

**Politics 4200G/9752B: Political Thought and 'Modernity':
"The Making - and unmaking? - of modern political thought."**

**Instructor: D. Long Room: 4112 Time: Mondays, 11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.
Office hours: Mondays 2:00 - 3:00 p.m.; Wednesdays 10:30 – noon.**

Prerequisites for this course (UWO Calendar) are: Political Science 237E and one additional course in political theory, or permission of the instructor.

Read this first: This outline is not a set plan for what we are going to "cover" (whatever that means) in the seminar. It identifies a very broad but (I think) important theme - the urgent necessity of a constructively critical re-assessment of modern political theory in the 21st century. It mentions lots of themes and issues, and names lots of theorists. As 'makers' of modern theory we could look at David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. The 'unmakers' are numerous, but could include Jaques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Francois Lyotard, Giorio Agamben, (perhaps) Richard Rorty, Jean Baudrillard, Georges Bataille and Giles Deleuze.

But don't be intimidated. We won't "cover" them all. Instead, I'll help you pick out the ones that interest you most.

Read this outline to see if you can find, somewhere within its broad boundaries, an issue or author(s) you would really like to study. Perhaps there is an issue (the rise and fall of modern liberalism?) or a set of authors (J.S. Mill? F.A. Hayek? J. Rawls? R. Rorty?) not listed in this outline that you would like to look at from the perspective of this course. Great. I'll help you do that. The course consists of a couple of classes in which I give guidance and suggestions and organize an agenda, followed by a series of presentations by students of their projects as work-in-progress, commented upon by other students. At the end you all submit the results of your semester-long project as a major paper. That's it.

OK - now read the following explanation, looking for what could work for you **Your interests** will be the building blocks of the course..

This seminar asks what "modernity" is in political thought: it asks what the distinctive characteristics of "modern" political thought are. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the term "modern" been used to describe anything current or recent, as opposed to antique or ancient, since 1555! So is "modern" political thought simply the "flavour of the month" in political theory? **What IS "modernity"?** Is it/was it a specific time period? A style of thinking? A way of life? **Is it 'over'?** Or does it still pervade present thought and shape our visions of the possibilities for our political future? **Can the 'modern' be distinguished from the 'pre-modern' and the 'postmodern' in plausible and useful ways?** Is there a 'modern' or 'modernist' mind set? Does the word "modern" name a time period, but say nothing at all about the kind of thinking (or acting) referred to?

In the case of political theory, "modern" does seem to mean something. One prominent and influential strain of current (or "contemporary") political thought is called "post-modern". It is devoted to uncovering the contradictions and fictions post-modern theorists believe are embedded in modern theory. Most forms of political theory that are deeply critical of "modernity" feel that it has identifiable and deeply problematic characteristics. Its claim to generate a final vocabulary of

politics, to produce the final, scientific and universal "truth" about justice, freedom, democracy, power etc. seems to them to be transparently false.

Let's suppose (anyone seen *The Truman Show*?) that we are acting and thinking inside the bubble of a 'modernist' paradigm: is it possible for a theorist to stand aside from, or outside of, that paradigm and see/say things really differently? Yes, it is. Is it valuable? Certainly. But is it easy or comfortable? Definitely not ...

Working hypothesis: there IS a modern 'paradigm' (i.e. a comprehensive and seemingly inescapable world-view; a definition of 'reality'), and it includes a paradigmatic modern conception of power.

Professor Sheldon Wolin, one of the greatest democratic theorists of the 20th and 21st centuries, provides an unique perspective on "**modern and postmodern power**". He argues in his extraordinary work *Politics and Vision* (rev. 2004; first edition 1960) that political theory in "the West" since about 1600 has owed much to Francis Bacon's call (1605) to all humankind to cease "cutting each other to pieces" and instead

“... to make peace between themselves, and turning with united forces against the Nature of Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and **extend the bounds of human empire**, as far as God Almighty in his goodness may permit.” (*De Augmentis Scientiarum* Book 4, Ch. 1)

Bacon's exhortation to scientists and philosophers to extend "the bounds of human empire" takes power beyond political legality and sovereignty, and opens the door to a modern world in which science and technology create a global web of informational and communicative technology (Foucault calls it the "grid" of "power / knowledge") which will order all human actions and communities. This "empire" is not, in the traditional or even "modern" sense, political: politics is simply one of its tools. Modern power dwarfs modern politics. In the 21st century politicians are more often messengers or symptoms (or even dupes) than causes of real change.

