

POSC 251, 371: MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY—

MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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I. Purpose and Scope

Prior to the advent of the modern age in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the central focus of political philosophy was the question of the best regime. What is human flourishing, the pre-modern thinkers asked, and what political order would best promote it? Yet even as the pre-modern thinkers were ambitious and even utopian in their theorizing, they were exceedingly sober in their practical thought and expectations. They accepted an insuperable gap between theory and practice—between human excellence as we might conceive of it and the flawed and indeed typically dismal reality of political life as it is actually lived.

That was then. The early modern political philosophers rejected both of these tendencies: both the exalted notion of what *ought* to be and the modest expectation of what actually *could* be. Indeed, the early modern philosophers argued that their predecessors' theoretical emphasis on excellence or virtue was a major cause of the dismal reality of political life. The pre-modern focus on rare and heroic virtue, the early moderns argued, tends to produce fanaticism in some and cynicism in others. The early moderns' proposed alternative? Build on lower but firmer ground. Direct people's devotion and aspirations away from transcendent longings toward more mundane but achievable ends like security. This revolution in political thought—which soon became a revolution in practice as well—was initiated by Machiavelli and carried forward by a number of powerful and persuasive successors. One of these successors, perhaps the one whose positive vision proved most powerful of all was Thomas Hobbes, whose masterwork *Leviathan* will be the focus of our first two weeks of study.

Hobbes insisted that the principles he articulated were not only necessary but also sufficient for security and such happiness as human beings might realistically hope to achieve. And indeed, the modern project, particularly in its Hobbesian version, began to make good on its claims: Societies that more or less instituted Hobbes' principles began to achieve unprecedented gains in science and technology, economic growth, and political stability.

Yet despite or perhaps because of these gains, the modern project provoked discontent—not just among defenders of the old order but even more so, or at any rate more consequentially, among thinkers who struck out in new, even more radical directions. The successes of the modern project were deemed more troubling than its failures. Of those who criticized the fruits of modern political thought and articulated new alternatives, perhaps the greatest was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's extraordinary analytic power was matched by an equally rare poetic and rhetorical power, and his 'talent' at discontent will humble even the best of the grumblers among us. In his *First and Second Discourses* he explores human nature and human affairs in a way

that stimulates nostalgia for a lost past. But Rousseau also inspired extraordinary hopefulness by exploring two putative solutions to modern humanity's ills. In the *Social Contract* he articulates a political solution; in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* he explores the possibility of an individualistic solution. These solutions are deeply at odds with one another, but their common basis is a new understanding of both nature and history—or, if you like, the historicity of nature.

This same theme—nature and history—was given yet another powerful treatment, one that constituted yet another revolution in thought, by yet another poetic philosopher: Friedrich Nietzsche. Where Rousseau inspires longing for restored wholeness, Nietzsche stimulates a desire for spiritual intensity and the overcoming of limits. In the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche investigates the origins of morality and spirituality—i.e., the origins of our humanity. He depicts these origins as accidental rather than divine or natural. Yet even as his explorations look backward, they also speak to the possibility of purposefully raising ourselves to new heights. The lower but firmer ground on which the early moderns built has proved both too low and much less firm than originally advertised.

II. Course Requirements

By far the most important requirement is that you read all assigned passages **closely** and **before class**. The readings are generally not long but they will often be difficult, and they demand—and success in the course will demand—careful attention and frequent rereading. You should come to class prepared to discuss what you've understood and prepared to ask about what you haven't understood.

Those taking the course as **POSC 251** will be required to write three seven to eight page papers, each worth 30% of your grade. These papers will be due on Friday, October 11, Friday, November 1, and Monday, November 25, respectively. Please mark your calendars.

Those taking the course as **POSC 371** will be asked to present a short paper (5 to 7 pages) on a selected portion of the text (chosen by the instructor in accordance with your preferences, if possible). The paper will be the basis of a portion of that day's meeting. The short paper (including the subsequent discussion) will count for 30% of your grade. A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 60% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Monday, November 25. Paper topics must be approved by me by Monday, November 11 (preferably earlier).

All papers should be sent electronically (either a Word file or a PDF) by 5:00 PM of the day indicated.

The remaining 10% of your grade, whether you take the course as POSC 251 or POSC 371, will be based on class participation. Since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is required.

III. Academic Honesty

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your submission of written

work means that your work is your own, that it is in accord with Carleton's regulations on academic integrity, and that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Be sure you are familiar with Carleton's principles and policies on Academic Honesty: if you haven't done so already, review the website found at <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/doc/honesty/>. I take academic honesty very seriously: students who are found to have violated these standards should expect severe sanctions.

IV. Assigned Texts

The following books are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Hobbes, *Leviathan*
Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*
Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*
Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*
Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

V. Class Schedule

Note that this is an *approximate* schedule. We are likely to depart from it as class discussions, etc. so require. Adjustments will be announced in class, typically at the end of the class period, or via email.

September 17: Introduction. Read:

- (1) Aristotle, book 1, chapters 1-2 (on eReserve; password: POSC);
- (2) Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Dedicatory Letter (pp. 1-2), Author's Introduction (pp. 3-5) and chapter 46

September 19: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters 1-11

September 24: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters 12-16

September 26: Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters 17-21 and 29

October 1: Rousseau, *First Discourse* (pp. pp. 2-28); recommended: "Preface to Narcissus"

October 3: Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, pp. 113-149¹

October 8: Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, second half of Part 1

October 10: Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, Part 2

¹ A note about the Notes: Rousseau appended fully 30 pages of endnotes to the *Second Discourse*. He claimed this was owing to his laziness. Does that sound a little fishy? The only way to find out is to make sure that you don't give in to laziness yourself: If you want the best possible understanding of Rousseau, read his Notes!

October 15: Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book 1

October 17: Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book 2

October 22: Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book 3

October 24: Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book 4

October 29: Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, first through third walks

October 31: Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, fourth through sixth walks

November 5: Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, seventh through tenth walks

November 7: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, first essay

November 12: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, second essay

November 14: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, third essay

November 19: Conclusion