



Echoes of T. S. Eliot's Political Ideas in Contemporary Political Thought

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Abstract

As a distinguished poet, essayist, and literary critic, T. S. Eliot's works delve into intricate societal quandaries, cultural decline, and the trials of modern civilization. This research paper endeavours to identify and analyse the core political concepts and philosophical perspectives expounded by Eliot throughout his poetry, essays, and other literary compositions on contemporary political thought. Key areas of investigation encompasses Eliot's notion of tradition and its impact on individual character and how it resonates with political institutions and governance, influencing stability and continuity; his critical examination of modern society, rapid industrialization, and urbanization, and its alignment or divergence from other political thinkers of his time; the intersection of Eliot's religious beliefs, particularly his conversion to Anglicanism, with his political views, moral principles, and notions of governance; his perspectives on authority, power structures, and the role of government, exploring the responsibilities vested in those in positions of power; his scepticism towards democratic governance and preference for an elite ruling class, relevant to contemporary debates on democracy and meritocracy; his writings on nationalism and cosmopolitanism, unveiling his views on balancing national identity and global cooperation; his conservative inclinations and cautious approach towards societal change, with implications for present-day political movements and debates on progress. The study reveals profound insights into tradition, religion, authority, and governance, providing valuable perspectives for contemporary political discourse. Eliot's works continue to resonate as a thought-provoking and influential force in shaping the understanding of politics in the present day.

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Introduction

T. S. Eliot was a famous poet and writer of the 20th century. However, this research paper dwells on finding arguments for consideration of him as a political philosopher. There is no definite definition of the word political thinker. But, a political thinker tries to find solutions to political and social issues with his research and thought. Political thinker, a gender-neutral word, is the one who comprehends contemporary issues and tries to give solutions for the same.

Eliot is not just known for his beautiful poems but also for his thoughts about how society should work. For example, Eliot borrows a term from an Oxford theology professor and refers to what he calls the '*pre-political area*.' It is the domain where the questions and issues are not practical but ethical, even theological, Eliot asserts, and that domain, he concludes, is the proper domain for the literature of politics. (MAMBROL 2020) T. S. Eliot's concept of the '*pre-political area*' is an idea he explored in his essay titled *The Idea of a Christian Society* which was published in 1939. In this essay, Eliot discussed the relationship between Christianity and society, and he introduced the concept of the '*pre-political area*' as a crucial aspect of his political and social philosophy.

The *pre-political area* refers to the realm of human life that exists before and beyond the scope of government and politics. Eliot argues that society's well-being and moral health depend on factors that are outside the direct control of the state. These factors include culture, morality, religion, and individual ethics. According to Eliot, these elements form the foundation of a healthy and stable society. Eliot was concerned about the moral and cultural decay he saw in society during his time, particularly in the aftermath of World War I and amid the rise of totalitarian ideologies. He believed that political solutions alone could not address these issues effectively. Instead, he argued that the '*pre-political area*,' which encompasses the moral and spiritual aspects of life, needed to be restored and strengthened. The concept of the '*pre-political area*' underscores Eliot's belief that the health of a society depends not only on its political structures but also on the moral and cultural values that underpin it. By emphasizing the importance of these non-

political elements, he argued for a holistic approach to addressing the challenges of his time, advocating for a return to core principles and a recognition of their significance in shaping a just and cohesive society. These arguments and Eliot's thoughts present himself as a political philosopher who is idealist in his thought. He has a condition, a utopian social structure, which many political philosophers have.

Every thinker is a child of his time. To provide a historical context for T. S. Eliot's political philosophy, it's essential to understand the period in which he lived and wrote. T. S. Eliot's life and work were influenced by several key historical and cultural factors. The period of the early 20th Century in Europe and America was the formative years of Eliot as a poet and thinker. This period marked significant political and cultural changes. This period includes the World War I (1914-1918). The devastation and disillusionment brought about by World War I had a profound impact on the intellectual and artistic climate of the era. Many intellectuals including Eliot, grappled with the sense of shattered world order and a loss of traditional values. This period of upheaval and uncertainty influenced Eliot's exploration of cultural and spiritual renewal in his works.

