Introduction to Western Political Thought

Government 1615
Spring 2012
MWF 11:15-12:05
GSH G64-Kau Aud.

Professor: Jason Frank
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TAs (White Hall B13):
Simon Gilhooley
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Course Description

This course offers a survey of modern political thought in the West. We will examine some of the persistent dilemmas of political modernity and the attempts of several canonical political theorists to respond to them: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Mill, Marx, and Nietzsche. In each case, we will attend to the particular crises these theorists addressed in their work—such as the European wars of religion, the English Civil War, colonialism, the French Revolution, and industrial capitalism—as well as the broader philosophical and political issues they continue to pose to us now. Our approach will be both historical and conceptual, in other words, with the hopes of providing students with a nuanced but clear understanding of political theory as a distinctive form of political inquiry.

Course Mechanics

This is an introductory lecture course, but time will be provided for classroom discussion. Bring the relevant book to class and be prepared to engage in lively conversation based on the week’s reading. The reading will average around 80 pages a week, and will be accompanied by prompts posted on the course blackboard site. Students must attend and participate in weekly discussion sections as a part of the final grade (10% of the total). There will be three short paper assignments over the course of the semester (6-7 pages), with each worth 30% of the final grade. A list of paper topics will be distributed one week before papers are due, along with instructions for formatting and citation. There will be no final exam.
Books to Purchase

Available at Cornell Bookstore:

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Hackett)
John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* (Hackett)
Peter Bondanella, ed., *The Portable Machiavelli* (Penguin)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (Penguin)

Weekly Readings

* Available on blackboard

**Week 1: Introduction: Political Theory and Modernity**

Reading: Sheldon Wolin, “Political Philosophy and Philosophy”*

January 23 – Course Introduction
January 25 – What is Political Theory?
January 27 – Modernity as a Political Problem

**Week 2: Morality and Political Realism**

Reading: Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1513), 77-166

January 30 – Machiavelli and Public Life
February 1 – Morality and Power I
February 3 – The Art of Politics: Virtù and Fortuna

**Week 3: Machiavelli and Republicanism**


February 6 – Machiavelli’s Use of History
February 8 – Republicanism and Rome
February 10 – Liberty and Political Contestation
**Week 4: Hobbes and the Science of Politics**


February 13 – Hobbes and the English Civil War
February 15 – The Science of Politics
February 17 – The Natural State

**Week 5: State Sovereignty**


February 20 – The Political Covenant
February 22 – The Liberty of Subjects
February 24 – Sovereignty

**Week 6: Liberalism and Rights**

Reading: Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* (1690), 3-68

February 27 – John Locke and Liberalism
February 29 – No Class
March 2 – Property

**Week 7: The Social Contract and Revolution**

Reading: Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* (1690), 68-124

March 5 – The Social Contract and the Liberal State
March 7 – Consent and Authority
March 9 – Revolution and the “Appeal to Heaven”
* First paper due in class.

**Week 8: Equality in the Modern Age**

Reading: Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (1754), 77-137

March 12 – Rousseau and the Ambivalence of Enlightenment
March 14 – Civilization and Inequality
March 16 – Alienation I

**Week 9: SPRING BREAK**
Week 10: Democracy and the General Will

Reading: Rousseau, The Social Contract (1762), 49-96, 136-43, 149-51, 176-88

March 26 – Man and Citizen
March 28 – The General Will
March 30 – Rousseau and the French Revolution

Week 11: Conservatism and the Authority of Tradition

Reading: Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), 3-77, 84-87, 144-52, 173-74, 217-218

April 2 – Burke’s Revolution
April 4 – The Authority of Tradition
April 6 – Radicalism and Violence

Week 12: Liberal Individualism

Reading: Mill, On Liberty (1859), 7-129

April 9 – Mill: Utilitarianism and Romanticism
April 11 – Social Authority and the Harm Principle
April 13 – Experiments in Living
*Second paper due in class

Week 13: Alienation, Exploitation, and Emancipation

Reading: Marx, On the Jewish Question (1843), 211-42*

April 16 – Marx before Marxism
April 18 – Alienation II
April 20 – What is Emancipation?

Week 14: History and Class Struggle

Reading: Marx, The Communist Manifesto (1848)

April 23 – Historical Materialism
April 25 – Capitalism and Modernity
April 27 – Class Struggle and Freedom
Week 15: Political Theory after the Death of God


April 30 – Nietzsche and the Death of God
May 2 – Morality and Power II
May 4 – Political Theory at Modernity’s End: Another Political Realism?

*Final paper due May 11th at 12:00.