American Political Thought: Teaching a Course

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AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT:

Teaching a Course

Steven A. Samson

Summer, 1979
INTRODUCTION

Soon after I enrolled in the political science program, I drafted a proposal to teach a course in American Political Thought similar to one I had taken several years earlier at the University of Colorado. Teaching a course in political philosophy appeared to offer an ideal vehicle for pursuing my research interests and experimenting with new teaching concepts. I wanted the opportunity to develop new curriculum material which I could include in my regular lectures on American government at Chemeketa Community College and the Oregon State Penitentiary. The resources available to my students, especially my students at the penitentiary, were very limited in both quantity and quality. Many students wished to go beyond the necessarily superficial treatment we gave to political issues in class. The textbooks, lectures, and discussions whetted their appetites for meatier fare, but when it comes to food for thought prison diets are notoriously thin and bland. This was a continual frustration.

My lectures and offhand remarks tend to move freely between the theoretical and the practical, the ideal and real. I find that students are genuinely receptive to digressions into the origins of basic concepts, even though many of these same students are functional illiterates. This is a fact worth pondering. Excursions into history and theory offer them an intelligible context for assimilating the formidable confusions of politics, a subject which they generally treat with disdain if they give it a second thought.

A particular problem at the penitentiary was the
negative atmosphere, at times chokingly thick with worldly cynicism. On the surface, the prison experience seemed to radicalize the inmates. Classes frequently were used as a forum in which a few of them would air various displeasures: at the administration in particular or at the system in general. But much of this vocal skepticism seemed to conceal a characteristic refusal to accept personal responsibility for meeting the world on its terms. I showed a film to my introductory classes in which the radical journalist, I. F. Stone, took exception with the thoughtless nihilism that often passes for radicalism. Stone remarked that many young radicals seemed to be working out their frustrations at their parents: "It may be therapeutic, but is it politics?" Politics is not simply the release of tension. It requires thought and judgment, including self-examination.

In all fairness I must say that this skepticism is by no means confined to the penitentiary. The general lack of interest in politics suggests that the so-called "post-Watergate syndrome" is still with us. Much of the younger generation of students has adopted a "laid back" philosophy of life. But the lack of political commitment is not unique to this generation. Students' awareness of political issues, although very selective and often divorced from any context, is probably higher than it ever has been. A natural inquisitiveness remains, and this reserve can be tapped. Complaints about personal hardships or worries about changing political and economic events often serve as useful springboards for evaluating daily life in terms of basic political concepts. With each new
class I endeavor to catalyze an intellectual chain reaction that would engage the minds of my students, provoking them to evaluate their lives and circumstances. I consider this to be my license to teach and the standard for measuring my success or failure as a teacher.

One term I used a chapter from Glenn Tinder's *Political Thinking* with very satisfying results, leading me to conclude that I must give greater attention to the conceptual roots of political science and kindred disciplines. The next logical step seemed to be development of a new curriculum. Soon I had the outline for a new course: American Political Thought. I hoped that it would become a proving ground for a new approach.

The response to the new class was disappointing. I was partly responsible for the low turnout. Since my work schedule was tight and growing even tighter, I delayed selecting a time until it was too late to include the course in the regular announcement. Four students attended the first meeting. Together we sized up the situation, chatted for twenty minutes, and adjourned. Two students promptly dropped the class and I cancelled it the following day. Several months after this initial offering in the autumn of 1978, the class was approved for the summer of 1979: again too late for inclusion in the regular schedule. By that time it was evident that my other teaching jobs would offer little competition. From six in the spring, my course load dwindled to one that summer: one which did not require a new preparation. In the meantime, I made adjustments in the format and reading list to fit a four-week
session. The idea of offering the class during a four-week session was, I regret to say, my own. It seemed like a good idea at the time, until I learned that one of the expected eight class sessions was devoted to registration and another fell on the Fourth of July. I attached a note to the course description in which I encouraged students to start reading but this tactic was not particularly successful.

