

On Politics and the Political

It has been clear to us from the beginning of the Re-imagining Democracy project that the changing use and meaning of the word democracy was deeply connected to changes in the way that people use other terms – republic, popular sovereignty, liberalism and so on. In the research we have done we have tried to link our developing understanding of the reworking of democracy with these broader changes in the lexicons and semantic fields of the countries we have studied. One word to which we have yet given rather little attention is ‘politics’ – and ‘political’: it is one of the most mundane of terms, it is also one whose use often carries with it the risk that modern understandings are projected on to earlier periods. Modern historiography has the terminology of ‘politics’ deeply embedded in thinking about the period, but it is not clear that this word and its cognates were in fact used in the same ways by people at the time.

According to one commentator: ‘even cultures with the strongest political awareness, for example, Greece and Rome, shared the quasi-naturalistic and therefore unproblematic view that only acts which have been decided upon and performed by the members of the political class(es), can be termed political...The acts of all others are, whatever their concrete character, also by definition, non-political....Modernity changes all this, slowly in the beginning, later with an ever increasing speed.’ (Heller, 331) Even if this is a sweeping claim, and lacks some precision, there does seem to be something right about it. For Aristotle, the political life was what people did together in their capacity as citizens – those who did not engage in rule were not citizens and did not act politically. And, at the end of the 18th Century, it does seem as if class as a natural basis for political action was coming to be challenged by at least some of those previously excluded. Moreover, in different languages, in different times, and under different pressures new distinctions are drawn – for example, between politics, policy and police:

With time, the differentiation between and gradual fragmentation of the different areas would lead to the crystallisation of various more or less autonomous spheres – religion, morals, politics, economics, social science, and so forth – but it would be a mistake to suppose anachronistically that it had already been separated in eighteenth century sources. Thus it is possible to observe the slow divorce between the notions of *politica* and *policia* that had largely overlapped for centuries.’ Javier Fernandez Sebastian (104)

In French in our period, the term *politique* continued to cover what many other languages distinguished as policy and politics.

The session in Lisbon April/May 2015 will take as a central focus the issue of how people understood arenas that we now think about using a language of politics , asking what vocabularies people used to talk about issues of power, authority, rule, government, corruption etc., examining how a range of terms were used and what they referred to, looking at the extent to which different national traditions developed distinctive lexicons and different meanings for common terms, and how this influenced the actions of men and women in the period.

To do this we want first to identify and then follow through a number of key terms for each country, and secondly to examine the way in which people talked about particular events at crucial junctures in each country's history.

We do not assume that there was be a single, coherent conception of politics at work or that 'politics' was necessarily the (or a) major term: in France, as suggested, 'politique' referred to policy and to a mode of government, so that there was no way of marking a separation between them. Moreover, it is striking that there is only one mention of 'Politique' in volume 9 of Brunot's survey *Histoire de la langue Francaise* (1937); that the term does not figure in Furet and Ozouf's *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (1988); and that, for all the turn to the 'political' made in accounts of the French Revolution, there has been rather little attention to the construction of the politics and the political from the perspectives of the actors themselves. Indeed, in many respects the language of virtue and the republic does not seem to have been linked to a language of the political – and it is unclear what significance, if any, was attributed to the term politics in the rhetorical invocations of virtue and unity, and disparagement of division, compromise and corruption.

In the UK context, there were several different constructions – one borrowing from Aristotle and the idea that a political life is a component of the good life; a strand in which politics was denounced as corruption and the pursuit of self-interest and in which it was often associated with court politics; an emerging strand of 'politics for the people', which was the title of a popular periodical including some commentary, songs, poems, quotations from canonical works of political philosophy, such as Harrington and others, and reports on events; and a language of politics to be found in private correspondence, and largely referring to public events and to politics as a subject matter – as in Thomas Hardy (founder of the LCS) in whose correspondence with his cousin he noted that 'a dish of chat about politicks Foreign and Domestic, I relish very well...'

That there were different strands of thinking about politics is likely to have been common elsewhere, but this raises the challenge of teasing out the different elements of people's understandings, and exploring the relationships between different aspects of their commitments. Just as historians often describe movements, activities and ideas as 'democratic' in periods when that would not have been how people understood them, so too there is a very powerful tendency to use modern conceptions of 'politics', of 'politicization', and the 'political' to describe activities, ideas, events, institutions and organisations that people at the time thought of in very different terms.

Consider, for example, the following issues:

- When something was described as political was this as well as, or in contrast to other descriptions? Was something 'political' as against something else? - perhaps legal, economic, social, religious – and were these terms in play and used to mark distinct domains? Was 'political corruption a distinct category, or just part of a more general category of corruption? In claiming rights were people in fact appealing to a juridical discourse, that they conceived of as distinct from things that they saw as political? How did people think of the relationship between legislation and politics; did the emergence of political economy (and what was covered by that) delimit a legitimate sphere of politics and/or a sphere in which politics was illegitimate?

