MA in Social and Political Thought

Text and Critique in Social and Political Thought (946M1)
30 Credits. Autumn Term 2008

Seminars: Monday 9-11 RB 33

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Introduction

Text and Critique, the core course of the SPT-MA, will introduce you to a number of exemplary texts in social and political thought. The course brings together a variety of material in ancient, early modern, modern, and contemporary social and political thought. The approach taken in the seminars will vary depending on the tutors, and their different interests and disciplines. They will look at some of the following questions

1. The origins, nature and purpose of human association.
2. The grounds of the legitimacy of the state.
3. The nature of political obligation.

The topics are arranged chronologically, usually, though not always linked to the work of an author. They provide a series of snapshots, rather than a development. The course is designed to explore the critical reception and reinterpretation of earlier ideas by later writers. Course literature is divided into essential primary reading (A) and essential reading (B) and further reading (C). Seminar questions are provided. In preparing for the seminars, you should not only answer the seminar questions, but try to formulate at least one question of your own, even if it is only a demand for clarification. (Jot these down on paper, for this helps the thought process.)

Week 1: Introduction
Week 2: Aristotle (G. Finlayson)
Week 3: Hobbes (A. Chitty)
Week 4: Rousseau (A. Chitty)
Week 5: Hegel (A. Chitty)
Week 6: Marx (A. Chitty)
Week 7: Habermas (G. Finlayson)
Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Aristotle (A. Chitty and G. Finlayson)

In his *Ethics* Aristotle says that all human beings seek happiness, and that happiness or 'the good life' consists in realising your nature as a human being, which in turn consists in living on the basis of reason. The rest of the *Ethics* enumerates the 'virtues' or specific excellences which we need to cultivate in order to be live in a rational way: justice, courage, generosity and so on. So morality, the practice of these virtues, is bound up with realising our essential human nature. But at the end of the *Ethics* Aristotle says that the virtues can only be cultivated within a polis (state) and correspondingly in the *Politics* he defines the state, by contrast with the household or the village, as that form of association which enables human beings to realise their nature as human beings. For Aristotle 'man is a political animal', an animal that can only realise itself within the polis. This is the basis for his recommendations in the rest of the *Politics* about how the state should be organised. We will look critically at the connections between Aristotle's accounts of human being and state, and at his justification of the state.

Seminar Reading:


Seminar Questions:

1. What is the meaning of Aristotle's claim that "man is by nature a political animal"?
2. Can Aristotle's idea that some people are natural slaves be reconciled with this view?
3. What are the most significant ramifications of this view for his political theory?
4. What does Aristotle mean when he says that the state exists by nature?
5. What are the different kinds of constitution and how does Aristotle rank them?
6. How does Aristotle define *demokratia*? What are the conditions in which it ought to thrive?
7. What, according to Aristotle, is the role of women in a polis?
8. Does Aristotle say that political participation is necessary to achieve *eudaimonia*? Does he mean participation in the community or participation in government?

C: Further Reading:

Introductions:


Morrall, J.B. (1977) *Aristotle*, ch. 4

More advanced:
Barnes J. et al., eds. (1997) *Articles on Aristotle*, 2, *Ethics and Politics*
Keyt, D. and Miller, F. D. Jr., eds. (1993) *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*
Swanson, J. A. (1991) *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy*

On human nature and the state:
Bradley, A. C. (1880) 'Aristotle's conception of the state', in E. Abbott ed. *Hellenica*
Develin, R. (1973) 'The good man and the good citizen in Aristotle's Politics', *Phronesis* 18
Clark, S.R. (1975) *Aristotle’s Man*, 2.1, 3.3

**Week 3: Hobbes (A. Chitty)**

For Hobbes unlike Aristotle human beings do not have a rational essence which they are trying to realise and which it would be good for them to realise. They are just bundles of desires, and reason for them is simply a matter of working out the best way to satisfy those desires. Morality ('the laws of nature') is nothing but a set of rules of enlightened self interest for humans who find themselves having to share the same territory. From this starting point Hobbes uses a social contract argument to justify the existence of the state and obedience to any existent state. We will reconstruct and examine his argument, with particular attention to the idea that the state gains its legitimacy from the consent of its citizens.

**Seminar Reading:**

A: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapters 13-22, 29, review and conclusion. Please give special attention to chapter 16. There are many editions available; two of the best are by R. Tuck (Cambridge U.P., 1991) and by E. Curley (Hackett, 1994).


