What is ‘Political’?

2nd term seminar 2017-2018

Organised by Stefano Bartolini

Register Online

Contact: Adele Battistini (adele.battistini@eui.eu)

Description

‘Politics’ is a noun that points to a field or sphere of human activity and interaction. ‘Political’ is an adjective that usually associates with other names to qualify and specify them. Political behaviour, political institutions, political participation and political groups denote special kinds of behaviour, institutions, participation and groups whose specialty resides in their being 'political'. What does this specification refer to? This is the question at the core of this seminar. In order to overcome characterisations that focus on mere activities, institutional locations or functions, an inquiry into politics as a field or sphere requires a micro-definition of the distinctive political element in human action. Hence, the emphasis in this course is on ‘the political’ and on ‘political action,’ leading to an understanding of politics. The seminar focuses on ‘politics’ understood as the production and distribution of ‘behavioural compliance,’ as opposed to the view of politics as a distribution of values, an aggregation of preferences or a solution to social dilemmas. Starting from a motivational definition of elementary political action, the endeavour proceeds to a differentiation of compliance instigations in different social fields of interaction, characterised by various levels of confinement of the actors and of monopolisation of command. Eventually, the work concentrates on the single 'meta-good' exclusively and unavoidably reserved for the political: the production of a generalised and stabilised positive attitude towards complying with any possible mechanism of production and distribution of any other good. This change of perspective is theoretically profitable. It helps to distinguish the changing phenomenology of politics as conventionally understood from its essential and stable core. It may help to more precisely define the knowledge task of the political scientist.
Audience

The seminar is open to all researchers.

Requirements

The course takes as a reference a manuscript of my own that is forthcoming and that discusses the topic in relation to classic and contemporary literature. Beyond this text a restricted list of additional readings is offered. Participants are expected to read them thoroughly and attentively so as to use them in the discussions throughout it. The ten meetings will be opened by an introduction of the weekly theme by the professor followed by a critical remarks paper of two participants and by a general discussion. Creditation requires attendance and the presentation of at least one critical paper.

This seminar is worth 20 credits.

Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1</td>
<td>11 January</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 2</td>
<td>18 January</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 3</td>
<td>25 January</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 4</td>
<td>1 February</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 5</td>
<td>8 February</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 6</td>
<td>12 February</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 7</td>
<td>22 February</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 8</td>
<td>1 March</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 9</td>
<td>8 March</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 10</td>
<td>15 March</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>17-19h</td>
<td>Seminar Room 2</td>
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Syllabus

Session 1) Introduction
- Organizational matters
- Why a continued debate?
- The historical development of the lemma ‘politics’

Session 2) The definition of nuclear political action
- What is ‘political action’?
- Conceptions of politics and political action
- Political action versus other types of action

Session 3) Five objections to ‘political action’ as search for compliance
Session 4) Behavioural compliance and the concept of power

Session 5) The conditions of political action: confinement of actors

Session 6) The conditions of political action: monopolization of command

Session 7) The analytical definition of the fields of political action
- Closed and open fields
- Monopolized and non-monopolised fields

Session 8) Compliance search and types of final values

Session 9) What is ‘politics’: The political good

Session 10) The character of politics in governmental fields
- Public goods and social dilemmas
- Stratification
- Autonomy
- Ultimacy
- What is left out and what’s next?

Readings for the seminar (available on Collab):

Bartolini, Stefano (1917), *The Political*, manuscript


Alexander, J. (2014), 'Notes Towards a Definition of Politics', *Philosophy*, 89: 273-300;

**Further readings suggestions on some of the key points of the manuscript (optional and not available on Collab):**

**On the lemma of ‘politics my suggestions include:**

Sartori, Giovanni (1973), 'What is “Politics”', *Political Theory*, 1: 5-26,


**On Politics seen through the concept of power:**


On exit options and open and closed fields:


**Foer ‘circumscription theory:**


For those interested in mechanisms of monopolization and enforcement in the economic theory perspective:


In particular Barzel, Yoram, *The state and the diversity of third-party enforcers*, pp. 211-233;

On primordial political predicaments my suggestion is:


De Jouvenel, Bertrand (1963), *The Myth of the Solution*, Addendum to *The pure theory of politics*, cit