

BRENDAN J. MCELROY

Sidney Smith Hall, 6026A

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto—St. George

b.mcelroy@utoronto.ca

EDUCATION

Harvard University

Ph.D., Department of Government

2020

Fields: Comparative Politics, Political Economy of Development

Thesis: “Peasants and Parliaments: Agrarian Reform in Eighteenth Century Europe” (winner of 2021 Walter Dean Burnham Prize for Best Dissertation in Politics and History, American Political Science Association, Politics and History section)

Committee: Timothy Colton (chair), Peter A. Hall, Torben Iversen, Daniel Ziblatt

Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies (CERES), Georgetown University

M.A., Russian and East European Studies

2013

Georgetown University

B.A., Government and Russian Studies *summa cum laude*

2011

EMPLOYMENT

Assistant Professor (Tenure Stream)

Department of Political Science, University of Toronto—St. George

2022–

Postdoctoral Fellow

Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies, University of Michigan—Ann Arbor

2020–22

ACADEMIC HISTORY

BOOK PROJECT

Peasants and Parliaments: Agrarian Reform in Later Eighteenth Century Europe

WORKING PAPERS

Representation, Property Rights, and Growth Revisited

Abstract: An influential literature attributes Europe’s economic precocity to “good” political institutions, such as representative assemblies, which shielded property from governmental predation. This analysis fails to account for the diversity of property rights in preindustrial Europe, many of which, such as serfdom, were obstacles to growth. Theories of development must be able to explain how European states eliminated these “bad” property rights despite constraints on the sovereign’s authority to do so. I propose a role for some—but not all—representative assemblies in overcoming this developmental hurdle. An assembly’s capacity to extinguish property rights is a product of what I call its decision-making efficiency, which, in turn, is associated with majority voting and centralized agenda control. I test these claims through a controlled comparison of agrarian reforms in Livonia and Schleswig-Holstein (1795–1805). In terms of their developmental contribution, my findings suggest, early representative institutions must be evaluated on the basis of their capacity not only to constrain the sovereign but also to support complex exchanges of property rights.

Serfowners against Serfdom: Elite Divisions and Agrarian Reform at the Livonian Diet of 1803

Abstract: What explains variation in the incidence of labor coercion? Predictions about landowner preferences can be derived from classic and recent political economy models of labor coercion, but no one has tested these

predictions at the individual level. This is the first empirical exploration of individual landowner preferences over labor coercion. I use archival materials to measure the political sympathies of 104 members of the Livonian Diet of 1803. This assembly of noble landowners adopted a package of agrarian reforms that transformed serfdom into a milder form of peasant subordination—an important first step toward emancipation. Combining these data with individual and estate level attributes, I show that existing political and social cleavages within the landed class, as well as economic interests, structured the reform process. Large landowners tended to favor agrarian reform, as did old families and defenders of Livonian autonomy within the Russian Empire. Contrariwise, smaller landowners, recently ennobled families, and supporters of administrative centralization defended the *status quo*. The availability of outside options for rural workers, export market exposure, and the threat of revolution do not predict landowner preferences over agrarian reform. My findings suggest that the distribution of power *within* the landed elite, in addition to factor endowments, shapes the incidence of labor coercion.

Soil and Serfdom, with Ron Rogowski

Abstract: This paper examines the connection between soil conditions and the institution of serfdom, and related forms of labor coercion and restricted mobility, in early modern Central and Eastern Europe. We propose that landowners sought to restrict peasant mobility in response to labor shortages *only* when they could not make the transition to more land-intensive and less labor-intensive agricultural activities, specifically sedentary animal husbandry. This, in turn, was largely determined by the underlying soil and climatic conditions which made animal husbandry feasible or infeasible in a particular locale. We test these conjectures empirically using data on soil conditions and multiple proxies for landowner preferences over labor coercion in eighteenth-century Silesia and Schleswig-Holstein.

Railways and Revolution in Late Imperial Russia, with Ron Rogowski

Abstract: Economic historians have argued for decades about the political and developmental trajectory of the Russian Empire before 1914: if not for the First World War, would Russia gradually converged with industrializing, democratizing Western Europe, or would it have remained an economically backward autocracy? We offer a new perspective on this question by examining the political impact of one of the most important developments in Russia's economy during the half-century between serf emancipation in 1861 and the outbreak of war in 1914: the country's integration into the world market and emergence as a major grain exporter. Specifically, we seek to answer the question of whether integration into the world grain market *dampened* or actually *intensified* rural unrest and peasant protest. Using a newly constructed dataset, we take advantage of the staggered construction of a railway network in European Russia during the 1860s and 1870s to estimate the effect of market integration (facilitated by railroads) on peasant unrest during this period.

