

GV311 Philosophy, Ideas and British Politics

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Do Ideas Matter?



Oakeshott on the Study of Politics

- Philosophy – an integrated and coherent account of the totality of experience.
- Practice – a partial perspective on experience directed towards achieving a goal.
- Tradition – a context in which human conduct is enacted and understood.

Freeden on the study of Ideology

- Ideology is not a sub-category of political thinking that is less respectable than philosophy.
- Ideology is political thinking situated in the dynamic world of changing political experience.
- Freeden draws on tradition going back to Marx, Mannheim, Gramsci and Althusser to explain the importance and ineradicability of ideological thinking.

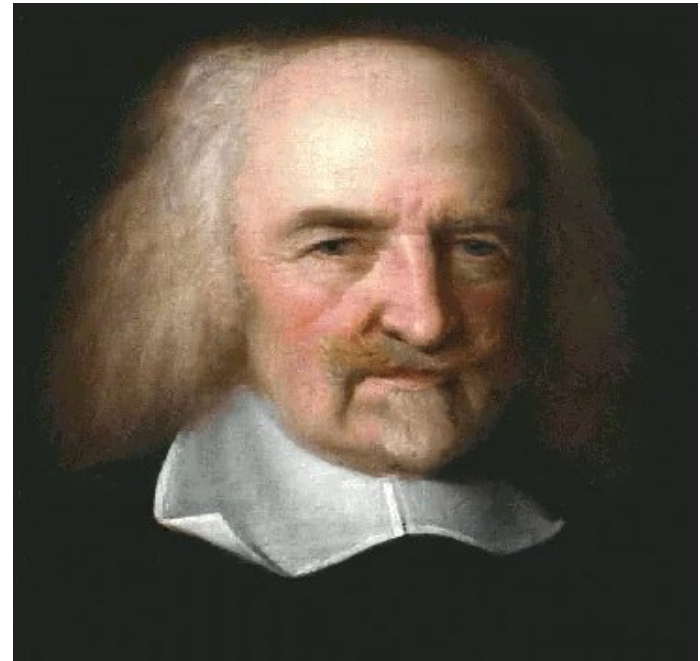
Section 2 Philosophers in British Politics

Rationalist - Thomas Hobbes 1588-1672

...the greatness of Hobbes is not that he began a new tradition ... but that he constructed a political philosophy that reflected the changes in the European intellectual consciousness...

...Leviathan, like any masterpiece, is an end and a beginning: it is the flowering of the past and a seed-box for the future.

Michael Oakeshott Rationalism in Politics, p. 278.





The Hobbesian View

- Rationalism – methodological individualism, constructivism and egoism.
- Will and Artifice – the state is an artificial entity, willed into being in order to secure order
- Problem of order derives from individual nature

The Hobbesian State

- Sovereignty – unified and indivisible. There can be no logical division or separation of powers.
- Law is the sanctioned will of the sovereign – jurisdiction extends to the limits of that power.
- Anti-republican – Government is of, and for, the people but not by the people.
- Liberty is sacrificed in return for security under the law.

Hayek on Hobbes' legacy

‘... It was the individual liberty which a ‘government under the law’ had secured to the citizens of Great Britain which inspired the movement for liberty in the countries of the Continent in which absolutism had destroyed most the medieval liberties which had been largely preserved in Britain. These institutions were, however, interpreted on the Continent in the light of a philosophical traditions very different from the evolutionary conceptions predominant in Britain, namely of a rationalist or constructivistic view which demanded a deliberate reconstruction of the whole of society in accordance with principles of reason. This approach is derived from the new rationalist philosophy developed above all by Rene Descartes (but also by Thomas Hobbes in Britain)...

Hayek, New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas, pp. 119-20

Hobbes's Legacy – Bentham and Philosophical Radicalism

Bentham (1748-1832) was a radical reformer.

