# *Political Philosophy (COR1004)*

# Part A. General Information

## *1. Course coordinator*

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## *2. Introduction*

Politics is a confusing business. It's hard to tell who believes in what. Politicians worry about focus groups and media coverage, scared to say things that might be used as political ammunition by their opponents. There are endless political debates, but little reflection on the principles, values, and ideas that underlie them. Some cynics would say that this is because politics is about power or force, or who gets what from whom. So why bother about these so-called underlying principles, values, or foundations? To some extent, the cynics are right: politics is about power. What they fail to understand, however, is that ideas also have power. This was true in Roman Empire and in the kingdoms of the Middle Ages. And it is true in our modern liberal democracies where a fundamental guiding principle of our system of rule is that the powers that be are always subject to criticism, and where only those governments that allow their legitimacy to be constantly challenged are seen as legitimate. But these ideas about the right to speak our minds and to hold power accountable are also grounded in fundamental principles that we would be wise to not forget; even if one of these principles might be that there are no fundamental principles. Ideas are the glue that keep societies together and keeps the violence that always looms in the distance at bay. Or, as many have argued, ideas are what allows violence to continue to be doled out, often by power, under the guise of ideas like "justice", "order", "reality". The cynics may be partially wrong: politics begins where violence ends; but politics can also contain and indeed conceal and legitimize great violence. Political philosophy is about these ideas, principles, values, and foundations.

This course is called "Political Philosophy". This is somewhat overgenerous. What we will read and discuss in the next weeks comprises a part of one episode in the long and diverse global history of political thinking, namely Anglo-American (English speaking) liberal-democratic philosophy. There is a long and very rich history of non-English speaking liberal philosophy (meaning liberal philosophy not written originally in English); there is a broader tradition of European political philosophy that is not "liberal" in its orientation. Though in this course we discuss the transition from "Aristotelian" (based on Aristotle's work) and classical (i.e. pre-modern) political thinking to liberal thinking, liberal political theory in Europe is most often opposed to "Marxist" or "socialist" traditions of political philosophy (we'll only be able to have a brief glance at that rich tradition). This clash has to a large extent defined not just academic debate about politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also concrete political debate and struggle. "Republican" political theory, which flourished in Italian city states and elsewhere, is

currently enjoying an academic if not political renaissance, is another important strand of political thought that we hint in this course, but do not cover in-depth. And of course there is a whole world of political theory that does not originate in Europe, and is sometimes a response to the political actions of Europeans and their intellectuals, namely what is often called post-colonial theory. We will look at one example of this: Samir Amin's critique of what he thinks to be the two dominant currents in European (and American) political thinking, "Rawlsian" liberalism (liberalism based on the work of the American philosopher John Rawls) and communitarian "culturalism".

All that being said, in this course, we will restrict ourselves to liberal-democratic theory. There are some good reasons for this other than time constraints.[1] Liberal-democratic political thinking is the dominant kind both in academic discussion and public policy discussions. The country that we live and study in, and the ones that surround it, consider themselves to be politically liberal, to differing extent, in structure and orientation. Many of the challenges that our societies currently face concerning inequality, privacy, the integrity of the political process, rights and responsibilities at individual and collective levels are issues that have to do directly with the basic aspects and questions of liberal political philosophy. On a broader scale, the historian and political theorist Larry Siedentop has argued (he's not the only one) that the modern development of the West (whatever that means) can be analysed productively through an examination of the major tension in liberal thinking: that between fundamental moral equality of individuals and (rational) freedom or autonomy of individuals. Liberal thought has as its fundamental unit of analysis (the thing that it really cares about) the *human individual* as a fundamentally free, rational and self-interested agent, and subsequently the holder of certain inalienable rights. In being free, individuals are also equal in their moral freedom. This leads to discussion about whether political freedom and equality is a logical consequent of moral equality in liberal thinking. Furthermore, this leads into a discussion about the tension between freedom and equality in moral, political and even economic senses. This tension leads into the question of how much freedom each person should be afforded, and how to ensure that the freedom of one does not constrain the freedom of another or of many others. Ultimately, individual freedom seems to come into conflict with equality, or at least economic and political equality. Some will use their freedom to become richer and more powerful than others. Should this be tolerated? To what extent? How should we set up systems of governance such that inequality does not start to erode freedom. One way has been to say that equality

