Description
This seminar serves three different functions. It is, in a loose sense, a sequel to POLSCI 602, which covers the ancient and medieval periods of the Western political thought. It also fills out some of the gaps left in the canon of modern political thought in last fall’s iteration of POLSCI 603. And it is a freestanding introduction to some central themes, texts and thinkers of what political theorists (unlike, say, artists or architects) consider the modern period: seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. The seminar will be accessible even to participants with little or no theory background.

This term, we begin in the early eighteenth century with Montesquieu’s Persian Letters (1721) and end with Friedrich Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality (1888) and Twilight of the Idols (1895). Last fall’s seminar focused on the heavy hitters, on the Top 40, on the supposed don’t-leave-home-without-these-books list: the social contract theorists for the most part. Our thinkers this term are equally important and influential, and sometimes, at least arguably, more interesting. They are harder to place politically and intellectually. For example, Montesquieu and Hume have been called both liberals and conservatives, we can use Burke, the founder of conservatism, to argue for the open source software movement, and Nietzsche has been embraced by Nazis and poststructuralists. Their approaches are also more varied. Our thinkers are, in short, not Salieri against last fall’s Mozart, but Tom Waits against last fall’s Bruce Springsteen: geniuses of a slightly different sort, but geniuses all the same.

Making sense of and coming to terms with the rapidly changing world, particularly social and political diversity, were central preoccupations of modern political theorists. We will try to understand the thinkers’ different approaches and answers to these questions. We will assume that all political theory aims to persuade its audience in some way and that a theorist’s epistemological commitments (how she thinks we know anything) inform her attempts at persuasion. One of the things we will see forming in the texts we study are the philosophical and even methodological foundations of the modern scientific worldview — and also early critiques of that worldview. Finally, if the very idea of social contract theory is to trade on the rhetorical power of “the natural,” most of our thinkers challenge the idea that nature, by itself, is normative.

Our selection sacrifices breadth for (a modicum of) depth. What you’ll learn, I hope, by our focus on the five thinkers is the ability to read difficult primary texts carefully, to understand some of the main themes, and to engage theories in an intelligent, even original way. You’ll
have to do that on your own with the other modern thinkers we now sidestep. (You really
will have to do that if you hope to take a prelim in political theory.)

This is a seminar in which we engage in inquiry. Texts are our object; for our method,
consider the following statement:

I always took for granted that the writers we were studying were much smarter than I was.
If they were not, why was I wasting my time and the students’ time by studying them? If I
saw a mistake in their arguments, I supposed those writers saw it too and must have dealt
with it. But where? I looked for their way out, not mine. Sometimes their way out was
historical; in their day the question need not be raised, or wouldn’t arise and so couldn’t
then be fruitfully discussed. Or there was a part of the text I had overlooked, or had not
read. I assumed there were never plain mistakes, not ones that mattered, anyway.¹

Since the person speaking is John Rawls, who was undoubtedly smarter than any of us, we’ll
take his word for it and use two principles: a principle of humility and a principle of charity as
our primary interpretive approach: generations of scholars, politicians, and intellectuals have
considered these texts central to the study of politics. Our task is to figure out why.

Seminar mechanics

• Everybody needs to come to seminar meetings prepared. There will be a lot of reading, but
there will be study questions which will help focus your reading a bit. Attendance is
mandatory, and unexplained absences are not allowed. One unexplained absence will result
in an E for participation, two will result in failure in the course. If you get the flu (H1N1, or
something equivalent), let me know immediately, and we’ll make appropriate
accommodations.

• Registered students will write two short papers (one 300–400-word response paper and one
1,000-word paper). There will also be a final project. It can a 3,500–4,000-word term paper,
with a required draft. It can also be an alternative, equally demanding project: a substantive
research proposal or a new media project. There will be a separate handout on and more
discussion of the details of the final project.

• The response paper will be circulated to all seminar participants before the seminar; we will
schedule those assignments during the first two weeks of the seminar. The person who
writes the response paper will also spend about five minutes talking about it at the
beginning of the seminar.

• Please turn in all work electronically through CTools.

• There will no incompletes except in cases of documented medical emergencies, provided
that at least half of the work has been completed. In other words, this is not your standard
take-as-long-as-you-want grad seminar.

¹ Quoted in Barbara Herman, “Editor’s Introduction” in John Rawls, Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy
Grading

Short papers 30%
Final project 50%
Participation 20%

What do my grades mean?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>On a paper</th>
<th>As the final grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>Send it for publication.</td>
<td>Absolutely brilliant and extremely rare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Excellent work.</td>
<td>Excellent work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A–</td>
<td>Good work; you are satisfying all expectations, although there are some problems with the paper.</td>
<td>Good work; you are satisfying all expectations, although you can — and likely will — improve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>Decent work, although there are some significant problems with the paper. Perfectly fine on early papers.</td>
<td>There are some real issues about your ability to do work in this field. You may want to consider whether this should be your major field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>There are some real problems in the paper: it’s insufficiently detailed, its argument is badly off the mark, prose is problematic. Don’t panic if this is a grade on an early paper, but try to see what the problems are.</td>
<td>You may want to consider whether grad school is the thing you’ll want to pursue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B–</td>
<td>The paper is just about unacceptable. If you put in a lot of effort into it, you’ll want to talk to me immediately.</td>
<td>I don’t think grad school is the right choice for you.</td>
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Rough distribution of final grades in my past grad seminars.
Books

David Hume, Political Writings (Hackett).
Montesquieu, Persian Letters (Hackett).
Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality (Hackett)
Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols (Hackett).
Mary Wollstonecraft, The Vindications (Broadview).

