

GONZAGA-IN-FLORENCE

MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT - POLS 331 (3 credits)

Dr Bernard Gbikpi, PhD

gbikpi@gonzaga.edu

Fall Semester 2009 - Meeting Time: Wednesday 3:35 - 6:15 p.m.

Course content

This course introduces the students to some important authors in the history of political thought, focusing on those whose works have underpin the rise of liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The authors are Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Montesquieu, James Mill, Constant, Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill. They were dealing with notions such as liberty and equality, consent and contract, and their embodiment in institutions through notions of check of powers and representation, notably.

Course objective

The course is intended to be a course of introduction to modern political thought. It goes through one of the major works of each of these authors, and aims at having students able to restate a political thinker's argument and to discuss it. The important expected outcome of the course is that students have a firm knowledge of the author's theory through the thorough consideration of one key notion of his.

Course description

Each session consists in the presentation by one or two students of the reading of the day, namely a chapter of a major work of the political thinker. Their presentation is the basis of a review/research paper. All the students are required to hand a proper outline of each session's reading. The session gives rise to a discussion. The students who have led the session are required to integrate in their successive review/research paper the arguments brought up during the discussion. Eventually, all papers are gathered so as to have as a final product of the course a collection of students' reflections on modern political thinkers. The tests consist in outlining and commenting in a proper way a reading taken from a political thinker.

Course grading

Participation of students (reading's outlines; spontaneity/attention/interest paid to the session; and constancy/assiduity along the semester) counts for 25% of the total grade.

Paper presentation and research paper counts for 25% of the total grade.

Mid-term exam and final exam contribute each to 25% of the total grade.

Bibliography

- A **reading pack** with the readings and material for students' presentation is made available and is indispensable.

- **Textbooks** available at **GIF library** are notably:

- David Boucher and Paul Kelly, eds., 2003, *Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the Present*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

- Iain Hampsher-Monk, 1992, *A History of Modern Political Thought. Major Political Thinkers from Hobbes to Marx*, Oxford, Cambridge Mass: Blackwell -facultative.

- John S. McClelland, 1996, *A History of Western Political Thought*, London and New York, Routledge

SCHEDULE

September 23, 2009

Introduction

- Liberalism and modern political thought – Format of the course

First Part: Natural rights and social contract theory

- *Lecture* on Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

September 30, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Chapters 13, parts from chapters 14, 17, and 18, i.e.: The state of nature – The social contract – The rights of the sovereign (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1957)
- *Lecture* on John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690)

October 07, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Chapters 5 and 9, i.e.: Property – The ends of political society and government. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960)
- *Lecture* on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762)

October 14, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762), Book 1, i.e.: The right of the strongest – Back to an original compact – The social pact – The general will and the civil state as the solution of the conflict between self-interest and duty (London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1973)
- *Lecture* on David Hume, *Of the Original Contract* (1748)

October 21, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* David Hume, *Of the Original Contract* (1748)
- *Lecture* on Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government* (1776)

October 23, 2009

- *Mid-term exams*

October 28, 2009

- *Correction of the Mid-Term, and Students' presentation of* Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government* (1776), chapter 1: Formation of Government, i.e. a critic of the idea of original contract through a thorough reading of Blackstone, and the foundation of the principle of utility as the basis for obedience (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Second Part: Constitution, Representation and Liberty

- *Lecture* on Montesquieu *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748)

November 04, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* Montesquieu *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Book 11, chapter 6 (Political liberty and the Constitution of England) (New York and London, Hafner Press and Collier Macmillan publishers, 1949).
- *Lecture* on James Mill, *An Essay on Government* (1819)

November 11, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* James Mill, *Essay on Government* (1819) The end of power – How to prevent abuse of power – The representative system as the only security against abuse of power from government (in *An Essay on Government*, edited by Currin V. Shields, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1955)
- *Lecture* on Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns* (1819).

November 18, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns* (1819) The description of the two liberties – Harms in not seeing their difference – Focus on the liberty of the moderns (individual and political liberty)(in *Political Writings*, edited by Biancamaria Fontana, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988)
- *Lecture* on Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835).

December 02, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835) Vol. 2, Part 2, Chapters 1-7. Tocqueville's purpose – The character of the democratic regime: equality – The problem of democracy: the tyranny of the majority – The resolution of the problem: associations and democratic expedient (Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, eds., Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2000)
- *Lecture* on John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859).

December 09, 2009

- *Students' Presentation* John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) Chapter one: *Introductory*, i.e.: Liberty and authority in old times – In modern times – Tyranny of society – The principle of self-protection – Liberty (in *Three Essays*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975)

December 16, 2009

- *Final exams*

THE OUTLINE

- 1) The **main argument(s)**:
 - a. What is the overall claim of the writing? (or/and) What is the author trying to convince us of?
 - b. Can we formulate the argument into a sentence or two? (or/and) Is there a sentence *in the text* where the author formulates it?
- 2) How does the author lead the argument? or What the **demonstration** consists in?
 - a. Here we need to follow the author's reasoning step by step. It is for this purpose (reconstructing the author's argument) that the outlining of the text paragraph by paragraph, section by section, is necessary. A good device for doing this is to give title to the paragraphs read (if the author has not or the author's ones are not sufficiently explicit)
- 3) We should aim to make an **assessment** of the argument: Does the argument convince us? Is only part of it convincing? Is it cogent/logical? Do we think it helps us understanding something fundamental about the issue at stake? What do we believe the strengths and weaknesses of the text are? Is there any particular assumption that is important for the argument that we think should be strengthened?
- 4) Keep in mind in making the assessment that, things such as the **vocabulary** (does the author use particular words that are particularly important for his argument/demonstration? What does he mean by these words? Are these words employed consistently –does the author always mean the same thing when s/he uses the words?); the **context** (are the period of writing or the period the writing refers to, the social, political, economic, and religious factors affecting his argument?); **alternative** or **counter-arguments** mentioned by the author her/himself, or anything else you deem relevant in the text, can be useful in making the assessment.

THE REVIEW/RESEARCH PAPER

The review part of your paper is a thoughtful account of the piece of writing you've read. The point of the review is to describe the piece of writing's content and argument(s) and to present some kind of discussion of it supported with some quotations from the writing that illustrate the points you're making. A person who has not read the piece of writing should be able to decide, from what you have written, whether or not to read it.

The research part of your paper is a bibliography of works that support your discussion of the author.

Your paper should include the following:

- ✓ Bibliographical information about the writing, including author(s), title of the chapter, title of the book, publishing information, date, page numbers (always appears at the top of your review)
- ✓ General summary of content (what is the writing about)
- ✓ Discussion of author's main point (why did the author write the book/chapter; what's the point(s) being made?)
- ✓ Identification of the main elements of argument (summarize the reasons the author cites to support the main argument)
- ✓ Discussion of the conclusion (what does the author conclude?)

- ✓ Identification of at least 2 problems/strengths that might be noted about the writing, the argument(s), the sources of information, the presentation, etc.
- ✓ Suggest, fix, discuss the problems/strengths you've noted in 6. What might have made the work stronger/better? what is so special about the really good aspects of the work?
- ✓ Suggest at least two bibliographical sources for supporting the discussion of the problems/strengths you've identified and give sufficient hints on their content.

Your paper should be between a medium-length paper (2 000 words or 6 double-spaced pages) and a long paper (3 000 words or 10 double-spaced pages).