[1] Another less discussed reason is that many academics, myself included, trained in Western political thinking feel unequipped to address non-Western traditions in a way that would not be superficial. Here are some resources that have been recommended on non-European philosophy (if you have more, please do let me know):

- https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/wole-soyinka-how-to-detoxify-young-minds-from-indoctrination
- https://uottawa.libguides.com/c.php?g=265022&p=1770805
- http://research.auctr.edu/c.php?g=197223&p=1297069
- http://www.cityu.edu.hk/ceacop/tnppea.aspx

should be equality of freedoms and opportunities not necessarily economic outcomes. This satisfies some people, though far from all. But even the people satisfied by this compromise can see how inequality of economic outcomes can quickly, over time, become inequalities of opportunity and perhaps *defacto* of freedoms. You can begin to see how the great political conflicts of the past and indeed the big debates of the present are still very much grounded in the ideas and tensions of liberal political thinking. It may seem odd, but it's perfectly consistent that Karl Marx, the best known and most important philosophical proponent of socialism and communism is also considered by many people to be a liberal, especially in his early writing – indeed Marx was concerned about the alienation of human individuals from certain aspects of their freedom (understood as creative, collective, productive capabilities) by forms of political and economic organization, namely capitalism, which were themselves grounded claims about individual freedom!

Throughout the development of liberal thinking there has been great argument about the *scope* of the human individual: who precisely was the subject or bearer of the relevant freedoms and hence had the right to make certain claims in defense of their own freedom and right to rule themselves. Some men? All men? All white men and women? All Humans? All *persons* having certain capabilities, regardless of whether they are human or not? Discussions, arguments, and indeed wars about the rights of women and about subjugated peoples (slaves for example) were had on the basis of disagreements concerning liberal principles. Discussions about the rights of higher functioning animals (like gorillas and other higher primates) often proceed today on the basis of liberal claims about freedom, rights and autonomy. It is safe to say that liberal thinkers have not always been consistent about how the fundamental concepts of freedom and equality have been applied in theory or in practice to really existing human beings (we'll see this in J.S. Mill's writing).

In the conclusion of his seminal book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, the philosopher Franz Fanon poignantly called "Europe" to task for its great hypocrisy when it came to its commitment to liberal values and principles:

> Let us waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicry. Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration. (…)
>
> That same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind.

Beyond the focus on the freedom of the individual and the equality of (at least some) humans, in most contemporary minds and societies, liberalism is closely linked to democratic rule. Many early liberals were however deeply suspicious of democracy (we'll

see this again in J.S. Mill's writing). They feared that, if given the power to rule themselves and others, the great mass of people could easily be swayed by powerful rhetoric to give-up and constrain for others the freedom and equality that liberalism held to be indubitable. Sadly, history has not shown these concerns to be entirely unfounded. Again, these same debates arise when it comes to contemporary discussions about security, migration, and global inequality.

Thus, even if at the outset, the questions that liberalism poses seem rather simple – what is freedom? what is equality? how do claims about freedom and equality translate into claims about the best way to govern our societies and economies? If democracy means that 'the people have power', power over what? – in practice, liberal governance has always been a tricky business. Among other things it has to balance often conflicting concerns about rights, security, (in)equality, distribution of wealth, and problems of governance in mass societies with universal suffrage and many powerful interest groups.

Today, most people in Western democracies probably don't think that they are in charge in any meaningful way, but it is true that 'the people' at least have the power to send their elected rulers packing. Power has always needs some kind of justification—be it religion or the mystical powers of a king—but power in democracy needs more than that: if a large part of the population turns its back to those in power, they won't survive the next election. Most people, especially idealists who have great expectations of politics, underestimate the importance of this feature of democracy, that it is possible to send those in power away. But even if we grant this, there must be more to politics than power and bringing down those in power. Democracies derive part of their attraction from the fact that they can channel the aspirations and frustrations of diverse groups and communities, to organize discontent, and more generally to deal with important socio-economic, religious, ethnic or cultural differences among social groups in more or less peaceful ways. These aspirations as well as this discontent are based on or fueled by underlying values and principles like liberty, equality and justice. An important question for us to ask today is if existing democratic institutions are still fulfilling these functions. Many politicians, citizens and philosophers are today becoming increasingly suspicious that democratic institutions are not fulfilling expectations of function. Some blame this on migration, multiculturalism, others on the corrupting influence of aspects of capitalism and the growing power of internationals corporations, especially in the "information age". These groups, the anti-immigration camps and the anti-capitalist (or anti neo-liberal capitalist camps) are sometimes aligned and sometimes (perhaps more often) opposed to one another. What they seem to share is a conviction that aspects of liberal-democracy that were long thought to be integral to it, namely free enterprise and freedom of conviction, belief and cultural practice (at least in the private sphere), are now threatening liberalism and liberal democracy from within. Some studies have tried to argue that some national democracies are now so controlled by special interest groups (mostly large corporations) that they are democracies in name only. Are we entering a period of post-democracy as the British philosophers Colin Crouch has argued? How can we go about thinking about this, how can we fix it? Is the age of liberal democracy really coming to an end? Was Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan correct when he said: "Democracy is like a tram ride: when you reach your stop, you get off"?