**Seminar Questions:**

1. What is the state of nature? What is the opposite of the natural for Hobbes?
2. Does Hobbes's argument that a state of nature becomes a state of war depend on unduly pessimistic assumptions about human nature?
3. What is the 'right of nature', according to Hobbes? In what sense is it a *right*?
4. What is the relationship between natural *right* and natural *law* in Hobbes?
5. What does Hobbes mean by saying that the members of the commonwealth are 'one person'?
6. Is Hobbes's justification of the state plausible?
7. Is Hobbes's argument for obedience to the state plausible?

**C: Further Reading:**

Introductions:
Week 4: Rousseau (A. Chitty)

Rousseau constructs his idea of a legitimate state from the starting point that humans are intrinsically free and that they can only be under such moral obligations as they freely put themselves under. He concludes that a legitimate state can only come about if it is a radically democratic one. He furthermore uses his starting point to set limits in advance to what kinds of laws can be legitimate. Thereby he initiates a ‘constructivist’ strand of political thought, in which the bare idea of freedom provides the basis for a new kind of natural law. We will ask what Rousseau means by the general will and whether he succeeds in combining democracy with legality in his vision of the legitimate state.

Seminar Reading:


Seminar Questions:

1. Why is a contract of slavery illegitimate for Rousseau?
2. Who are the parties to the social contract?
3. How does the social contract bring about a ‘remarkable change in man’?
4. What is the general will?
5. Does Rousseau successfully justify direct democracy?
6. Are there limits to what the general will can will?
7. Is Rousseau’s thought ‘totalitarian’?

C: Further Reading:

Introductions:


More advanced:

For Hegel we do not associate in order to meet each other's material needs but in order to become free, and a genuine human association is one that fully realises freedom. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel tries to show that to become properly self-conscious (and so free) a human self must be recognised by another human self as self-conscious. This necessity drives human beings, when they first meet each other, first to engage in a life-and-death struggle for recognition, then to create a master-servant relationship of one-way recognition, and finally to arrive at a society of mutual recognition, in which all see each other as sharing the same essence, namely freedom. Thereby they constitute themselves as a 'people', with a shared national 'spirit' (or 'ethical substance'). Their laws and state are the ways in which they give an objective expression to that common spirit. But the initial community of mutual recognition establishes a freedom that is inherently unsatisfactory because it is based on mutual identity and makes no room for individual difference. In the introduction to the *Philosophy of History* Hegel sees the whole of human history as the emergence of national spirits (oriental, Greek, Roman and 'German', i.e. Northern European) which give a successively greater space to individual freedom, or what he calls 'subjective freedom'. Finally in the *Philosophy of Right* he tries to show how the 'system of Right' of modern European societies (i.e. the set of their basic legal and political institutions) expresses a form of spirit in which collective and individual freedom are both fully developed. These institutions are those that incorporate the ideas of 'abstract right' (individual rights of person and property) and 'morality' (the idea of individual moral responsibility) into a larger framework of 'ethical life' whose components are the modern love-based family, the market and its supplementary legal and welfare institutions, and the monarchical constitutional state. We shall focus on the role of the idea of freedom in the *Philosophy of Right* and ask how convincing Hegel's claim is that the modern set of social and political institutions is the genuine 'existence of freedom'.

**Seminar Reading:**

A: Hegel, G.W.F. [1821] *Philosophy of Right* (or *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*), Preface, §§1, 4-7, 11, 14-15, 20-21, 26-30, 142-157, 257-61 (Please read the additions to each paragraph too; these are lecture notes in which Hegel explains and develops the points in the main text. In the Wood edition they are printed after the paragraphs, but in the older Knox edition they are at the end of the book)

Hegel, supplementary quotes, available from Study Direct site.

B: Riley, P. (1975) 'Hegel on consent and social contract theory: how does he 'cancel and preserve' the will?'; *Western Political Quarterly* 26(1), available from Study Direct site.