Eliot's most significant political essays, such as *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1942) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), were written in the interwar years. This period was marked by economic instability, political extremism, and the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe. This was another phase when Eliot's writings reflected his concern for the moral and cultural decay he observed in society.

Similarly, he has a comprehensive view of political and economic contemporary issues. The economic period of The Great Depression brought hardships of the Great Depression in the 1930s and added to the social and political challenges of the time. Eliot was interested in the role of culture and religion in addressing these crises and promoting social cohesion. Eliot's intellectual development was also shaped by his engagement with various philosophical and theological traditions in that period which included his understanding of Anglicanism and his interest in the works of philosophers like St. Augustine. These influences contributed to his exploration of the relationship between Christianity and society.

The latter part of this period made Eliot a key figure in the literary modernist movement, which sought to break with conventional forms and experiment with new ways of expression. This artistic context influenced his writing style and themes, as he grappled with the fragmentation and dislocation of modern life.

Objectives

The research paper as discussed earlier has a broader objective. First, to understand T. S. Eliot's political beliefs, his thoughts about politics, mainly in his writings like 'The Idea of a Christian Society' and 'Notes towards the Definition of Culture.' Second, To explore the main ideas he talked in his political writings like what he thought about tradition, culture, religion, and the role of intellectuals in society. Third, To find how things were after World War I and during the rise of modernism and this will help us to understand what shaped his political thinking. Fourth, To find out the importance of T. S. Eliot's ideas and views in today's politics and look at speeches, books, or movements where people echo his ideas.

Research Methodology

This research paper will be primarily descriptive and analytical, aiming to explore and analyse T. S. Eliot's political ideas and their influence on contemporary political thought. The paper also examines Eliot's ideas such as 'The Idea of a Christian Society' and 'Notes towards the Definition of Culture,' to extract and understand his political ideas. The research aims to provide valuable insights into the importance of Eliot's ideas in contemporary politics or international relations.

Eliot's Contribution to Political Thought

T. S. Eliot's contemporary political thought was shaped by the tumultuous events of his time, particularly during the early to mid 20th century. His essays and writings offer insights into his evolving political views. The first contemporary idea which influenced Eliot and vice-versa is his writing on cultural renewal. Eliot believed in the importance of culture in maintaining social order and cohesion. He argued that a healthy society requires a strong cultural foundation. In his essay 'Notes Towards the Definition of Culture' (1948), Eliot explores the significance of culture and its role in preserving civilization. His famous quote, 'Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other peoples and other generations in

saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilization that it was worthwhile for that civilization to have existed.’ (T. S. Eliot) Summarizes his understanding and efforts for cultural renewal. Eliot asks society to hold cultural values as ideal for social change.

Another area of concern for Eliot is Materialism. He is a critic of materialism especially of modern materialistic and secular trends. In his essay ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925), and through his poetry, he expressed concerns about the spiritual emptiness and moral decay brought about by materialism and the loss of traditional values. ‘We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!’ These lines immediately set the tone for the poem, depicting a group of people who are spiritually empty and hollow. They are stuffed with material possessions but lack a deeper, meaningful existence. This hollowness is a direct critique of the spiritual vacuum that can result from an excessive focus on material wealth and consumerism.

Eliot also expresses concerns about the loss of traditional values in the face of materialism. In *The Hollow Men*, he writes, ‘Shape without form, shade without colour, Paralysed force, and gesture without motion.’ (Scofield and Martin 1988) Here, Eliot suggests that the individuals he portrays in the poem have lost their spiritual and moral bearings. They have become shapeless and colourless, devoid of the values and principles that once gave meaning to their lives. This can be seen as a commentary on how materialism can erode the moral and spiritual foundations of society. This colourlessness has also caused the loss of political will among the leaders. The corruption and decay in national character can also be linked with the same thought that Eliot presents. Throughout the poem, Eliot paints a picture of moral decay and apathy. He writes: ‘This is the way the world ends not with a bang but a whimper.’ (Cheshire 2021) Here, he suggests that the pursuit of material gain and hedonism has led to a moral decline in which significant events or changes occur quietly and without a sense of purpose. This reflects Eliot’s belief that materialism can lead to a lack of moral responsibility and a sense of futility. Eliot, a devout Christian, often incorporated religious imagery and references in his work. In ‘The Hollow Men’, he includes religious allusions that underscore his critique of materialism and the loss of spirituality. For example, he writes: ‘for thine is the kingdom between the idea and the reality between the motion And the act falls the Shadow’. (*The Hollow Men*) Here, the mention of ‘the kingdom’ and the concept

of a shadow between idea and reality alludes to Christian themes of salvation and the distance between human actions and divine ideals. It reinforces Eliot's message that materialism has separated individuals from their spiritual beliefs and values.

