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Suggested reading - overview works

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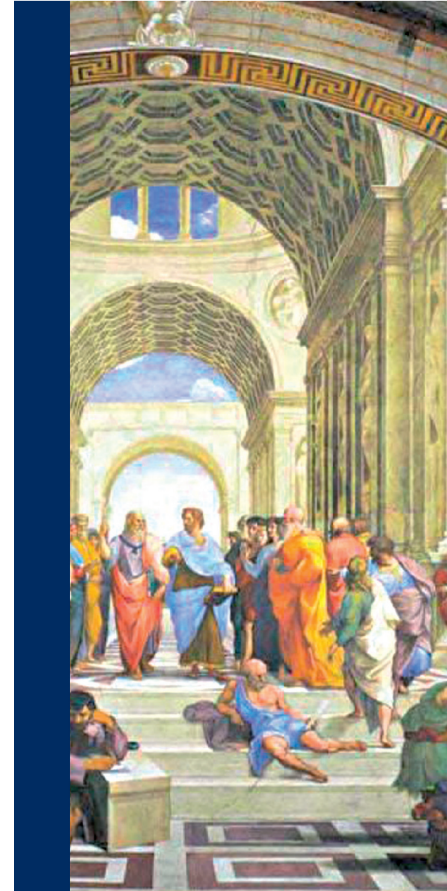
Stephen Eric Bronner, ed., *Twentieth Century Political Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2005



POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

AN AUDIO COURSE ON WESTERN
POLITICAL THEORY

By Grahame Lock



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Suggested reading - original works

Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003.

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

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deeper historical and dogmatic roots of contractualist thinking are. They suggest that we in the West live, as did and do other peoples, in a dogmatic system, whose dogmatic character we however deny or ignore. This system is sometimes called neo-liberalism. Whether or not this name is the right one, its ruling ideas constitute on this view a danger for the future of mankind.

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like religions, nations or ideological movements of all kinds.

In these respects, our contemporary world is no different from its predecessors. Though people talk a lot about freedom, this often means only narcissistic gratification. In fact, human beings want to be enslaved, says Freud: the mass "wants to be dominated by an unlimited power, it grasps for authority, it is hungry for subservience..."

Lecture 12: The present-day - Contractualism, individualism and the dogma of our times

Our last thinker, Freud, died on the eve of the Second World War. What has happened since in political philosophy? Too much, we might say. It has become a massive and fragmented field. So we are obliged to leave much out of account here. There is for example a whole line of "French" thinking, from Jean-Paul Sartre through to Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and many others. There are German movements, some stemming from the Frankfurt School, whose best-known recent spokesman is Jürgen Habermas. There are Third World thinkers, one of whose most interesting representatives was Frantz Fanon. And so on.

On the American scene, there was of course John Rawls. Rawlsian theory - set out in his *Theory of Justice* (1971) - is based on a contractualist approach. In this sense it is, like a great deal of American political theory, scholastic in character: only convincing if you accept certain presuppositions, which from another point of view are quite arbitrary. There are however analytical thinkers, like Pierre Legendre and Alain Supiot, who aim to discover what the

L11: Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) - Why the masses love their leaders

Freud is not primarily a political thinker. But a number of his theories have important consequences for political analysis. On Freud's view, man is born as a little animal that has to be humanized. This is a difficult process. It requires him to renounce his early narcissism - his dependence on maternal love, which treats him as "his Majesty the Baby", as the centre of the universe. In the Oedipal phase, he (or she) must learn to renounce this dependence and accept the "paternal law" - the law which applies indiscriminately to all and which reflects reality, as against the pleasure principle. Some people never succeed in successfully negotiating this passage from childhood to maturity. In fact, elements of our early narcissism remain, more or less hidden, in all of us.

In difficult situations in later life, when we despair of solving our problems, we are tempted to regress to such infantile dependence. This, Freud argues, is also true of whole societies. Faced with massive problems (of economic crisis, war or whatever), a society may regress to a narcissistic state in which it demands that a "great leader" should take all its problems onto his shoulders. The leader is a mother rather than a father figure. He is an enemy of bureaucracy (the paternal law). He "loves" all his people with an equal devotion (and is of course saddened or angry when any turn away from him). Freud describes these phenomena in his 1921 work on *Group Psychology*.

