Political theory and Politics Introductory seminar
Political Theory and Ethics course

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Topics of the lecture

- Welcome and getting to know each other
- Course structure and assignments
- What is and why do we need political theory?
- What is politics and how does it relate to the modern state?
- The crisis of democracy?

Course structure

- Lecture-seminars – in class and remote participants
- Reading responses forum as an 'input' for class discussion
- Debates

Course goals

- To pursue understanding of complex theoretical issues and outlooks, relate them to our current concerns and new challenges

- Understand the historical origins of our current concerns, the inescapably historical nature of all political theory

- Striving for knowledge and understanding, but also a certain pursuit of civility and interpretative generosity in the class

- Opportunity to acquire or practice various kinds of skills

Methods of assessment

- Participation in seminars and moodle forum(s) 40%
  - Participation in seminars up to 20 points
  - Reading responses up to 14 points (7 seminars)
  - Position-takings in debates 6 points (3 debates)
- Participation in a debate 15%
- Essay 45% - deadline 6 January 2022

R. Grant (2002): Can we know what is worth knowing in politics through scientific research methods alone?

Political science versus political theory

Political Science

- Verification
- Causal relationships
- Knowledge and certainty

Political theory

- „Exegesis"
- Understanding meaning and significance
- Judgement and uncertainty

The death of democracy and the unknown beast

J. Dunn (2015): Just why, if you wish to understand politics today and tomorrow, should you take the trouble to brood over old texts? How, if you do take that trouble, can you hope to remain fully alert to the political turmoils and bafflements of your own day?

Political theory

- Imaginative space, necessary distance
- Historicity of our circumstances and (political) language
- Continuities and ruptures, recurring debates and new beginnings
- Moral disagreement and progress in thought?
- 'Depth, clarity and comprehensiveness' as criteria

What is politics?

- How is it related to ethics and rhetoric?
- What is constitutive of politics?

Aristotle, Politics (4th century B.C)

- Special kind of rule: rule among free and equal human beings
  - at best aiming at the supreme human good
  - deeply harmonious with what the human beings and the world are really like, and how they ought to be (Dunn)

  - Speech, self-sufficiency, self-government

Alternative views

- Original sin
- Conflict of interests
- Partiality of judgement
- The logic of collective action

Arendt on politics (1963)

- Not liberation, not a distinct set of liberties
- Freedom, no-rule
- Acting together, plurality (not just positive liberty)
- Initiating new things, spontaneity

Max Weber, *The Profession and Vocation of Politics* (1919)

- Politics as independent leadership activity (*leitende Aktivität*)

- The modern state defined through its specific means – physical violence [*Gewaltsamkeit*]

- 'The state is that human community which (successfully) lays a claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a territory'

The State

- Weber: the state is a sort of factual entity, one that 'successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the *legitimate* use of physical force'

- Hobbes and Bodin: the state is an idea, a distinct relationship between three elements: the ruling power, a given set of human individuals and a territory.

- Lasts over time, the central motif is the idea of sovereignty, a unified and internally unchallengeable site of authority.

John Dunn, *The Cunning of Reason* (2002)

- the key to politics is how human beings **see** the world (and particularly the role and significance of one another in making it what it is), and how they **choose to master it**, to bend it to their wills. How they **judge** and how these judgements **impel them to act**. Often, perhaps on careful examination always, mastering it includes, and perhaps principally requires**, subduing, eluding, persuading and enlightening each other**.

Legitimacy and domination

- Power is the ability to find obedience
- Weber's three criteria of the legitimacy of domination [*Herrschaft*] :
  - The authority of the eternal past
  - Charismatic domination
  - Domination on the basis of legality

D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (1991)

- Weber: „belief in legitimacy"
- Beetham: legitimacy is grounded in „deeper beliefs"
- Beetham's criteria
  - (1) rule of law
  - (2) justification of laws according to deeper beliefs;
  - (3) legitimacy is expressed in consent

When is power legitimate?

- **Democratic legitimacy** – de facto authority
- **Normative legitimacy** – why should the citizens obey the commands (laws) of the state? (Christiano 2012)
- Are there any commands/laws which they should not obey?

How are we to organise politics?

- Normative ideals inherited from the past
- Liberty, democracy, representation, rule of law, freedom, equality
- What do we mean by these concepts? Are they compatible with each other?
- How do we choose?

A selection of newly published „crisis literature"

- Yannis Papadopoulous, *Democracy in Crisis? Politics, Governance and Policy* (2013)

- Simon Torney, *The End of Representative Politics* (2015)

- David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (2019)

- Daniel Ziblatt, Steven Levitsky, *How Democracies Die* (2019)

- *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, vols. 1-3. Gregor Fitzi ... [et al.] (2019)

Democracy

- Democracy as the only legitimate regime nowadays
  - Sovereign and illiberal democracies?
- The recession of democracy (Larry Diamond)
- Attacks on liberalism
- So what kind of crisis it is at all? Where do its origins lie and what are the threats?
- What are the possible solutions?

Current (possible) threats to democracy

- Pandemic(s)
- Populism
- Digital transformation
- Climate change
- Globalisation, sociological processes