

17 January 2014 The last topic from the Warburton menu - "Politics":- Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau & Marx.

We did well to get through this agenda in the morning as there seemed to be so many important elements in each philosopher to cover. We must be getting good at this, because as the discussion progressed you brought out issues the group had noted I found I was ticking off the points that I had in mind and the questions Rosa sent (we checked at the end that we had addressed them). Hopefully you agree we are achieving this skim through, and getting a grasp of the subject across its range.

Machiavelli comes out as a an experienced politician who had lost his job who used the basis of the classical writers to produce a manual of how to achieve the aims of a Prince or a Republic. He's set aside any ethical ideals of "virtue", to put it mildly, and it is therefore perhaps a wrong question to ask if he is evil – though his methods are calculated to minimize strife, so could be seen as a political utilitarianism. Some of his maxims and advice were quoted: to Princes - "Know when to be brave as a lion, when to be cunning as a fox". "Treat fortune like a woman" (i.e. roughly!), "It is better to be feared than loved", "Do the harsh dirty work early"; to Republics – "you needed a strong founder", "Use good religion and good laws", encourage some strife between balanced factions" (e.g. patricians & plebs), "have strong laws against slandering the leaders", prevent citizens from getting over-wealthy", keep (military command) appointments short-term", "encourage immigration", "in your quest for empire, have short, big wars". Some of these still resonate, and we discussed the currency of the need for a dirty side to politics in the real world.

I learnt this time round the consistency of Thomas Hobbes Philosophy and the way he built his political theory on one underlying assumption. He was a Renaissance man, a scientist, materialist, empiricist and atheist. He noted that we cannot know what the world is really like, we have only our sense perceptions. Extending these ideas to ethics, again, we don't have a fundamental set of rules, only what we each believe to be true – he was a relativist. One concept he thought universal was that we all have the right to protect our own continuing existence – though even here he thought we would all respond differently to any possible threat. therefore best to give up our freedom to "the sovereign" (we might say "the government", or "the state") to decide on the rights and wrongs of everything. And that includes religion and beliefs as well as when to go to war and the law. This sounds totalitarian, but it is tempered because the sovereign is bound by the same contract, and can act only to protect the life of his subjects. So wars must be defensive, not to aggrandize the monarch; welfare for the poor is desirable to prevent riots and revolution (what was George Osborne saying about raising the minimum wage?), but the imposition of equality of wealth or the abolition of property would be beyond the sovereign's rights.

Rousseau seemed to attract the greatest collective suspicion. OK, we could see that man in the state of nature would be well content – conflict shouldn't arise when there is an abundance of territory and resources. It was observed that his theory that citizens should be educated to understand and be free within "The General Will" could lead to state control, and the Cultural Revolution in China is still in our minds.

It is difficult to see how we could deal with Marx in a short session (and we can't – see below for the next session). It was good to look at his philosophy: how he adapted Hegel's idea of the progress and inevitability of history to demonstrate the inevitability of the revolution of the proletariat; his challenge to liberal ideas of freedom, encompassing the "free market" by his economic analysis and argument that capitalism pushed wages to starvation level. We examined reasons why communism has failed (so far?!). It was noted that both Russia and China missed out capitalism, going straight from feudalism to communism. We read an article from The Times on Bangladeshi clothing factories. We read Peter Singer's list of where Marx was wrong written in the 1985 (another in the OUP Very Short Introductions series), and thought that maybe the jury is still out on some: "The income gap between capitalists and workers will increase", More and more independent producers will be forced down into the proletariat", "Workers' wages will remain at

subsistence level”, “The rate of profit will fall”, “Capitalism will collapse because of its internal contradictions”, “Proletarian revolutions will occur in the most industrially advanced countries”.