Another area of Eliot's thoughts can be understood is his stand on Anti-Totalitarianism. Eliot was deeply troubled by the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe during his lifetime, particularly Nazism and Communism. He expressed his opposition to these ideologies and their disregard for individual liberty and human dignity. T. S. Eliot's stance against totalitarianism is indeed a significant aspect of his intellectual and moral concerns. He lived during a tumultuous period in history, witnessing the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe, particularly Nazism in Germany and Communism in the Soviet Union. Eliot was deeply troubled by the consequences of these ideologies and their impact on individual liberty and human dignity. Eliot submits a sophisticated, if aloof, deconstruction of Fascist totalitarianism, interrogating its neo-Pagan, en masse idolization of Mussolini in a heady brew of politics, culture, and religion. (Araujo 2017)

This idea can be reflected in Eliot's renowned poem *The Waste Land* (1922). While the poem is complex and multifaceted, it contains passages that suggest a sense of disillusionment and despair, which can be interpreted as a response to the upheaval caused by totalitarian regimes. For example, in the section titled 'The Fire Sermon' Eliot describes a world filled with corruption and spiritual decay, possibly alluding to the moral bankruptcy of totalitarian regimes.

In his essay 'The Idea of a Christian Society', Eliot explicitly addresses the dangers of totalitarianism. (T. S. Eliot) He argues that a truly Christian society must be founded on certain moral and ethical principles, and he condemns both Nazi fascism and Soviet communism for their disregard of individual rights and human dignity. He criticizes the idea that the state should have absolute power and control over every aspect of life, as was evident in these totalitarian regimes. Eliot's writings showcase how poetry can show us the possibility, despite religious in nature, greater necessity for a predominantly secular age than for a religious one. (Scofield and Martin 1988)

Against totalitarian thoughts and ideas, Eliot propounded individualism and believed in the importance of safeguarding individual liberty. In his essay, 'Notes Towards the Definition of Culture' (1948), he argues for the preservation of cultural and intellectual traditions that value individuality and freedom of thought. Totalitarian ideologies, in

contrast, suppress dissent and enforce conformity, which goes against Eliot's vision of a society where individuals have the freedom to think and express themselves. Eliot was not shy about expressing his political views in his writings and public statements. During World War II, he contributed to the anti-Nazi propaganda efforts through his work at the BBC. His broadcasts, such as 'The Moral Basis of Democracy' (1940), reiterated his opposition to totalitarianism and his belief in the moral and spiritual foundations of a democratic society. He believed in preserving the moral and spiritual values as essential for a just and free society, in stark contrast to the dehumanizing effects of totalitarian ideologies.

However, Eliot was also critical of excessive individualism and believed in the importance of community and social cohesion. His works, such as 'The Rock' (1934) and 'Murder in the Cathedral' (1935), reflect his exploration of these themes. T.S. Eliot's criticism of excessive individualism and his emphasis on the importance of community and social cohesion are recurring themes in his works. He was deeply concerned about the breakdown of social bonds and the erosion of traditional values, which he saw as a consequence of unchecked individualism. In 'The Rock' Eliot serves as a reflection on the state of society and the need for collective responsibility. In this work, Eliot expresses his concerns about the moral and spiritual fragmentation of society. He argues that a healthy community must be founded on shared values and a sense of collective purpose. Eliot writes, 'the endless cycle of idea and action, Endless invention, endless experiment, Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness; Knowledge of speech, but not of silence; Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance, all our ignorance brings us nearer to death, But nearness to death no nearer to God.' (The Information Age 2023) These lines suggest that the relentless pursuit of individual knowledge and action, divorced from a sense of stillness, silence, and higher spiritual truth, can lead to spiritual emptiness and social fragmentation.

