

Political Theory Comprehensive Exam

Tim Came

PART A: Approaches

1. Compare and contrast at least three accounts of the relationship between political theory and political science. Frame and defend your own position in relation to these accounts.
2. If one aims to situate a text in its “historical context”, what does one examine? Discuss critically, drawing on Quentin Skinner’s views (as portrayed by Tully, if necessary) and at least one other thinker.
3. In *The Company of Critics* Michael Walzer makes a case for what he calls “connected criticism.” Explain what does Walzer means by this notion and discuss how well it stands up against at least two other approaches to political theory. (**Note:** Your chosen alternative approaches need not be completely unrelated to Walzer’s.)

PART B: Tocqueville

1. Explain how Tocqueville conceptualizes the benefits and potential dangers of democracy, relying both on Tocqueville’s texts and those of at least two of his interpreters. Include in your essay an account of what Tocqueville means by “democracy.”
2. Are the de Tocqueville of *Democracy in America* and of *The Ancien Regime and the Coming of the French Revolution* one and the same political thinker?
3. In his review of the second volume of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, J. S. Mill remarked: “It is necessary to observe that by Democracy M. de Tocqueville does not, in general, mean any particular form of government. He can conceive a Democracy under an absolute monarch. ... By Democracy, M. de Tocqueville understands equality of condition, the absence of all aristocracy, whether constituted by political privileges or by superiority in individual importance and social power.” It is toward Democracy in this sense, toward equality between man and man, that he conceives society to be irresistibly tending. Toward Democracy in the other and more common sense, it may or may not be traveling.” **Is this a fair assessment of Tocqueville’s view of the development of modern democratic politics? Assuming that Mill’s view has some validity (which you, of course, may contest), what does Tocqueville teach us about the relationship between democratic government and a “democratic” state of society?**
4. “Theorists of participatory or developmental democracy suffer from an excessive faith in the interest of ordinary citizens in political affairs.” Discuss this claim in light of Tocqueville’s work.

PART C: Bureaucracy and Democracy

1. In Max Weber's view, democracy and bureaucracy are antithetical, both in principle and practice. At the same time, modern democracies have increasingly pushed more "political" work into the domain of executive branch bureaucracies, raising issues of democratic representation and accountability. Can bureaucracies be democratized? Should they be democratized? Discuss at least three contemporary approaches to these questions.
2. Is bureaucracy an *inherent* threat to representative government? Discuss, with reference to at least three thinkers.
3. Franz Kafka once wrote that the chains of the world are made of office paper. Is this a fitting description of bureaucratic man and woman? What does this insight tell us about the challenges that modern bureaucracy poses to modern democracies? Discuss these questions with reference to at least three thinkers.

Political Theory Comprehensive Exam
Emily Moore
March 14, 2008

A. Approaches:

1. Do postcolonial theorists risk creating new forms of essentialism, particularly in its challenges to the concept and practice of “otherness”? Discuss, with reference to at least three authors.
2. If knowledge is situated, as many postcolonial theorists argue, is political *theory* even possible? That is, if political theory involves some kinds of abstraction, generalization, and thinking across difference, is theory an inherently meaningless activity on the post-colonial view? With reference to at least three authors, explain post-colonial views of knowledge and the relationship of these views of knowledge to political theory.
3. What are the purposes of political theory? That is, why do we engage in the activity we call “political theory”? Or, again, in practicing political theory, how are we engaging the world, and to what ends? Discuss, with reference to at least three authors.

B. Foucault

1. Are Foucault’s ethics as confused as Nancy Fraser argues? Discuss, with reference to at least three authors.
2. Do Foucault’s conceptions of agonism and resistance have some relationship to universal ontological assumptions and/or ethical aspirations? Discuss with reference to at least three authors.
3. The central issue for philosophy, according to Foucault, has to do with the question of the possibilities and dangers inherent in the use of reason: “How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately criss-crossed by intrinsic dangers?” (from *What is Enlightenment?*) Explain, with reference to at least three authors.

C. Nietzsche

1. Does Nietzsche have an ethics? If so, how is it conceived, where is it located within his philosophy, and is it adequate to ethical judgments? If not, why not?

2. Does Nietzsche's "perspectivism" provide an epistemology that can function to distinguish among judgments? That is, is there some conception of "objectivity" within Nietzsche's thought? If so, does this conception have any importance for political theory?
3. Why does Nietzsche place art and aesthetic practices at the heart of his philosophy? What are the costs and benefits of Nietzsche's approach for political theory?
4. Explain Nietzsche's understanding and use of genealogy as a method. What does genealogy provide to political theory that is absent in other approaches? What are the weaknesses, if any, of his genealogical method?

