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« Back to module search Department: Politics Module co-ordinator: Dr. Gabriele Badano Credit value: 30 credits Credit level: I Academic year of delivery: 2020-21 See module specification for other years: 2021-22 2022-23 Module will run Occurrence Teaching cycle A Autumn Term 2020-21 to Summer Term 2020-21 Module aims For all their variety, most political systems in the global north can be characterised as liberal democracies, electing their leaders according to one-person-one-vote, and upholding political rights of association and participation, a free and independent press, rule of law and protection of property, and more. A normative commitment to these practices is even more widespread; few regimes advertise themselves as illiberal and even fewer reject the claim that they are democratic in some sense. Liberal democracy today is often thought to be under threat from both internal crises of confidence and external pressures. Yet there is great confusion over what liberal democracy means, and there are important differences in the ways that the concepts of liberty and democracy have been understood, and in the ways, they might be thought to come together or pull apart. Also, there are legitimate questions about whether liberal democracy is really up to all the challenges governments must handle. The course is structured into two parts. The first part of this course, in the Autumn term, will focus on theories of democracy, asking: Is the 'will of the people' meaningless? If not, how might we come to know it (or create it)? Why should we prefer majority rule to alternative decision procedures? Is individual freedom consistent with democracy? Who should be included within democratic decisions, and who should be excluded? When - if ever - should judges overrule elected politicians? We will focus on contemporary philosophical arguments around democracy but anchor them in a range of contemporary and historical examples, including the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. The second part of the course, in the Spring term, will address contemporary liberalism, starting with the classic work of John Rawls but then turning to authors probing the limits of liberal approaches. Is the stress placed by liberal philosophers on the redistribution of resources excessive, or is it insufficient? Does liberal theory actually realise its ambition to be inclusive of all groups in society? We will examine these and other questions with reference to concrete issues of justice surrounding social class, gender, race, disability, and multiculturalism. Module learning outcomes To develop in students a critical understanding of approaches to and problems in contemporary political philosophy; To develop students' analytical, argumentative and communicative skills; To develop a critical understanding of approaches to and problems in contemporary political philosophy; To develop an ability to advance and analyse arguments in political philosophy. Assessment Task Length % of module mark Essay/coursework2000 word essay N/A 40 Online Exam 24 hrsOpen Exam - Contemporary Political Philosophy N/A 60 Module feedback Students will receive written timely feedback on their formative assessment. They will also have the opportunity to discuss their feedback during the module tutor's regular feedback and guidance hours. Indicative reading David Estlund (ed.) Democracy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Will Kymlicka, Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971/ revised edition 1999). The information on this page is indicative of the module that is currently on offer. The University is constantly exploring ways to enhance and improve its degree programmes and therefore reserves the right to make variations to the content and method of delivery of modules, and to discontinue modules, if such action is reasonably considered to be necessary by the University. Where appropriate, the University will notify and consult with affected students in advance about any changes that are required in line with the University's policy on the Approval of Modifications to Existing Taught Programmes of Study. Will Kymlicka's Contemporary Political Philosophy explores theories of justice, specifically related to distribution of resources and wealth. The book critiques various theories of justice (or rejection of justice), from 'liberalism' [definition vague], to libertarianism, to Marxism, communalism, and feminism.After a brief overview of utilitarian theory [that justice derives from the actions that produce the greatest overall utility, however that is defined - be it something hedonistic like pleasure, or greatest overall good, or greatest good across the largest number of people], Kymlicka gets into his core argument.He uses as his starting point John Rawls's theory of justice. Rawls posited that all citizens are entitled basic civil liberties, and that any social or economic inequalities [note he completely omits physical inequalities] that arise as a result of these liberties (that is, equal access to opportunity) are only permissible in as much as they benefit the least well-off in a society. As Kymlicka argues, the first point about equal access to opportunity is fairly unobjectionable. The second principle (called: the difference principle), however, runs into problems. Firstly, Rawls's definition of inequality refers only to material inequality (be it opportunity or wealth), not physical. Therefore, his theory completely ignores differences that may arise out of physical disabilities or inequalities, equally as arbitrary as material inequality. In other words, one cannot help being born disabled, just as one cannot help being born into an underprivileged group and thus should not suffer as a result of this.In true liberal fashion, however, Rawls's theory also suffers from a very general (or, in his own words, 'very thin') definition of 'good', generally leaving it up to people to decide for themselves the actions they deem to have value. In some respects, I agree with this. I would like to think of myself as fairly pro-liberalism. Yet, simultaneously, I believe there are places that the state must step in and set limits, and I believe I am somewhat more interventionalist as to the areas I believe it must do this than Rawls or many other self-declared liberals.In order to look at the critiques of these liberal theories, Kymlicka first assesses an ideology that rejects redistributive justice in totality: Libertarianism. Though I had my suspicions before, the book's assessment of libertarian thought has confirmed my belief that they are, in fact, devoid of any understanding or appreciation of history. Libertarianism seems to be the most historically, economically, and socially illiterate ideology I've ever encountered. And I want to devote some time to explaining why.At its core, Libertarianism is based on the idea that justice can only come about from the pursuit of total liberty. On the surface, this seems fair enough. Nobody sane would honestly argue for anything like the return of slavery, and common libertarian support of civil rights issues (like support for gay marriage) is plaudworthy. Simultaneously, libertarian