The mass, following the leader and "identifying" with him, loses much of the cognitive and moral capacity of those making it up. It will display levels of stupidity and cruelty rare in its individual members. The identification process between these members will cause it to hate outsiders. Intolerance is thus a normal and even unavoidable aspect of the formation of united groups,

Synopsis of the audio-course on political philosophy

L1: Plato (427 - 347 B.C.) - The beginnings: justice and the philosopher kings

Why study the ancient thinkers, in particular the Greeks? Aren't they long out of date? Or is it the other way around - that, unlike the sciences, philosophy does not make "progress", so that the old texts are as good as, if not better, than the new?

Plato is widely regarded as the first great political philosopher. He lived in the 4th-5th century B.C. in Athens, perhaps the original democracy. But Plato was the first systematic anti-democrat. The main topic of his masterpiece, the *Republic* (in Greek *Politeia*) is justice. The book is written as a series of dialogues between characters, named after real-life persons. Socrates generally represents Plato's own thinking.

There is a cynical view of justice, presented by Thrasymachus, which suggests that it is whatever the rich and powerful make it out to be. Against this view, Plato (via Socrates) argues that justice has an objective basis. In each individual human being, he urges, are found three elements: animal instinct or appetite; spirit or heart; and reason. In each individual, one of these elements is dominant. So there are three classes in society, including the class of all those who live mainly by reason - the philosophers. Now just as anyone would rather trust a doctor than asking his neighbours to vote on what kind of illness he has, so we should trust the philosophers to run society and do justice, rather than asking the opinions of the ignorant - who live in the realm of mere opinion - about such matters. Only the philosophers know what justice is - an unchanging idea, to be perceived by the soul. Justice requires each to stick to

his own task and not to interfere with other people's. That is why democracy is a bad idea, Plato insists. How to bring into being such a society as Plato describes is however a different, difficult and troublesome matter.

L2: Aristotle (384 - 322 B.C.) - Happiness, politics and the *telos* of mankind

Aristotle was a pupil of Plato at the latter's Academy. He was born in Macedonia but worked for many years in Athens, where he founded his own Lyceum. He is said to have been tutor to the young man who became Alexander the Great. He was a polymath, an experimenter and expert in nearly every field of knowledge, from biology via political science to metaphysics. Aristotle divided science into three kinds: theoretical (concerned with knowledge for its own sake); practical (concerned with getting things done); and productive (concerned with making things). Political philosophy is of the second, practical kind.

To come to know something, we need to grasp its four causes: its material cause (what it is made of); its formal cause (its form or shape); its efficient cause (what brought it into being); and its final cause (its built-in purpose or *telos*). Aristotle held that the final cause of mankind lies in what human beings can do supremely well, as compared with other beings, namely using their rational capacity. Making use of this capacity, they strive for happiness (*eudaimonia*), the ultimate good. "Happiness" does not mean "pleasure", but living in accordance with virtue or excellence. The role of the city-state is to provide the conditions for this happy life. Common to the virtues is that each represents a middle-point or golden mean between opposite extremes.

Contribution to A Critique of Political Economy. It is the relations of production, he argues, which constitute the economic structure of society, "the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure" and to which correspond ideas and ideologies. He adds that "at a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution." So revolution is not so much something that we *choose* to make - its *necessity* is written into history. This approach is what Marx calls "scientific socialism". Yet we can't wait for history to bring us its end-point, communism - the class struggle must be actively fought and won.

After the Paris Commune of 1871, Marx drew new conclusions about politics and the capitalist State. One thing especially was proved by this event, he claims, namely that the working class cannot just lay hold of the existing State machinery and wield it for its own purposes, but must destroy it. This is because the very structure of the capitalist State involves the same kind of division of labour as the capitalist economy - a few are specialized in command, the masses essentially follow orders. This is just as true of the "parliamentary-democratic" State as of any other form. So if Marx's critique is of any relevance, it is as relevant today as in his own time.

L9: Alexis de Tocqueville (1805 - 1859) - America and democracy: an aristocratic point of view

Tocqueville was a nobleman from an old Norman family, who made a career in law. As a young man he visited the United States. This visit was the basis for his work on *Democracy in America*, published in two parts in 1835 and 1840.

He was shocked by the vulgarity of American society, but also worried by the dangers posed by the democratic regime which, he argued, offers only "very inadequate securities against tyranny". Americans, he notes, love equality - indeed, they would rather be equal in slavery than unequal in freedom. There is no country, he says, where there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion. For the influence of public opinion is so great that individuals fear to think for themselves.

Tocqueville's criticisms of "Americanism" are powerful and merciless. Yet he concludes that it is mankind's future. Many present-day commentators thus read him to mean that, in a sense, he is an admirer of the American way of life.

