Introduction to Modern Political Thought
Course Syllabus

Aims and objectives

This course, 130 Introduction to Modern Political Thought, provides an introduction to the nature of political theory through an examination of the ideas of six of the most important western political theorists of the modern period – that is since the emergence of the state system in the early seventeenth century. The aims and objectives of the course are to:

• provide an introduction to the great texts of modern political theory;
• examine the meaning and justification of important concepts such as sovereignty, freedom, equality and rights;
• explore rival theoretical frameworks such as natural law, utilitarianism, egalitarianism, communitarianism and Marxism, through the analysis of classic texts;
• develop critical skills necessary to examine and assess complex theoretical arguments and assess their strengths and weaknesses.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, and having completed the set readings and the activities, students will be able to:

• demonstrate a familiarity with main ideas of the thinkers discussed in the subject guide;
• provide an account of the main concepts used by the thinkers covered on the course;
• evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments employed in the theories studied;
• formulate original interpretations of the thinkers covered using the model exam/essay questions.

Course Description

This course offers an introduction to some of the great texts of European political theory written since the seventeenth century. The period covers the rise and development of the modern state. This form of political association has come to dominate the modern world and continues to shape the structure of modern politics. These texts provide an insight into how this emerging political form is understood, defended and criticised. The course also covers the nature and purpose of political theory in a world of states.

The course begins with an overview of the political context from which modern political theory emerged. This covers the political context and the intellectual context of the European Enlightenment. This is followed by a discussion of the justification of state sovereignty and the legitimacy of absolutist rule. Students will consider the nature and rights of the individual, whether these are compatible with political rule; the use of social contract arguments to explain and justify political obligation; the nature and scope of natural law and the role of property in limiting sovereign power. The legacy of these ideas is explored through a discussion of utilitarianism and contemporary contractarianism.
The second part of the course covers the challenge to the voluntarist account of the state and its account of individuals as free and equal subjects. Rousseau and Hegel offer an alternative model of the state and its connection with freedom. Both of these thinkers develop some of the ideas at the heart of communitarian conceptions of politics and the state. Finally the course considers Marx’s critique of the centrality of the state to modern politics.

Methods

The methods and forms of study used on this course include lectures, seminars, teachers’ consultations and students’ own self-study. There is one weekly lecture and one weekly seminar. Each seminar is based on the contents of the preceding lecture. Seminar discussions encourage students to actively engage with the ideas presented in the lectures, a process that should clarify and deepen their understanding of the issues. Students must do a set preparatory reading before participating in a seminar.

The forms of assessment used in the course include a mark for seminar participation, three midterm exams and the final University of London External Program exam (a three-hour written examination).

Main Reading


Supplementary Reading


University of London Internet Resources

Students may find the login details in their individual study pack

- Virtual Learning Environment: http://my.londoninternational.ac.uk
- Online Library: http://external.shl.lon.ac.uk/index.html
Grade Determination

The final grade consists of the following components:

- University of London External Program Exam – 50%
- First semester – 30%
  - Seminar participation – 30%
  - Autumn midterm – 35%
  - Winter midterm – 35%
- Second semester – 20%
  - Seminar participation – 25%
  - Spring midterm – 75%

Note: in order to get full marks for the seminar participation students need to actively participate in the class discussions, to demonstrate familiarity with assigned readings and lecture material, including being prepared to answer the questions that may be posed by the class teacher.

Course Outline

1. Course introduction
   What is political theory? Course outline, main topics, ground rules. Assessment: formative and summative, internal and external. How to succeed in the course. The emergence of modern political theory. Overviews of key concepts and basic approaches.
   *(Kelly, pp. 1-16, 77-83)*

   Hobbes’ life and works. Leviathan in context: overview and basic concepts. The problem of pluralism and the role of the sovereign. The state of nature, war of all against all.
   *(Kelly, pp. 17-26; Boucher and Kelly, pp. 163-180; Cahn, pp. 312-343)*

3. Hobbes II: State of nature

4. Hobbes III: The social contract

5. Hobbes IV: Resistance and rebellion
   De facto and de jure authority. The nature of political obligation. Right to rebellion and resistance. Consent, might and self-interest. Conclusion and recap.

6. Locke I: Introduction
   Locke’s life and works. Second Treatise in context: overview and basic concepts. The problem of absolutism. Natural law and natural rights.
   *(Kelly, pp. 27-34; Boucher and Kelly, pp. 181-197; Cahn, pp. 365-392)*
7. Locke II: Natural law and natural rights
   Locke and Filmer: political and versus patriarchal power; the divine right of kings. Locke and Hobbes on the state of nature and the origins of political society. Property, laws and rights in the natural condition. Mixing one’s labour and the workmanship theory. Executive power of the law of nature.

8. Locke III: Contract and consent
   Liberty versus licence. The right of freedom and the contract. Two stages of the agreement. Express and tacit consent. The problem of consent and political obligation.

9. Locke IV: Sovereign power and the right of resistance
   Government versus civil society. Limited government, toleration and the rule of law. The problem of religious pluralism. The right to revolution.

10. Mill I: Introduction
    *(Kelly, pp. 35-43; Boucher and Kelly, pp. 324-342; Cahn, pp. 741-746, 747-807)*

11. Mill II: The principle of utility

12. Mill III: Tyranny of the majority and the harm principle

13. Mill IV: Freedom and individuality

14. Rousseau I: Introduction
    *(Kelly, pp. 45-52; Boucher and Kelly, pp. 235-252; Cahn, pp. 422-436, 437-465)*

15. Rousseau II: The state of nature
    Critique of Hobbes and Locke. Natural condition: *pitié* and *perfectibilité*, *amour de soi* and *amour propre*. Transition from nature to society: private property; metallurgy and agriculture.