D. Culture and Resistance

1. Explain the relationship between culture and resistance in three authors, focusing on the normative resources for resistance that are immanent to culture.
2. Is deliberative democracy, as Benhabib describes it, a potential avenue to addressing injustices in society, particularly as they relate to difference? What are the strengths and drawbacks of this kind of theoretical approach? Compare or contrast the approach of at least one other author.
3. What role might art or aesthetically-oriented practices play in a politics of resistance? Under what conditions can art become a distinctly *political* force? Draw as you see fit on the works of Gramsci, Connolly, Cruikshank, and Foucault to answer these questions.
4. How does the concept of "resistance"—as both an analytic and normative concept—relate to the concepts of "empowerment" and "revolution"? Is there a distinctive politics of resistance? Discuss, referring to at least three authors.

Comprehensive Exam

Clark Banack

Part A: Approaches to Political Theory

1. Compare and contrast at least two recent accounts of the purposes of political theory. Frame and defend your own position in relation to these accounts.
2. In what sense should the activity of political theory be “critical”? Discuss and evaluate at least two thinkers’ understandings of political theory as a critical activity.
3. Is Richard Rorty a modern or post-modern political theorist and does this distinction matter? Compare Rorty’s approach with at least one other thinker.
4. If one aims to situate a text in its “historical context”, what does one examine? Discuss critically, drawing on Quentin Skinner’s views (as portrayed by Tully, if necessary) and at least one other thinker.

Part B: Aristotle

1. Aristotle originated the notion that humans are political animals, and that speech is the distinctively political means of constituting good polities. In this respect, Aristotle’s thinking is close to much contemporary political theory. Aristotle’s understandings of these dimensions of politics were, however, based on a naturalistic ontology. Does Aristotle’s naturalism undercut the utility of his thinking for contemporary political theory?
2. What is Aristotelian phronesis? How does it inform Aristotle’s conception of citizenship? Does the concept have any relevance to political theory today?
3. What is the meaning of justice in Aristotle’s political theory? Does it have any relevance to political theory today?

Part C: Taylor

1. Charles Taylor’s article “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” was an influential call for an interpretive study of politics. Discuss the key elements of Taylor’s interpretivism, as exemplified by essays such as “Interpretation” and “Ethnocentricity and Understanding.” Then trace some of the more significant links between this aspect of Taylor’s work and (a) the communitarian aspects of this thinking, and (b) his call for a politics of recognition.

2. Explain Taylor's understanding of human beings as self-interpreting animals as well as the relevance of this understanding for (a) the study of politics generally; and (b) his particular kind of communitarianism.
3. Is Hegel or Wittgenstein more important to Taylor's thought and why?

Part D: Identity Politics and Multiculturalism

1. An issue that has divided thinkers such as Benhabib, Fraser and Honneth, Kymlicka, Parekh, Habermas, Barry and others is the extent to which considerations of culture and cultural recognition should be treated as at least partly autonomous from, or irreducible to, questions of political economy. Fraser and Honneth, among others, have addressed this question in terms of the relationship between recognition and redistribution. Choose three or four participants in this debate and explain how they understand the claims of culture or cultural recognition in relation to the politics of equality and political economy.
2. "Multiculturalism as a formal policy and practice is at odds with the requirements of democratic citizenship, which prioritize collective action and communication within a context of some minimal shared values." Discuss this claim, referencing three or four thinkers who have thought about the relationship between culture, identity, and democracy.
3. What, precisely, is "multiculturalism" in the Canadian context? What are its strengths and weaknesses as a response to the challenge of diversity in contemporary western societies?
4. What kinds of obligations can host societies legitimately ask of immigrants, and what kinds of recognition and/or toleration can immigrants legitimately ask of host countries? Discuss and assess the responses three or more thinkers who address these questions.

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Political Theory Comprehensive Exam

Daniel Drugge

PART A: Approaches

1. Where does Quentin Skinner locate the “meaning” of a historical text and how does he understand the role of the interpreter? Critically compare Skinner’s understanding of the meaning of a text and the role of the interpreter with those of two of his critics.
2. In “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” Isaiah Berlin writes: “For political thinkers, ... the primary question is not that of genesis and conditions of growth, but that of validity and truth.” Yet in the same article Berlin also insists that “what is characteristic of specifically philosophical questions is that they do not ... satisfy conditions required by an independent science, the principal among which is that the path to their solution must be implicit in their very formulation.” **What, then, are the special or distinctive truths that political theorists must strive to discover and formulate? And to what extent, if at all, has Berlin succeeded in illuminating the methodological insights that are required if political theory is to continue to exist and if it is to avoid becoming merely a branch of ideology? Discuss these questions drawing on at least two theorists.**
3. **What is political theory?** Discuss this question with reference to the answers given by at least three of the following theorists: Skinner, Wolin, Taylor, Grant, and Berlin (focusing here on Berlin’s specific answer to this question).
4. Understanding the native’s point of view, Clifford Geertz writes, “is more like grasping a proverb, catching an illusion, seeing a joke – or ... reading a poem – than it is like achieving communion.” Accepting, for the moment, the truth of this statement, what do you take to be the most important substantive and methodological implications of Geertz’s insight for the study and practice of political theory? Discuss this question with reference to the ideas of two political theorists.