L10: Karl Marx (1818 - 1883) - Class struggle and history

Marx once said: "I am not a Marxist". This provocative remark is misleading. He was a Marxist - that is to say, he became one, in the years after leaving Germany to live in Victorian Britain. In the Introduction to the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 he and his co-author Frederick Engels wrote: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". This is a key idea of Marxist doctrine. He summed up this doctrine more generally in a passage in his

In the city, free men (not slaves, not women, not workers by hand) meet and a "circulation of the *logos*" (of the word) takes place - that is, people debate and make their contributions to political decision-making. In the household, in contrast, the *logos* tends to go in one direction: the husband tells the wife what to do, the wife the children, and all give orders to the slaves.

Aristotle is one of the most influential of all thinkers - he is often called "*the* Philosopher". For hundreds of years after the founding of the first universities, in the 11th century, his known works were taught as a major part of the curriculum.

L3: St Augustine (354 - 430) - The State as a necessary evil

Born in Roman North Africa, Augustine studied rhetoric. He grew up a pagan, though his mother was a Christian. As a young man he joined a sect composed of followers of the 3rd century Iranian prophet Mani. The Manicheans preached a dualistic religion, dividing up the universe into good and bad, light and dark, form and matter, striving for purity. Augustine became disillusioned with Manicheism and finally converted to Christianity - though some say that he imported elements of his old beliefs into the Christian system. His famous work on *The City of God* was written in the first instance as a reaction to the fall of Rome in 410 to the Visigoths: the debate was on whether the Christians were to blame for this.

The key to his approach to social and political questions is the claim that all men are sinners, against the background of the doctrine of original sin. On this point he was challenged by his rivals the Pelagians.

Augustine did not believe that the body is evil in itself, but he did hold that there is an asymmetry between body and soul - the soul is superior and must in principle rule. Yet the body tends to rebel. Evil is, he stressed, not something substantial, but the absence of good. So there is no symmetry in this connexion either - a position already found among the neo-Platonists.

Like Aristotle, Augustine had a theory of happiness. But for Augustine happiness is to be found not in social and political life but rather in union with God: this earthly life is only a preparation for that eternal union - which however not all human beings will enjoy.

He taught that the State, given the universal sinfulness of mankind, is *necessary* (to repress the consequences of sin) but at the same time an *evil* - for the rulers of mankind are sinners too and will surely give way to their own desires for ever greater power and riches.

He thus had no high regard for the State. In a famous passage from *The City of God* he asks what, if we abstract from the question of justice, kingdoms are but ... great gangs of robbers.

L4: St Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) - A rational Christian philosophy

Augustine lived at the very beginning of what became known as the Middle Ages, Thomas nearly a thousand years later. He insisted on the role of rationality in Christian thought (as against revelation alone).

Thomas regarded political theory as a sub-department of ethics. The core of his moral and political philosophy lies in his notion of natural law.

Locke's basic natural rights are life, liberty and estate - what we call private property. He offers a number of philosophical arguments for the legitimacy of the institution of private property, beginning with God's gift of the world in common to mankind and ending with a defence of unlimited capitalist accumulation.

L8: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778) - The general will: a critique of representative government

Unlike most previous political theorists, Rousseau came from a poor family. Born in Geneva, he lived most of his life in France, in the Absolutist period preceding the French Revolution.

In a *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* he argued that progress in these fields had corrupted mankind. In his *Discourse on Inequality* he problematized earlier social contract theories. Such theories, he says, involve a trick: the rich and powerful offer only a limited choice: chaos or their own rule. But a better contract is possible. In his work entitled *The Social Contract* he describes this better construction. Each, he says, should contract with all others to establish a sovereign body which will "contain all". None should ever transfer his decision-making powers to a separate body, as for instance is required by representative or parliamentary systems. As a member of the sovereign people, each will be moved not by considerations of personal interest but by the idea of the general will (*volonté générale*).

makes and enforces. This arrangement, though it might have many inconveniences, is better than any alternative, because it at least guarantees law and order and therefore tends to promote the safety of each individual. If on the other hand it turned out that someone's existence was threatened by the Leviathan, that person would have not just a right but an obligation to resist.

Hobbes was true to his own theory: in 17th century England he supported whatever power seemed likely to have the upper hand - first the King, then Cromwell, etc.

