

# Modern Political Thought (SP215.II)

Lecturer: Gerry Fitzpatrick, Room 327, Áras Moyola

Lecture Venue: **AM250** Mod. Lang. Building, **Wed 12-1** and **Friday 12-1**

**Semester II 2016/17**

## **Introduction**

This course will look at the history of Western political thought through a study of some of the principal European writers ***from the Renaissance to the eve of the First World War***. This will involve tracing the development of varieties of political discourse from the sixteenth century through to the early twentieth century. The writings of political thinkers as diverse as **More, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Bentham and Mill, Hegel and Marx** will be elucidated and analysed. The aim of the course is for the student to obtain a thorough understanding of how historical political thought has shaped *contemporary* political philosophy - and thus affected the modern world.

The main theme of the course will be the **emergence of the modern State** and the related issues of **allegiance, obligation and dissent**: why should and do we display loyalty and obedience to the State within which we live? The implicit idea guiding the lecture series is to highlight the *contemporaneous relevance* of these seminal debates in the history of modern political thought:

If all important public affairs questions are ultimately political – and politics is finally expressed by State activism and through State institutions – then understanding the theoretical and historical underpinnings of the modern State is of supreme relevance to current affairs.

Prerequisites: None

Teaching and learning methods: Series of lectures. Students (with the exception of the Visiting and Erasmus students) must take part in the semester 2 general seminars.

Methods of assessment and examination: Two-hour written exam (70%) and 30% of marks awarded for coursework as part of the general seminars.

Language of instruction: English

Core texts: Assigned readings

## Course Aims and Objectives

The learning objectives of this course are to familiarise students with the key texts and major arguments of political modernity from the Renaissance until the early twentieth century: the thematic foci being both the emergence of the modern, integrated nation-state - and rival concepts of Obedience and justifications of Dissent.

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course students should possess:

- A coherent grasp of the contents of the seminal texts of modern political thought
- An understanding of rival methodological and theoretical approaches within contemporary academic analysis
- The ability to evaluate critically a literary source
- The competence to place political ideas in their historical and linguistic context
- The capacity to relate general theoretical ideas and approaches to particular political questions

## Textbooks and General Reading:

The best five general textbooks for this course are

**Ryan Alan**, (2013) *On Politics, A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*, Penguin

**Hampsher-Monk, Ian** (1992) *A History of Modern Political Thought*, Blackwell

**McClelland, J.S.**, (1996) *A History of Western Political Thought*, Routledge

**Wootton, David (ed.)**, (2008, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *Modern Political Thought, Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, Hackett

**Plamenatz, John**, *Man and Society, Vols I and II and III* (1963 and 1992) is no longer in print – but the library contains copies in the reference section.

These five books will cover almost all the thinkers we shall be analysing.

Other useful texts that contain good introductions to some of the thinkers we will be analysing are:

G Browning, (2016), *A History of Modern Political Thought, The Question of Interpretation*

D Boucher and P Kelly, (2009) *Political Thinkers, From Socrates to the Present*

A. Haworth, (2004) *Understanding the Political Philosophers*

A Levine, (2002), *Engaging Political Philosophy*

J. Hampton, (1997), *Political Philosophy*

J. Wolff, (1996), *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*

M Forsyth and M. Keens-Soper, (1992), *The Political Classics* [texts up to Rousseau]

D Thomson, (ed.), (1990) *Political Ideas*

D Miller et al. (1991), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*

Collections of academic articles can be found in J Lively and A Reeve, (1989), *Modern Political Theory from Hobbes to Marx*

Feminist critiques of some of the thinkers covered are provided in  
M.L. Shanley and C. Pateman, (1991), *Feminist interpretations and political theory*  
C. Pateman, (1989), *The Disorder of Women*  
C. Pateman, (1988), *The Sexual Contract*

Some copies of the key political text(s) of the thinkers we shall be discussing are also contained in the Hardiman Library's collection.

(Any other relevant texts held by the library will be mentioned throughout the lecture series.)

## **The 16<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **Introduction: Two voices of the Renaissance**

- Thomas More and *Utopia*
- Niccolo Machiavelli and *The Prince*

More and Machiavelli deal in contrasting ways with the proper relationship between canon law and secular law, between Church and State. They provide very differing answers as to the causal impact of Christian ethics on political agency. Their writings were markedly influenced by the humanism of the European Renaissance: More, basing his ideas on universalist rationalism; Machiavelli, on amoral pragmatism. Both, nevertheless, gave a broadly republican perspective on the questions of right political conduct and the best political institutions.