This is where political philosophy comes in. It would be a great overestimation of the importance of philosophers to state that people need these professionals to understand and formulate these values and principles. Someone who is oppressed most likely does not need a philosopher to explain what justice or liberty is all about. He or she *feels* it in ways that many political philosophers, who may never have felt what it is like to be treated unjustly, to be hampered in one's freedom, or to be humiliated, can't fathom. But in public debate and in everyday politics these feelings are not enough, no matter how authentic they are. When it comes to expressing values and principles in a way that we hope might convince others of the rightness of our case, we must make use of rhetoric, argument, and the sometimes fuzzy invocation of concepts. Who could object to community, democracy, liberty, or justice? But what if the price of more community is less liberty? What if my liberty can only be enhanced at your expense? What if liberty requires less equality? It is during Forster's intervals "when force has not managed to come to the front", that political philosophy may contribute to the quality of political and public debate.

Take the debate surrounding the financial crisis which started in 2008. Some politicians felt that the tax-payer should clean up the mess by buying up "toxic-debts", i.e. loans that are unlikely to be paid back. They argue that this is the only policy that can help banks to get back on their feet, adding that a healthy finance sector is essential to a flourishing economy. Others feel that such a policy is profoundly unjust. In a capitalist system, banks are allowed to make unbelievable profits in good times without sharing these profits with society at large; so, they should also carry their losses alone. This debate directly relates to at least four central questions that are of a philosophical nature:

1. What right does the state have to interfere with the *freedom* of individuals as economic agents or tax payers?
2. Are gross economic differences compatible with the (democratic) assumption that we are born *equals* and worth the same?
3. By what criteria can we establish whether a policy is *just* or *unjust*?
4. What do we owe to our state, society and *community*?

By examining a (not *the*) story of the development of liberal philosophy, this course will introduce contemporary philosophical debates about such central concepts as *liberty*, *justice*, *equality*, *community* and *democracy*. Students will become familiar with the work of some of the most important political philosophers in the liberal tradition: Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Rawls, Thomas Pogge, Isaiah Berlin, Robert Nozick, Martha Nussbaum, and Michael Sandel, but also contemporary critiques of liberalism like Colin Crouch and Samir Amin. Since conceptual analysis is the core business of philosophy, students will learn to analyze concepts, to clarify fuzzy moral and political ideas, and, most importantly, to explicate the tension between different moral values and principles.

3. Structure of the course

The course can be thought about as having five intertwined parts. These follow a history about the development of liberal political theory, but also focus on specific themes and concepts within that story: *first* we will look at two examples of ancient Greek political philosophy: Pericles (as reported by the historian Thucydides) and Aristotle. The point of doing this is to understand how these politicians and philosophers saw the world and specifically the state in ways that were very different and sometimes very similar to our own. We'll use these ancient Greeks as a point of comparison to the moderns as we progress through the course.

The *second* part looks at the beginnings of liberal philosophy. We will examine how the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes turned political philosophy on its head by questioning the foundation of political authority and making the rational and self-interested individual the central focus of his philosophy of the state. Hobbes was no liberal in today's terms, but his reformulation of the relation between the state and nature set the stage for liberal philosophy. We then turn to writings by Mary Wollstonecraft on the role and rights of women, and John Stuart Mill's formulation of the "harm principle", the need to curtail potentially harmful social habits, and the potential dangers of democracy.

In the *third* part we jump from the nineteenth century to the 1960s and John Rawl's theory of "justice as fairness". Rawls was the most influential English-speaking political philosopher of the twentieth century. His attempt to renew social contract theory through the "original position" thought experiment and the balance he tries to strike between equality, freedom, and overall social welfare (utility) had a massive impact on political philosophy and public policy discussions.

