“This is that noble Science of Politics, which, of all sciences, is the most important to the welfare of nations, which, of all sciences, must tends to expand and invigorate the mind, which draws nutriment and ornament from every part of philosophy and literature, and dispenses, in return, nutriment and ornament to all.”

-- T. B. Macaulay

Description:

This course is intended as an introduction to political philosophy as seen through an examination of some of the major texts and thinkers of the Western political tradition. The course will focus on the concept of the regime as the central principle of political life: the polis experience (Plato, Aristotle), the sovereign state (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke Rousseau), and the rise of democracy and its consequences (Tocqueville). We will focus especially on the way in which different political philosophies have given expression to various forms of political institutions and our ways of life.

Texts:

Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*
Plato, *Gorgias*
Aristotle, *Politics*
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*
Machiavelli, *Mandragola*
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*
John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Political Writings*
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

All texts are available at the Yale Book Store on Broadway.

Requirements:

There will be three short papers (5-6 pages each) and a final exam. The papers will be due on Friday September 30, October 28, and December 2 at a time and place to be determined by your TF. Attendance and participation in sections is a further requirement. Each paper, the final examination, and participation in section will count for approximately 20% of the final grade. Students taking the class in one of the WR sections will have a different paper schedule to be explained by your TF.
Office Hours:

Wednesday: 2:00-4:00 in RZ, 315 or by app’t. I can best be reached by email (steven.smith@yale.edu). I will return your email always within a day and often within a few minutes.

Course Outline:

Week 1

What is Political Philosophy?

Why do we read the works of the classical political philosophers and what can they tell us about politics? What are the questions or problems asked by the great thinkers and how do they inform the political science of today? Political philosophy has traditionally focused on the concept of the regime: what is a regime? How many types are there? How are they governed? Is there one best regime?

Week 2

Socratic Citizenship

A. Plato, Apology of Socrates

Who was Socrates and why was he put on trial? What were the historical circumstances surrounding the trial? Socrates is charged with impiety and corruption. What is meant by these terms and in what respects are they considered a threat to Athenian democracy? Socrates challenges his audience to live an “examined life.” In what sense is this idea a plausible basis for citizenship?

B. Plato, Crito

In the Crito Socrates defends the right of the city to put him on trial and even to take his life. What are his arguments regarding political authority? Why are we obliged to obey the laws? Socrates writes a speech for the Law of Athens. Are his reasons convincing? Is he being sincere? What are the limits, if any, of political obligation?

Week 3

Philosophy and Rhetoric
A. Plato, *Gorgias* (447-80)

The *Gorgias* is the Platonic dialogue about rhetoric. What is the problem about rhetoric that Plato wants to reveal? Where do Socrates and his interlocutors disagree about the uses of rhetoric/speech in political life? What are the legitimate uses of rhetoric in politics?

B. Plato, *Gorgias* (481-527)

The *Gorgias* also deals with the themes of power and justice. What is the relation of these terms? In Callicles’ famous “tyrannical speech,” he praises the “real man” who will not be deterred by the power of conventional morality or the threats of legal justice. What is the basis of this claim? Can Socrates refute Callicles’ defense of the tyrannical life? Is his refutation convincing?

Week 4

**The Regime and its Forms**

A. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, II (1-5)

What does Aristotle mean in saying man is a “political animal?” He claims that the city (polis) exists “by nature.” What does he mean by this? He also defends the naturalness of slavery. What does he mean by slavery? Who are slaves by nature? If we are by nature political animals – entitled to take a part in the offices of government – how is it natural for some people to be enslaved others?

B. Aristotle, *Politics*, III-IV

Aristotle offers a typology of regime forms. What is a regime? How many kinds are there? He distinguishes between regimes ruled by the one, the few, and many. Are there other criteria for distinguishing between regime types? Where would the American regime fit in Aristotle’s typology? And is there one regime that is best by nature?

**Politics and Virtue**

Week 5

A. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I (1-9), II (1-6), III (1-2)
Is ethics a branch of political science? What kind of knowledge is ethical knowledge and how is it acquired? What is virtue (arête) -- is it an end in itself or is it good because it contributes to our sense of well-being (eudaimonia)? Aristotle proposes a concept of virtue as a mean point between extremes. Is this an adequate understanding of virtue? Has Aristotle forgotten the ethical hero (Socrates) in his defense of moral common sense?

B. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV (3), V (1-3, 7), VI (5, 8-9, 12-13), X (8-9)

Magnanimity (megalopsychia) and justice are the twin peaks of the moral virtues. Can Aristotle defend his theory of natural right (justice) from the charge of conventionalism (relativism)? At the end of the book he seems to elevate philosophy – intellectual excellence – above moral virtue. Can the philosophical life and the life of moral excellence be reconciled or are they incompatible? Where does Aristotle stand?