PUBLICATIONS

NON-REFEREED

“Capitalism and Democracy, Revisited” (editor's introduction), in *Democracy and Autocracy* (newsletter of the Democracy and Autocracy section of the American Political Science Association) **20.3**, December 2022, pp. 2–4: <https://connect.apsanet.org/s35/newsletter/>

Review of Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*, in *Governance* **34.2**, April 2021, pp. 592–594: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12585>

CONFERENCE AND WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS

Landed Elite Preferences over Labor Coercion: Evidence from the Livonian Diet of 1803 (poster)

2nd annual Summer Workshop in the Economic History and Historical Political Economy of Russia 2020

Minorities and Disaster Relief: 1891–1892 Famine in Imperial Russia (paper), with Volha Charnysh

American Political Science Association annual meeting 2019

Minorities and Disaster Relief: 1891–1892 Famine in Imperial Russia (paper), with Volha Charnysh

1 st annual Summer Workshop in the Economic History and Historical Political Economy of Russia, University of Wisconsin—Madison	2019
Political Implications of Noble Economic Decline in Late Imperial Russia (paper)	
Association for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies annual convention	2018
Learning Revolution (paper), with Yuhua Wang	
American Political Science Association annual meeting	2018
Representative Institutions and Policy Responsiveness in Autocracies: 1891–1892 Famine in Imperial Russia (paper), with Volha Charnysh	
American Political Science Association annual meeting	2018
Famine in Russia, 1891–1892 (paper)	
GIS Winter Institute Workshop, Center for Geographic Analysis, Harvard University	2017
Landed Elites and Human Capital-Promoting Institutions: Evidence from Russian Serfdom (paper)	
2 nd annual Politics and History Workshop, Harvard University	2015

LIST OF COURSES

UNDERGRADUATE

Topics in Comparative Politics II: State and Development in Historical Perspective (POL 443) *spring 2023*

New course

Course description: What is the state’s role in economic development? What caused the industrial revolution, and why was Britain at its forefront? These questions have preoccupied social scientists and political practitioners alike since the nineteenth century, and the profusion of empirical economic history research over the past two decades suggests that scholarly consensus remains as elusive as ever. Much of this literature takes an institutional approach, attributing Europe’s (and especially Britain’s) economic precocity to “good” institutions such as secure property rights. Although this argument has a distinguished pedigree, its assumptions are increasingly at odds with the findings of recent historical scholarship on early modern Europe and beyond. We will work together to bridge this gap, contrasting the work of historians, political scientists, and economists on the causes of European economic development, and devoting particular attention to the role of the state in each. Although we will concentrate on the institutional approach and its critics, we will also examine other explanations for European distinctiveness, including geography, class structure, demography, culture, and ideas.

Politics and Society in Russia (POL 354) *fall 2022*

Newly prepared course

Course description: It is already clear that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine marks a turning point, not only in the post-Cold War international order, but also in the development of the Russian polity and economy. How did we get here? Who is Vladimir Putin, how did he rise to power, and how has his regime changed over the past two decades? We will take an historical approach to these questions, examining the evolution of Russian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union. After acquiring a basic knowledge of Russia’s political development since Gorbachev, students will explore a variety of themes in contemporary politics, including public opinion, the media, elites and parties, civil society and interest groups, state building, federalism, the military and security services, and the linkages between domestic politics and Russia’s behavior on the international stage. This last theme brings us full circle, back to Putin’s war in Ukraine and its near-future implications. Here, we will consider not only the prospects for Russia’s democratization but also how Russia might adapt to the other challenges it will face in coming decades—especially climate change.

Topics in Comparative Politics I: The Making of Modern Democracy—From the Middle Ages to the European Union (POL 377) *fall 2022*

New course

Course description: This course examines political change in Central and Eastern Europe from the Middle Ages to the present day. For our purposes, Central and Eastern Europe encompasses Germany, Austria, the Czech lands, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland; we shall devote more limited attention to Scandinavia and the Baltic countries. Although this course is not a general survey of modern European history, one of its ambitions is to question the idea of a divergence between “West” and “East” before 1945. Consequently, we shall at times venture outside the region defined above to identify comparable and contrasting West European developments.

How are democracies created and why do they collapse? We shall approach this question from an historical perspective, considering in succession the multiple “layers” of historical legacies—old regime, nineteenth century, interwar period, state socialist—each in relation to the region’s present-day politics. Throughout, the course will introduce students to a variety of historical explanations for present-day political phenomena (especially democratization and democratic breakdown) as well as accounts centered on more proximate causes, such as leadership and strategic interaction-based explanations. Moreover, as we uncover the foundations of political regimes, we will address a variety of related questions: what is the relationship between democracy and capitalism? Is democracy possible only within the framework of the sovereign state? What causes revolutions? Why did early modern European states take on such diverse forms, and what was the impact of these variations on subsequent trajectories of democratization and economic development?

GRADUATE

State and Development in Historical Perspective (POL 2322) *spring 2023*

New course

THESES SUPERVISED

Milad Naeimi, “Representative Institutions and Structural Change: Comparing Iran’s First Two Parliaments after the Constitutional Revolution, 1906–11” (undergraduate senior thesis) *2022–23*

ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

Member of European Politics search committee, UTSG Department of Political Science *fall 2022*