

Contemporary Political Thought (3rd Years) – Autumn Semester

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 Contemporary Political Thought course follows and builds on the previous semester's work and topics. In the continuity of the last – relatively compact – semester, we will revisit some of the main political thought classics introduced in the Spring. We will push the study forward and learn how to use and mobilize these classic references to address some of our most pressing contemporary issues and political challenges. In short, there is no other prerequisite than doing our best to refresh our dim memories of the last semester.

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 and more contemporary works in the political philosophy field – but not exclusively. Regarding textual understanding, we will continue our work in text analysis and proper quoting and improve the way we can 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 or more contemporary works – this exercise is quite different from 'hunting' for information through more extended readings
- ✓ Learn how to organize their thoughts in consecutive points, whether the task is short text analysis or the structure of a position paper
- ✓ Practice the art of pros and cons in shaping their own opinion
- ✓ Practice the basic skills required to debate a political topic

- ✓ Learn how to identify political stakes in the fields of human and social sciences based on the political classics at work in these fields
- ✓ 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

Classics are meant to be reread. The ability to mobilize classic sources to address contemporary challenges shapes our understanding of the present. Classics make our opinion more substantial – interestingly, such an active practice of political culture is also what establishes great classics as such: every epoch has its own interpretations of great classics. The texts remain, but the reading grids change through consecutive times. For instance, the Kantian framework of ‘perpetual peace’ might have a different ring to it in 2022 than in the bygone, post-war context of European integration from 1945 to the end of the Cold War.

A complex turning point in history (a new war, a new type of modernizing process, or what seems to be a cultural relapse) calls for alert means of orientation. Political phenomena that seem ‘brand new’ or ‘unprecedented’ as we experience them through present times must be put in historical perspective. This calls for longer-term chronologies but, more importantly for us in this course, for more awareness about how our thinking structures are changing – or not.

The specificity of classic philosophical texts is that they tend to address real issues indirectly. There is no ‘information’ in the *Critique of Judgement* about our present-day reality and its ‘post-truth’ tendencies. Still, Kant built up conceptual frameworks we can mobilize to criticize these tendencies, including the often *ad hoc* and sometimes unreflecting labels we put on our contemporary challenges (for instance: ‘post-truth’). More contemporary readings might also show evidence of such ‘indirect’ relevancy.

The question is how to proceed. We will revisit the classic texts in political philosophy introduced in the previous semester. Instead of following the chronological order of the history of political thought (Kant, then Hegel, then Marx), we will reread the classic authors in the thematic light of our contemporary challenges and complete them with more contemporary references. We will examine how some of our most pressing contemporary challenges call for classics in political philosophy from Plato to the late moderns.

We will not lose sight of the chronological order, though: the legacy of the Enlightenment, anti-Enlightenment movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, the many ramifications of the Marxian framework in contexts such as the emancipation from colonial order or critical theory’s grasp of the ‘culture industry,’ or Hegel’s impact on the way we try to make sense out of history need to be located in time. However, the main goal is to build critical and reflective bridges between past and present, between classics and our contemporary world. The ‘Main topics and readings’ section describes the thematic approach. The methodology is clarified in the ‘Requirements’ section.

Main topics and readings

We will build bridges between classics and contemporary political challenges through five main topics. These will structure the lectures and our discussions during the seminars. They will also provide a framework for the individual tasks (the mid-term commentary and the final paper, see 'Requirements'). We will discuss the five of them during the introductory class on Tuesday, September 20.

Here are the five domains and the topics one can choose within them. The readings are listed for inspiration. Students are not expected to read through all these books. Their self-tailored bibliographies will depend on the topic they opt for at the beginning of the semester (see 'Requirements'). The five domains easily overlap, hence the recurring readings in the five entries. The readings listed here indicate the kind of classics and contemporary, sometimes interdisciplinary sources one can expect to work on when opting for a topic. The main classics (from Plato to Marx) from the previous semester are not listed here: they are omnipresent behind all these readings.