In his play 'Murder in the Cathedral', Eliot explores the similar thought of the conflict between individual conscience and social cohesion. The play is based on the assassination of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and it delves into the moral dilemma faced by Becket as he confronts the demands of both his individual conscience and his duty to the Church and society. The play raises questions about the role of individuals

within a larger community and the sacrifices required for the greater good. One of the key speeches in the play is Becket's reflection on martyrdom, where he states: 'The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.' Here, Eliot underscores the importance of doing what is right not just for personal gain or individual satisfaction, but for the sake of the larger community and its moral integrity.

Another political thought that Eliot propounds in his writing is Conservatism. While Eliot did not align himself with any political party, his views on culture, religion, and society often resonated with conservative thought. His writings emphasized the preservation of tradition and the importance of established institutions. Conservatism is related to the thought of the Preservation of Traditions. Eliot was a staunch advocate for the preservation of cultural and literary traditions. In his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), he argues that artists and writers should engage with and build upon the literary and cultural heritage of the past. He believes that true creativity emerges from a deep understanding and respect for tradition. Eliot writes: 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.' (Eliot-p.36) This perspective aligns with conservative values of valuing and preserving the wisdom and achievements of previous generations.

Conservatism also means giving importance to established institutions. Eliot recognized the importance of established institutions, both in culture and in society. He was a devout Anglican Christian and expressed his belief in the role of the Church as a stabilizing force in society. In his essay, 'The Idea of a Christian Society' (1939), Eliot argues for the significance of religious institutions in providing a moral framework for a functioning society. He writes: 'A Christian society is not going to arrive until most of us really want it: and we are not going to want it until we become fully Christian.' This reflects his view that established religious institutions, like the Church, can play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and moral values.

Conservatism also means a thought of Critique of Modernity. Eliot's conservative inclinations are also evident in his critique of modernity. He was critical of the excesses and disruptions brought about by rapid social and cultural changes. In his work *The Waste Land* (1922), he portrays a world in disarray, where traditional values have eroded, and individuals are alienated from one another. This can be seen as a commentary on the

negative consequences of modernity and the need to hold onto enduring values.

Another side of this political thought is scepticism toward Political Ideologies. Eliot expressed scepticism toward radical political ideologies, particularly in the face of the totalitarian regimes of his time. He believed that these ideologies often led to the erosion of individual liberty and moral decay. This has been discussed earlier.

Another political thought of Eliot is T. S. Eliot's scepticism of democracy, a notable aspect of his political thought, and this scepticism is evident in his essay 'The Class and the Elite' (1923). In this essay, Eliot explores his concerns about the limitations and challenges of democracy, particularly in the context of culture and governance. He is a critic of Mass Culture. In 'The Class and the Elite', Eliot expresses reservations about the impact of democracy on culture. He argues that a purely democratic society tends to prioritize mass culture over high culture, which he views as a threat to the preservation of intellectual and artistic traditions. Eliot is concerned that in a democratic society, culture may become increasingly shallow and commercialized, catering to the lowest common denominator. He writes: 'The great works of the past were produced with the belief that an élite existed who were capable of understanding and enjoying them. It was further believed that such an élite was desirable for the future of civilization; that without its civilization could not progress, and that if it were not preserved, it would disappear.' Eliot thus underscores the idea that an intellectual and cultural elite is necessary to safeguard and cultivate the highest achievements of human civilization.

Eliot also emphasizes Leadership and Expertise. Eliot argues for the importance of leadership and expertise in society. He contends that not all individuals are equally capable of making informed and wise decisions, particularly in complex matters of governance and culture. He believes that society should rely on the guidance of an educated and discerning elite who can provide direction and make decisions for the greater good. He states, 'The élite [should] maintain the standards of culture and initiate the rest of society in appreciation and understanding of them. The masses, in a healthy society, will take an interest in their élite, and will respect the authority of the élite, in the proportion that they are led by the élite and influenced by them.' This viewpoint emphasizes the role of an intellectual and cultural elite in shaping the values and direction of society.