The response to this abridged version was much the same. Four students attended the first meeting. Although I was reluctant to begin the term with fewer than six students (based on unhappy experience), the students and some members of the department encouraged me to continue. I led off, uneasily, with a lecture on basic political concepts and some principles of critical thinking. One student dropped the class the following day; the others stuck with it.

I will now begin my evaluation of the course. First, I will outline my teaching objectives, discuss the reading material, and lay out the structure of the course. Next, I will review the lectures and discussions. Finally, I will evaluate what I regard as the successes and failures of the class. Some handouts and material from the students will be included in the appendices.

OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

My objectives were twofold: to introduce students to American political classics and to use this material as a vehicle for some exercises in critical thinking. Since the course carried a senior-level designation, I assumed that
the students would be juniors or seniors who had some background in political science. My plans for the course were fairly ambitious when I first proposed it late in 1977. I suggested using Kenneth Dolbeare's *Directions in American Political Thought* as the basic textbook. I was familiar with the book and had enjoyed its use of long selections from a few selected philosophers, statesmen, and journalists. The book is somewhat dated, like the few other textbooks on the subject that remain in print. It spoke to the radical persuasion of the late 1960s. But when it came time for the book orders, I discovered that its price had risen considerably, so I looked for substitutes and finally settled on Alpheus Mason's *Free Government in the Making* as my choice.

Mason's textbook has the advantages of being more comprehensive and less expensive. It also has a companion volume with which I was already familiar. Unfortunately, it contains nothing more recent than Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," which was written in April of 1963. It does not always compare favorably with the Dolbeare volume, either. For teaching purposes, Dolbeare's textbook has the advantages of offering several selections from each political thinker and presenting a comprehensive ideological framework in which to examine the authors' values and assumptions. Mason's introductory essays to each chapter focus more on the selections than on their historical and ideological context. Dolbeare's essays emphasize the development of particular and philosophical
traditions. Mason's prose is ponderous, although thoughtful, while Dolbeare's is transparent by comparison.

Glenn Tinder's *Political Thinking* was used as a point of departure. I regret that the summer session was too short to make better use of it. It is a highly readable book which reviews many fundamental questions of political thought. The book's format reflects the interdependence of these questions with those of philosophy and religion, particularly those that pertain to metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

The structure of the course was simple in conception. Time pressures and difficulties with the reading material forced me to simplify the plan even further. I began by introducing the subject of American political thought with an extended lecture on the principles of critical thinking, some highlights from the history of western political thought, and the emergence of an American synthesis from several distinct traditions: what Louis Hartz called "the liberal tradition." Although I made some cuts, this lecture spilled over into the second session.

Following this initial lecture, I planned to open each session with brief remarks on the readings and their historical context. This was to be followed by a discussion of the readings, which I wanted to be the mainstay of the course. But the discussions sometimes plodded along listlessly, indicating that the class was having trouble digesting the material. Most of the readings were written in styles that seemed foreign to our ears. Moreover, each selection because of its brevity and editing seemed torn out of context. The language difficulties were compounded by having to move quickly from one writer to another. It was enough to set the students' heads spinning.
By the end of the term, however, the students were demonstrating a more sophisticated grasp of the material and were asking perceptive questions.

We covered a variety of writers and topics ranging from the Putney debates concerning suffrage for the common soldiers in Cromwell's victorious Parliamentary Army to fairly recent essays on the race issue, although our discussions did not get past the Progressive Era. The students substituted either a paper or a take-home essay exam for the fourth quiz, which I had scheduled for the final class session. This allowed them more time to reflect on the material and, more importantly for them, more time to prepare for other exams. We discussed each quiz during the following session of class and extracted themes which became the reference points for later discussions.

A list of the readings, copies of the quiz questions, and copies of the student's written work are included in the appendices.

LECTURES AND DISCUSSIONS

Rather than review the lectures and discussions (which are outlined in an appendix) in any detail, I wish instead to focus on a few themes: some purposes of political philosophy, principles of critical thinking, concepts and definitions, and recurrent practical issues.