*After we read Rawls in task four there will be a mid-term exam. This serves as a kind of check up on the basic ideas and theories that will guide our discussions in the rest of the course.*

Rawl's compromises were of course criticized from all sides. "Communitarians" like Michael Sandel critiqued him for not paying enough attention to the importance of community and the ties that bind us to others beyond the procedures of liberal democracy. Sandel asks if the "proceduralism" of liberal democracy and its tendency to allow for a gradual creep of market logic into all aspects of social life don't undermine the ethical foundations of forms of community where people actually care for one another, are willing to sacrifice for one another. Should a rich criminal be permitted to upgrade her prison cell for a fee? Should first class travelers be allowed to cut the line at immigration? Again, you can see that the fundamental tension between freedom and equality in liberal society rears its head. Free market "libertarians" like Fredrick Hayek and Robert Nozick argued that the whole concept of "social justice" around which Rawl's theory was built was nonsense. The libertarians focus on freedom, but what exactly does freedom mean? Does it always mean the same thing? Are there different types of freedom? And, are there types of freedom that

are oppressive? Isaiah Berlin famously argues that the "negative" freedom of the liberals can be contrasted with a potentially more pernicious "positive" freedom that can be forced upon individuals in the name of what's good for them: forced to be free! The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum develops a notion of "real freedom" as having capabilities to realize individual life choices and plans. Her theory is based in part on extensive empirical study and collaboration with the Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen.

In the *fourth* part of the course we will examine how these ideas of rights, freedom and community that have been developed in liberal theory, are applied to ongoing policy debates concerning global justice and migration. Here we will have two in-class debates about redistribution of wealth to the global poor and the ethics of migration: we'll ask, what do we owe to others people far away from our immediate sphere of life and concerns.

The final, *fifth*, part of the course looks at recent critiques of liberal politics from a diverse group of philosophers and economists working today. We'll focus on the critiques of procedural democracy and the warning that we are entering a "post-democratic" period. The philosopher Mark Fisher asks why it's nearly impossible to imagine a world without capitalism, and the Marxist economist Samir Amin scrutinizes the liberal conceptual triad of liberty, equality and property. Our aim is to end the course by asking what future there is for liberal thought, can or should it be renewed and reinvigorated, or has it run its course?

The course consists of lectures, tutorials, and debates. The lectures will provide the overarching conceptual background for the group discussions and introduce students to the major points of contention, the debates will put these ideas into action. The PBL-meetings are intended to dig into specific concepts, questions, and texts. We'll also use some of the tutorial sessions before each of the exams to catch our intellectual breath, conceptually regroup, and think about writing, rhetoric and argumentation.

*Please consult the course schedule in the student portal for a precise idea of what we will do on what days.*

## *4. Course objectives*

The course aims to provide you with a basic understanding of what liberal political philosophy is about and why it is important and perhaps even useful in contemporary democratic societies. We will concentrate on some of the central concepts of the discipline: *justice, equality, liberty, community* and *democracy*. This basic understanding consists of two important elements: *first* an understanding of the meaning of central concepts as they are presented and defended by some of the most influential political philosophers. These concepts acquire their meanings in and through the discussions between these philosophers, so we will pay attention to both these concepts and how philosophers outline and defend their own interpretations of these concepts. Whenever possible we will read the original texts, because there is value in learning about these concepts by reading these primary sources. We will also study secondary literature that gives an overview of the philosophical debate about these concepts. For the most part we will be using Adam Swift's book *Political Philosophy, a Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians* as our guide.

It is a good book; however, it is important that you do not take Swift as gospel. Swift, like all of us, has his faults and inclinations and you are urged to be as critical of Swift's text as you would be of any other text.

We will then take these ideas one step further to consider the practical and pragmatic consequences of them. For example, what are the consequences of prioritizing liberty over equality in the current political debate about the welfare state? Looking at these practical consequences is important for at least two reasons: political philosophers spend a lot of time in the clouds away from the endeavors and problems of ordinary people who are more worried about actions than ideas. The second reason is that we also want to use these ideas and concepts to make sense of, and maybe even interfere in, our political conditions and circumstances.

So, in this course students are not only invited to read about and understand the different meanings of concepts; they are also invited to think about the practical and political consequences of these concepts. The lectures and the discussions in the tutorial groups will focus on the two elements just outlined: understanding and being able to use and 'apply' concepts in practical, political contexts.

