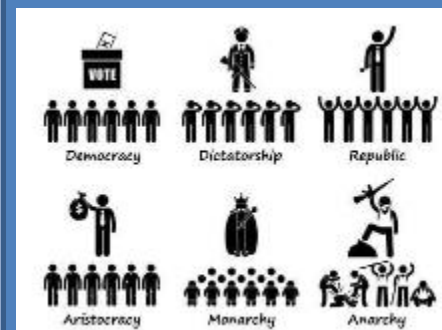
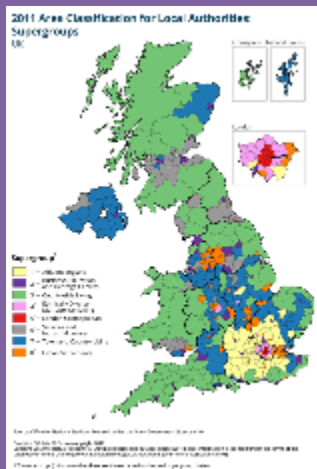




ECED7001: Political Influences in Inequality & Diversity

Theme 2: An Introduction to Political Theory – Key Concepts

Part 1

What does it mean to be political?

- ‘A modern mainstream view might be: politics applies only to human beings, or at least to those beings which can communicate symbolically and thus make statements, invoke principles, argue, and disagree’.
- ‘Politics occurs where people disagree about the distribution of goods, benefits, or statuses **and have at least some procedures for the resolution of such disagreements**’.
- ‘It is thus not present in the state of nature where people make war on each other in their own interests, shouting, as it were, ‘I will have that’ rather than ‘I have a right to that’.

Normative Concepts

- We have already seen (Theme 1) that what can be considered to be 'political' is a contested area
- In this Theme we will explore an number of **concepts** that are central to the political debate
- In doing so we will explore the '**normative**' elements of these concepts
- That is to say the way in which each concept is, by its nature, value laden due to the fact that each one is a social construct (you will be asked to consider the values behind these concepts)
- Some concepts, we will return to in later Themes

Normative Concepts

- Left wing
- Right wing
- Authoritarianism
- Libertarianism
- Justice
- Rights
- Liberty
- Individual Autonomy
- Equality
- Democracy
- Populism/Demagoguery
- Private Property
- The Common Good
- State Sovereignty

Left wing / Right Wing

- This way of describing political positioning dates back to the Constituent Assembly at the start of the French Revolution (1789).
- In the chamber the radical Jacobins radicals sat on the left side of the King's seat; moderates sat in the centre; and royalists and clerical members sat on the right.
- The terms passed into general use to refer to the opposition between the egalitarian, democratic, and anticlerical views of many reformers and radicals, and the defence of aristocratic and clerical privileges by conservatives and reactionaries

Left wing / Right Wing

- The meaning of the phrases has changed somewhat since this time.
- For example economic liberalization and free trade—was once a radical proposition in many contexts, it has migrated to the right as part of the neo-liberal agenda.
- Left-wing agendas have been generally much more tied to forms of state regulation and intervention in economic life—reflecting the modern pursuit of egalitarian goals with the tools of the welfare state
- The 20th century model of UK politics saw the Conservative Party on the right, the Liberal Democrats in the centre and the Labour party on the left but this has changed again in the 21st century
- We will explore this change further as we discuss the next two concepts

Authoritarianism

- A style of government in which the rulers demand unquestioning obedience from the ruled.
- Traditionally, 'authoritarians' have argued for a high degree of determination by governments of belief and behaviour and a correspondingly smaller significance for individual choice but did leave some room for private choice
- This has been enhanced by the concept of totalitarianism (mostly closely associated with fascism and state communism) in which even personal freedom is restricted
- However, even democratically elected governments can drastically restrict personal freedoms

Can you think of examples from recent history?



Libertarianism

- Refers primarily to a range of theories and attitudes whose common characteristic is that they seek to reverse the progress of collectivism and authoritarianism and to 'roll back the frontiers of the state'.
- Traditionally, 'libertarian' denoted a believer in free will, as opposed to determinism;
- A further meaning referred to a kind of principled libertine, a person in favour of breaking down whatever inhibited and constrained natural or instinctive behaviour, whether it was religious belief, family ties, or the enforcement of laws by the state. But these meanings are now antiquated.