One purpose of political philosophy is also one that it shares with ethics: to discover rules that govern behavior. Politics, at one level of analysis, is applied ethics. This was understood at least as early as the ancient Israelite historians. Politics bears witness to its underlying world view. Our notions
about reality, knowledge, communication, and value are part of our cultural baggage. They affect our relations with other people and our responses to matters of common concern. The perversities that obscure motives and disrupt communication are less remarkable than the purposefulness, adaptability, and consistency of human behavior. Political philosophy is worth studying for the patterns of behavior and argumentation it discloses.

Another purpose of political philosophy is to discover the assumptions which provoke political thought. Certain perceptions of reality undergird the questions we ask and the answers we find. I recommended Edward T. Hall's The Silent Language, Adam Schaff's Language and Cognition, and Michael Polanyi's The Tacit Dimension for their discussions of this factor.

Questions regarding the analysis of behavior and perceptions of reality may be addressed, in turn, to these same political thinkers as men of affairs. (Women, by the way, were not represented in the textbook). I offered some principles of critical thinking as a set of working hypotheses. These principles, which were phrased as puns and homilies, concerned rules of evidence and methods of detecting biases. They were in a fluid state even as I presented them. I am always adding to and modifying them.

I provided a set of working definitions for some of the key concepts of political philosophy: politics, political power, authority, legitimacy, and government. I used several models--such as Adolph Berle's five natural laws of power,
Max Weber's three sources of power, and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs—as teaching aids. I have collected numerous such models and have found them useful for reaching certain students who can work at abstract levels of thought.

Following a period of discussion, I resumed the lecture with a quick survey of the major traditions that influenced the American colonists. These I gathered into four categories: Classical, Biblical, British, and Continental. I paid particular attention to the Biblical concept of the covenant, the theories of natural law, the idea of mixed government, and the English system of common law.

We discussed some components of the dominant liberal ideology in reference to Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America* and William Appleman William's *Contours of American History*. These components included individualism, pluralism, natural rights, limited government, private property, due process, decentralization, and social classification, including racism and nativism.

I wrapped up my introductory lecture at the beginning of the following session by noting the impact of the Reformation on the development of modern liberalism. The Puritan tradition, in fact, was discussed in connection with the first reading assignment. Most of that discussion dealt with the Putney debates on the issue of suffrage.

Among the themes that were at the center of our discussions were the gradual extension of suffrage, the movement from status to contract and back to status as the basis of many rights, the conflict between rule of law and rule of men, the liberalization of religion and the secularization of society, the conflict
between local self-government and the creation of a nation, the debate over the proper delegation of powers, the myth of the rugged individualist, the pursuit of territorial expansion and industrial development, and the rule of the wealthy versus government by small property owners. A major issue which brought these diverse themes together concerned the question of legitimacy: who has the right to exercise the sovereign power and to what ends may it properly be applied? We concluded our series of discussions by examining the emerging industrial concentrations of wealth and power through the agency of the state and national governments.

Some of my lecture and discussion notes have been included in an appendix. They are fairly sketchy and do not begin to capture the "widening gyre" of our discussions. The readings provided much grist for our mill. I drew heavily on my background in the history of technology, legal history, philosophy, and linguistics.

EVALUATION

The task of determining the degree of a course's success or failure raises several problems and questions: Success for whom? Success at what? Success according to what standard? Let us begin with the last question first.

There are several ways to measure a course's success: according to performance, according to personal satisfaction, and according to personal growth and development. Today's educators are expected to be able to project the "results" of a course in terms of specific behavioral objectives: for example, "the student will (be able to) define the concept of mixed government and discuss its application in the constitution of Massa-
chusetts and the writings of John Adams." These behavioral objectives are apt to be a priori unless the teacher has had experience teaching the particular course in question. Although I developed a set of objectives for my original proposal, I found that they served me better as a point of departure than as an actual description of what occurred in the classroom. This, I believe, represents the true importance of developing a set of objectives: it gives continuity and direction to what would otherwise appear to be flux. But digressions are equally important in many situations. The particular needs and interests of the students and the teacher at a specific time help set the agenda for lectures and discussions. Although some students are confused by digressions, others find them helpful; this triggers further discussion. Preparation, then, includes an element of improvisation along with a sense of formal structure.

