn't vote? Does that mean that I am not bound by the government's laws? The ideal of government by consent seems plausible, but it might not explain political authority completely. Of course there is little we can do when the government does something we have not consented to. Or is there? We can always start a revolution, and sometimes we might even have the right to do so.

Literature

Excerpts from *Second Treatise of Government* in the Cahn book (1st edition: 243-274 / 2nd edition: 315-342 / 3rd edition: 365-392)

Pitkin, H., *Obligation and Consent 1*, APSR.

Assignment 8 – Rousseau: The General Will

Imagine that the citizens of a society would assemble to discuss some issue or problem. Let's assume that they have all the relevant information, can reason flawlessly and unclouded by bias and emotion, and are motivated by a public spirit and a desire to promote the common good. It is likely that under these circumstances, all the members would come to unanimously agree what should be done. Indeed, their solution would be the right one, and for this reason it should be implemented. In other words, this General Will binds us. If we could identify it, it would tell us what to do. And there might be ways to determine what the General Will requires without this type of idealized assembly. So, Rousseau claims to have found an independent guide as to how our societies should be structured. We simply ask ourselves what the General Will in these questions is, and this tells us what we should do.

Then again, perhaps this general will is merely a convenient fiction. It seems unlikely that a society could ever discern the General Will. How would it do so? Will voting reveal the General Will, or does finding out what the General Will is require some sort of specialist knowledge? If so, then the individuals who possess that knowledge should be allowed to rule and tell us what to do. In this way the idea of the general will may lead to totalitarianism.

Literature

Excerpts from *Of the Social Contract* in the Cahn book (1st edition: 293-320 / 2nd edition 370-398 / 3rd edition 437-465)

Berlin, I., Two Concepts of Liberty, in *Great Political Thinkers, 6th ed*, ed. Ebenstein, W & Ebenstein, A, Belmont, Wadsworth, 2000, pp. 851-859.

Assignment 9–Smith: The Invisible Hand

Adam Smith lived in an age of great economic change. During the industrial revolution England, and in its footsteps many other nations, left the incessant poverty of the middle ages behind them and produced the largest economic gains seen in human history. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith sought to explain how this happened. One might think that such extraordinary development would be the result of a carefully designed master plan. After all, the amount of coordination and organization that characterizes an industrial economy is so complex and well-attuned, that it could only have been created by a wise and powerful government. However, Smith argues that, actually, nothing could be further from the truth and offers an alternative explanation. A large part of his explanation rests on the idea of an invisible hand, coordinating the self-interested actions of individuals to achieve the general good. This invisible hand is said to be superior to any centralized, planned process of development. It creates the coordination and allocation of resources necessary to create economic growth. Government, however well-intentioned it may be cannot compete with this decentralized mechanism, and should get out of its way. If we want to get rid of poverty and create economic development, we should simply sit back, and let the invisible hand do its magic.

Literature

Excerpts from The Wealth of Nations in the Cahn book (1st edition: 331-349 / 2nd edition: 452-467 / 3rd edition: 492-506)

Nozick, R., *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, New York, Basic Books, 1974, pp. 18-22.

Assignment 10 – Hegel & History

The history of the world is one of the rise and fall of civilizations. The Orientals, the Greeks and the Romans, the Arabs, the German Nations, the Americans, they have all had their moment in the spotlight of history, after which they were overtaken by some other, more advanced civilization. This historical progress is an interesting phenomenon. Why does history go the way it goes?

Hegel attempts to explain this very phenomenon. His Philosophy of History suggests that the reason why civilizations come and go in a pattern of historical progress is because there is a World Spirit, seeking to be free, which is becoming conscious of itself. It does so by passing through several phases of self-discovery, each revealing a particular aspect of itself. Every civilization corresponds to such a phase. When the World Spirit has become conscious of whatever a particular civilization can reveal about the spirit, it moves on and the civilization, having no purpose to serve, withers away into obscurity. A new, different civilization arises, one that brings the World Spirit closer to its ultimate aim of becoming free. Eventually, the spirit is completely self-aware and hence free; this is the end of history.

Literature

Excerpts from *Philosophy of Right* and *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* in the Cahn book, (1st edition: 392-405 / 2nd edition: 556-565 / 3rd edition: 686-695)

Cohen, G.A., Images of History in Hegel and Marx, in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, OUP, Oxford, 1978, pp. 1-21.