**Seminar Questions:**

1. What is the basic message of the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* as you read it?
2. What does Hegel mean by saying that the will combines particularity and universality? (§7)
3. What is the 'free will that wills the free will'?
4. What does Hegel mean by saying that right is the existence of freedom? (§29)
5. What does Hegel mean by 'ethical life'? (§§142-157)
6. How exactly is the modern state supposed to synthesise individual and collective freedom? (§§257-262)

C: Further reading:

Introductions:

More advanced:

Hegel on mutual recognition and history:
- Hegel G.W.F. [1820s] The Philosophy of History, pp. 16-40 (‘The inquiry into the essential destiny of reason …’ to ‘… merely animal existence’), or, in slightly different translations, as Reason in History tr. L. Hartman, pp. 20-53, or as Introduction to the Philosophy of History tr. L. Rauch, pp. 19-42

Free will, recognition and spirit in Hegel’s political philosophy:
- Maletz, D.J. (1989) ‘Hegel on right as actualised will’, Political Theory 17
- Hardimon, M. O. (1994) Hegel’s Social Philosophy, ch. 2 sec. 1
- Chitty, A. (1998) ‘Recognition and social relations of production’, Historical Materialism 2 (sections 2-4 of this article)

Week 6: Marx (A. Chitty)

Marx’s relationship to Hegel is complex, but we can follow one strand of it by seeing that he takes up Hegel’s essential ideal of a society of mutual recognition which unifies individual and collective freedom, describing it as a society of ‘species life’ which realises the essence of human beings as ‘species beings’. For Marx in On the Jewish Question this species life has taken on an independent existence as the modern political state, leaving individuals reduced to a sub-human struggle with each other for existence in their everyday economic lives, and the task is to reclaim this species life from the state and live it out in our economic lives. This reorganisation of economic life through a Hegelian conception of freedom is the positive content that Marx gives to the idea of socialism (or ‘human society’ as he calls it). In the course of 1844 Marx came to conceive ‘capital’ rather than ‘the state’ as the alien being that had absorbed human species-life and in which that life had become an autonomous power
reducing individuals to nothing but its own agents. This is the basic idea of ‘alienation’ (Entäusserung, literally 'emptying-out') and estrangement in the 1844 writings. It reappears in his later writings as the idea of the ‘subsumption’ of products and individuals by the autonomous power of capital. Accordingly Marx’s interest moved from the state to the economy, and he saw the democratisation of the state as useless as long as it operated in the context of capitalism. Yet his basic critique of capital is democratic in that he attacks it for removing collective agency from human beings. We will ask whether Marx is ultimately a democrat, and if so of what kind.

Seminar Reading:

A: Marx [1843] ‘On the Jewish Question’ part 1 (e.g. in D. McLellan, Karl Marx: Selected Writings, first edition 1977, pp. 39-57)
Marx [1844] ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, sections on ‘Alienated/ estranged labour’ and ‘Private property and communism’ (e.g. in McLellan pp. 77-96)
Marx [1844] ‘Excerpt-notes on James Mill’ (e.g. in McLellan, pp. 114-122)
Marx [1871] The Civil War in France, part 3 and 1st draft, section on ‘The character of the commune’ (both reproduced in McLellan pp. 539-557)
Marx [1875] Critique of the Gotha Programme, first few pages of sec. 4 (e.g. in McLellan pp. 564-566)


Seminar Questions:

1. What is a species-being?
2. How does Marx use the idea of recognition in the Notes on James Mill?
3. Is Marx’s 1844 conception of socialism dominated by a ‘work ethic’?
4. How does alienation come into existence, for Marx?
5. On the evidence of these texts, does Marx care about economic equality?
6. Is Marx a democrat?

C: Further reading:

Introduction:

On species being:

On alienation:
Tucker, R. (1961) Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx, chs. 2-7, esp. ch. 3

On alienation and subsumption in Marx’s later works:
On socialism:
Maidan, M. (1989) 'Alienated labour and free activity in Marx's thought', Political Science 41(1)
Berki, R.N. (1990) 'Through and through Hegel: Marx's road to communism', Political Studies 38

On Marx and democracy:
Marx [1874] 'On Bakunin's Statism and Anarchy', in McLellan pp. 562-563
Femia, J.V. (1985) 'Marxism and radical democracy', Inquiry 28

Week 7: Habermas's Legal and Political Theory (G. Finlayson)

In the 1980s Jürgen Habermas developed a theory of 'discourse ethics', which was essentially a theory of the social function of moral discourse. Habermas maintains that the understanding of meanings depends upon the possible give and take of reasons, which is essential to communication and discourse. He argues that the moral standpoint (which in his view can be captured by the principle of moral discourse, U) is anchored in, and can be derived from, the structures of communication and discourse that, in modern societies, take charge of social integration. In 1991 under the influence of communitarian criticisms of liberalism, he began to reflect on the role of what he called 'ethical' as distinct from 'moral' discourse, namely discourse about the good, and conceptions of the good life, and on how these differed from other kinds of practical discourse. The distinction between ethical and moral discourse became very important in his later political and legal theory, where he develops a distinctive account of the legitimacy of democratic institutions, which is different from the story told by various communitarians on the one hand, and Rawlsian liberals on the other.

