



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

Modern Political Thought: Varieties of Liberal Modernity

Fall 2022

Yeshiva College (Friday 10:00-12:30, Belfer 511)

Prof. Neil Rogachevsky

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Course Summary

John Locke has often been considered the founder of a liberal political modernity that stresses individual natural rights and a republican (or at least quasi-republican) form of government. That regime protects property rights and encourages a commercial rather than a militaristic politics. Locke's ideas of individual natural rights are today under attack, both from the Left and the Right. On the Left, Locke is seen as an ideologist of a predatory capitalism, which encourages inequality, imperialism, and racism. Meanwhile, some thinkers on the Right have anathemized liberalism for its alleged atheism, materialism, and destruction of the communal bonds of citizenship necessary for a healthy society.

To what extent are these criticisms of liberalism justified? How do our current debates mirror eighteenth-century debates about the nature of liberalism, both its possibilities and its limitations?

This course will study one prominent origin point of modern liberalism in Locke's political thought as well as key writings of successors of Locke who sought to expand on or challenge his teachings. In our study of Locke, we hope to gain a great understanding of individual natural rights, the separation of powers, and the origins of modern constitutional government. Turning to Lessing, we will consider how individual natural rights relate to questions of religious practice and religious toleration. In our study of Montesquieu, we will focus on his view of the dangers and possibilities inherent in liberal commercial politics of the kind Locke sought. Finally, in studying Rousseau, we will examine perhaps the most memorable critique of liberal modernity ever put to page.

This course fulfills the CUOT requirement for YC students and the Nat./Soc. Science Req for Sy Syms students.

Expectations

The material in the class demands careful reading and analysis. Students will thus be expected to come to class having read the material for that class with the hopes of gaining some understanding of the

authors' arguments and intention.

Each student will give a c. fifteen-minute oral presentation on the material to be discussed that week. Much like an essay, this presentation should aspire to introduce the topic under consideration, outline the main argument of the book/chapters, point out any potential problems or issues, and raise questions for class discussion.

There will be an essay assignment. Students will choose to write an essay among a few possible questions distributed by the instructor.

There will be a take-home final exam that will cover all the material studied in the course.

Attendance

Active attendance and participation are essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience. Attendance will be taken at every class. All absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructor. Unexcused absences will result in a docked grade.

Grading

15%: Class Attendance and Participation

15%: Presentation

30%: Essay

40%: Final Exam

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services—(646) 592-4280, akelsen@yu.edu—during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

Books

Students must acquire the following works *in the following editions*. They are available in the library on reserve, but students are strongly encouraged to acquire their own copies. Please contact the instructor if you have any trouble acquiring the books.

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, (Cambridge University Press, Laslett ed.)



Gotthold Friedrich Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, (Bedford-St. Martin's Shechter translation)
Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and of their Decline*,
(Hackett Press, Lowenthal translation).
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, (Cambridge University
Press, Gourevitch translation)

Other readings may be distributed.

Schedule

Week I – (Aug. 26) Introduction: Natural Rights and The Critics

Readings:

Yoram Hazony and Ofir Haivry, "[What is Conservatism?](#)"
Peter Berkowitz, "[Redefining America to Remake Conservatism](#)"
C.B. Macpherson, "Locke on Capitalist Appropriation" (PDF in Canvas)

Week II – (Sept. 2)

Readings:

John Locke, *Second Treatise*

Week III – (Sept. 9)

Readings:

John Locke, *Second Treatise*

Week IV – (Sept. 16)

Readings:

John Locke, *Second Treatise*

Week V – (Sept. 23)

Readings:

Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*

Week VI – (Sept. 30)

Readings:

Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* [Zoom session]

Week VII – (Oct. 21)

Readings:

Montesquieu, *Considerations*

Week VIII – (Oct. 28)

Readings:

Montesquieu, *Considerations*

Week IX – (Nov. 4)

Readings:

Montesquieu, *Considerations*

Week X (Nov. 11)

Readings:

Rousseau, *First Discourse*

Week XI (Nov. 18)

Readings:

Rousseau, *First Discourse*

Week XII (Dec. 2)

Readings:

Rousseau, *Second Discourse* (first part)

Week XIII (Dec. 9)

Readings:

Rousseau, *Second Discourse* (second part)

Week XIV (Dec. 16)



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Readings:
Rousseau, Review, & Conclusion