advocacy of liberalising drug laws tends to look superficially forward-thinking. But I intentionally use the word 'superficially', for any analysis into the content of libertarian thought - and thus investigation into why they support these position - yields more disappointing results. On a superficial level, libertarians also tends to support limitless (or, near-limitless) private ownership and property, without any due consideration to the negative consequences of these policies.The main flaw in libertarian policy can be summed up in Kymlicka's assertion that it pursues freedom not as a means to better society or achieve greater equality, but as an end in itself. Yet, surely freedom is useless as an end in itself. What good can it possibly serve except as a means of achieving greater equality? Rather, an hedonistic perusal of freedom for freedom's sake could risk entrenching inequalities based along rather arbitrary lines (such as brute strength).Kymlicka uses the thought of Robert Nozick to assess libertarianism. Nozick's theory of justice was as follows: treating people as equals entails recognising everyone owns themselves (pretty uncontroversial). Thus, our rights over ourselves have implications for our rights over external resources. In Nozick's view, only unrestricted capitalism can ensure our freedoms over ourselves are maintained. For, in his view, any policy of redistribution infringes on our right to ownership. In other words, only absolute property rights reflect our rights over ourselves. As Kymlicka astutely asserts, this position is actually untenable, for it rests on a number of assumptions.Firstly, Nozick's theory we have a right to own external resources derives from a position in which the world is initially unowned. Following this, anyone can acquire absolute rights over something (disproportionately, too) so long as it doesn't worsen anyone else's condition. This is the most fundamental aspect of Nozick's theory, and also the place it falls apart. For, it is impossible for anyone to gain disproportionate ownership of anything without worsening the conditions of at least someone. Consider Kymlicka's example of a piece of land. If one person appropriates a piece of land, it means someone else can then not do the same (literal first-come-first-serve), and since there's not enough land in the world to actually go around, person 2 is always going to be worse off, as they are forced to work on that land for survival, whereas person 1 has the luxury of owning the land, and - under Nozick's arrangement - doesn't need the consent of person 2 to attain it.There is some room in this for negotiation. In some respects, I can appreciate how this might actually birth some anarcho-libertarian philosophy - whereby there is cooperative ownership on a small scale. But even this, in a sense, contradicts the pretensions of libertarianism to defend absolute property rights, as in a cooperative arrangement, people's share would be equal.In another respect, this view of the world being initially unowned is devoid of any understanding of how power has worked throughout human history. In a libertarian reality (and let us recall how none exist, thus begging the question - is it possible?), the strongest few would end up owning the strongest amountIt is ironic, then, that libertarians argue taxation leads to serfdom. When, in fact, the scenario described above is the very reality of feudalism.While Libertarianism arguably views freedom as an end in itself, and most Liberals would view it as a means to an end, Marxism - as I understand it from Kymlicka's characterisation - views justice as a means not an end. That is, justice is only relevant in the context of exploitation but not as an ideal. Thus, in the ideal communist society, there wouldn't be a need for justice (so the argument goes) because everyone would be working for the common good anyway. The vagueness of this aside, Kymlicka does evidently see in the socialisation of the means of production a way of remedying the potentially inviability of Rawls's just society of private property.In other respects, Marxism and Rawlsian liberalism seem to be in step (eg. in their desire to redistribute wealth according to the needs of the least well-off).In G.A. Cohen's view, for instance, a capitalist may be deemed exploitative of their workers if the additional profit they accrue some of the value produced by the labourer which exceeds their needs - I sympathise with this.Yet in other respects, Marxism seems to share a libertarian-esque fetishisation of an individual's ownership over their own time. In this way, even an unemployed person, or mother in need of child support, may be deemed exploitative because they're taking (exploiting) some of the worker's product. This is where some Marxists have attempted to refine their understanding of exploitation. Roemer, for instance, defines exploitation 'in terms of the results of an unequal distribution of external resources' and is thus in step more with Rawls. This contrasts with the an orthodox Marxist understanding of exploitation which, as Kymlicka says, 'works with the 'more conservative' premiss that people have rights of self-ownership, so that equality of resources does not include any requirement that unequal talents be compensated for'. This, however, conflicts with our understanding of equality of opportunity. In the view of these other Marxists, capitalism is exploitative instead because 'most of the surplus taken from workers...winds up in the hands of those who benefit from the unequal distribution of talents and wealth'. Thus, focus shifts back to the question of what Marxism can offer us that Rawls does not already consider. And thus, we are no closer to refining some of the vaguer points in Rawls's theory.The original Marxist argument said that workers are entitled to the product of their labour, and it is the forced denial of that entitlement which renders capitalism unjust. But most contemporary Marxists have tried to avoid that libertarian premiss, since it makes aid to the dependent morally suspect. And the more they try to accommodate our everyday sense that not all technical exploitation is unjust, the more they have appealed to Rawlsian principles of equality'.In a lot of respects, Marxist political theory is deeply limited. As Kymlicka says, Marxism views workers as the main agents of social change. Consequently (and perhaps contradictory to what you would assume the school of thought that birthed conflict theory would advocate) this leads to some kind of economic reductionism - ignoring the ways in which minorities and women are exploited, favouring instead what Kymlicka calls the 'fetishisation of labour'.Yet, after exploring various Marxist, Feminist, Communitarian and Libertarian critiques of Liberalist trends like those of Rawls and Dworkin, one can't help but feel that, actually, Kymlicka's intention was not ever to offer potential remedies to the limits of Rawls and Dworkin's theories. Rather, it seems, his intention is merely to defend them against the criticisms. This left me overly disappointed with the book, as it felt like it was building towards a direction it never actually took.more

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