The extreme thought of Eliot of this thought can be observed in his ideas and Scepticism of Universal Suffrage. Eliot questions the idea of universal suffrage, arguing that not everyone is equally qualified to participate in the political process. He believes that a more selective and discerning approach to voting is necessary to ensure that those who hold power are truly capable of making informed decisions. He writes, 'One of the signs of a healthy political or social philosophy is its attitude to universal suffrage. It is the mark of a philosophy which takes into account the complexity of life, which recognizes the importance of differentiation and the necessity for organization.' Eliot suggests that universal suffrage, without proper qualifications or considerations, can lead to poor governance and the erosion of cultural and intellectual values. He argues for the importance of an educated and discerning elite in preserving culture and providing leadership. Eliot's views on democracy align with his broader concerns about the erosion of tradition and the importance of preserving intellectual and cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

T. S. Eliot's views on international relations are also very important to understand. It is very evident in his essay 'Thoughts after Lambeth' (1931). This essay provides insights into Eliot's thoughts on diplomacy, foreign policy, and the role of the Church in international affairs. In this regard, Eliot criticises the Political Idealism. In 'Thoughts after Lambeth' Eliot criticizes what he sees as the idealistic approach to international relations. He expresses scepticism about the belief that diplomacy alone can solve complex global problems. Eliot argues that a realistic understanding of human nature and power politics is necessary for effective foreign policy. In this regard, Eliot writes: The mistakes that we make and that we seem always doomed to make, in international relations, arise from one fundamental error: the belief that we can make agreements with others which will change their natures. Eliot's critique reflects his belief that idealistic attempts to change the behaviour of nations through agreements and treaties often overlook the fundamental motivations and interests that drive international politics. Eliot's view emphasizes the potential of religious institutions to contribute to the ethical dimension of international relations.

The main idea of Eliot revolves around pragmatism and realism too which is an important school in International Relations. Eliot advocates for a more pragmatic and realistic approach to international affairs where he emphasizes the importance of recognizing the limitations of diplomacy and the need to prioritize national interests.

In this regard, he writes: ‘We need more willingness to face unpleasant facts and more willingness to act upon them without the disastrous delay of endless talking.’ Eliot’s call for a willingness to confront harsh realities aligns with his scepticism of idealism and his belief in the necessity of practical, results-oriented diplomacy.

Conclusion

This research paper ‘The Echoes of T. S. Eliot’s political ideas in contemporary political thought’ resonates across the landscape of contemporary political thought. The facts and the discussion offer an enduring insight into the complex interplay between culture, religion, and politics interweaving the political thoughts of Eliot. Throughout this research, the key facets of Eliot’s political philosophy, including his emphasis on the pre-political area, the importance of culture, his Christian ethos, and his critique of materialism and totalitarianism. These ideas, rooted in the early to mid-20th century, continue to hold relevance and significance in our contemporary world.

T. S. Eliot’s enduring relevance as a political thinker lies in his unwavering commitment to the idea that society cannot be sustained by politics alone. He reminds us that the health of a nation is intricately linked to its cultural and spiritual foundations. His call for a return to Christian values and the recognition of the moral dimension of society underscores the enduring tension between individualism and community, secularism, and faith, and the need for a broader ethical framework in the realm of politics. While Eliot is primarily celebrated as a literary giant, his contributions to political thought should not be overlooked. His essays, poems, and correspondence reveal a deep engagement with the pressing issues of his time and offer a thoughtful response to the challenges of modernity. Eliot’s multidimensional perspective on politics encourages us to consider the profound impact of culture, religion, and tradition on the dynamics of governance and societal well-being.

In an era marked by rapid change and ideological polarization, T. S. Eliot’s legacy as a political thinker serves as a reminder of the enduring importance of examining the cultural and ethical dimensions of politics. His work challenges us to think beyond the immediate and the political, urging us to consider the timeless values that sustain societies and civilizations. Thus, considering T. S. Eliot as a political thinker enriches our understanding of the intricate relationship between politics, culture, and morality, offering insights that remain pertinent and enlightening in our contemporary political discourse.

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