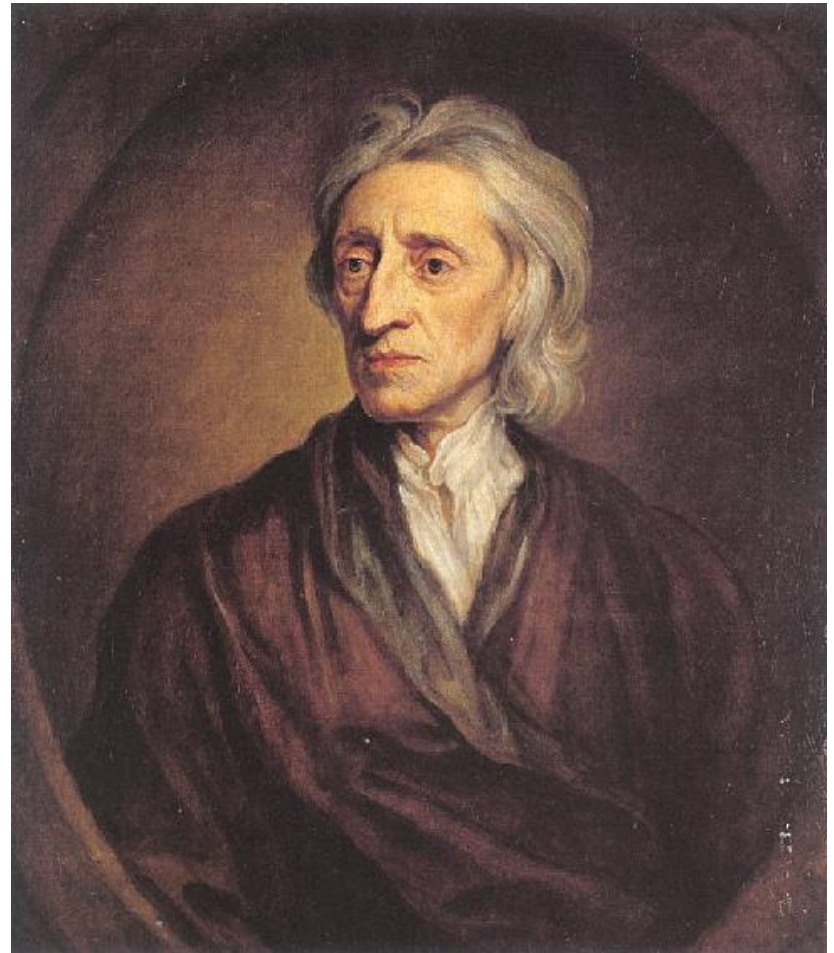
Critics of Sir William Blackstone and advocate of legal positivism; theorist of sovereignty, and advocate of rational reform.

Arguably an authoritarian liberal – government by experts to secure the greatest happiness of the greatest number.



Radical - Locke and the Mixed Constitution

- Author of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)
- Two Treatises on Government (1689) Anon.
- A Letter on Toleration (1689). (Latin). Anon.
- Reasonableness of Christianity (1695). Anon.



Locke on Government

Political power, then, I take to be a right of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties, for the regulating and preserving of property, and employing the forces of the community in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the commonwealth from foreign injury, and all this only for the public good. (II § 3)

Locke on Government 2

- Law of Nature is a Law of Reason
- Political Society is a social contract
- Government is an agreement by a people to place its natural executive power as a trust in a set of institutions to preserve rights – including property
- Government authority depends upon consent of the Governed
- Sovereignty: divided between legislative and executive, and federative (for foreign affairs) – its not the solution it's the problem.

Montesquieu

Part 2 Chapter 6 On the Constitution of England

In each state there are three sorts of powers: legislative power, executive power over the things depending on the right of nations, and executive power over the things depending on civil right...

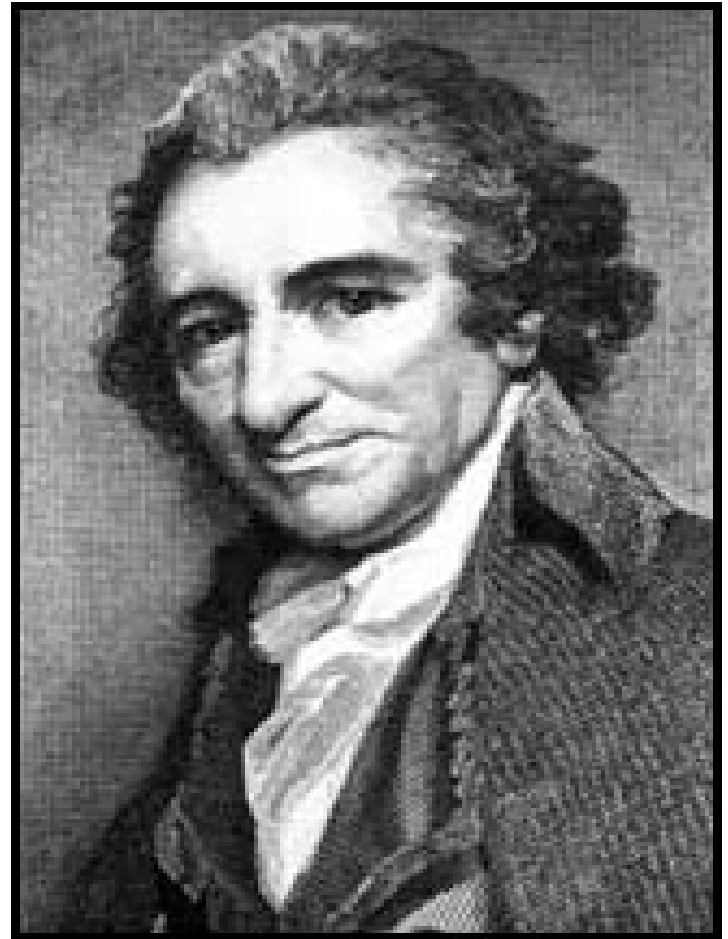
...Political liberty in a citizen is that tranquillity of spirit which comes from the opinion one has of his security, and in order for him to have this liberty the government must be such that one citizen cannot fear another.

...When legislative power is united with executive power in a single person or in a single body of the magistracy, there is no liberty, because one can fear that the monarch or senate that makes tyrannical laws will execute them tyrannically.