The ultimate 'human empire' is the empire of global capitalism. Inside it, modernity accomplishes its political mission with the arrival of a 'universal, homogeneous state': global capitalist democracy. In this state modern power achieves full, successful and conclusive deployment... Or does it? In *Politics and Vision*, Wolin examines and ultimately rejects the most pervasive forms of modern power: corporate, organizational, cultural, ideological and political. He also concludes that as a form or structure of power, political democracy (actually politics generally) has become a 'fugitive'. The manipulation and marginalization of democratic political power could be a theme for one of us to pursue. Post-modern 'unmakers' such as Wendy Brown, Jacques Ranciere, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben have argued that modern democracy has come to mean, in Brown's phrase, "anything and nothing" in the 21st century, and the surely the sense of frustration and crisis at "street level" in North American democratic politics is palpable. That could be a research theme for someone - or more than one - among us.

Modernity builds Sir Francis Bacon's 'human empire' on the basis of Newton's mathematical and mechanical principles. Like Descartes and Hobbes, it says "give me matter and motion and I will build a world". It is grounded in a pseudo-science of 'human nature', and modern political science serves its goals. Globalized democratic capitalism is its 'concretization'.

The modern modes of power which entrench and 'fine tune' this post-Newtonian paradigm are legitimized by scientific rationalization: reason and knowledge are thought to control and direct it, when in fact they more often serve and defend it - sometimes speciously. The bloodthirsty historical record of the 20th century and recent outbreaks of global economic and social instability fly in the face of such claims to restrain power and direct it to some agreed good end. When it defends selected forms, locations, or applications of power, exactly what IS modern political science defending? In the 21st century power is assuming new forms (Twitter anyone?), finding new locations (Twitter anyone?) and breaking down old barriers (globalization – or Twitter?). Much of the power we encounter in today's world is simply not on the 'radar screen' of traditional political science. And this is only one of the central - and intensifying - problems of modern politics. Political science doesn't understand the new realities shaping its own core concepts. The idea that what we need now in political theory is 'more of the same' is unappealing and ineffectual. We need new ways of looking at and talking about power urgently. Our traditional understanding of it is in danger of becoming 'academic' in the worst sense of that word.

So: one characteristic of "modernity" in political thought is its core conception of power as sovereignty. Hobbes gives the most influential expression of this theory in *Leviathan*. **Hobbes is thus one of the "builders" we must look at. His post-modern critics** are not hard to identify. Two of the most influential of them are **Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault. In *Homo Sacer*** and other works Agamben redefines sovereignty in the 21st century as an indefinite, boundless extension of ruling power justified by some exceptional circumstance: the classic example is the American Patriot Act passed after 9/11. **Michel Foucault ('Security, Territory, Population: lectures at the College de France, 1977-8')** declares that in the light of new forms of power Hobbes's sovereign must be "decapitated".

Its distinctive paradigm of power is not the only central characteristic of modern political thinking that can be identified. At least for the sake of discussion, others can be specified, and their "builders" and critics" can be identified too:

Characteristics: secularism, self-interested individualism, and the primacy of "commerce".
"Builders": David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham;
"Critics": Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben. Georges Bataille

