

Political Science 603

MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Winter 2010

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Office Hours:
1:30–2:30 Mondays
2–3 Tuesdays
& by appointment

Description

This seminar serves three different functions. It is, in a loose sense, a sequel to POLSCI 602, which covers the ancient and medieval periods of the Western political thought. It also fills out some of the gaps left in the canon of modern political thought in last fall's iteration of POLSCI 603. And it is a freestanding introduction to some central themes, texts and thinkers of what political theorists (unlike, say, artists or architects) consider the modern period: seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The seminar will be accessible even to participants with little or no theory background.

This term, we begin in the early eighteenth century with Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) and end with Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1888) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1895). Last fall's seminar focused on the heavy hitters, on the Top 40, on the supposed don't-leave-home-without-these-books list: the social contract theorists for the most part. Our thinkers this term are equally important and influential, and sometimes, at least arguably, more interesting. They are harder to place politically and intellectually. For example, Montesquieu and Hume have been called both liberals and conservatives, we can use Burke, the founder of conservatism, to argue for the open source software movement, and Nietzsche has been embraced by Nazis and poststructuralists. Their approaches are also more varied. Our thinkers are, in short, not Salieri against last fall's Mozart, but Tom Waits against last fall's Bruce Springsteen: geniuses of a slightly different sort, but geniuses all the same.

Making sense of and coming to terms with the rapidly changing world, particularly social and political diversity, were central preoccupations of modern political theorists. We will try to understand the thinkers' different approaches and answers to these questions. We will assume that all political theory aims to *persuade* its audience in some way and that a theorist's *epistemological commitments* (how she thinks we know anything) inform her attempts at persuasion. One of the things we will see forming in the texts we study are the philosophical and even methodological foundations of the modern scientific worldview — and also early critiques of that worldview. Finally, if the very idea of social contract theory is to trade on the rhetorical power of “the natural,” most of our thinkers challenge the idea that nature, by itself, is normative.

Our selection sacrifices breadth for (a modicum of) depth. What you'll learn, I hope, by our focus on the five thinkers is the ability to read difficult primary texts carefully, to understand some of the main themes, and to engage theories in an intelligent, even original way. You'll

have to do that on your own with the other modern thinkers we now sidestep. (You *really* will have to do that if you hope to take a prelim in political theory.)

This is a seminar in which we engage in inquiry. Texts are our object; for our method, consider the following statement:

I always took for granted that the writers we were studying were much smarter than I was. If they were not, why was I wasting my time and the students' time by studying them? If I saw a mistake in their arguments, I supposed those writers saw it too and must have dealt with it. But where? I looked for their way out, not mine. Sometimes their way out was historical; in their day the question need not be raised, or wouldn't arise and so couldn't then be fruitfully discussed. Or there was a part of the text I had overlooked, or had not read. I assumed there were never plain mistakes, not ones that mattered, anyway.¹

Since the person speaking is John Rawls, who was undoubtedly smarter than any of us, we'll take his word for it and use two principles: a *principle of humility* and a *principle of charity* as our primary interpretive approach: generations of scholars, politicians, and intellectuals have considered these texts central to the study of politics. Our task is to figure out why.

Seminar mechanics

- Everybody needs to come to seminar meetings prepared. There will be a lot of reading, but there will be study questions which will help focus your reading a bit. Attendance is mandatory, and unexplained absences are not allowed. One unexplained absence will result in an E for participation, two will result in failure in the course. If you get the flu (H1N1, or something equivalent), let me know immediately, and we'll make appropriate accommodations.
- Registered students will write two short papers (one 300–400-word response paper and one 1,000-word paper). There will also be a final project. It can be a 3,500–4,000-word term paper, with a required draft. It can also be an alternative, equally demanding project: a substantive research proposal or a new media project. There will be a separate handout on and more discussion of the details of the final project.
- The response paper will be circulated to all seminar participants before the seminar; we will schedule those assignments during the first two weeks of the seminar. The person who writes the response paper will also spend about five minutes talking about it at the beginning of the seminar.
- Please turn in all work electronically through CTools.
- There will *no* incompletes except in cases of documented medical emergencies, provided that at least half of the work has been completed. In other words, this is not your standard take-as-long-as-you-want grad seminar.

¹ Quoted in Barbara Herman, "Editor's Introduction" in John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xvi–xvii.

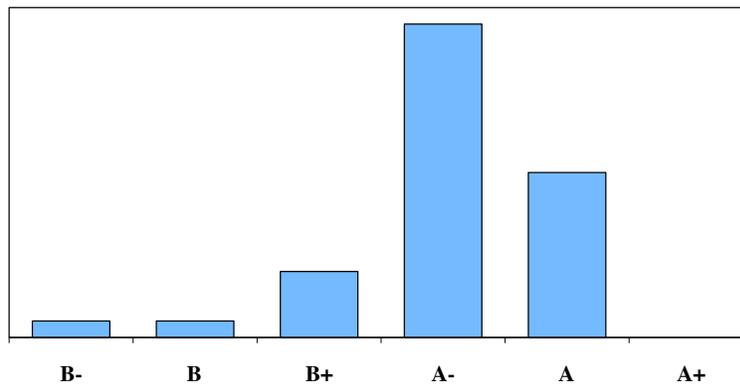
Grading

Short papers	30%
Final project	50%
Participation	20%

What do my grades mean?

