

## **Topics in Political Thought: Natural Rights and the Origins of Modern Politics**

Yeshiva College  
Fall 2023  
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### **Course Description**

This course will be a careful study of three principal founders of modern political thought, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Despite important differences between them, the two Englishmen and the Frenchman all were rebels—against the dominant political thought and practices of the times in which they lived, against medieval Christian political thought, and against the political thought of classical antiquity. Turning away from the ancient emphasis on prudence and the medieval emphasis on natural law, these political thinkers sought to ground government in new theories of human nature and natural rights. Their goal: making government sturdier and more legitimate than it had hitherto been.

These writers have had their followers as well as their withering and friendly critics across the centuries, until today. But their ideas continue to inform both the theory and practice of politics and human life, especially in the West. Through careful study of the texts of these writers, students will be asked to reflect on the central themes they address, including: What is the nature of rights? What is political obligation? What is the state? When is government legitimate? Can the powers of government be separated? What is the relationship between religion and politics? How far can science inform politics? Considering these questions along with our authors, students will gain a good grasp of the foundations of modern politics.

### **For Political Science majors**

The course counts toward the political theory distribution.

### **Expectations**

Students will be expected to carefully read up to 100 pages a week. The class is not the venue for “thoughts on politics of the day” that one may develop through reading social media, newspapers, or by listening to podcasts. It rather provides the opportunity to reckon with and think with important political texts in order to deepen our own understanding of politics and the world. The class will be focused on the issues and arguments through careful interpretation of the texts themselves. The role of the instructor is to help students grapple with the texts by clarifying major issues and themes. Prior to every class, students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of that week, and to participate in class discussions about them. Students will be asked to write two short essays that ask for analysis and interpretation of the

texts. A take home final exam will ask for comparisons between thinkers covered and major themes addressed in the course.

### **Attendance**

Active attendance and participation is essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience. All absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructors. Any more than 2 unexcused absences will result in a docked attendance grade.

### **Grading**

20%: Class Attendance and Participation

40%: Short Papers

40%: Take Home 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](mailto: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.

All students are required to obtain their own copies of the following works, **in the following noted editions/translations**. Please contact the instructor if you have any difficulties, financial or otherwise, in obtaining these texts.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge)

John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (Cambridge)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge), *On the Social Contract* (Cambridge)

Other readings will be distributed or made available online

### **Course Schedule**

Week 1 (Aug. 28 -Aug. 30): Introduction: Natural Rights and Modern Government

Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," Graeme Wood, "How BAP Charmed the Far-Right."

**NB: August 30 NO CLASS**

Week 2 (Sept. 6): Thomas Hobbes I

*Leviathan*: Frontispiece, Hobbes' Letter to Godolphin, Introduction, Chapters 1 – 4, Thomas Hobbes, "Life as a Race," Book of Job: Chapter 41

Week 3 (Sept. 11 - 13): Thomas Hobbes II

*Leviathan*, Chapters 4 – 13

Week 4 (Sept. 20 via Zoom): Thomas Hobbes III  
*Leviathan*, Chapters 14 – 21

Week 5 (Sept. 27 via Zoom): Thomas Hobbes IV  
*Leviathan*, Chapters 22, 27, Leo Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity”

Week 6 (Oct. 11) Thomas Hobbes V  
*Leviathan*, Chapters 29, 31, 32 – 37

Week 7 (Oct. 16 – 18) John Locke I  
*First Treatise of Government*, **First Essay Due**

Week 8 (Oct. 23 – 25) John Locke II  
*Second Treatise of Government*, Chapters 1 – 6

Week 9 (Oct. 30 – Nov. 1) John Locke III  
*Second Treatise of Government*, Chapters 6 – 14

Week 10 (Nov. 6 – 8) John Locke IV, Introduction to Rousseau  
*Second Treatise of Government*, Chapters 15 – 20, *First Discourse*, Frontispiece, Preface, Introduction

Week 11 (Nov. 13 – 15) Jean-Jacques Rousseau I  
*First Discourse* **Second Essay Due**

Week 12 (Nov. 20 – 22) Jean-Jacques Rousseau II  
*Second Discourse*, Part I

Week 13 (Nov. 27 – 29) Jean-Jacques Rousseau III  
*Second Discourse*, Part II

Week 14 (Dec. 4 – 6): Rousseau IV  
*Social Contract*, Part I

Week 15 (Dec. 11 – 13): Rousseau V  
*Social Contract*, Part II

Week 16 (Dec. 18 – 20): Review and Conclusion  
**Final Exam Distributed**