Seminar Reading:
If you have time, also look at: Habermas, J. [1992] Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy, ch. 3 (esp. from 3.1.4 onwards) and Postscript pp. 447-462.
B: Stephen Grodnick: 'Rediscovering Radical Democracy in Habermas's Between Facts and Norms' Constellations, Volume 12, Number 3, 2005, available from Study Direct site..

Seminar Questions:

1. What, in Habermas's view, are the grounds of the legitimacy of the state? Are there clear criteria for what kinds of laws are legitimate and what are not?
2. What is the role of moral and ethical discourse in democratic discourse?
3. What is the tension that Habermas claims obtains between the facticity and the validity or law? What does he mean by these terms?
4. How, according to Habermas, do modern democratic states incorporate the two ideas of popular sovereignty and human rights?
5. In BFN Habermas divides the public sphere up into two distinct domains. What are they? And how do they (and should they) relate to one another?
6. What is a reconstruction? How is Habermas’s theory of law ‘reconstructivist’?
7. Is Habermas’s theory descriptive or normative?
8. Is Habermas’s model of democracy utopian or realistic?
9. Is Habermas’s political and democratic theory a critical theory? Say what you mean by this.

C: Further reading:


Habermas’s discourse ethics:

On Habermas’s theory of law and democracy:
There are useful bibliographies in Rehg 1994, Heath 2001, and in The Cambridge Companion to Habermas.

Week 8: Georg Simmel (Darrow Schecter)

Marx’s sociology of conflict and Nietzsche’s ideas on Ressentiment and the political relevance of individual psychological forces mark important moments in the emergence of what one might call the sociological imagination. Yet Simmel indicates that however important these contributions might be, theorising the social entails going beyond Marxist notions of interest and Nietzschean intuitions about the psyche and values. If Hegel demonstrates that the difference between possession and property is the state, and that the state is the condition of an individual rational will, Simmel suggests that in the course of modernity Hegel’s juridical epistemology must cede place to a more contingent and de-centred account of knowledge and action. That is, society replaces the state as the medium of individual and group agency. In this week we look at Simmel’s ideas on reciprocal functional exchange, money, and the specificity of the social. How might one compare Hegel’s state-centred theory of ethical life and objective spirit with Simmel’s theory of
society? In what ways does Simmel enrich historical materialism, and in which ways does he depart from it? In what ways do Simmel’s ideas on contingency and the reality of social form (as opposed to anthropological essence) anticipate later developments in philosophy and social theory?

Seminar Reading

A: Simmel, ‘How is Society possible?’, and The Philosophy of Money (excerpts)

B: David Frisby, Fragments of Modernity (1986) and Georg Simmel (1993)

Week 9: The Critique of Everyday Life (Darrow Schecter)

This week looks at the critique of everyday life from its origins in Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, to surrealism, situationism, and the ideas of Cornelius Castoriadis and Henri Lefebvre. Special attention is paid to questions of aesthetics, urban life and its possibilities, and forms of resistance inspired by the critique of everyday life, such as those created during May 1968. What is the sociology of everyday life? How and in what ways does the critique of everyday life complement the critique of political economy? What are the theoretical and practical legacies of Lefebvre and Castoriadis?

Seminar Reading:


B: Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (1987)
Kristin Ross, The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (1988)
John Roberts, Philosophising the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory (2006)
Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century

Week 10: Biopolitics and the State of Exception (G. Finlayson)

Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer (1995) is a revisiting of social and political Western thought on a grand scale, arguing that ever since Aristotle, politics has been, at least implicitly, based on the opposition and between life and bare life and the exclusion of the latter. Thus, far from being a recent development, the centrality of biopolitics turns out to be the oldest aspect of political life. What is specific to the recent past is only the direct form in which power is exerted over life: the camp as paradigm of the modern.

Seminar Reading:


Seminar Questions:

1. What does Agamben mean by ‘bare life’?
2. How does he claim it relates to ‘the political way of life’?
3. Do his claims ring true of Aristotle’s *Politics*?
4. What according to Agamben is “the bio-political paradigm”? What examples does he give?
5. What are the social and political consequences of this paradigm?
6. To what concrete criticisms of contemporary political society does this lead Agamben?
7. Are Agamben’s criticisms diagnostic or remedial, or both? What is the diagnosis? What is the remedy?
8. Does Agamben’s account of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer* purport to be true? Need it?

C: Further Reading