	On a paper	As the final grade
A+	Send it for publication.	Absolutely brilliant and extremely rare.
A	Excellent work.	Excellent work.
A-	Good work; you are satisfying all expectations, although there are some problems with the paper.	Good work; you are satisfying all expectations, although you can — and likely will — improve.
B+	Decent work, although there are some significant problems with the paper. Perfectly fine on early papers.	There are some real issues about your ability to do work in this field. You may want to consider whether this should be your major field.
B	There are some real problems in the paper: it's insufficiently detailed, its argument is badly off the mark, prose is problematic. Don't panic if this is a grade on an early paper, but try to see what the problems are.	You may want to consider whether grad school is the thing you'll want to pursue.
B-	The paper is just about unacceptable. If you put in a lot of effort into it, you'll want to talk to me immediately.	I don't think grad school is the right choice for you.

Rough distribution of final grades in my past grad seminars.



Books

David Hume, *Political Writings* (Hackett).
 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* (Hackett).
 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge UP).
 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Hackett)
 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (Hackett).
 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications* (Broadview).

Calendar

Below is the calendar for the semester. A number of **paper topics** are available for each week. They will also serve as study questions, to orient you to the issues we may want to focus on in class discussion. The paper is due on the Monday the material is discussed if it is the 1,000-word paper; if it is a response paper you are scheduled to circulate, it is due on Sunday evening by 8 p.m. You may **not** write on an earlier week's topics. On most occasions, the length limit is a serious constraint on what you could say; I am fully aware of that. The papers have to be brief and can serve as first-stab think pieces into broader topics.

In addition to the topics listed below, you may also write a **book review** on the reading for the day. For examples on what book reviews in political theory look like, consult *Perspectives on Politics* or, e.g., *Political Theory*.

Week 1 Introduction. No reading.
January 11

Week 2 **MLK Day. No seminar.**
January 18

Week 3 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, Introduction, letters 1–84.
January 25 Read my handout “How to Read the *Persian Letters*,” available in the resources on the course website.

Paper topics:

1. Discuss the political significance of the Troglodyte story.
2. What is the epistemological significance of letters 17–18?
3. What motivates humans in the *Persian Letters*?

Week 4 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, rest.
February 1

Paper topics:

1. The “Enlightenment” is taken to promote “universalist” political values. Is the *Persian Letters* universalist? In what way, if it is?
2. Where do we find happiness in the world of the *Persian Letters*? What do we make of it?
3. Is the *Persian Letters* a feminist text?

Week 5
February 8

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Part 1, bks. 1–5, 8. Part 2, bk. 12

Paper topics:

1. Discuss one of the motives in Montesquieu's political psychology and contrast it to its corresponding regime type.
2. Focus on some theme that appears both in the *Persian Letters* and the *Spirit* and discuss whether you detect changes in Montesquieu's views.
3. What is the political significance of *moderation* as a virtue?

Week 6
February 15

Montesquieu, *The Spirit*, Parts 3–4.

Paper topics:

1. Montesquieu's "climate theory" is often taken to be one of the key foundations of modern western racialism and racism. Do you agree or disagree?
2. The *Persian Letters* uses irony frequently. Does the *Spirit*?
3. On what grounds might one reasonably describe Montesquieu as "the founder of social science"?

Week 7
February 22

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. III, Part II. (Pp. 1–97 in *Political Writings*).

Paper topics:

1. "Humean circumstances of justice" is a concept used to indicate the circumstances in which it can become meaningful to talk of *politics*. Describe what those circumstances are and why politics can only arise under them.
2. What motivates people, according to Hume?
3. Describe Hume's theory of property.

March 1

Spring break

Week 8
March 8

Hume, *Political Writings*, pp. 101–111, 157–181, 184–189, 230–240.

Paper topics:

1. What is the problem with social contract theories, according to Hume?
2. In the eighteenth century, "enthusiasm" counted as a pathological condition. Why? What is the political significance of that?
3. Some commentators treat Hume as a conservative, some as a liberal, some as both. How about you? Why?

Week 9
March 15

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

(We will spend two weeks on the book, but it is not easily divisible. Our discussion will focus roughly on the first half of the book. The reading questions apply to both weeks.)

Paper topics:

1. What is Burke's conception of reason?
2. Burke's first claim to fame was as an important theorist of the aesthetic. How do aesthetic considerations figure in the *Reflections*?
3. How does Burke think of political representation?