**New Modes and Orders**

**Week 6**

A. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (chaps. 1-12)

Machiavelli claims to offer a new kind of political science based on the “effectual truth” of things. What does he mean by this? To whom is the *Prince* addressed and what are the qualities of a good prince? Machiavelli distinguishes between armed and unarmed prophets. Why does he invoke this language in discussing the qualities of a prince?

B. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (chaps. 13-26)

Machiavelli speaks continuously of the virtù of a prince. What is princely virtù and how does it differ from Christian or moral virtue? Is the Machiavellian prince a tyrant or does he display quasi-democratic sympathies? What is the function of the final chapter of the *Prince*?

**Week 7**

A. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Preface, Book I, chaps. 1-13, 25-26, 29, 55, 58:

Book II, chap. 2

The *Discourses* is Machiavelli’s book about republics. What is the relation between the princely or monarchical teachings of the *Prince* and
the republican or popular teachings of the *Discourses*? What are the distinctive features of Machiavelli’s republic and how does it differ from Aristotle’s *politeia*?

A. Machiavelli, *Mandragola*

Machiavelli was not only a political theorist but a playwright. In what ways does *Mandragola* convey his political teachings through the devices of comedy? In particular how do Machiavelli’s politics come to invade the sphere of domestic life? In what way is the family a metaphor for politics?

**The Sovereign State**

Week 8

A. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Letter Dedicatory, Author’s Intro, ch. 5, 6, 11)

Hobbes follows Machiavelli in claiming that he has established a new political science. What does Hobbes mean by a science of politics? How is it different from Aristotle’s? Hobbes treats human beings as uniquely prone to the passions of pride and fear. Why do these two passions seem paramount in his account of human psychology?

13-18, 3-15,


What is the state of nature and what function does it play in Hobbes’s new science of politics? What is the status of the laws of nature? Are they laws in the sense of the law of gravity or are they moral laws?

Week 9


The center of Hobbes’s political philosophy is his account of sovereignty? Who or what is the sovereign? What problem did Hobbes’s sovereign seek to answer and what problems did it create? Is Hobbes’s sovereignty a recipe for absolutism? What is the role for law in his theory of government?

**Constitutional Government**

Locke draws on Hobbes’s metaphor of a state of nature on which to ground his theory of government. How “Hobbesian” is Locke’s theory? How does Locke modify or transform Hobbes? Locke is justly famous for his theory of property. What are the origins of property rights? In what respect does Locke defend at least a rudimentary idea of capitalism?

Week 10

A. Locke, Second Treatise, chaps. 7-9, 11-14, 19

Locke provides for a doctrine of limited constitutional government based on separation of powers. How, then, do you explain the broad powers (“prerogative”) that Locke accords to the executive? Locke is sometimes presented as America’s philosopher-king. How “Lockean” are we?

The Democratic Age

B. Rousseau, Discourse on Inequality

How does Rousseau’s state of nature function as a critique of Hobbes and Locke? What are the sources of inequality: are they principally material (private property) or psychological (pride, amour propre)? What are the moral consequences of the progress of civilization and what is Rousseau’s alternative to our current condition of corruption and degradation?

Week 11

A. Rousseau, Social Contract, I-II

Rousseau believes that all legitimate government is based on the exercise of the General Will. What does he mean by this term? How is the General Will established? How is it determined and how does it differ from the will of all? What is the basis of Rousseau’s dislike of representative government? What alternative does he propose?

B. Social Contract, III-IV

Rousseau has been credited for the creation of a new form of government – “totalitarian democracy.” Are his doctrines of the “Legislator” and his views on “civil religion” susceptible to this charge? Do Rousseau’s teachings contain the seeds of later revolutionary doctrines (Robespierre, Marx, Lenin) or is this charge over stated? What do you imagine the most important legacy of Rousseau to be?
Week 12

Democracy and its Discontents

A. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 3-15, 56-65, 235-64

Among the “habits of the heart” that help to sustain democracy, Tocqueville pays particular attention to religion. What is the relation between democracy and religion and why does Tocqueville regard it as essential? To what extent is Tocqueville’s account of religion influenced by Rousseau’s chapter on “civil religion?” What are the dangers to which religion is prone in a democratic age?


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Thanksgiving Break

A. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 500-08, 535-39, 589-99, 661-65, 673-76

Tocqueville fears that even democracy may create new, even unprecedented forms of tyranny. What does he mean by democratic despotism? How accurate are Tocqueville’s predictions about the tendencies of democracy? Is he optimistic or pessimistic about democracy’s future?

In Defense of Politics

B. Conclusion