These two elements also return in the two take home exams of the course. Both are take-home exams, which means that students can use all the course material available while they are working on the mid-term and final exam. Since all material will be available during both exams the emphasis will not be on the reproduction of what students have read, but on understanding the different meanings of the concepts and on how they can be applied in practical contexts.

## *5. Study materials*

There will be one book as essential reading. Students should buy this book. Most of the other literature will be provided as E-readers, and will be marked with 'E-reader' in the course-book. Other articles will be available on the internet (as E-journals or via a direct link). Finally, some literature will have to be directly copied from books for copyright reasons.

***Essential reading:***
Everyone should buy the Swift book (2014). We will not be referring to it very often, however it is an essential resource for helping you clear up your own thinking.

***Further Introductions and Collections:***
There are many good overviews of the field (Goodin, Pettit, & Pogge, 2012; Kymlicka, 2002). Feel free to consult them.

***The following books are available in the Reading Room of UCM:***
We've also made a few book available in the Reading Room (Ryan, 1993; Parekh, 2002; Gaus & D'Agostino, 2013; Miller, 2006; Avineri & De-Shalit, 1992).

## *6. Lectures*

1. *The Natural State and the State of Nature* (Meacham)
2. *Natural Desires and Free Souls: does liberal theory need gods?* (Meacham)
3. *Justice as Fairness: Thinking from the Original Position – Rawls* (Meacham)
4. *FREEEEEEDOM!* (Meacham)
5. *What do we owe to others who are far away? Global Justice and Migration* (Meacham/Schaepkens)
6. *The Least Worst System of Governance? The Virtues and Vices of Democracy* (Prof. dr. Koenis)

## *7. Evaluation and examination*

The evaluation consists of four parts:

1. Mid-term exam (40%);
2. Participation (10%);
3. Group work: debate preparations (10%);
4. Final take-home exam (40%).

Both exams are take-home exams. The midterm and final exam questions and instructions will be posted on Eleum. When grading these papers, your tutor will put quite a bit of emphasis on the stylistic elements of your paper (clarity of prose, quality of argumentation, formatting, etc.). That is, you will be evaluated on your essay writing abilities as much as on the content of your claims (note that it's impossible to evaluate the content of your claims unless they are expressed clearly). The mid-term will be distributed with a long list of tips regarding things that you should never do, things that you probably should not do, and things that you should always do while writing an essay. The list is very clear, please take the time to read it. The same holds for the final.

Regarding the debates, each tutor group will break into teams (2 or 3, depending on the assignment). Each team will produce a preparation document. This will be a short summary of your team's major claims/arguments and should include an anticipatory account of the likely retorts to each of your major claims, and finally a rebuttal to that retort by your team (*something like: we say, they say, we respond*). This is worth 10% of your grade. Only those who contribute to the debate preparation should be listed as authors, and only the authors will get participation grades.

### *7.1 Attendance Requirements*

Students should attend all tutorial meetings. Attendance does not mean just being there, but actively participating in the group discussions (see below). Attendance also means being on time. If you are more than ten minutes late, your attendance for that meeting will not be counted.

Official UCM attendance policy is as follow:

Students must have attended at least 85% of all tutorial group meetings to be allowed to take the final test of the course. Students who have not met the attendance requirement and who have not missed more than 30% of all meetings, will be given a provisional overall grade point for the course. To qualify for an additional assignment and thus to meet the attendance requirement, students must submit to the UCM, LAS/MSP or UCV Office of Student Affairs a completed request form for an additional assignment because of insufficient attendance, within 10 working days after completion of the course. Request for additional assignments can be submitted online via the portal of UCM, LAS/MSP or UCV. The course coordinator shall decide on the validity of the reasons given. If the course coordinator decides that a student has had valid reasons for not complying with the attendance percentage, s/he will be given an additional assignment within 10 working days after receipt of the online request. The nature and volume of the assignment will be proportional to the number of tutorials that were missed more than the attendance requirement allowed for. The assignment must be completed and submitted to the course coordinator concerned within 20 working days after the student has received the assignment. The result of the additional assignment has to be available before the end of the running academic year. Students, who receive a pass for the additional assignment, will be regarded as having met the attendance requirement and their provisional overall grade point will be declared valid. If the course coordinator decides that the reasons for absence were not valid and/or if more than 30% of the meetings have been missed, no additional assignment will be given and the provisional overall grade point will be annulled.