One way of measuring the performance of the students is to see how far their work reflects an increased understanding of the material. In this particular case, the students' written work showed a progressively greater sophistication up to the end of the term. I found that I was able to raise my own expectations of them as the term progressed. One student tended to dominate the discussions, especially at first, but this was a welcome relief to the bewildered silence that too often greeted my questions. This gradually changed, but not quickly enough. It takes time for the right atmosphere and rapport to be established in the classroom. In this case, time worked against us. I tried to extend the sessions; the
students resisted these efforts. I expected to have thirty hours of class meetings; I barely was able to muster twenty hours. Once all of us accepted the limitations under which we labored, things started settling down. Adjustments that are difficult enough to make in twelve weeks loom as major obstacles to success in a four-week course. I would not attempt to teach this course again in less than a ten or twelve week term.

I am not in a position to assess either the degree of student satisfaction or the role this course may have played in their personal growth and development. I usually have to depend on evidence that I can see during the term, course evaluations at the end of the term, and the occasional remarks I hear from my students after the term is over. But I can evaluate my own satisfaction and, to some extent, my own personal growth and development.

One satisfaction comes from developing a deeper acquaintance with certain students: the ones who are willing to open up themselves and sustain a personal relationship. I do not regard myself as a remote authority figure, although I frequently leave some of my students with this impression. There may be risks in getting too close to the students but a certain level of rapport is needed simply to encourage them to risk embarrassment and speak out for themselves. This is a lesson I learned when I began teaching at the penitentiary. Unless you are at ease with the men (and occasionally, the women), working at the prison is bound to be a stressful experience. But we make many of our own worries. I found that I could
relax and be "myself." If my expectations got out of line, I learned that I had to make adjustments or the wheels of education would grind to a halt. The most difficult classes for me have usually been those in which I did not respond quickly and realistically to a teaching problem. Measured against the thirty or more classes I have taught, I would have to say that in this case my response was only adequately quick and realistic. The time factor did not allow me the luxury of hesitation. Also, I wish I had gotten to know the students on more of a personal level. This might have made adjustments easier.

As a learning experience, however, the course gave me considerable satisfaction. It brought my research into sharper focus, opened up new areas to explore, enabled me to develop some new curriculum material and evaluate its impact, and better prepared me for a course in political theory that I taught the following term. I have subsequently added to and refined my curriculum for American political thought. I consider it natural for a teacher to learn as much as or more than his students about the subject in the course of a term. Each new teaching experience adds to an accumulating capital of knowledge and experience. This is one of the genuine pleasures of teaching.

This brings me finally to the question of the course's success, which I have answered in part. What remains to be considered is the matter of content. Did the readings and discussions adequately present a survey of American political thought? Within the stipulations I have already set, I can answer affirmatively. The course was not as comprehensive as
a one-semester or one-year course would have been. But that was not the object. Within its four-week time-frame, we covered a broader range of historical material without sacrificing analysis than I thought possible. Perhaps I had originally set my goals too high. But in my efforts to achieve them, a strength and consistency of purpose seemed to keep these goals within reach. I made adjustments, trimmed the reading material, dwelt on a few major themes, and attempted to relate the material to current issues. The specific content changed but the changes still reflected or represented a survey of American political thought. The themes I had proposed were the same themes around which the final product emerged. The course was compact, time-consuming, intensive, mind-stretching, and, ultimately, rewarding. I hope that the students found the experience equally rewarding. If the class was too small, the readings often too dense, and the textbook too demanding for beginners, these drawbacks did not prevent us from tackling the subject and profiting from it.
Textbooks

Mason, *Free Government in the Making*
Tinder, *Political Thinking*

Course Outline

I. Foundations
   A. Classical Roots
   B. Christian Roots
   C. Renaissance and Reformation Influences
   D. British Constitutionalism

II. The Colonial Experience
   A. Puritan Political Ideas
   B. Ideological Origins of the Revolution

III. Sources of the Constitution
   A. Period of the Confederation
   B. The Philadelphia Convention
   C. Ratification Debates
   D. Bill of Rights