L7: John Locke (1632 - 1704) - Life, liberty and estate

Locke is a later thinker of the same English 17th century. Like Hobbes, he studied in Oxford. He was for many years in the service of the Earl of Shaftesbury, a leader of the Whig party, which opposed the Catholic leanings of the Stuart Kings of England. Locke's famous *Second Treatise of Government* was written as a kind of advance legitimization of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when the last Stuart monarch was expelled and the Constitutional Monarchy of William and Mary was established.

Like Hobbes, Locke uses the device of a social contract. But his assumptions and conclusion are different. His state of nature is not a state of war but a relatively peaceful state of liberty with a "law of nature" to govern it. Yet it is an unstable situation. So it is a rational move for each to join together with all others to leave the state of nature and set up a "political or civil society". The main purpose of the establishment of such a society is, he says, the protection of property.

There is, he says, a *lex naturalis* which does not depend on what any existing political authority may decree - it is "written in nature" and can be discovered by the use of human reason, which is itself a gift of God.

There are four kinds of law: human law (positive or black-letter law); the above-mentioned natural law; eternal law - the *lex aeterna* or "principle of all things", to be found in God; and divine law - eternal law in so far as it is (though only partially) revealed to mankind in the Old and New Testaments.

Worldly power or dominium rests on two foundations: the will of God and the usefulness of such power. Unlike Augustine, Thomas does not regard power as inherently evil. Every authoritative power implies a measure of subjection, he argues. But there are two kinds of subjection: slavery on the one hand, subjection to legitimate political authority on the other. Only the first is a consequence of the sinfulness of mankind. Political subjection - *sub-jectio civilis* - is on the contrary a rational answer to the question of order and justice in society. No society is possible without authority. So the *sub-jectio civilis* is not only legitimate but an ethical necessity.

Using Aristotelian terminology (he was much influenced by Aristotle) Thomas adds that the formal cause of a just society is God, its material cause being mankind: men build society up. But, let us add (with an eye to later thinkers), not on the basis of a social contract. For that would make society something artificial. And society is not artificial, it is part of the natural order.

L5: Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 - 1527) - Behind the scenes of the political game

Machiavelli is often described as one of the founders of political science. This is because of his *realism*. He is interested in how the political game works in reality.

He grew up and made his career in the city-state of Florence. At his time Italy was a patchwork of such more or less independent cities, all of which were however prey to repeated foreign (especially French and Spanish and Holy Roman Empire) intervention.

After the fall of the Medici family in 1494, the Dominican monk Savonarola helped to establish a Florentine Republic. He in turn was overthrown by a regime under the influence of the Soderini family. Machiavelli, whose father was a friend of the Soderinis, was appointed to a post at the Second Chancery, a kind of foreign ministry. Here he worked until 1512, when the Medicis regained control of the city.

As a diplomat working for the government, Machiavelli got to know all the political leaders, Italian and foreign, of his epoch. He used this knowledge when, after his removal from office, he retired to his country house at San Casciano and wrote a number of studies on politics, history and war, as well as literary works.

In *The Prince* Machiavelli holds up a mirror to rulers. If you want to get hold of and keep political power, he says, you must never forget that there are two ways of fighting your enemies: the one by law, the other by force. The prince or politician needs to master both techniques. To the extent that he does so, he has "virtue" - not the Christian concept, but the old Roman idea (from *vir* = man) of control over fortune - which Renaissance thought repre-

sented as a woman. As example of a prince who possessed both was Cesare Borgia, Duke Valentino - son of the Pope, Alexander VI, who lent him an army, which was indeed a piece of good fortune. Cesare was entirely unscrupulous in his political tactics. But it was bad luck - bad fortune - that finally brought Borgia down.

Machiavelli's account of how to acquire and maintain political power, though it is explicitly amoral, does presuppose a political goal, namely Florentine, and ultimately Italian, prosperity and independence.

L6: Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679) - Why we need a Leviathan to rule over us

Hobbes' age was that of the England of Revolution and Civil War. It was his experience of these times that inspired his political theory.

He had a great interest not only in politics but also in the nature of man. Human beings, he tells us, strive above all to preserve their lives, to avoid pain and to enjoy pleasure. That is the modern, scientific view. Applied to politics, this means that each of us ought to aim in the first place at his own survival. So his first task is to avoid the "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" life characteristic of all states of war. Since each man ought to strive for peace - out of self-interest - it follows that he should be willing if necessary to renounce his natural right of liberty, that is, to transfer his natural right to an all-powerful sovereign authority called the Leviathan (the name of a Biblical monster), which Hobbes calls a "mortal God". This each agrees to do together with all others: Hobbes calls it a Covenant. Note that the Leviathan is not a party to the Covenant: he stands and must stand above the law, which he