Calendar

Below is the calendar for the semester. A number of paper topics are available for each week. They will also serve as study questions, to orient you to the issues we may want to focus on in class discussion. The paper is due on the Monday the material is discussed if it is the 1,000-word paper; if it is a response paper you are scheduled to circulate, it is due on Sunday evening by 8 p.m. You may not write on an earlier week’s topics. On most occasions, the length limit is a serious constraint on what you could say; I am fully aware of that. The papers have to be brief and can serve as first-stab think pieces into broader topics.

In addition to the topics listed below, you may also write a book review on the reading for the day. For examples on what book reviews in political theory look like, consult Perspectives on Politics or, e.g., Political Theory.

Week 1
January 11

Introduction. No reading.

Week 2
January 18

MLK Day. No seminar.

Week 3
January 25


Read my handout “How to Read the Persian Letters,” available in the resources on the course website.

Paper topics:
1. Discuss the political significance of the Troglydyte story.
2. What is the epistemological significance of letters 17–18?
3. What motivates humans in the Persian Letters?

Week 4
February 1

Montesquieu, Persian Letters, rest.

Paper topics:
1. The “Enlightenment” is taken to promote “universalist” political values. Is the Persian Letters universalist? In what way, if it is?
2. Where do we find happiness in the world of the Persian Letters? What do we make of it?
3. Is the Persian Letters a feminist text?
Week 5
February 8

Paper topics:
1. Discuss one of the motives in Montesquieu’s political psychology and contrast it to its corresponding regime type.
2. Focus on some theme that appears both in the *Persian Letters* and the *Spirit* and discuss whether you detect changes in Montesquieu’s views.
3. What is the political significance of *moderation* as a virtue?

Week 6
February 15

Paper topics:
1. Montesquieu’s “climate theory” is often taken to be one of the key foundations of modern western racialism and racism. Do you agree or disagree?
2. The *Persian Letters* uses irony frequently. Does the *Spirit*?
3. On what grounds might one reasonably describe Montesquieu as “the founder of social science”?

Week 7
February 22

Paper topics:
1. “Humean circumstances of justice” is a concept used to indicate the circumstances in which it can become meaningful to talk of *politics*. Describe what those circumstances are and why politics can only arise under them.
2. What motivates people, according to Hume?
3. Describe Hume’s theory of property.

March 1
Spring break

Week 8
March 8

Paper topics:
1. What is the problem with social contract theories, according to Hume?
2. In the eighteenth century, “enthusiasm” counted as a pathological condition. Why? What is the political significance of that?
3. Some commentators treat Hume as a conservative, some as a liberal, some as both. How about you? Why?

Week 9
March 15
Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

(We will spend two weeks on the book, but it is not easily divisible. Our discussion will focus roughly on the first half of the book. The reading questions apply to both weeks.)

Paper topics:
1. What is Burke’s conception of reason?
2. Burke’s first claim to fame was as an important theorist of the aesthetic. How do aesthetic considerations figure in the *Reflections*?
3. How does Burke think of political representation?)
Week 10  March 22
Burke continued; see above.

Week 11  March 29
Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chs. I–VI.
Paper topics:
1. What is the relationship between the arrangement of large-scale political institutions and the organization of gender roles, according to Wollstonecraft?
2. Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* was an explicit rejoinder to Burke. How is this *Vindication* also a critique of Burke?
3. Characterize Wollstonecraft’s relationship to Rousseau’s ideas.

Week 12  April 5
Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, chs. VII–XIII.
Paper topics:
1. What is the purpose of the family?
2. How does Wollstonecraft understand the so-called private/public distinction?
3. Some scholars have argued that interpreting Wollstonecraft only as a feminist theorist obscures her role in the late-eighteenth-century post-Revolutionary politics in general. What might be the theoretical consequences of such a focus?

Week 13  April 12
Paper topics:
1. Why genealogy? And what is it?
2. What is the slave revolt in morality?
3. What, briefly, is the genealogy of “bad conscience”?

Week 14  April 19
Paper topics:
1. Does Nietzsche have a political epistemology?
2. What’s wrong with ascetism?
3. What does Nietzsche want?

Selected Secondary Readings

Below are recommended secondary readings. I don’t expect you to do all the readings, but I do expect you to do them especially for authors you write papers on. You may find them generally helpful as guides into the texts, on the one hand, and as examples of how contemporary scholars engage these texts. They represent just a small part of the possible literatures; I have tried to choose texts that reflect different approaches to these texts. I have used local talent in part to give you a sense of the kind of word folks around here to.
Montesquieu


Hume


**Burke**


**Wollstonecraft**


**Nietzsche**