*Participation*

Problem Based Learning (PBL) requires participation. This course will operate only through your consistent attendance and sustained, active participation in discussions. Active participation means: spending time with the required readings and preparing for discussion. This means:

- Reading, annotating, and thinking about the texts and learning goals carefully before each class.
- Fulfilling your role as discussion leader and note-taker (for more details see under 'Tutorial method').
- Contributing to class discussions in a spirit of constructive and engaging dialogue; i.e. by asking or answering questions, evaluating the literature, giving your interpretation of passages, criticizing certain assumptions and arguments, etc.

As noted above, your individual participation—which includes your contribution to class discussions and your performance as discussion leader—will be graded. This means that we will also look at the quality of your participation.

*7.2 Tutorial Method*

The tutorial groups will follow the standard method of PBL as taught at UCM, in which each of the tasks in this course manual is treated according to the 'seven-step approach'. The tasks and assessments are made with this model in mind. The approach is summarized below.

*First meeting –Pre-discussion*

1. Clarifying concepts; make sure that you do not only take the text of the task into account in your pre-discussion, but also the titles of the readings that are listed.
2. Defining the problem (outcome: one 'umbrella' problem statement).
3. Analyzing the problem: brainstorming.
4. Systematic classification (what belongs to what, B is a sub-question of A etc.).
5. Formulating learning objectives.

*Between meetings*

6. Self-study: finding answers to learning goals and preparation by presenters.

*Next meeting –Post-discussion*

7. Reporting (post-discussion). Tutorial group meetings (except for the first and the last) follow a standard format: Post-discussion. In the first hour, students discuss the literature based on learning objectives formulated in group discussions in the previous meeting. Pre-discussion. In the second hour, the group deals with a new task by formulating a problem statement that provides the input for a brainstorming session. This discussion is concluded by formulating learning objectives that provide the basis for the presentations in the following meeting. This format for instruction and learning requires students to fulfill three roles. Each meeting requires a discussion leader who serves as a chairperson, and a note-taker who takes notes on the whiteboard. The discussion leader should not only establish an agenda and keep order, but also guide the discussion, stimulate students to participate, summarize important conclusions, and make sure that the literature is well understood by everybody. The note-taker jots down points for clarification and learning objective(s) for further study on the whiteboard. Ordinary group members have read the literature and have thought about the learning objectives. They are required to contribute to the discussion based on this preparation. To fulfill these roles effectively, students must be well prepared. Finally, students are personally responsible for making their own minutes of the pre- and post-discussion. Discussion leader and note-taking roles will be distributed either during the first session, or successively, as agreed between the group and the tutor.

*7.3 Resits*

Students who failed the course but made a credible attempt at passing will be admitted to a resit take-home-exam. Students qualify if they have passed attendance and submitted both exams and participated in the debates. The resit will replace your lowest mark from either your mid-term or your final.

*7.4 UCM Writing Center*

UCM has a writing center that everyone should know about. Their email address is: ucm-writingcenter@maastrichtuniversity.nl. They will always display their walk-in hours in the common room and on a Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/ucmwritingcentre).

Here we go…

## Task 1: Turning away from the Ancients: from the natural state to the state of nature

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions [. . .] (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 146)

Many of the defining political debates of our day appear to be torn between two essentially antagonistic positions—the left and the right, liberals and conservative—but are these positions really that different? Much of this course consists of delineating those debates and distinguishing the various camps one from another. However, we are well served by considering first what those debates have in common and what that whole spectrum of debate presupposes. The purpose of this first task is to take a big step back in order to try to get a more panoramic view of political philosophy as a whole. In the broadest sense, the point here is to displace the idea that political philosophy is about taking sides in today's debates. It is not, it is about understanding the entirety of that debate. Or, in other words, the purpose here is to see how those ideas that we all accept as essentially true and normal, are both historically constructed and, from the perspective of the ancients, deeply weird.

Consider the debate over human rights. What are they? Who has them? And, who is obligated—that is, who has the duty—to ensure that they are realized? On one side of this debate—or, on one side of the spectrum of this debate—are those who are often called "libertarians". Libertarians hold, among other things, that what we have the "right" to, is our body and everything that we have fairly obtained through work or by way of market transactions. Here, unfreedom consists in any interference by any entity into those things we have a right to; justice is getting what one is due. The state here (another concept that is worth reflecting upon) is understood as a sort of night-watchman whose only purpose is to ensure that these individual rights are respected. Fair enough. These people talk a lot about freedom by which they tend to mean the freedom to be left alone.