IV. Birth of a Nation
   A. Federalists and Whigs
   B. Democrats

V. Industrial America
   A. Civil War
   B. Rise of Big Business
   C. Populists
   D. Progressives
   E. Social Service State

VI. Contemporary Political Thought

The first class session will be devoted to a lecture on the sources of the American liberal tradition, plus an introduction to political thinking. Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before class and contribute to the discussion. Four unannounced, open-book essay quizzes will be given during the term. A term paper (approximately 10 pages in length) may be substituted for one of the quizzes. Term papers will be discussed in class. Students are also expected to make short presentations on assigned political thinkers during each class session.

Grading

Each quiz is worth 20% of the grade. A term paper, also worth 20%, may be substituted for one of the quizzes. Preparation for class and participation...
Bibliography

Abstrome, Sidney, "The Religious History of the American People"
---
Adams, John, "The Folklore of Secession"
---
Allen, Bernard, "Ideological Origins of the American Revolution"
---
Beard, Charles, "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution"
---
Boorstin, Daniel J., "The Americans"
---
Brackberger, R. H., "The Image of America"
---
Cash, W. J., "The Mind of the South"
---
Calhoun, John C., "Disquisition on Government"
---
Chyung, J. P. C., "European Background of American History"
---
Connolly, W. W., "The American Mind"
---
Corwin, Edward, "The "Higher Law" Background of American Constitutional Law"
---
Curtis, Herle, "The Growth of American Thought"
---
Drucker, Peter, "The Future of Industrial Man"
---
Goldman, A. F., "Rendezvous with Destiny"
---
Hamilton, Jay, "Madison and the Federalist"
---
Hart, Louis, "Liberal Tradition in America"
---
Hofstadter, Richard, "The American Political Tradition"
---
Lewis, R. W., B., "The American Adam"
---
Lippmann, Walter, "The Good Society"
---
McDonald, Forrest, "We the People"
---
Marx, Leo, "The Machine in the Garden"
---
Miller, Perry, "American Thought"
---
Miley, G. Wright, "The Power Elite"
---
Montgomery, J. W., "The Shaping of America"
---
Niebuhr, Reinhold, "The Irony of American History"
---
Parrington, Vernon, "Main Currents of American Thought"
---
Pocock, J. G. A., "The Machiavellian Moment"
---
Reno, N., "Mark 0, "Ideology and Myth in American Politics"
---
Rosen, Clinton, "Political Thought of the American Revolution"
---
Sabine, George, "A History of Political Thought: Theory"
---
Simon, Yves, "Community of the Free"
---
Tocqueville, Alexis de, "Democracy in America"
---
Turner, Frederick Jackson, "The Frontier in American History"
---
White, Morton and Lucia, "The Intellectual versus the City"
---
Wills, Garry, "Inventing America"
READINGS

First Session

Start Tinder's Political Thinking. Finish as soon as possible.

Second Session

Mason's Free Government in the Making (Students responsible for leading discussion on two apiece)

1. Putney Debates, pp. 8-22
2. Locke, pp. 22-38
3. Harrington, pp. 38-44
4. Winthrop, pp. 60-62
5. Williams, pp. 63-68
6. Franklin, pp. 86-93
7. Otis, pp. 93-99
8. Hamilton, pp. 110-112
9. Paine, pp. 127-131

Third Session

10. Adams, pp. 144-146
11. Hamilton, pp. 148-158
13. Madison, pp. 170-172
15. Madison, pp. 192-194
16. Lee, pp. 256-264
17. Yates, pp. 277-283
18. Hamilton, pp. 283-293
19. Madison, pp. 293-308

Fourth Session

21. Hamilton, pp. 334-353
23. Kent, pp. 416-419
24. Ruel, pp. 424-426
25. Upshur, pp. 431-437
26. Randolph, pp. 437-440
27. Jackson, pp. 449-453
29. Taney, pp. 465-468
30. Browson, pp. 468-473
31. Emerson, pp. 479-486
32. Whitman, pp. 494-501
33. Fitzhugh, pp. 521-525
34. Harper, pp. 525-528
35. Lincoln, pp. 529-537

