



Introduction to political philosophy (2nd Years): From the French Revolution to Marx

BISLA
Liberal Arts College

Code:

Term:	Autumn
ECTS credits:	6
Lessons per week:	2×90 mins
Language:	English
Instructor:	Adam Bence Balazs
Form of study:	Lecture + Seminar

Prerequisites

The course aims to introduce Western European political philosophy from the French Revolution to Marx. There is no other prerequisite than to refresh our dim memories about the previous semester, i.e., the main political topics and thinkers at work in political philosophy at the dawn of the French Revolution.

Course Objectives

The course will develop the students' political eye. The main goal is to learn how to sense political stakes in different types of texts, starting with classics in the political philosophy field – but not exclusively. We will proceed chronologically from the French Revolution to the Marxian framework to understand the evolution of political thought in a relatively short yet intensive period of modern history. Regarding textual understanding, we will improve our means and tools in text analysis and proper quoting and start learning how to mobilize great classics to address contemporary political challenges.

Methodologically, students will:

- ✓ Learn the skills required to develop an analysis of *short* excerpts from classic political philosophy – this exercise is quite different from 'hunting' for information through more extended readings
- ✓ Learn how to organize their thoughts in consecutive points (structure)
- ✓ Practice the basic skills required to debate a political topic, especially the art of pros and cons in shaping their own opinion
- ✓ Learn how to identify political stakes in classics – in the literal meaning of texts and also between the lines
- ✓ Learn to better orient themselves in texts and the contemporary world – textual understanding being one of the common denominators between texts and political reality

Contents

From the beginning of the French Revolution to the 1860s, Western Europe went through radical changes that still shape our global world and the way we orient ourselves in it. The revolutionary

process, the emergence of the nation as a political concept, and the first decades of the Industrial revolution reshaped in depth our very notions of space and time, progress and development, the relation between groups and the individual, the community and the citizen, and the Western conception of the world in the intertwined fields of politics, culture, and economics. Understanding these changes and the impact of this multilayer revolutionary process is key to getting a firm grasp of our most pressing contemporary challenges in these early decades of the 21st century.

From Rousseau to Marx through Kant and Hegel, political philosophy was inspired by these changes and critically reflected on them. The Enlightenment formulated universal promises at the dawn of the revolutionary process – promises that the tumultuous times of industrialization, nation-building, and colonization struggled to keep. The great promises of industrial progress and the nation-building projects also bumped into their touchstones.

Studying political philosophy from the Enlightenment to the *Capital* in chronological order might not cover an extended period. Still, the pace and rhythm of those decades, from the 1780s to the 1860s, show an excitingly rich reflection on modernity, the Western world, its place and role in the world, and, well beyond the West, a contrasted picture of the human condition. We will also reflect on the radicality of the changes above in the mirror of political philosophy.

We will proceed chronologically to map the central classics in political philosophy, from Kant to Marx. We will examine these thinkers' substantial contributions to political thought and locate their political texts within their complete works. Indeed, without an overview of Kant's critical framework, the significance of texts such as *Perpetual Peace* or *What is Enlightenment?* would be hard to grasp. Behind the action-oriented texts by Marx (and Engels) stands the multilayer and interdisciplinary monument of *The Capital*. Hegel's role in shifting from the Kantian system to the dialectic organism of Marxian thought calls for examining Hegelian texts that might not look explicitly political at first sight. The semester's aim – and the main challenge – is to develop our political eye and our ability to sense political stakes in political philosophy classics and beyond. That is how one's political eye is connected to basic textual understanding and interpretation skills – a matter of reading practice.

Readings

Here is a non-exhaustive list of the core readings, the 'backbone,' to be completed by secondary readings in and around political philosophy

Rousseau, J-J.: *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*

The Social Contract

Burke, E.: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

Kant, I.: *Perpetual Peace*

What is Enlightenment?

What Does It Mean To Orient Oneself in Thinking?

Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View

- Preface

Critique of Pure Reason (short excerpts)

Critique of Judgement (short excerpts)

Hegel, G.W.F.: *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (short excerpts)

The Science of Logic (short excerpts)

Marx, K. and Engels, F.: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

Marx, K.: *The Capital* (excerpts)

Requirements

The main challenge is to develop our ability to sense political stakes through textual understanding; we will mostly rely on text analysis.

1. We will practice short text analysis through the weekly readings. Every week, students will have to do **small tasks** on the readings to learn how to build up the **commentary of a short excerpt** from a classic work. This is different from ‘hunting’ for information through more extended readings. The technique will be acquired progressively throughout the semester. The idea is to reorganize the content of a short text into **three consecutive points** (instead of just commenting on the text as it goes) and then develop these three points with additional references from the excerpt’s context and other sources. Such a commentary appropriates the text’s content, logic, and meaning. In theory, this might sound more challenging than it is in reality once the basic means and tools are well-understood.
2. There will be **2 to 3 tests** about the **keywords** explained in class. The keywords are always duly highlighted. The tests take **15 minutes** each.
3. To take stock of these skills and also the basic concepts at work in the studied political philosophy classics, the **mid-term assignment** will consist of a text commentary in which students will have the opportunity to use the keywords and structure their thoughts. This mid-term test will not be graded (see the ‘Evaluation criteria’ section). This will help us map the skills to develop and improve for the end-term assignment.
4. The **end-term assignment** is the developed analysis and commentary of a short excerpt. In the second half of the semester, students can form smaller groups to work on a given classic and then proceed to the commentary of different excerpts from that classic individually. The commentary should be **a minimum of three pages**.

Evaluation Criteria

Quantitative evaluation

40% Group assignments

30% Tests (2-3) and weekly assignments

15% Mid-term essay

15% End-term essay

Progress

I first and foremost evaluate your individual progress. You do not get actual grades for the mid-term test, only an indication (let's say C+/B-). What I look at is the progress you make throughout the semester. If your first weekly assignments are weak (let's say E+/D) but the mid-term test is better (let's say C+), and then the final text commentary is even more consistent and has integrated lessons and advice, then chances are you are close to an A or B.

This way of evaluation is not easy to quantify, while students do need some signposts to orient themselves. For the sake of transparency in evaluation:

- ✓ A mid-term evaluation will be provided to help students signpost their progress.
- ✓ In case this is not enough, you can ask for a consultation anytime to see where you are – to see where you think you are in terms of progress, find out what I think of it, and discuss how to proceed from there.
- ✓ Although this student-oriented approach is based on individual follow-up, there are cases at the end of the semester where I need to compare students to each other as well, in terms of efforts and diligence to bring delicate nuances to the final grades.

Behaviour and communication

The following points might play a role when it comes to comparing efforts and achievements at the end of the semester:

- Please respect deadlines and schedules (e.g., the agreed time slots of consultations).
- Passing a course assumes that the student was not absent for more than four lessons.
- Please use email for communication, following the basic rules. Be polite and friendly; the two do not exclude each other. Unpolite, impatient, or demanding communication is counterproductive from all points of view.
- Active class participation is highly appreciated.

- However, a student who does not talk but pays attention and shows evidence of it in written tasks or consultations is considered actively participating (you have the right to be shy).
- Obviously, this does not work if we are all shy in the classroom. That's already a thorny political question about freedom and equality...

Course Evaluation (%)

A – excellent:	100-93%,
B – very good:	92-84%,
C – good:	83-74%,
D – satisfactory:	73-63%,
E – sufficient:	62-51%,
Fx – fail:	50-0%.

Aware of the previous section on Evaluation Criteria, this percentage quantification is purely indicative. However, it has the advantage of showing that B or C are *not* bad grades.