

Modern Political Thought  
PL 205H, Fall 2020  
Professor Flagg Taylor, Ladd 306A  
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### Course Description:

This course will examine modern political thought through a consideration of the modern reconceptualization of human reason and our relationship to the natural world. The revolutionary thinking introduced into the world in the 17<sup>th</sup> century has enabled an extraordinary advancement in scientific progress, material wealth, and comfort in the world. What is the foundation of that progress? Has this extraordinary progress been an unmitigated good? What have been the grounds for critiquing this aspect of the modern project? In this course we will analyze the foundations of modern natural science as elaborated in the writings of Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Next, we look to critics of the modern turn like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The final section of the course will include writers from the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Václav Havel, Aldous Huxley, and Leon Kass.

### Required Texts:

- René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Richard Kennington trans. (Focus Philosophical Library)  
ISBN: 978-1585102594
- Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis and The Great Instauration*, G. Weinberger ed. (Wiley Blackwell)  
ISBN: 978-1119098027
- Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Simon and Schuster/Folger Shakespeare Library)  
ISBN: 978-0743482837
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Major Political Writings*, John Scott ed. (University of Chicago)  
ISBN: 978-0226151311
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (Harper Perennial)  
ISBN: 978-0060776091

### Course Outline:

- I. Introduction
  - A. Introduction to course [Aug. 25]
  - B. Leon Kass, "The Problem of Technology and Liberal Democracy" (PACKET) [Aug. 27]
  - C. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation"; Pierre Manent, "Introduction" to *A World Beyond Politics* (PACKET) [Sept. 1]
- II. Foundations of Modern Thought
  - A. Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration* (NAGI, pp. 8-32; 35-56) [Sept. 3]  
Bacon, *New Atlantis* (NAGI, pp. 63-76) [Sept. 8]  
Bacon, *New Atlantis* (NAGI, pp. 76-91) [Sept. 10]  
Bacon, *New Atlantis* (NAGI, pp. 91-111) [Sept. 15]
  - B. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (DM, pp. 15-27) [Sept. 17]  
Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (DM, pp. 27-37) [Sept. 22]  
Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (DM, pp. 37-47) [Sept. 24]  
Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (DM, pp. 48-57) [Sept. 29]

- III. Early Responses
- A. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (MPW, pp. 3-21) [Oct. 1]  
 Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (MPW, pp. 23-36) [Oct. 6]  
 Rousseau, Preface to “Narcissus”; Preface to 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to Bordes (PACKET) [Oct. 8]
  - B. Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Act I) [Oct. 13]  
 Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Act II-III) [Oct. 15]  
 Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Act IV-V) [Oct. 20]
- IV. Future Dystopia?
- A. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, pp. 15-86 [Oct. 22]  
 Huxley, *Brave New World*, pp. 86-157 [Oct. 27]  
 Huxley, *Brave New World*, pp. 58-195 [Oct. 29]  
 Huxley, *Brave New World*, pp. 196-231 [Nov. 3]
- V. Concluding Reflections
- A. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” (PACKET) [Nov. 5]
  - B. Václav Havel, “Politics and Conscience” (PACKET) [Nov. 10]
  - C. Leon Kass, “Thinking about the Body”; “Mortality and Morality: The Virtues of Finitude” (PACKET) [Nov. 12]
  - D. Harvey Mansfield, “Science and Non-Science in Liberal Education” (PACKET) [Nov. 17]
  - E. TBA [Nov. 19, last day of classes]

**Course Requirements:**

Discussion guides: 15%

Response Papers: 15%

Essay 1: 20%

Essay 2: 25%

Final Exam: 25%

*Discussion guides:*

The class will be divided into groups of 2 or 3. Each group will act as co-discussion leaders 5 times during the course of the semester. Each group must submit to me an analytical outline or thematic/plot outline (depending on the nature of the reading assignment) of the assigned readings and 4-5 questions they think the author is pushing the reader to consider. You must submit this document to me on the day before the class when we will discuss the readings (by 6pm).

*Response Papers:*

These are short 1-2 papers where you lay out the argument of the assigned text or analyze and elaborate on a portion of that text. You must complete 5 of these over the course of the semester—

1 for each of the principal authors of the course (Bacon, Descartes, Rousseau, Shakespeare, and Huxley).

*Essays:*

These are formal essays where you are expected to have an identifiable thesis with arguments to support it. They should demonstrate a command of the text at hand, and a thoughtfulness about the claims made therein. I will hand out topics approximately two weeks before the essays are due. These are not research papers and you are not required to read any secondary literature. I want you to engage these authors directly.

*Final Exam:*

This will be a comprehensive take-home exam (open book and open note). You will be asked to complete it in 24 hours.

*General Expectations:*

**You are expected to read the assignments carefully and reflectively, remaining open to the possibility that what you are reading is right.** Your first duty as an attentive reader is to understand what is being said. This means grasping the argument of the author—identifying central claims and seeing how these claims are supported. When you encounter something you strongly disagree with, make sure you first understand the argument. You are expected to give reasons for your opinions.

You will be attentive in class and always display the demeanor of one who is interested in the material and respectful of others. You will take your share of responsibility for the quality of class time, coming prepared to discuss the assignments thoughtfully.

**No laptops are permitted in class unless you have a medical problem that prevents you from taking notes by hand.**

*Attendance:*

My normal policy is 2 absences no questions asked but for each subsequent absence you get points taken off your final grade. I will be more flexible this semester for obvious reasons. Please just let me know ahead of time if you are not feeling well and therefore won't be in class.

