



Contemporary political thought (2nd Years): Ancients, Moderns, and the Contemporary Challenges

BISLA
Liberal Arts College

Code:

Term:	Spring
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 revisit the classics in philosophy introduced in previous semesters (both the Moderns and the Ancients) to learn how to mobilize our references when we address the most pressing theoretical challenges of the contemporary world. There is no other prerequisite than to refresh our dim memories about previous semesters: the leading political topics and thinkers at work in political philosophy from the French Revolution to Marx (Fall semester) and the Greeks (J-Term).

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 complete our list of references with additional texts by Kant, Hegel, and Marx. However, we will not proceed chronologically anymore, but thematically (concept by concept), revisit the classics introduced previously, and examine how they might shed some old-new light on our present-day political issues.

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
- ✓ The group assignments will focus on the distinction between theory and fiction, i.e., the difference between conceptual and narrative approaches to political topics

Contents

In the previous semesters, we followed the chronological order to grasp the basics, the order, and the connection of consecutive theories in Western political thought. In command of these theoretical basics, we can now go for a more thematical approach and learn how to mobilize our classic references.

This thematical approach means focusing on concepts rather than authors and theories. This approach has four advantages:

1. In terms of content, this allows us to complete the list of our references and look closely at texts only mentioned previously. Besides additional texts by Kant, Hegel, and Marx, the thematical approach will also call for some texts by these authors' contemporaries (Burke) and more recent studies (Hobsbawm).
2. Again, in terms of content, this thematical approach will allow us to combine Modern references from the Fall semester and Ancient ones from the J-Term. The contrast between the Ancients and Moderns will shed new light on our contemporary political challenges.
3. Methodologically, focusing on concepts will allow us to learn how to *use* or *mobilize* classic references to address contemporary political challenges.
4. Again, regarding methodology, we will learn how to build up a reflection and structure our arguments following the questions we will phrase concerning these concepts. The ability to articulate a question and then propose a set of answers in consecutive steps is critical to how philosophy makes sense in contemporary political thought.

The three concepts we will examine were already at work in the previous semester: **cosmopolitanism**, **nationalism**, and **modernity**. How to build up a reflection based on a concept like *world citizenship*? How to think of the *nation* as a political concept and *construction*? What does it mean to live in a globalized world where all 'civilizations,' beyond suspicious narratives about their 'clash,' all share modernity? How to reflect on such an idiomatic notion?

The semester's aim – and the main challenge – is to develop our political eye and 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:

Kant: *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking*

Kant: *Perpetual Peace*

Kant: *Theory and Practice*/Burke: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (short excerpts)

Marx and Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

Marx: *The Capital* (excerpts)

Hobsbawm: *Nation and Nationalism Since 1780*

Lévi-Strauss: *Race and History*

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 the basic concepts at work in the studied political philosophy classics, the mid-term assignment will consist of a text commentary in which students can 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. The texts: students will choose between three classics with an explicit political layer.
4. The **end-term assignment** is the developed analysis of a topic addressed during the semester. Students are expected to use their references in political philosophy and the literary text (mid-term assignment) to feed their structured arguments. The end-term essay should be a **minimum of three pages**.

Evaluation Criteria

Quantitative evaluation

30% Weekly assignments (minor tasks)

20% Tests (2-3)

15% Mid-term essay

15% End-term essay

20% Attendance and participation

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. For example, 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.