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PSCI 453E.01: Modern Political Theory

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University of Montana
Political Science Department

PSC 453E
Fall 2011

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Office Hrs TTh 11am-12:30,
or by appointment

Modern Political Theory

Course Description:

This course covers political thinkers from the 16th c., beginning with Thomas Hobbes, to the early 20th century, ending with Marx. This semester we will examine the following questions with regard to several political theorists.

(1) What is "classical" about classical political thought? What is "modern" about modern political thought? Is there one, two, or more traditions of political thought?

(2) What difficulties are involved in making a view of human nature the basis of a political theory?

(3) Should political theory concern itself with establishing standards of human conduct?

(4) Does labeling a political argument or theorist (say, "conservative," "liberal," or "radical") help us to understand it or him?

This course will be conducted as a seminar with some lecturing.

Course Objectives: upon successfully completing the course work, the student should be able to:

1. Recognize general differences between modern and classical theory regarding the purpose of political inquiry, the origins of the state, and nature of a "good life."

2. Identify and assess the various tests or criteria (such as relevance, significance, or ethical considerations) that can be used to establish the value of a theoretical argument or theorist.

3. Present and orally defend (and if necessary revise) a series of interpretive, analytical essays which examine a thinker's ideas about human nature, justice, social obligation, and political legitimacy.

4. Orally critique an essay in terms of its analytical clarity, accuracy in its interpretation of the readings, and the logic of its conclusion.

5. The goal of the course work, overall, is to encourage students not only to learn about modern thinkers, but also to think philosophically about politics. **Political philosophy. . . “is a complex, imprecise, psychologically demanding, imagination-requiring field of enquiry, in which nothing like certainty can ever be obtained, only, at the most, a high degree of plausibility and coherence and evidence of intellectual power and originality and effectiveness.”**
--Isaiah Berlin

To achieve the above objectives— Course Grading:

This course will be taught as a seminar. Each student will submit and orally defend in class **three critical essays** (45% of course grade or 15 pts each), not to exceed 4 double-spaced pages. The essays will be assigned weekly and are due *no later* than the class period before you are scheduled to orally defend it. (For topics, see below.) If you are absent the day we are scheduled to discuss your essay, you will not get credit for it. In addition, each student will complete a **take-home final** (35% of course grade.) Each student will be graded on class **participation** and attendance (**10%** of course grade.) (** Students who attend class, but seldom raise questions or participate in discussion usually receive between 7-5pts out of 10. See below regarding absences.)

Finally since *it does not honor a writer to read him/her without seeking to challenge him/her (Burke)*, students will be required to submit **two written questions** for each of the **essays discussed** that day (**10%** of course grade.)

Cautionary note: if you are absent more than 3xs, three attendance points will be deducted for every absence thereafter. Excused absences require a medical note for illness, injury, family emergency, or letter from instructor for field trips, ASUM service, music/drama performances, intercollegiate athletics, military service. Instructor will also excuse absences for reasons of mandatory public service.

Students taking this course to **fulfill the 400 writing requirement** will be required to revise and *expand all three of their essays into 6 pages each*. Substantive and grammatical revisions will be expected. The writing grade will be based upon the following writing guidelines and expectations:

- Each critical, interpretive essay must provide a **clear thesis** (preferably at the end of the introductory paragraph), indicating the author's main points with regard to the essay question.

- Each essay must support the thesis statement with **specific references** to the primary texts, **providing footnotes** for all quoted material and **a bibliography** at the end. Please use Chicago style.
- Students should pay close attention to their **choice of words** in summarizing and clarifying the substance of a political theory (i.e. *the* good state and *a* good state are *not* the same). They must demonstrate awareness of how words can clarify and/or obscure a theorist's principles, illustrations, and, in general, the nature of their political inquiry.
- After the first essay draft is defended in class, it will be returned with editorial comments. Students are encouraged to talk with me about their essays before revising them.
- Student must include **original essay draft with revised draft**.
- Revised essay will be **graded based upon:** grammar, spelling, appropriate choice of words, transitions between paragraphs, use of quoted material to support their interpretation, accuracy in paraphrasing, logical organization of ideas and points, and clarity.
- Only **one revision** is allowed per essay. Proof read the final drafts for any grammatical, spelling, or typos before turning it in.

Graduate Students, in addition to completing the above assignments, will submit a 10-15 page research paper on one of the social contract theorists, Burke, Marx or neo-Marxists thinker which addresses a substantive theoretical topic in consultation with the professor. This paper will be of graduate quality, and will probe more deeply a theoretical issue related to modern thought than those of the undergraduate essays. The paper shall include an introduction that clearly identifies a question or issue and its significance in modern political theory, and will draw upon appropriate primary & secondary literature to support the paper's thesis and analysis.