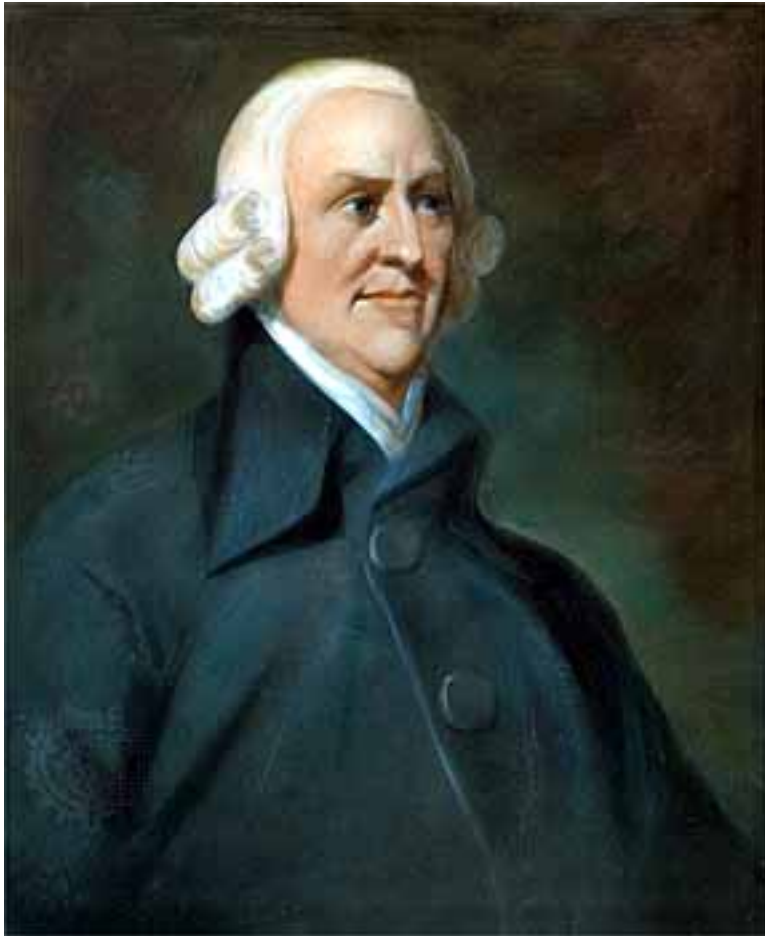
...Nor is there liberty if the power of judging is not separate from legislative power and from executive power.

Tom Paine and Radicalism

- Rights of Man 1791
- Takes Lockean ideas and systematises them into a defence of a written constitution.
- A constitutional radical and advocate of democratic emancipation.



Traditionalist - Smith and Burke



The Traditionalist View - Smith

- Smith's Lectures on Jurisprudence provide an account of the evolution and development emergence of social institutions.
- Anti-rationalist – reason is dispersed.
- Freedom – is not a set of rights but an institutional and cultural achievement. The rule of law is a practice.
- Constitution is a way of doing politics amongst a people who recognise themselves as sharing a common identity and destiny.

The Traditionalist View - Burke

- Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France is a classic statement of Conservatism and opposition to rationalist constitutional reform.
- Doctrine of Prescription
- Celebration of Prejudice – pre-judgement.
- Intergenerational contract – ‘...a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.’

Traditionalism – Burke 2

- Burke provides a narrative for change that respects the integrity of the past.
- *Contra* Paine – the constitution is a process not a document. The rationalist tendency to reduce to a document leads to errors. (compare with Bentham's critique of the rights of man).
- *Contra* Hobbes – sovereignty and the state is connected to, not a precondition of society.

From Philosophy to Ideology/Practice

Part 3

A British Political Tradition

- Oakeshott – historical and institutional story that cannot be distilled into a few themes.
- Hayek – a theme of liberty. A Whig history of evolutionary liberalism against a rationalist statism (socialism).
- W.H. (Jack) Greenleaf – the British Political Tradition – the study of the rise of the state, organised around two poles individualism and collectivism – both cut across party lines.

The Challenge of Neo-Liberalism



Neo Liberalism

- Not a straightforward concept – but can be traced to Hayek (see Stedman-Jones, 2012).
- A combination of classical liberalism and social conservatism.
- Small states and free markets but also a spontaneous moral order – a tradition.
- Last 40 years have seen a neo-liberal assault on the welfare state. This has forced/encouraged ideological transformation.

New Edwardians?: Norman and Glasman



New Edwardians

- Why Edwardians – force us to reconsider the settlement of state, economy and society that characterised the 20th century.
- Scepticism about the state's capacity to deliver security, well-being and economic growth.
- Turn to society – Blue Labour –what is left of class politics without calls analysis.
- Big society – Norman's attempt to shift from Hayek to Oakeshott and Hobbes to Burke.

Conclusion

- What I haven't tried to do is to single out one of the philosophical frameworks as the best way to understand the development of British Politics – that is for others.
- Similarly in respect to the development of ideological debate I have not covered anything but a small snapshot.
- What I have tried to do is to show that the two themes are connected and that understanding British Politics as a tradition of ideas (amongst other things) remains vitally important.