PART B: Berlin

1. What kind of political philosophy emerges from Berlin’s writings? Contrast Berlin’s political philosophy with that of at least one other contemporary liberal thinker, emphasising Berlin’s distinctiveness.
2. In “The Pursuit of the Ideal, Isaiah Berlin writes: “I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.’ That is relativism.” In the same article, as in many other articles, Berlin also discusses pluralism to which he himself attaches considerable importance and which he distinguishes from relativism. Is Berlin’s pluralism merely a disguised relativism? Or is there more to it, so much more in fact that it can easily support the great weight that Berlin puts on it?

3. What is the connection, if any, between Berlin's famous reflections on the "Two Concepts of Liberty," his well known pluralism, and his interest in counter-Enlightenment thinkers?

PART C: Marx

1. In "On the Jewish Question," Marx quotes with approval a passage from Rousseau (Tucker, Marx-Engels Reader, 1972, p. 44): "Whoever dares undertake to establish a people's institutions must feel himself capable of **changing**, as it were, **human nature** itself, of **transforming** each individual who, in isolation, is a complete but solitary whole, into a **part** of something greater than himself, from which in a sense, he derives his life and his being." To what extent, did Marx deepen our understanding and even provide a solution to the problem identified by Rousseau?
2. In what ways do Marx's (a) methodology and (b) conception of the human condition remain of value for contemporary political theory? In what ways are these elements limiting and/or obsolete?
3. Explain the rise of reform-oriented Marxism in the pre-WWI era? What were the issues? What was at stake? What are the lessons, if any, for contemporary political theory?
4. "Marx is a theorist of freedom with respect to both his materialist conception of history and substantive political project." Discuss this claim with reference to at least two commentators on Marx's political thought.

PART D: Violence

1. Explain the roles and justifications (if any) of violence in the reproducing social order. To what extent is violence necessary? Is violence ever desirable? Your answer should discuss at least two thinkers.
2. Why does Hannah Arendt distinguish violence from power, and does her distinction provide any conceptual and/or critical benefits? Compare Arendt's approach to at least two other theories of violence.
3. In the second last paragraph of the first volume of The Open Society and Its Enemies, Karl Popper writes: "Our dream of heaven cannot be realized on earth ... There is no return to a harmonious state of nature. If we turn back, then we must go the whole way – we must return to the beasts." He then goes on to say: "But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society." Must someone who wishes to remain human reject violence?
4. How should we understand the relationship between violence and the political? Discuss with reference to at least three thinkers.

Political Theory Comprehensive Exam

Anastasiya Salnykova

Section 1: Approaches

1. Compare and contrast Skinner's and Gadamer's approaches to understanding historical texts. How do they understand and locate the meanings of texts? How do they understand and locate themselves as interpreters?
2. Although Skinner and Gadamer focus to a large extent on interpreting texts, their ideas along with Charles Taylor's are instructive for thinking about agency (or agency and structure) in the study of politics. Explain.
3. What are the purposes and goals of political theory? Explain and assess the approaches of a least three thinkers.
4. Critical Theorists have wrestled with questions of reason, particularity (or contextual specificity), and universality in developing the idea of a "critical" political theory. Discuss and evaluate at least two thinkers' understandings of these issues for the idea of critical theory and of what makes it "critical." political theory as a critical activity.

Section 2: Deliberative Democracy

1. Explain the key features of Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy. Are there significant differences between Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy and others who identify with the concept, such as Dryzek or Gutmann and Thompson? Does anything important depend upon these differences?
2. It is relatively easy to imagine a deliberative democracy under ideal conditions, when participants are relatively equal in power and seek, in good faith, to influence one another through argument. Such ideal conditions, however, rarely accompany real political problems. Must ideal conditions exist for the theory of deliberative democracy to have relevance to politics? Discuss, with reference to at least two theorists of deliberative democracy.
3. Discussing at least two different theorists of deliberative democracy explain and evaluate the debates over procedural versus substantive aspects of the idea of deliberative democracy.

Section 3: Multiculturalism

1. How “liberal” is Kymlicka’s approach to multiculturalism? And what are the alternatives? Compare Kymlicka’s approach to at least one other theorist of multiculturalism.
2. “Multiculturalism as a formal policy and practice sits at odds with the requirements of democratic citizenship, which prioritize collective action and communication within a context of some minimal shared values.” Discuss this claim in relation to three to four of the texts on the reading list.
3. Can formal recognitions of (and policies that respond to) cultural claims be consistent with the norms of free and equal citizenship? Under what conditions are they consistent, and under what conditions do they conflict? Making use of at least two theorists of multiculturalism, discuss this question in relation to one or more examples of multicultural policy.
4. In different ways, theorists such as Benhabib and Connolly have sought to develop distinctly *critical* theories of multiculturalism and identity politics. With reference to at least two theorists explain and assess the idea of an avowedly critical theory multiculturalism and identity politics.