16. Rousseau III: The two contracts
    Rousseau’s two contracts. Majority and minority; oppression and domination. The conditions of the free society. The general will and the will of all. The problem of faction.

17. Rousseau IV: The social contract
    ‘Forcing one to be free’. Procedure, virtue and the lawgiver. Civil religion and the censorial tribunal. Rousseau: totalitarian, liberal or republican?

18. Hegel I: Introduction
    Hegel’s life and works. *Philosophy of Right* and *Philosophy of History* in context: overview and basic concepts. Ethical society and the state.
19. Hegel II: Idealism, communitarianism and historicism

20. Hegel III: Theory of history
‘Geist’: individual, social and theological aspects. Historicity of spirit. The dialectical account of history: origins, goals and the forces of change. The world spirit and freedom. Stages of history. The end of history.

21. Hegel IV: Ethical society and the state
From property to the state. The family, the civil society and the state. The problem of war and state building. Hegel’s account of international politics.

22. Marx I: Introduction
Marx’s life and works. *The Paris Manuscripts, The German Ideology* and *The Manifesto* in context: overview and basic concepts. Marx as a political theorist. What is critique?

23. Marx II: The critique of the modern state

24. Marx III: Human essence and its alienation

25. Marx IV: The communist alternative
Self-destruction of capitalism. Capitalism as the groundwork for communism. The proletariat. Class struggle and revolution. Transition from capitalism to communism. Role of the state and autonomy of the political.

26. Wrap-up and revision
Individualism and communitarianism. Hegel and Marx as the heirs and the critics of the European political philosophy. Individualist and communitarian approaches. Social contract in question.

27. Exam strategies revision
Tips and strategies on how to prepare for and write the University of London Exam.
Questions for Revision

**Hobbes**

- Why does Hobbes describe the state of nature as a state of war?
- Are there any limits to the authority of the Hobbesian sovereign?
- In what ways, if any, does Hobbes’ psychological theory contradict his account of sovereign authority?

**Locke**

- If we can have society in Locke’s state of nature, why do we need the state?
- Why does Locke argue that private property is a pre-political right?
- Explain and assess Locke’s distinction between express and tacit consent.

**Mill**

- Can one separate self-regarding from other-regarding actions?
- How does J.S. Mill try to answer the criticism that psychological hedonism is a ‘philosophy for swine’?
- Why does J.S. Mill attach such importance to liberty?

**Rousseau**

- ‘Rousseau is one of the most profound critics of social contract arguments.’ Discuss.
- Does Rousseau’s conception of the general will limit freedom?
- If, according to Rousseau, our natural condition is one of equality, how does inequality arise?

**Hegel**

- Does Hegel sacrifice the individual to the claims of the state?
- What role, if any, does war play in Hegel’s theory of the state?
- Does the modern state mark the ‘end of history’?

**Marx**

- Does Marx offer a moral critique of capitalism?
- Is the collapse of capitalism inevitable according to Marx?
- Does Marx have a theory of human nature?
Sample Examination Paper

Candidates should answer THREE of the following TWELVE questions. All questions carry equal marks. Time: 3 hours.

1. ‘Hobbes’s unwillingness to accommodate a right of resistance to the sovereign in his political theory is one of his greatest strengths.’ Discuss.

2. Explain the role of natural right and the law of nature in Hobbes’s state of nature argument.

3. Explain the distinction between express and tacit consent in Locke’s argument and which is the more important?

4. Explain and assess Locke’s arguments for the origin of private property.

5. Critically assess the place of the harm principle in Mill’s defence of liberty.

6. Why does Mill attach such importance to the idea of ‘experiments in living’ in his theory of liberty?

7. Critically assess Rousseau’s account of the state of nature.

8. Is Rousseau’s idea that one can be forced to be free a contradiction in terms?

9. What does Hegel mean by the end of history?

10. What does Hegel mean by considering the state a form of ethical life?

11. Explain Marx’s conception of class and why it is so important in his account of historical change?

12. Why does Marx think that communism is the inevitable successor to capitalism?

Exam Guidelines

Modern political thought covers a range of topics relating to the modern state through a critical examination of key European political thinkers from Hobbes to Hegel and Marx. Although there is a historical dimension to the paper the primary focus is philosophical and analytical. Candidates are expected to show a familiarity with the logic of the respective arguments and the best candidates will display a critical engagement with those arguments by analysing strengths and weaknesses.

The paper is not sectionalised. Candidates are offered twelve questions on six thinkers. Where there are two questions on one thinker these will require a focus on different aspects of the author’s ideas, consequently there should be no issue of overlap. Candidates are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by focusing on a narrower rather than a broader range of thinkers.

Where candidates focus on a narrow range of thinkers they must offer different answers and not merely repeat the same material. Some candidates disadvantage themselves by offering too much historical and biographical detail, whilst saying little about the arguments of the key thinkers. Other candidates fail to provide four complete answers, thus bringing down their marks for the paper as a whole. Candidates should always answer four questions and endeavour to distribute their time equally across the four questions. Another common weakness is to read the question as an invitation to write everything one can think of on the thinker mentioned, rather than trying to
frame a distinct answer to a particular question. The candidates who are most successful address
the question.

For more detailed guidelines please see the latest available issue of University of London official
Examiners’ commentaries.