## **The 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **Early Modern English 'Liberal' Thought**

- Thomas Hobbes and *Leviathan*
- John Locke and the *Second Treatise on Government*

The impact of the socio-political upheavals caused by the English Civil War and the subsequent Restoration of the monarchy formed the context in which Hobbes and Locke formulated their responses to the fundamental political question: Why should man obey the State? Both provided answers based around the concept of a social contract between the people and the duly constituted legal authorities.

## **The 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **The Reaction against Contractarianism**

- David Hume against the social contract
- Edmund Burke's *Reflections* against rationalism

In the eighteenth century the growth of new forms of scientific learning and historical knowledge had a significant impact on political theorising. In particular, doubt was cast upon the historical legitimacy and empirical verifiability of contractarian thought. Hume used rationalist scepticism to criticise the assumptions of Lockean liberalism; while Burke's historicism rejected radical assumptions that political power could be used beneficently to transform society for the better.

### **The European Enlightenment**

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau and *The Social Contract*
- Immanuel Kant and liberal Reason

In contrast to the 'empirical tradition' of Anglo-British political thought, on mainland Europe Enlightenment rationalism in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to attempts to understand the fundamental principles of both 'civilisation' and the meaning of 'politics'. Rousseau analysed the historical origins and evolution of 'modern' society, and suggested radical solutions for what he believed to be its serious defects. Kant used his transcendental method of philosophy to formulate universally valid principles of 'correct' political conduct.

### **English Radicalism and Two Revolutions**

- Tom Paine and *The Rights of Man*
- Mary Wollstonecraft and *The Rights of Woman*

Paine, an Englishman, was personally involved in both the major revolutions that created the modern political world: the American revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. He attempted to combine Lockean notions with democratic republicanism, and anticipated the creation of the Welfare State. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first recognisably 'proto-feminist' political writers, sought to apply the insights of enlightened rationalism to the social and political inequalities suffered by women. She argued for greater social, economic and political rights for women.

## **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **English Liberal Utilitarianism**

- Jeremy Bentham and utilitarian liberalism
- John Stuart Mill *On Liberty*

The impact of the Industrial Revolution on English society becomes clear in the writings of Bentham and Mill. Here it has become apparent that the Whiggism of the pre-industrial era is no longer sufficient for an adequate understanding of contemporary society. Bentham grasped the potential of exploiting the resources of the modern State to reform society according to the principle of utility. Whilst being a utilitarian, Mill was concerned that the growth of the State and modern politics would undermine individual liberty – the danger being not arbitrary government but benevolent despotism.

### **German Historical Idealism, Materialism and Nihilism**

- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and *The Philosophy of Right*
- Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and 'Marxism'
- Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and the 're-evaluation of all values'

These three German thinkers made manifest the impact of industrialisation on European political thought.

Until the advent of Hegel most political thinking was based on a non-historical or historically cyclical understanding of society: either the fundamental realities of political civilisation were unchanging or politics was based on a cycle embracing the rise, decay and disintegration of the social order (the original meaning of the word 'revolution'). Hegel through his application of dialectical idealism to historical change systematically introduced the concept of linear progress to ethical and political thought. Marx in a sense inverted Hegel and replaced his historical idealism with historical materialism to explain the primacy of the 'economic factor' in political analysis. Nietzsche radically enlarged the dimension of relativism contained within Hegelian historicism to preach an understanding of politics based around complete moral relativism, intellectual nihilism and the 'will to power'.

## **The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **A Bridge to Contemporary Political Theory**

- Max Weber and modern political sociology
- L.T. Hobhouse and the 'new' liberalism

Recognisably 'Contemporary' (post- World War Two) varieties of political thought are encountered in the work of Weber and Hobhouse. Weber's liberalism recognised the political importance of factors he regarded as constitutive of modern industrial society: the ultimate irreconcilability of moral values; the significance of nationalism and the nation-state; the limits of political agency in relation to the socio-economic sphere of human existence. Hobhouse's modernism came from his attempt to find a 'third way' between the classical liberalism of Bentham and the socialism of Marx. He articulated a political framework based on a 'mixed economy', a generous welfare state and a complex ideological compromise which commingled individual libertarianism with social egalitarianism