Week 10 March 22	Burke continued; see above.
Week 11 March 29	Mary Wollstonecraft, <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i> , chs. I–VI. Paper topics: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the relationship between the arrangement of large-scale political institutions and the organization of gender roles, according to Wollstonecraft? 2. Wollstonecraft's <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Man</i> was an explicit rejoinder to Burke. How is this <i>Vindication</i> also a critique of Burke? 3. Characterize Wollstonecraft's relationship to Rousseau's ideas.
Week 12 April 5	Wollstonecraft, <i>A Vindication</i> , chs. VII–XIII. Paper topics: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the purpose of the family? 2. How does Wollstonecraft understand the so-called private/public distinction? 3. Some scholars have argued that interpreting Wollstonecraft only as a feminist theorist obscures her role in the late-eighteenth-century post-Revolutionary politics in general. What might be the theoretical consequences of such a focus?
Week 13 April 12	Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i> , Preface, First and Second Treatise. Paper topics: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why genealogy? And what is it? 2. What is the slave revolt in morality? 3. What, briefly, is the genealogy of "bad conscience"?
Week 14 April 19	Nietzsche, <i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i> , Third Treatise. Nietzsche, <i>Twilight of the Idols</i> , "'Reason' in Philosophy," "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fiction" Paper topics: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does Nietzsche have a <i>political</i> epistemology? 2. What's wrong with ascetism? 3. What does Nietzsche want?

Selected Secondary Readings

Below are recommended secondary readings. I don't expect you to do all the readings, but I do expect you to do them especially for authors you write papers on. You may find them generally helpful as guides into the texts, on the one hand, and as examples of how contemporary scholars engage these texts. They represent just a small part of the possible literatures; I have tried to choose texts that reflect different approaches to these texts. I have used local talent in part to give you a sense of the kind of word folks around here to.

Montesquieu

- Althusser, Louis. 1972. *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx*. Translated by B. Brewster. London: NLB.
- Behdad, Ali. 1989. The Eroticized Orient: Images of the Harem in Montesquieu and His Precursors. *Stanford French Review* 8 (2-3):109-126.
- Hullung, Mark. 1974. Patriarchalism and Its Early Enemies. *Political Theory* 2 (4):410-419.
- . 1976. *Montesquieu and the Old Regime*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Keohane, Nannerl O. 1980. *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Krause, Sharon. 2002. *Liberalism with Honor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Mosher, Michael A. 1994. The Judgmental Gaze of European Women: Gender, Sexuality and the Critique of Republican Rule. *Political Theory* 22 (1):25-44.
- Muthu, Sankar. 2003. *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Robin, Corey. 2000. Reflections on Fear: Montesquieu in Retrieval. *American Political Science Review* 94 (2):347-360.
- Shackleton, Robert. 1961. *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1988. *Essays on Montesquieu and on the Enlightenment*. Edited by D. Gilson and M. Smith. Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation.
- Shklar, Judith. 1987. *Montesquieu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1993. *On human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Yack, Bernard. 1992. *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Hume

- Baier, Annette. 1991. *A Progress of Sentiments*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Blackburn, Simon. 1998. *Ruling Passions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Forbes, Duncan. 1975. *Hume's Philosophical Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herzog, Don. 1985. *Without Foundations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Laursen, John Christian. 1992. *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant*. Leiden: Brill.
- Miller, David. 1981. *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pinch, Adela. 1996. *Strange Fits of Passion*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Stewart, John B. 1992. *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Whelan, Fredrick G. 1985. *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wolin, Sheldon S. 1954. Hume and Conservatism. *American Political Science Review* 48:4.

Burke

- Richard Boyd. 1999. "The Unsteady and Precarious Contribution of Individuals": Edmund Burke's Defense of Civil Society. *The Review of Politics* 61:3.
- Terry Eagleton. 1989. Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke. *History Workshop* 28.
- Don Herzog. 1991. Puzzling Through Burke. *Political Theory* 19:3.
- Isaac Kramnick. 1977. Religion and Radicalism: English Political Theory in the Age of Revolution. *Political Theory* 5:4.
- Stephen K. White. 1993. Burke on Politics, Aesthetics, and the Dangers of Modernity. *Political Theory* 21:3.
- Melissa Williams. 1996. Burkean "Descriptions" and Political Representation: A Reappraisal. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 29:1.

Wollstonecraft

- David Bromwich. 1995. Wollstonecraft as a Critic of Burke. *Political Theory* 23:4.
- Maria Falco. 1996. *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Penn State Press.
- Wendy Gunther-Canada. 2001. *Rebel Writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Politics*. Northern Illinois University Press.
- Eileen M. Hunt Botting. 2002. The Family as Cave, Platoon, and Prison: The Three Stages of Wollstonecraft's Philosophy of the Family. *The Review of Politics* 64:1.
- Eileen M. Hunt Botting. 2006. *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family*. SUNY Press.
- Virginia Sapiro. 1992. *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*. University of Chicago Press.
- Elizabeth Wingrove. 2005. Getting Intimate with Wollstonecraft: In the Republic of Letters. *Political Theory* 33:3.

Nietzsche

- Ansell-Pearson, Keith. 1994. *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1983. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Leiter, Brian. 1997. Nietzsche and the Morality Critics. *Ethics* 107:2.
- Strong, Tracy. 1999. *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*. Expanded edition. Champaign, Ill.: The University of Illinois Press.
- . 1985. Texts and Pretexts. *Political Theory* 13:2.
- Thiele, Leslie Paul. 1990. *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Warren, Mark. 1985. Nietzsche and Political Philosophy. *Political Theory* 13:2.
- Yack, Bernard. 1992. *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.