- Were the varying forms of the word important? How did people see their 'unit' – as a nation, a state, a polity, a political order, or what? Did they see it as a unity – bringing together different components – perhaps social, economic, religious, cultural, historical etc.; or did they see it as a distinct sphere of activity within a broader entity, an empire or monarchy? Were the acts of kings, or sultans, legislators, senators, representatives, or citizens seen as political, or were only some, or none? Were some of these depicted as above politics or as a part of it – and to what extent?
- How did people imagine and represent the order under which they lived and which directed them – and how did they represent it – both in the unifying imagery/imaginary of, for example, Marianne in France, and in contrasts drawn using unifying and divisive imagery to capture aspects of contemporary politics. How far was there a conception of corruption predicated on some sense of a natural order of rule that was decaying or threatened by decay – how far was politics itself seen as a form of corruption of the body of the state/nation?
- What relationships were demarcated in the area of authority and rule – for example between politics, government, statesmanship, policy, administration etc – and how did linguistic cultures compare in the identification of salient divisions and terms? Who was seen as participating in politics, or as being political, who was not, and what were the lines of demarcation? In *Moderation Unmasked* (Dublin 1780) a distinction is drawn between the management of the King's Service and the Welfare of the country, on the one hand, and the actions of a set of men, 'whose sole ambition it is to share in the Plunder of their Country' who are depicted as retiring 'from the Reach of a dazzling and importunate Integrity within the dark Atmosphere of Court Politics...' Were tyranny and despotism seen as constitutional, or non-constitutional forms of rule – and was that distinction at all related to whether the terms politics or political was seen as relevant? Is constitutional rule seen as political or above politics? Was the replacement of the government of men by the administration of things seen as an anti-political project, as well as an anti-factional one? How does the rise of Political Economy change the character of discussions about politics, if at all?
- Are there processes of both politicisation and de-politicisation and how do these work – how controlled, or how spontaneous, are such processes. Under what conditions, for example, do riots come seen as political manifestations; and, in complementary fashion, how do activities get de-legitimated and side-lined by refusing political benediction?
- Were popular forms of action conceived of as political by those who undertook them, and by those against whom they were directed? And what was being singled out in seeing actions as political – or in denying their political character? Did women, who were everywhere almost wholly excluded from the franchise (in some places increasingly so) have any sense that they might be in some way 'political' or engage in politics. How did people describe events and actions that we tend to see

as evidence of politicisation, or political participation. How far was popular action described as being political – and how far was there an accompanying lexicon that marked some events as political – such as demonstrations, barricades, marches, parties; but not riots, journées, mob action, or social organisations? How did the events that are included or excluded change over time? Were petitions and oaths, conventions and plebiscites necessarily seen as political in character, or did the description depend on their content, or on the context, or on the relative balances of power and authority?

- Was there a positive content to the language of the political? – perhaps in the form of a distinct sense of difference between licence and political liberty (and how was that drawn); did people distinguish, and if so on what basis, between civil and political rights, political and other forms of corruption, political publications and those not so described, etc. What made a political proposal ‘idealistic’ or utopian?
- In states where the military intervened, was this seen as them intervening in ‘political matters’ or in politics, and as being out of keeping with their place in the system – or were they seen as an extra-political source of order. How far were there varied languages of political – disdain for political factions and for the corrupt horse trading of place and pension; increasing praise of political leaders and political solutions; some sense of the importance of the political process?

We are interested in exploring this topic across the whole geographical region, including the Ottoman and North African world. In part the object in exploring the issue is to see how far the thinking about politics and thinking about democracy interacted in different ways in different places, and in part to re-construct the language of the political of the period.

Sessions: I suggest running this over two days and having some of each on each day, to encourage back and forwards movement between the two approaches

Tracing terms

1. Politics/political, government, administration, policy, rule, order, statesmanship, political economy, corruption, patriotism, rights, constitution? Within different national but also local contexts – is voting seen as a political act, and what do people mean by that?

Britain/France
Spain
Portugal
Italy
Greece
Ottoman/North African

2. How do people in fact describe what we think now think of as major political events in the period and the movements that develop: for example:

the Cadiz constitution, the trienio, and the practices of *pronunciamentos*, the abdication of Maria Christina, the Carlist movement in Spain; the trienio, the acceptance of the 1822 constitution by Maria II, the peasant uprisings of 1846/7, and Saldanha's coup in Portugal; the activities of the *carbonari*, and the revolutions of 1799 and 1820/1, 1830, and 1848/9 in Italy; the war of independence, the granting of a constitution in 1843, and the abdication of Otto in 1862 in Greece; the organisation of the Charter in Britain and the holding of mass meetings in Britain and Ireland;

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