David Hume constructed a theory of politics without divine or philosophical truth as its foundation. His was a politics of interests and probabilities, a politics of expediency and utility. In "Of the origin of justice and property" he wrote that the most powerful human "affection" was "the interested affection" and that the only thing capable of restraining self-interest in individuals was self-interest better understood. He gave the best and most concise statement of our modern view by asserting that in politics "every man must be supposed a knave". He also understood that the rise of "commerce" was sure to transform political life beyond recognition. His good friend **Adam Smith**, author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), shared Hume's views on self-interest and

commerce. Smith, widely seen as the father of modern capitalism, also wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1757). Smith's works contain the first great moral justification of modern commercial individualist society. He argued that the free play of selfish interests in commercial activity is counter-balanced by a sense of justice that is natural to human beings, a sense without which "a man would enter civil society as if he were entering a den of lions". In his political thought Smith sought moderation as the core goal essential to maintaining the balance between selfishness and community, and ensuring a tolerably equitable distribution of the fruits of commercial activity. **Jeremy Bentham** was a great Adam Smith fan. Bentham's utilitarian system of moral and political thought, and his writings on political economy, sought to "optimize the condition of mankind insofar as it depends upon the law", thus capturing the spirit of Francis Bacon's original call to extend the empire of humanity to its utmost limits. Bentham's ideal utilitarian society was an aggregation of utility-maximizing rational individuals: it was a system of representative democracy in which government would conscientiously serve the goal of producing the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" under the monitoring gaze of an economically self-interested electorate.

The modern vision of society and polity as essentially an arena for the interaction of rational economic agents is virtually fully formed in the writings of Hume, Smith and Bentham. So it is interesting to note that the brilliant post-modern author Gilles Deleuze published a work early in his career that applauded David Hume as a "true empiricist" in political and moral thought. Bentham's writings became famous in the late 20th century largely because of Michel Foucault's use of Bentham's idea of a "Panopticon": an inspection-house" in which inhabitants would be subject to constant and inescapable surveillance and control. The Panopticon, Foucault presciently observed, was a perfect symbol of modern surveillance societies and governments (Wikileaks, anyone?). Adam Smith's vision of a just and moderate commercial society inspired deeply subversive and critical writings by the post-modern authors **Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Georges Bataille**, in which the basic ideas of commerce and economics came under philosophical fire. And the modern ideas of justice, community and democracy were subjected to a playful but disturbing critique by **Jacques Derrida**.

Two other figures, each unique in his perspective, must be considered when we think about builders or critics of modernity: **Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche**. Each of these can be seen, paradoxically, as both a builder and a critique of the modern paradigm. In *Politics and Vision*, Prof. Wolin reminds us of Marx's enthusiasm for the achievements of modern capitalism. And Marx's commitment to the idea of the primacy of economic interests, actions and organization cannot be denied. At the same time, Marx attacked Smith's political economy with all the force at his command, and declared that Bentham was "a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity". It would be a fascinating project for this course if someone simply undertook to examine Marx's unique position as a theorist who inspired much post-modern thought yet exhibited some of the key perspectives and priorities of a modern theorist. And as for Nietzsche: why, we might ask, did the thoughtful Canadian conservative moralist George Grant say that it was impossible to understand modernity if one did not understand Nietzsche? (see Grant's *Time as History*).

These are only **some** of the themes and sources that are available to us. My “picks” as listed above are all, as I see it, interesting and important, but **I am always open to presentations, texts, and projects that you generate yourselves. In fact I much prefer them.** Do not hesitate to let me know if you have your own ideas for presentations and papers that will harmonize with the goals and scope of this course.

Communication between you and me is crucial. I will do my best to ensure that every student finds a project that truly interests them. I will conspire freely with all interested individuals to develop exceptional essay topics and presentation packages of readings and questions. It is unacceptable to me that any member of this seminar should end up doing a major project that they didn't really choose or are not strongly motivated to pursue. I want you each to "take ownership" of the seminar and its work. When in the past students have done this, I have found the results to be extraordinary.

A Hypothetical Timetable of Meetings:

I do not intend to set out at this point a compulsory sequence of seminar topics. This sequence is simply an example of the sort of things we could do. I will finalize a sequence of topics for this year after I confer 1-to-1 with every member of this year's group. However, the schedule below will at least give you the dates of our meetings and help you when it is time to select dates for your presentations and to plan your work in the course.