- Plus/Minus Grades will be used based on the following:
 100-93 = A; 92-90 = A-; 89-87 = B+; 86-83 = B; 82-80 = B-; 79-77 = C+; 76-73 = C; 72-70 = C-; 69-67 = D+; 66-63 = D; 62-60 = D-; 59 < = F

Required Texts:

Hobbes, *Leviathan*
 Locke, *Second Treatise On Government*
 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*
 Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
 James Mill, *Political Writings*
 J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*
 Ed. Robert Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*

Course Schedule:

- 8/30 *Introduction to the Course*
Political Theory: the Search for Standards, Rules and Laws
Read for next time: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, "Dedication of Godolphin," "Introduction"; Part I (Chaps. I-IV); Part I (Chaps. XI-XVI)
- 9/1 *Thomas Hobbes's Natural Man; Social Contract Theory*
Read: *Leviathan*, Part I & Part II
- 9/6 *Leviathan: The Seat of Power*
Read: finish *Leviathan*, Part II
- 9/8-
9/13 Analysis & Discussion of Hobbes' Theory
Essays (due 9/6): Consider Hobbes' analysis of human nature— is it brutish man or brutish conditions? How does an emphasis on one or the other affect the theorist's vision of the predicament?
- Or **Essays (due 9/6):** 'It's his clear-cut individualism that makes Hobbes' philosophy the most revolutionary of his age.'
- 9/8-9/13 **Essays (due 9/8):** Hobbes apparently believed that there is 'no obligation on any man, which ariseth not from some act of his own; for all men equally, are by nature free.' Discuss the implications of this 'free will' for Hobbes' theory of government.
- 9/15-
9/20 *Hobbes' Critics & His Constitutionalism*
Read: Locke, *Second Treatise On Government*, Chaps. 1-6.
- 9/15-9/20 **Essays (due 9/13):** 'Hobbes denied the independent existence of ethics.'
- 9/15-9/20 **Essays (due 9/13):** "Hobbes is often defined as an absolutist, a description that is, at best, only partially true."
- Or **Essays (due 9/15):** 'Hobbes does not claim infallibility for *Leviathan*, but it is hard to see how *Leviathan* can endure unless its citizens believe that it will do right by them, a belief that must, if it is to be sustained, have some basis in fact.' Discuss.

- 9/22 Locke: the State of Nature & Social Contract Revisited
Read: Locke, Chaps. 7-10; Locke, Chaps. 11-14.
- 9/27 Locke's Liberalism & His Natural Right to Revolution
Read: Locke, Chaps. 18-19;
- Essays (due 9/22):** 'Both Hobbes and Locke recognize laws of nature, but that doesn't mean that they meant the same thing by them.'
Or
- Essays (due 9/22):** 'All the major assumptions that underlie modern democratic theory can be traced back to John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*.'
- 9/29 Continued Discussion of Locke
Read: Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Books I & II
Essays (due 9/27): "The natural rights-social contract theory provides a justification for anarchy but not a firm basis for government."

or
Essays (due 9/27): Can one defend constitutional government without resorting to 1} a state of nature argument? Or 2, a view of human nature? Or {3, a social contract theory?
- 10/4 Rousseau's Social Contract Theory & General Will
Read: Rousseau, Book III
- 10/6-
10/13 Rousseau's General Will Reconsidered
Read: Book IV
Essays (due 10/4): "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains." What does Rousseau mean by this famous observation? What implications does it have for his social contract theory?
- Essays (due 10/4):** 'Rousseau and Locke differed considerably over what makes a polity democratic, yet both may be right.'
- 10/11 *Slack Day:* if we are on schedule with essays, there will be no class. Use this time to get ahead in readings & preparing essays.

10/18- Rousseau's Democratic Community
10/25 Read James Mill, *On Government* &
Read J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*

Essay (due 10/13): "What Rousseau contributed to socialism was the general idea that all rights, including those of property, are rights within the community and not against it."

Or

Essays (due 10/18): "If Rousseau is a democrat, so much the worst for democracy."

Or

Essays (due 10/18): "If freedom is so valuable, why should we not, if we could, force people to be free?"

10/27 Bentham & James Mill's Utilitarianism
Read: James Mill, *"On Government"* & J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*

11/1- Bentham and James Mill's Utilitarianism reconsidered:
11/8 **Essays (due 10/27):** What would a utilitarian penal system look like? What would constitute "serious" crimes? What would be the purpose of "punishment" or "reform"? What kinds of sentences would be administered under utilitarian system?

Or

Essays (due 11/1) What is the significance of Bentham's belief that 'push-pin is as good as poetry' for his political theory? (Pushpin is a children's game in which pins are pushed one across another.)

James Mill: Leadership of the Middle Rank

Essays (due 11/3): Who would be included & who would be excluded in James Mill's "middle rank?" Does he support for a 'middle rank' contradict his defense of representative government?

11/10- John Stuart Mill's Liberalism
11/17 Read: Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 83-167.

Essays (due 11/8): 'J.S. Mill is not altogether clear about why he wants people to be free, and is simply confused about what freedom is.' Discuss.

Or

Essays (due 11/8): 'Mills political thought may be a plea for eccentricity, but it is eccentricity of a very predictable kind.' Comment

11/22 Edmund Burke's Conservatism
Read: Burke, pp. 167-253; pp. 253-377.

● * * * * * Thanksgiving Break November 23rd -27th * * * * *

11/29- Burke's Conservatism & Realism reconsidered
12/1 Read *Marx-Engels Reader*, pp.676-717; 203-217; 367-376; 403-417; 579-585.

Essays (due 11/22): "The lesson, above all, to learn from Burke is this: we must start with the world as it is, not as we should like it to be."

Or

Essays (due 11/22): "If every political theorist is in his heart of hearts a utopian, then Burke is that rare exception."

12/6- Marx & Engels Radicalism
12/8 Read: *Marx-Engels Reader*, 70-105; 133-135; 439-442; 542-555; 725-729.

Essays (due 12/1) The validity of Marxism as a political doctrine stands or falls on its assertion that the proletariat is the historical force which will bring about socialism."

Essays (due 12/1): What are the 'modern' ideas/ideals in Marxist theory?

Or

Essays (due 12/1):"It is only because of the belief in the inevitability of progress that Marx thought it possible to dispense with ethical considerations."

* * * * * **Final due Monday December 12th by 12:30pm** * * * * *