Libertarianism

- The most precise form of libertarianism rests on a belief in the essential separateness of individual persons who possess, quite irrespective of whether or not they are part of a society or subject to the laws of a state, a set of inalienable rights, which necessarily include rights to acquire and retain property.
- Libertarians would argue that the denial of these rights by states can never be defensible and people should only consider themselves subject to states in so far as those states enhance their rights or rest on voluntary procedures.

Can you think of examples from recent history?



Our Own Political Positioning

- The concepts of right / left and authoritarian / libertarian can allow us to create a schematic representation of where different politicians and parties sit in relation to each other
- This idea has been used by a website called 'The Political Compass'
- Although not a formal research tool it does allow us to evaluate and reflect on our own political positioning

In preparation for future discussions please follow the link below and 'Take the Test'.



Justice

- One of the oldest concepts in Western political theory (e.g. Plato's Republic circa 375 BC).
- Plato asked the question “What is justice”?
- For him, it was to be found in ‘good and orderly government’ by those **who are the wisest and best suited for government**

What are your thoughts on the last point above (in terms of the value laden nature of normative concepts)?



Justice

- It is generally held that there are two forms of justice;
- **Criminal justice** – referring to the establishment and maintenance of order in society
- Usually, in contemporary society, this is through the system of law enforcement, involving police, lawyers, courts, and sanctions, punishments & rehabilitation (Smits, 2016)
- The values and norms of those in power / government will necessarily have a direct effect on the laws passed, levels of policing and the balance between sanctions and rehabilitation (see for example Allen, 1959)

Justice

- It is generally held that there are two forms of justice;
- **Distributive justice** - Distributive justice is concerned with how capital, goods, honours, and obligations are distributed within a community.
- Claims on distributive justice can be (and have been) justified on the basis of need, moral standing, precedent, rights (especially property rights), and aggregate social welfare, among others.

(Calhoun, 2002)
- The values and norms of society will necessarily have a direct effect on the distribution of welfare, honours, status etc. (e.g. the concept of the deserving and undeserving poor)
- The key question is.....who decides?

Justice

What different 'values' of justice from around the world can you think of?



- A brief exploration of justice systems from around the world and through times shows that the notion of justice varies
- Thus we can see that 'justice' is a normative concept in that it is shaped by the dominant culture of a time or place
- E.g. what is illegal in Saudi Arabia may not be illegal in the USA

What might influence the differences between different systems of 'justice'?



Justice

- For the reasons outlined on the previous slide, it can be argued that there is no such thing as an ‘essential’ justice, unchanging through time or place
- In each case the notion of justice is a **social construct** influenced by the history, religion etc. of a nation or culture
- Postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida have argued that there is therefore no ‘true’ justice merely a notion of justice that is constructed from cultural **signifiers** or symbols
- They argue that concepts such as justice need to be **deconstructed** (that is taken apart to see what values etc. they are made of) in order to be understood
- Deconstruction is, in this sense an act of understanding and not destruction as is often thought

Rights

- Usually taken to refer to entitlements that are given particular weight or importance by a society or system
- A right entitles a person to act or be treated in a particular way
- As a concept rights have been with us for centuries
- For example, the Magna Carta (1215) which, among other things, established the rights of all free citizens to own and inherit property and to be protected from excessive taxes (see for example Chakrabarti, 2015)

Rights

- Other classic examples include;
- [The Bill of Rights](#) – the first 10 amendments to the US Constitution which includes the ‘Right to keep and bear arms in order to maintain a well regulated militia’.
- [The Rights of Man](#) (1791) in which Thomas Paine argued that popular political revolution is permissible when a government does not safeguard the natural rights of its people
- [A Vindication of the Rights of Woman](#) (1792) in which Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women were of equal value to men and therefore deserved equal rights
- [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) which was drawn up in response to the atrocities committed before and during WWII

Rights

- There are generally considered to be two types of rights in society
- Socio-legal rights which are based on social norms and enshrined in law
- Moral rights which are based on codes of practice established by a group or society (e.g. a religion)
- They can be one and the same thing (e.g. Thou Shalt Not Kill and the crime of murder)
- There is also a debate regarding the inalienable nature of rights (i.e. is it possible to 'give away' your rights because of your actions or are they a way of asserting individual freedom because individual rights 'trump' those of the state (see for example Dworkin, R., 2009)

Rights

- Individuals can assert their rights against the state or others individuals
- Two rights (either legal or moral) can also come into conflict with each other

What examples can you think of?



- Right to life / right to choose
- Freedom of speech / right to be free from hatred
- Right to privacy / 'the right to know'

We will now explore the issues of distributive justice and rights in more detail.

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