

With Comments 10 March 2025
Subject to Revision

Humboldt-Universität, Berlin
21-25 July 2025

Professor Michael Rosen
Humboldt-Universität and Harvard University
e-mail: mrosen@gov.harvard.edu

Professor Jonathan Wolff
Oxford University
e-mail: jonathan.wolff@bsg.ox.ac.uk

ACCOUNTABILITY AND POWER: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE
PROBLEM OF INSTITUTIONS

No one can doubt that institutions are of central importance in social life. However, political philosophy often treats them as secondary – empirical means to the realization of values that are independently given.

There are three, connected reasons why this neglect of institutions should be questioned.

(1) First, it is important to ask how political institutions should be understood.

Institutions play a central role in the most significant systematic political theory of the late twentieth century: John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Since Rawls considers the subject-matter of his theory to be what he calls the “basic structure” of society, the way in which “the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (*TJ*, §2), how he conceives social institutions is obviously of fundamental importance.

There are, however, alternatives to be found in political theory, particularly outside the Anglo-American tradition. Do they offer us a helpful alternative conception of institutions or do they perhaps lead us away from an exclusive focus on “institutions” entirely?

(2) Following from Rawls's conception of institutions, is the idea that institutions can be examined from the point of view of what he calls “strict compliance”. As he himself says, it is obvious that the problems of partial compliance are “the pressing and urgent matters”. But, he says, “The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems” (*TJ*, §2).

And this brings us to a second reason to re-think our approach to institutions. Should political philosophy start from “ideal theory”? If not, why not, and what are the alternatives? What would a “non-ideal” approach to political theory look like? Jonathan Wolff has developed a contrast between what he calls “applied” and “engaged” political theory. What are its advantages and disadvantages?

(3) Rawls’s ideal theory encourages us to ask, first, what an ideally just set of institutions would look like (one that embodies the “two principles” of justice) and to design actual institutions to realize that ideal so far as is feasible (“imperfect procedural justice”, in Rawls’s terminology). One important issue that comes to the fore in Wolff’s “engaged” perspective is: what are the different values embodied in institutions and in what way can they best be realized in them? Would an engaged perspective on institutions lead to a more pluralistic conception of the values to be sought in institutions and the mechanisms by which institutions can best be controlled in the service of those values?

SYLLABUS (SUBJECT TO REVISION)

Background Reading

Participants are encouraged to read whatever they can of the following four books as a background for the class.

1. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970)

Hirschman’s work is (exceptionally among classic works of social science) short, vivid and highly readable. It gives a thought-provoking account of different approaches to different kinds of institution.

2. Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017)

If institutions are determinate sets of rules and regulations, the task of the street-level bureaucrat is to implement those rules. But if the values embodied in institutions are diverse and conflicting, the agents whose job it is to implement them face what Zacka calls an “impossible situation”. As one writer puts it in his blurb, “*When the State Meets the Street* reads as one might imagine a collaboration between Bernard Williams, Richard Sennett, and James Scott could turn out.”

3. Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) [deutsch: *Kritik von Lebensformen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2013)]

Bringing together insights from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School with feminist social theory, Jaeggi sets out to develop a theory of “forms of life” to set against formalistic conceptions of social institutions and to show what conception of social criticism it is appropriate to bring to bear on them.

4. Lorraine Daston, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023)

Daston gives a panorama of the different kinds of rule that order life in the Western world – an engaging background to the understanding of the rule-governed conception of institutions with which we shall be concerned.

Class Schedule and Readings

Note The readings below are available on the course Moodle Site

Monday 21 July 11:00-13:00 Social Theory: Diagnostic and Engaged

Required

Jonathan Wolff, “Method in Philosophy and Public Policy.” In A. Lever and A. Poama (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Ethics and Public Policy*. Routledge, 2019: 13-24

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971): §§ 1 and 2.

Suggested

Jeremy Waldron, “Political Political Theory: An Inaugural Lecture.” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21(1), 2019: 1-23

Elizabeth Anderson, “A Note on Method in Political Philosophy” in *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010: 3-7

Katrina Forrester, “Liberalism and Social Theory”. *Analyse & Kritik* 44 (1), 2022: 1-22

Michael Rosen, *Dignity: its History and Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Preface

14:30-16:30 Institutions (1): Rawls

Required

John Rawls, “Two concepts of rules.” *The Philosophical Review* 64 (1), 1955: 3-32.

John Rawls, "Institutions and Formal Justice" in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971): §10

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press, 2001): §50 “The Family as a Basic Institution” p.162-168 [Response to Susan Moller Okin]

Suggested

Susan Moller Okin, “Justice and Gender” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16, 1987: 3-46

John Rawls, “The Best of All Games: Philosopher John Rawls on the delights of baseball.” In: *Boston Review*:

<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/rawls-the-best-of-all-games/>

Tuesday 22 July

11:00-13:00 Institutions (2)

Required

Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street : Public Service and Moral Agency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017): Ch. 2

Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life* Jaeggi, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019): “Introduction”, Ch 1 (“What Is a Form of Life?”), and “Conclusion”

Suggested

Bernardo Zacka, “What’s in a Balcony? The In-Between as Public Good. *Political Theory and Architecture*, 2020: 81-102

Oded Na’aman, “The Checkpoint” *Boston Review* (Cambridge, MA : 2012) 37 (4): 38

Bernardo Zacka, “An Ode to the Humble Balcony”, *New York Times*, 9 May 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/opinion/covid-balconiesarchitecture.html>

AFTERNOON SOCIAL EVENT

Wednesday 23 July

11:00-13:00 Structural Power and Structural Injustice

Required

William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) Chapter 3 (“Power and Responsibility”)

Clarissa Hayward, “On Structural Power.” *Journal of Political Power*, 2018

Suggested

Iris Marion Young, “Structure as the Subject of Justice”, *Responsibility for Justice*, Ch. 2

14:30-16:30 Power and Powerlessness

Required

John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness : Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) Chs. 1,2

Suggested

John Gaventa, "Power and powerlessness in an Appalachian Valley – revisited", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:3, 440-456, 2019
James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak*. Ch. 2

Thursday 24 July

11:00-13:00 Accountability

Required

Michael Walzer, "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen." *Dissent* 1968
Jeremy Waldron, "Accountability: Fundamental to Democracy", NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 14-13, 2014
Jane Mansbridge, "A Contingency Theory of Accountability." In: Bovens M, Goodin, R., Schillemans, T. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

14:30-16:30 Institutions: the Economic Perspective

Required

David Ciolepy, "Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation" *American Political Science Review* Vol. 107, No. 1, 2013: 139-58
Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970)

Friday 25 July

11:00-13:00 Final Discussion

The sessions will generally open with a presentation by Rosen or Wolff and a short response from the other one, but there will be ample time for discussion by class members. Those wishing to have credit for participation may be asked to make brief presentations. The working language is English, although we will make every effort to accommodate those who are less confident in it.

19 March 2025