Modernity

- **Modernity and the age of globalization**
- **Is digitalization the new Industrial Revolution?**
- **Modernity: an epoch or a conception of time?**
- **Hybrid and modern: synonyms or complementary concepts?**
- **Culture and entertainment: opposites or complementary concepts?**

Arendt, H.: *Between Past and Future*

Barthes, R.: *Mythologies*

Borges, J. L.: *Fictions*

Calvino, I.: *Invisible Cities*

Conrad, J.: *Heart of Darkness*

Critical theory (The Frankfurt School – Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse)

Durkheim, E.: *The Division of Labour*

Elias, N.: *On Time*

Elias, N.: *The Civilizing Process*

Hobsbawm, E.: *Fractured Times*

Latour, B.: *We Have Never Been Modern*

Lévi-Strauss, C.: *Tristes Tropiques*

Mahbubani, K.: *Has the West Lost It?*

Mauss, M.: *The Techniques of the Body*

Simmel, G.: *The Sociology of Space*
Sloterdijk, P.: *Critique of Cynical Reason*
Sternhell, Z.: *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*
Terkel, S.: *Chicago*

Security and Freedom

- **Do security and freedom exclude each other?**
- **What are the guarantees of inner security?**
- **What place for freedom in security-driven times?**
- **Emancipation between freedom and sovereignty**

Alinsky, S.: *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*

Arendt, H.: *Between Past and Future*

Arendt, H.: *Civil Disobedience*

Arendt, H.: *On Violence*

Arendt, H.: *Responsibility and Judgement*

Badie, B.: *New Perspectives on the International Order*

Conrad, J.: *Heart of Darkness*

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F.: *Thousand Plateaus*

Fanon, F.: *The Wretched of the Earth*

Foucault, M.: *Discipline and Punish*

Gramsci, A.: *Prison Notebooks*

Hobhouse, L.T.: *Liberalism*

Mahbubani, K.: *Has the West Lost It?*

Said, E. W.: *Culture and Imperialism*

Said, E. W.: *Orientalism*

Terkel, S.: *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession*

Traven, B.: *The Death Ship*

History and Politics

- **How objective is history as a science?**
- **Is memory an aim or a tool for the historian?**

- **What are the citizens' tools against the political instrumentalization of the past?**
- **Politics and textual understanding**

Barthes, R.: *Mythologies*

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

Elias, N.: *On Time*

Elias, N.: *The Civilizing Process*

Hobsbawm, E.: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*

Le Goff, J.: *The Birth of Europe in the Middle Ages*

Pratt, H.: *Corto Maltese*

Rawls, J.: *A Theory of Justice*

Ricœur, P.: *Memory, History, Forgetting*

Ricœur, P.: *Time and Narrative*

Sloterdijk, P.: *Critique of Cynical Reason*

Nature and Culture

- **Climate change between nature and politics**
- **Gender between biology and society**
- **Racism: in the 'name' of nature?**

Latour, B.: *Where to Land?*

Butler, J.: *Gender Trouble*

Fanon, F.: *Black Skin, White Masks*

Lévi-Strauss, C.: *Tristes Tropiques*

Mauss, M.: *The Techniques of the Body*

Said, E. W.: *Culture and Imperialism*

Requirements

The main challenge being how to mobilize classics to address contemporary political issues, I propose to proceed in three steps:

1. Students will have to **choose one of the four main topics** at the beginning of the semester and briefly explain their choice. The readings under the five listed topics are not an exhaustive list but rather an indication of the kind of texts and types of potential questions students will frame and develop within the chosen topic.
2. A. Afterwards, they will be given a list of readings and a short excerpt to comment on (whether a classic from the previous semester or a more recent text in the continuity of those classics). **This short text commentary is the mid-term written assignment.** We will practice this way of commenting on short texts through the weekly readings in class. 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. This commentary should be **a minimum of two pages** long.

B. We will practice short text analysis throughout the semester with the weekly readings. **Every week**, students will have to do **small tasks in textual understanding** to improve their ability to develop a commentary.
3. In their **end-term paper**, students will be asked to **mobilize the text they commented on** to feed their reflection within the topic they picked at the beginning. They are expected to progressively **specify their question** to which the final paper will provide a set of answers. Indeed, a topic is not a question yet (we will not write four to six pages on 'modernity in general'). You will have to frame and formulate a question you can address in your final paper. The text commentary, the self-tailored readings, and the consultations are meant to help in this process. The end-term paper should be **a minimum of three pages** long.

Evaluation Criteria

Quantitative evaluation

40% Group assignments

30% Weekly assignments, summaries + participation

15% Mid-term text commentary (minimum 2 pages)

15% End-term essay (minimum 3 pages)

Progress

I first and foremost evaluate your individual progress. You do not get actual grades for the midterm paper (the text commentary), only an indication (let's say B/A-). What I look at is the progress you make throughout the semester. If your first draft is weak (let's say E+/D) but the text commentary is better (let's say C+), and then the final paper 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 own 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.