Ben Ansell:

WHY POLITICS FAILS

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I have long searched for a book about political science that I can recommend to friends who want to learn about the field. Ideally, the book should give them a sense of how political scientists view the world and set out some of their main findings. Economists tend to produce such books fairly regularly (from *Freakonomics* on down) and there are some in sociology as well (from C. Wright Mills to Duncan Watts).

It is harder to think of examples by political scientists. One of our few bestsellers is Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracy Dies*, but it is more speculative and focused on historical analogies than based on well-confirmed theories. Another is Robert Dahl's *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?*, which nicely blends normative and empirical thinking though on a narrow subject.

Ben Ansell's *Why Politics Fails* is a good contender for one of the first works broadly based on good political science research that you could also recommend to your friends. Ansell takes an explicitly political economy approach that begins with the problem of individuals whose self-interested actions prevent the achievement of collective goals. Politics is necessary because of our tendency to disagree, dissent and defect, yet any political solution inevitably creates problems.

The difficulty of writing a pop political science book is that practitioners in our field don't have a simple, distinctive point of view on the world in the way that economists and sociologists do. We are more of a mongrel field without a figure like Adam Smith or Emile Durkheim to provide 'one simple idea' with many variations.

Ansell's version of the one simple idea (besides individual rationality versus collective irrationality) is that there are tradeoffs (or in his terms 'traps') in achieving the five major goals of politics. This might be a good motto for our field. One of the messages that many of us took from grad school was 'Not all good things go together'. This perhaps counteracts a natural tendency to believe that there is an ideal political system that provides everything we want. Of course, tradeoffs are central in the self-conceptions of other academics, particularly economists, but Ansell provides a distinctive political spin on them.

His specific tradeoffs, which provide the organising structure of the book, are:

- Democracy: There is no such thing as the will of the people;
- Equality: Equal rights and equal outcomes undermine each other;
- Solidarity: We only care about solidarity when we need it ourselves;
- Security: We can't avoid anarchy without risking tyranny;
- Prosperity: What makes us richer in the short run makes us poorer over the long haul.

It is hard to argue with these, though one could imagine others – for example, the tradeoffs between effectiveness and representation; stability and change; and providing what the people want versus what the people need. How much our choices here depend on values or normative perspectives as opposed to empirics is another issue that Ansell hints at (he recognises the inevitability of disagreement and sometimes lays out alternative

positions, for example, on solidarity), but doesn't treat as systematically. Nevertheless, these topics and tradeoffs provide a strong framework for a package tour of political science.

The substantive parts of the book give a breezy summary of political science research on these areas with many applications to current events. After introductory anecdotes, each section is organised as What is X?; the X Trap; and Escaping the X rap. Most of the material will be familiar to practising political scientists, but we are all also likely to pick up one or two new ideas. Some readers may find it a faithful review of their long-forgotten comprehensive exam preparations. To give a sense of the material (leaving out the applications to current politics):

- The democracy chapters cover the Schumpeterian definition, a brief history of democracy (from Athens to the Third Wave), majoritarian versus consensus designs, Condorcet cycles, Arrow's impossibility theorem, strategic voting, median voter theory and polarisation.
- On equality, Ansell considers the question of equality of what, the agrarian origins of inequality and Pikettyian theories of its evolution, the Meltzer-Richard model, Cohen's egalitarian ethos, the equality/efficiency tradeoff, the relationship between inequality and polarisation, the Swedish model, the Great Gatsby curve, redistributivist versus elite competition theories of democracy, gender inequality and assortative mating.
- The solidarity sections discuss Durkheim, ethical perspectives on what we owe each other, decommodification, the emergence of the solidaristic state, informational limits to solidarity, how welfare became black in the US and ethnic tension over welfare, and moral hazard and adverse selection.
- On security, the key theories/theorists are Hobbes, the emergence of modern police forces and incarceration (this was relatively new to me), the debate on the decline of violence, solutions to the problems of tyranny and anarchy, and the dark side of social capital.
- Finally, in the section on prosperity, the author analyses measures of prosperity, the Malthusian trap and the Great Divergence, inclusive institutions, credible commitments, collective action problems along with selective incentives and encompassing organisations, the prisoner's dilemma and tit-for-tat, the resource curse and manias.

It would be hard to cram more material into just under 300 pages. I would need to ask a layperson if it is too much or if the main tradeoffs allow them to make sense of it all.

What sets Ansell's book apart for me is the focus on the solutions to some of these tradeoffs. Elsewhere, I have criticised political science for failing to adopt an engineering mindset. We tend not to create new solutions in the way that economists, for example, have a sub-field of mechanism design. I give credit to Ansell for searching for original Pareto improvements to the status quo in the US and elsewhere.

To improve democracy, he thus probes ways to constrain democracy to avoid the Scylla of chaos and the Charybdis of polarisation. Pragmatically, he suggests quadratic voting, citizens' assemblies, online deliberation (for example, vTaiwan), open primaries, compulsory voting, heresthetics and proportional representation. To reduce inequality, he probes ways to make a wealth tax more palatable (mainly by finding areas where wealth is attributed to luck) and considers policies on minimum wage, unionisation, low interest rates and social investment. These overlap with the solutions to the solidarity trap that

include a universal basic income and providing benefits to the middle class.

The security solutions are both more controversial (improving monitoring with speed cameras and data science algorithms as in China's social credit scheme) and less controversial (body cameras for police). At the international level, Ansell's proposals include democracy promotion and collective security arrangements like NATO, and even lethal autonomous weapons systems. Finally, escaping the prosperity trap could be mitigated through the coordinated market economy, the entrepreneurial state (for example, innovation agencies and sovereign wealth funds), higher taxes, bank regulation and carbon taxes. This is not to say that Ansell endorses any of these solutions uncritically; even here he is alert to tradeoffs.

Ultimately, Ansell makes an argument for the inevitability and even centrality of politics. Trying to take conflict and self-interest out of politics (through techno-libertarianism or populism) will lead it to emerge elsewhere. Again, this might be the one simple idea of political science. He suggests that an appreciation of this idea could lead to better politics, though it is hard to see how self-interested actors will come to such an understanding. But if you had to choose one book to recommend to friends to give them an appreciation of politics and political science, *Why Politics Fails* may be the best choice.

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Michael J. Sandel:

THE TYRANNY OF MERIT: WHAT'S BECOME OF THE COMMON GOOD?

New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2020, 288 pages.

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Michael J. Sandel is a distinguished political philosopher and one of the world's most prominent public intellectuals. In his career, he has proven himself capable of writing dense and precise philosophical texts that resonate strongly with the leading figures in the field. However, he has been writing for a broader general audience for some time now. His books have a tremendous appeal primarily because they deal with critical philosophical issues and arguments in accessible language while at the same time not devaluing their substance, a true rarity among (contemporary) intellectuals. Thus, every time he publishes a new text, it resonates.

Sandel offers a timely intervention into contemporary debates on meritocracy in his latest book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* The work is a critique of the modern trend of credentialism and the societal pursuit of individual success, which, he argues, has come at the cost of the collective good.

The author strongly opposes the established dogmas of meritocracy. He believes that our societal reverence for individual achievement – epitomised by the adoration of elite educational qualifications – has fostered a toxic culture. In his view, this creates two interconnected problems: