I Course Overview

It was tough to be modern. The period spanning the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries was marked by ghastly violence and inspiring humanity, as well as by transformative discovery and reactionary closure. On one hand, cities that took reason centuries to build were sometimes razed by angry mobs in the space of a few paroxysmal hours. On the other hand, advances in medicine and engineering prolonged and improved the lives of millions, making contemporary urbanization and production possible. It was a social and political Big Bang of sorts—an explosion creativity out of which our world was born. Indeed, many of the problems we face today (e.g., widening inequality, resource scarcity, environmental degradation, sectarian violence, etc.) are lingering remnants of that not-too-distant period. Our constitutions, our institutions, even the language we use to conduct contemporary politics were all bequeathed to us by our modern forebears. In order to understand ourselves, we must first know something about them.

This course will examine the major political themes of the modern period, including:

- the distinction between public and private spheres of life
- the distribution of goods and power between the wealthy and the poor
- the tension between positive and negative liberty
- the relationship between citizens and their government
- the conditions under which social progress is possible

We will do so by way of surveying the major canonical thinkers of the period. By the conclusion of this course students should be able to:

- interpret primary philosophical and political texts
II Course Requirements

Participation

Your participation for this course begins before you come to class. In addition to regular attendance (see description below), you will be required to complete weekly reading assignments and brief quizzes on that material. I warn you that these texts will be challenging and time-consuming, as they frequently demand several readings for adequate comprehension. That said, the reading quizzes are not intended to be so much taxing and helpful: the material on the quiz is the especially important information you will need for class. You must bring texts to class in order to receive full participation credit. In addition to completing the reading, I expect everyone to offer thoughtful contributions to our class discussions. A “thoughtful contribution” can take many forms: informed questions; problems with the author’s arguments, answers to questions; or connections between the assigned readings and other texts/problems. I’m pretty liberal about what counts here, but please consult me if you tend toward the shy side. Classroom contributions will count for 50% of your participation grade.

We will tackle some difficult questions which have perplexed very smart people for a very long time. We will each be offering tentative arguments which stake out positions in controversial debates. As such, I remind everyone that we might emphasize listening over speaking. A single, thoughtful contribution to the discussion is frequently more valuable than a series of careless remarks or reactionary rebuttals, and will be assessed accordingly. Along a similar vein, students may already know that Socrates was renowned for his often hostile elenchus, or method of questioning. In trying some of this out for ourselves, we will do well to remember that we are interrogating arguments and not people: dismissive or disrespectful comments are not welcome here.

Required Text

The main text for this course is *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, 2nd edition, ed. David Wooton (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2008). I chose this collection for both its comprehensive inclusion of major canonical thinkers as well as for its relatively inexpensive price. That said, most of the Hackett editions of these texts can be found online or in used bookstores for around $1. Multiple copies of each text are also available in the
UNC library network. I strongly encourage you to acquire print copies of these texts, as they will be easier to cite and follow along with during class discussion than e-readers. If you have trouble acquiring a text, please let me know. Additional course readings are also available on the course Sakai page.

**Attendance**

Class will begin promptly at 12:30. If you are running more than 5 minutes late you will be counted as absent regardless of whether you attend the remainder of the class. **Students are allowed 2 unexcused absences from class.** Each subsequent absence will result in a letter-grade deduction from the student’s attendance grade, as well as a 0 for the missed day’s participation.

**Reading Quizzes**

As noted above, students are required to complete weekly reading quizzes. The quizzes will be posted under the “Tests & Quizzes” tab on the course Sakai page each Friday morning and should be completed by midnight on the subsequent Monday. Quiz performance accounts for 50% of the participation grade.

**Exams**

There will be two exams in the course, each worth 15% of your final grade. More detailed information will be available prior to each exam.

- Exam 1: Tuesday, October 16th
- Exam 2: Tuesday, December 11th

**Essays**

You will be assigned two (2) 5-6 page analytic essays in this class. Prompts will be distributed two weeks before each paper. **The first essay will constitute 20% of your final grade and the second essay will account for 20%.** Late papers will be penalized by one letter grade for each day after the deadline. Because your written work will count so heavily toward your final grade, I encourage you to think carefully about assignment instructions and to give yourself time to revise your original draft. I will also remind you that all of your work for this course should reflect original effort on your part and should not have been previously and simultaneously submitted for credit in another course.

- Essay 1: Thursday, October 11th
- Essay 2: Thursday, November 29th
Grading

Assignments will be weighted according to the following:

- Participation = 20%
- Attendance = 10%
- Exams = 30%
- Essay = 40%

All work should accord with the University Honor Code, which can be found here: [honor.unc.edu](http://honor.unc.edu)

University Registrar Procedures Memo No. 8 provides the following (abbreviated) definitions of undergraduate grades:

- **A**: Highest level of attainment. The A grade states clearly that the student has shown outstanding promise in the aspect of the discipline under study.
- **B**: Strong performance demonstrating a high level of attainment. The B grade states that the student has shown solid promise in the aspect of the discipline under study.
- **C**: A totally acceptable performance demonstrating an adequate level of attainment. The C grade states that, while not yet showing unusual promise, the student may continue to study in the discipline with reasonable hope of intellectual development.
- **D**: A marginal performance in the required exercises demonstrating a minimal passing level of attainment.

III Reading Schedule

**August 21**: Course Introduction—What is Modern Political Thought?

**Overview**: This session will introduce students to the major themes of the course by way of contrasting modern political thinkers with their ancient forebears.


**August 23**: The Violent Birth of Modernity, Part I

**Overview**: We will review Machiavelli’s advice for would-be political leaders in the modern world, including what Sheldon Wolin described as the Florentine's “economy of violence.”

- Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 9-26

**August 28**: The Violent Birth of Modernity, Part II
Overview: This meeting picks up where the last left off, focusing on Machiavelli’s conception of modern political leadership. We will also discuss his theory of how to properly acquire and maintain political power.

- Department of the Army, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, Ch. 1.5; 3.4; 5.3; 7

**August 30:** APSA meeting—CLASS CANCELLED

**September 4:** Renaissance and Republicanism

Overview: We shift gears within Machiavelli’s corpus in this meeting, where we will compare the “blood and iron” politics advanced in *The Prince* with the civic-minded ideals of the *Discourses on Levy*.

- Machiavelli, *Discourses*, pp. 53-74

**September 6:** Republican Struggles

Overview: We will explore Machiavelli’s characterizations of virtue and fortune, respectively, emphasizing the problems of contingency for modern thinkers.

- Machiavelli, *Discourses*, pp. 76-88

**September 11:** The Reformation and Invention of Political Science

Overview: We move into the British empiricists with Hobbes’ conception of politics as a science in this class.

- Suggested: Hobbes’s Moral and Political Philosophy

**September 13:** Inventing Liberalism: Natural Law, Contracts, and the Commonwealth

Overview: This session will introduce the first of several conceptions of natural law we will encounter throughout the course. Pay special attention to Hobbes’ theory of government as a contract between citizens and its implications for the public/private divide.


**September 18:** Sovereignty and Sectarian Violence

Overview: Our discussion will grapple with the problem of religious and cultural differences in political life by examining Hobbes’ thoughts on the production and evaluation of knowledge.


Overview: We continue our study of the “British empiricists” with John Locke’s theory of the state of nature and the role contracts play in ushering us out of it. We will also read Hume’s critique of social contract theories.

- Required: Locke, *Second Treatise*, pp. 286-306
- Required: Hume, “Of the Original Contract” 254-362
- Suggested: *Locke’s Political Philosophy*

September 25: Limiting (Unlimited) Government

Overview: This session will return to the public/private distinction with a discussion of negative liberty in the liberal tradition.

- Locke, *Second Treatise*, pp. 307-325; 327-333; 343-353

September 27: Liberalism, Religion, and the State

Overview: Locke reprises the Hobbesian problem of religious and cultural difference in this meeting’s conversation about the role of religion in political decision making.

- Required: Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration [Sakai]
- Suggested: Luther, *95 Theses*

October 2: Innocent Natures Trained in Cruelty

Overview: In this final installment in our study of modern philosophers' fascination with the state of nature, we will explore Rousseau's anthropological account of human nature and its distortions. We will tie this account in with contemporary debates over the value of higher education in America.

- Required: *Is a Liberal Arts Degree Worth It?*
- Required: *Rethinking the Value of a Business Major*
- Required: *Law Grads Face Brutal Job Market*

October 4: Formulating the General Will

Overview: Contra the liberal thinkers previously discussed, Rousseau will return to a robust republican doctrine of legitimacy in today’s session.

October 9: God-like Legislatures and Republican Government, Part I

Overview: This session begins our study of Rousseau's institutional design with an emphasis on his definition of “the people,” the community, and the legislatures who design their laws.


October 11: God-like Legislatures and Republican Government, Part II

Overview: We continue our previous discussion with a deeper investigation of Rousseau's notion of the General Will.

- *Exam Review for final 20 minutes of class*
- **PAPER 1 DUE**

October 16: **FIRST EXAM**

October 18: Fall Break

October 23: Terror, Revolution and the Rights of Man

Overview: In the summer of 1789, the French stormed the Bastille, passed their *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, and forced the royal court from its palace in Versailles back to Paris. A few years later they would execute their king and some 40,000 more during the so-called Reign of Terror. This session will review the reactions from some of the English-speaking world's most influential thinkers at the time.

- Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Men* [Sakai]
- Paine, *Rights of Man* [Sakai]

October 25: Enlightenment: Revolution of the Mind

Overview: We transition from irrational terror to pure reason with today's discussion of Kant's tremendously influential philosophical thought. Pay special attention to how he constructs the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork*.

- Required: Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”
- Required: Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* [Sakai]
- Suggested: *Kant's Moral Philosophy*

October 30: Enlightened Politics: From Theory to Practice
Overview: This session asks how well Kant’s theory can be applied to political practice on the world stage.

- Kant, *The Perpetual Peace* [Sakai]

**November 1:** Industrial Revolution and the Spread of Capital

Overview: This meeting will situate the industrial revolution in its historical and socio-philosophical context.

- Required: Fulcher, *Capitalism*, pp. 1-38

**November 6:** Liberty and the Individual

Overview: The last of the great liberal thinkers discussed in this course, Mill’s impression is still felt today in everything from contract theory and utilitarianism to feminist political thought and postcolonial studies. We introduce his work in this meeting.


**November 8:** Liberty and Social Groups

Overview: Mill was one of the few canonical modern thinkers to take women’s rights seriously. This session will focus on that dimension of his political thought.

- Suggested: Spinner-Halev and Mann, “John Stuart Mill’s Feminism: Progress, the State, and the Path to Justice” [Sakai]

**November 13:** Ethics in a Material World

Overview: In the wake of the most recent financial collapse, many are asking themselves if there is a moral limit on the reach of the capitalist market. Karl Marx, one of the greatest students of capitalism in history, formulates his thinking in today’s readings. Before critiquing political economy, however, he had to break from his romantic and idealistic forebears. We will explore both of these transitions in today’s meeting.

- Required: Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, pp. 742-757
- Required: Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 738-741
- Required: Marx, *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, pp.758-765
- Suggested: *Early Works*

**November 15:** The Science of History
Overview: Marx’s conception of history is perhaps his most lasting impact on contemporary political thought. We will grapple with its main features and its implications for how we understand politics and ethics in today’s meeting.

- **Required:** Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, pp.775-797
- **Suggested:** *Theory of History*

**November 20: “The Most Revolutionary Class”**

Overview: Marx’s critique of political economy has been more closely scrutinized (and bastardized) than most features of modern political thought. We will work our own way through selections from his monumental *Capital* during this session.

- **Required:** Marx, *Alienated Labor*, pp. 766-772
- **Required:** Marx, *Capital*, pp. 832-839
- **Suggested:** Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, pp. 816-832
- **Suggested:** Althusser, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 1997)

**November 22: Thanksgiving Recess—NO CLASS**

**November 27: Working Men of the World...**

Overview: *The Communist Manifesto* has been described as one of the most influential pamphlets ever circulated. We will discuss a selection from it during today’s meeting.


**November 29: Radical Critique of Modern Morality, Part I**

Overview: We wind down our survey of modern political thought by discussing a thinker who challenged everything about it.

- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 865-884
- **PAPER 2 DUE**

**December 4: Radical Critique of Modern Morality, Part II**

Overview: In our final session of the course, we will ask ourselves where morality comes from, if it is real, and how it structures modern life.

- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 884-903
- *Final Day of Class*

**December 11: FINAL EXAM, 12:00 pm**