Fifth Session

36. Webster, pp. 551-555
37. Calhoun, pp. 555-565
38. Chase, pp. 571-573
39. Sumner, pp. 583-591
40. Ward, pp. 591-596
41. Conwell, pp. 596-599
42. Rauschenbusch, pp. 605-608
43. George, pp. 608-614
44. Lloyd, pp. 623-631
45. Warner, pp. 631-633
46. Debs, pp. 652-656
47. Adams, pp. 667-670
48. Brandeis, pp. 670-676
49. Lippmann, pp. 679-682
50. Holmes, pp. 705-709
51. More, pp. 711-715
52. Brandeis, pp. 719-720

Sixth Session

54. Bourne, pp. 729-734
55. Mencken, pp. 738-743
56. Berle and Means, pp. 752-759
57. Roosevelt, pp. 767-775
58. Arnold, pp. 806-813
59. Nock, pp. 813-816
60. Roosevelt, pp. 816-819
61. Hoover, pp. 819-820
62. Quinn, pp. 837-841
63. Berle, pp. 841-846
64. Kennan, pp. 862-865
65. Washington, pp. 867-869
66. Warren, pp. 869-871
67. Workman, pp. 871-876
68. King, pp. 876-878
69. Lippmann, pp. 893-899
70. Niebuhr, pp. 899-906
1. Two early controversies that generated heated debate may be summed up in two slogans: "No taxation without representation" and "No representation without taxation." Each debate concerned the proper role of civil government with respect to property. Discuss the views and arguments of any three of the following: Ireton, Rainboro, Locke, Franklin, and Otis.

2. Alexander Hamilton proposed a central government vested with broad discretionary or prerogative powers. John Marshall later asserted the power of judicial review in support of a positive construction of national powers. Anti-Federalists, such as Robert Yates, feared the consequences of such general grants of power by the Constitution, especially to the judiciary. Identify and discuss some of the issues raised by the need for a central government "confident of its powers," on the one hand, and the fear of a "tyranny of the majority," on the other.
American Political Thought: Quizzes 3 and 4

3. Jacksonian democracy, which favored laissez faire and a broadened franchise for the propertyless majority, was succeeded a generation later by a post-Civil War reassertion of the power of private wealth. Our political writers almost universally censured the emerging plutocracy of the so-called "Robber Barons." Social Darwinists, like William Graham Sumner, appealed to laissez faire. Many radicals, like Walter Rauschenbusch and Eugene Debs, called for socialism. Some, like Louis Brandeis, advocated legal changes and state intervention. Others, like Henry Demarest Lloyd, warned of the collaboration between big business and government.

Identify and discuss some particular dangers these writers found in the concentration of private power and the remedies they proposed. You might compare these arguments with some of the earlier debates concerning taxation, suffrage, and discretionary power.

4. "In our modern state, and in the United States more than anywhere else, the social structure is based on contract, and status is of the least importance.... In a state based on contract sentiment is out of place in any public or common affairs.... The sentimentalists among us always seize upon the survivals of the old order. They want us to save and restore them. Much of the loose thinking also which troubles us in our social discussions arise from the fact that men do not distinguish the elements of status and of contract which may be found in our society." William Graham Sumner, p. 585

"Sir Henry Maine says mankind moves from status to contract; from society ruled by inherited customs to one ruled by agreement, varied according to circumstances. Present experience suggests the addition that the movement, like all in nature, is pendulous, and that mankind moves progressively from status to contract, and from this stage of contract to another status." Henry Demarest Lloyd, p. 630

Illustrate from the readings some of the changes in custom or status that came about through application of the social compact and consent theories. Do you recognize an interplay between status and contract relationships in the extension of suffrage, the promotion of bounties and monopolies, the loosening of laws governing patrimony, and so forth? Can you detect—perhaps predict—a trend in the development of our "liberal tradition?" Pay particular attention to trends in our legal history and legal theory.