1. **Jan. 5th:** Student Info / Outlines: discussion of course goals and themes.
2. **Jan. 12th:** Towards an agenda - getting a picture of how the presentations inter-relate. This is when the actual course scope and sequence, unique to this group, will emerge.
3. **Jan. 19th:** **Hobbes and modern power. Foucault's critique** of Hobbes's 'juridical' theory of power.
4. **Jan. 26th:** **Foucault and Giorgio Agamben:** from 'disciplinary' power to 'biopower'?
5. **Feb. 2nd:** **The complete Adam Smith:** morals, commerce and politics in modern theory.
6. **Feb. 9th:** **David Hume:** scepticism and self-interest
Feb. 16th: Study Week
7. **Feb. 23rd:** **Jeremy Bentham:** utilitarian democracy
8. **Mar. 2nd:** **Foucault's critique of Bentham?** "Panopticism".
9. **Mar. 9th:** **Problematizing democracy I:** from Tocqueville's "democratic despotism" to Wolin's "inverted totalitarianism".
10. **Mar. 16th:** **Problematizing democracy II:** Derrida, Brown, Ranciere: when democracy means anything it means nothing ...
11. **Mar. 23rd:** **Marx and Modernity:** is he "modern"? **Bataille's "general economy" and Baudrillard's "libidinal economy".**
12. **Mar. 30th:** **"Justice as conflict":** from Stuart Hampshire to Francois Lyotard.

13. April 6th? : Round-table discussion of everyone's projects / major papers.

The seminar will only succeed if each seminar member works 1) with the source material, 2) with the other members, and 3) with me to develop and pursue lines of investigation which really interest her/him. I will act as a resource person. One-to-one interviews with each seminar member will be used to establish the member's background and areas of interest. Only after I have talked (one-to-one) with each of you will the actual schedule of presentations for the term be finalized. I want the final timetable to reflect primarily your interests, not mine.

Finally: **Where do our grades come from?**

Summary: Each seminar member will write a short **commentary** on a **single self-selected reading** at the start of term, make one **seminar presentation** during the term, act as **commentator** on another student's presentation, and hand in a **major paper** at the end of (or in the course of) the term.

Your final grade will be arrived at as follows:

1. **Commentary**: a short (8 - 10 page) commentary on a single source text, chosen from among a list identified at the start of the term, to be submitted by **Monday, February 2nd 2015**

In the past this has proved a very valuable way to 1) get you focussed and engaged with the course, 2) help you pick out themes and authors for presentations and major papers, and 3) give me an early idea of your writing styles, interests and abilities. We'll discuss some of the texts you have chosen in subsequent seminars. **Value: 20%.**

2. **Instructor's assessment of seminar presentation** (including preparation and distribution **in advance** of a package of readings and an outline of topics/problems for discussion, as well as actual delivery of presentation): **Value: 20%**

Note: for each student presentation there will be a designated student commentator: as a commentator you play **three roles in the week leading up to the presentation** on which you are to comment: 1) you are the 'model student' who reads carefully and completely everything the presenter asks us all to read and consider; 2) you are the presenter's primary supporter and critic, offering criticisms and appreciation appropriate to the quality of the work done; and 3) you are the presenter's link to the other students, helping them to 'get' what the presenter is 'getting at'. You do NOT have to hand in written comments to me, though you may if you wish to. You DO have to communicate with and really work to help the presenter, and make the class session a better one in any way that you can that has the presenter's support.

Value: No grade, but it's a major and essential part of your overall participation in the course

4. **Major term paper** - due at last class of term (April 6th 2015) or before that at your convenience: **Value: 40%**

5. Instructor's assessment of member's **seminar participation**: **Value: 20%**

Notice that 60% of your grade will be determined on the basis of your written assignments, while the other 40% will be based on various aspects of your participation in actual classroom sessions. A seminar is only worthy of the name if the whole group shows a commitment to it. I expect all members to attend, to do their best to prepare each week, and to contribute consistently to constructive, rational and mutually supportive critical discussion. **A seminar is not a "zero-sum" game. The grades you earn are not earned at the expense of other students. Be generous and supportive with one another – you will only gain by it.**

(Graduate) Statement of Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf