POLT 232: European Political Theory: Hobbes to Marx

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Course Description
In this course we will survey the political thought of the 17th-19th centuries, a period commonly referred to as “The Enlightenment.” This was an extraordinary period in European history, a time of war and revolution, of astonishingly rapid industrialization, of ideological struggles between liberalism and conservatism, of the emergence of communism. How, in this fraught and dynamic context, did political thought develop? Does it still matter today? We will study the emergence of and responses to this historical period, paying particular attention to the relationships among human nature, history and politics; the grounds of political authority; forms of political power and community; the nature of rights and freedom and the sources of unfreedom. We will do so through careful readings of French, German, Swiss American and English thinkers: Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx.

Course Objectives

First Objective: Get excited. For those of you taking your first political theory course, I want to introduce you to the field (or at least a snippet of it) and to get you as excited about it as I am. I want us to discover together the thrill of grappling with important texts and ideas, and of arguing about politics in a theoretically informed way. The parts of this course that excite you may also guide you in further explorations of political theory in higher level courses and private readings. For those who have some prior familiarity, the course offers a more in-depth and sustained look at a particularly fertile period of intellectual and political history.

Second Objective: Think dangerously, not recklessly. In this course you will learn to cultivate your analytic skills: You will learn to read carefully; think critically; and to speak and write thoughtfully and clearly about difficult topics. Together I hope that we will come to appreciate the subtlety and intricacy of these texts, their arguments, their ambiguities, their tensions and contradictions. And I hope that we will also learn how to treat texts respectfully, but not reverently; to engage thoughtfully and constructively with their arguments; but also to seek out
actively those moments where the arguments seem to falter, and to try to understand how and why. We will learn, that is, to think dangerously, but not recklessly.

Expectations

What you can expect of me:
This class depends on the quality of our discussions. You will not “learn” political theory by listening to me talk at you about it. These texts are much more interesting than I am. I can promise you that nobody will be talking about me 400 years from now. You should treat these texts as invitations to discussion, not as subjects for lectures. I will not lecture except where some context seems appropriate, and never for long. I am here to help guide the conversations, and to participate in it when and as it seems important to do so.

Outside of the classroom, I will hold regular office hours which you are encouraged. This can be a useful time to bring up questions or confusions that we do not address in class, or to discuss any concerns about your progress in the course.

You can also expect assignments to be graded and returned promptly, with comments and questions about what you’ve written, and suggestions about how to improve.

What I expect of you:
This course is both reading-intensive and writing-intensive. It is reading-intensive because I want to strike a balance between, on one hand, allowing us to probe beneath the surface of these texts, to uncover questions, problems, and inspirations in them; and, on the other, to give you a broad sense of the trajectory of 300 years of political thought. The course is writing-intensive because writing is a discipline best improved through regular practice. You will learn it best by doing it.

This class demands regular, thoughtful and constructive participation. I expect you to come to each class having read and thought about the material for that session. You may find it helpful to take notes on the readings, and to jot down questions to pose in class as they occur to you.

In addition, you will be responsible for two kinds of writing assignments: Essays, and a course reflection

Short Essays (500-750 words): You will be responsible for three short essays over the course of the semester. This will be focused on quite narrow questions that I will provide in advance. Unlike the longer essays, there will not be a choice of questions for these essays. Their purpose is to focus you on a crucial issue in the text, and to force you to write about it very concisely. They should be analytic rather than critical: What does the author mean when she says X? Or, how does she explain Y? Short essays are harder to write than they sound. As the 17th century French thinker Blaise Pascal wrote in one of
his “Provincial letters,” “I have made this [letter] longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter.”

*Longer Essays* (1500-2000 words): These are longer essays in which I will expect sustained, critical engagement that will delve more deeply into a topic than the shorter essays allow. In these assignments you will have a choice of 3 or 4 topics.

*Course reflection:* The purpose of this assignment is more “therapeutic” than pedagogical. Did this course challenge how you think about yourself and the political world you inhabit? If so, how? If not, what is the most surprising idea or argument that you encountered during the course? Has your response to it changed over the course of the semester?

**Grading**

There are three components to your course grade: Participation, essays, and course reflection. They will be weighed as follows:

- Participation—25%
- Short Essays—20%
- Long Essays—45%
- Course Reflection—10%

**Plagiarism**

The use of other people’s words or ideas without proper acknowledgment is a serious academic offence, for which you may be subject to a range of sanctions by me and by the College. Do not bother trying—I will catch you. If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism, please see Page 2 of the document “Students’ Rights and Responsibilities:


If you still have questions, please discuss them with me.

**Late submission policies:** Missing deadlines creates a lot of headaches for you and for me. Don’t do it. Late assignments will be penalized **ONE HALF LETTER GRADE PER DAY, INCLUDING WEEKENDS.**

**Disability:** If you require specific accommodations because of a disability, you must come speak to me and provide a letter from Disability Services by February 13.
Books for Purchase

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*
Hobbes, *Leviathan*
Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*
Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*
Paine, *Rights of Man*
Rousseau, *The Discourses and other early political writings*
Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other late political writings*
Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*
Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*

Course Schedule

February 4     **Introduction**
February 6     Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”, “On the Different Human Races”
February 13    Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 10-11, 13-16
February 15    Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 17-20
                **Short essay**
February 18    Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 21, 24-26
February 22    Locke, *Second Treatise*, chapters 1-5
February 25    Locke, *Second Treatise*, 6-10
February 27    Locke, *Second Treatise*, 11-15
March 1        Locke, *Second Treatise*, 16-19
March 4   Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*
March 6   Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, letter, preface, Part 1
March 8   Rousseau, *Discourse*, Part II
March 13  Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book II
March 15  Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book III
March 18  Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book IV
First Essay Due
March 20  Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 3-35
March 22  Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 36-68
April 1   Burke, *Reflections* 68-188
April 3   Burke, *Reflections* 188-end
Short essay due
April 5   Paine, “Common Sense” (up to “Of The Present Ability of America”), Appendix
April 8   Paine, *Rights of Man* Part One,
April 12  Paine, Ch. 4-5
April 15  Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, “Dedication,”
“Introduction,” ch. 1-3
April 17  Wollstonecraft, chs. 4-5
April 19  Wollstonecraft, ch. 6
April 22  Wollstonecraft, ch. 7-end
Second Essay Due

April 24  Hegel, *Lectures on The Philosophy of History*, chs. 1-3

April 26  Hegel, *Lectures*, 3-4

April 29  “Race, History and Imperialism,” *Lectures*, 6, Appendix

Short Essay Due

May 1  Engels, “Marx,” in *Ludwig Feuerbach and The End of Classical German Philosophy*

Engels, “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific”

May 3  Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 1-3

Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing”

Marx, “On The Jewish Question”

May 6  Marx, “Ideology,” (pp. 148-200)

May 8  Marx, “On Imperialism in India,”

“*Inaugural Address of the Working Men’s International Association*”

“*The Class Struggles in France*”

May 10  Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, Engels, “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx,” (pp. 681-2)

Final Essay due May 16, by noon, via email.