On the other side, there are some who hold that human rights consist of a far more robust set of rights. I have the right to my body, but I also have the right to, say, a fair wage, housing, healthcare, maybe a job, maybe a vacation, even the Internet has been referred to as a human right. Here, the state is often asked (obligated) to do quite a bit. And doing so will always require that the state asks more of us, either by way of taxes or other ways of redistribution (you can see why the libertarian would get worked up here). On this account, freedom is often demoted, and priority is given to justice.

Don't worry about those specific questions right now, we will get to them, what we're interested in at the moment are *grounds*. Different positions about questions like human rights have different kinds of foundational principles. Solid philosophical positions are well-grounded ones, and solid grounds are clear and firm. So when we read the ancients we're interested in questions like what was a democracy for Pericles? What was justice?

What was freedom? But we're also interested in how Pericles grounds or supports his claims, does he see the need to do so at all?

Then, consider Aristotle. This is a difficult text, why? Why do the very terms of debate seem so alien? That the text is so difficult is part of the lesson; it tells us a lot about ourselves. Keep in mind that for 2000 years Aristotle's *Politics* was accepted as simply being the truth about politics. What does Aristotle say about virtues? Regimes? The point of the state? Again, it is important that you allow yourself to be confused by these ideas; but try also to make sense of them. Consider, for example, if these ideas are compatible with your own understandings of justice, democracy, politics, freedom, etc. Do we occupy the same ground(s) as Aristotle?

**Required readings:**
Start with Pericles's Funeral Oration in Thucydides (2009, pp. 89–97). Then read through Aristotle (1998, bk. 1: chapters 1-8 13; bk. 3: 1-13).

**Recommended readings:**
Some of you may be interested in reading Wolin (1993).

Martha Nussbaum, who we will read later in the course is an "Aristotelian" political thinker, she's also a clear writer (I think), so for those interested have a look at:

- Nussbaum, M. (1992). Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism. *Political Theory, 20*(2), 202-246.

- Nussbaum, M. (1993). Social Justice and Universalism: In Defense of an Aristotelian Account of Human Functioning. *Modern Philology, 90*, S46-S73.

Beyond that, there is a world of secondary literature on these topics. However, we strongly recommend that you do not read any of it. Focus very clearly on understanding the elemental claims of the primary texts. Pay attention to their assumptions, their arguments, and their rhetoric. Again, you'll find these to be difficult texts. That's good. This task is exactly about understanding why these ideas seem so alien to us.

## Task 2: The development of liberalism 1: Overturning traditional authority

Around the middle of the seventeenth century a gentle English philosopher and tutor of the exiled king produced a work that would turn political philosophy on its head. Hobbes goes to war against the ideas of the Ancients and pours the concrete foundations of our modern world. What did he do? What is different in Hobbes? What does Hobbes say about human nature? About rights? About the state? Freedom? When you're reading Hobbes, ask yourself if Aristotle's ideas can exist in Hobbes's world?

Hobbes's picture of the world, or at least the human world, focuses on individuals. It seems pretty obvious to most people today that political theory should concern itself with individuals, but in Hobbes time, this was radical in itself. Even worse, from a traditional perspective, Hobbes seems to insist that all these individuals that political philosophy now has to worry about are more or less equal! This may seem a bit paradoxical: a philosopher best known for defending the absolute power of the sovereign thinks that individuals are basically equal. The path from the equality of individuals to the more or less absolute power of the sovereign is thus central to Hobbesian thinking.

What impact does this have on the ruler's position vis-à-vis the ruled, and on the capacity to rule. Hobbes is trying to show his readers (kings and other high-powered folk) how power can be firmly grounded in a world where more and more certainties are being called into question by political, cultural and scientific events. If you were the ruler, what would you make of Hobbes's argument?

The contemporary historian and philosopher Larry Siedentop argues that the ideas set out in Hobbes's philosophy: individuals, freedom, equality form the core meaning of what we call the "West". Is he right? Think back to this questions of foundations or grounds that we started with in the last assignment, have the grounds shifted?

### Required Readings

Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1996, pp. 86–100).

Siedentop, L. (2017). "On the Identity of the West" In: Mathieu Segers and Yoeri Albrecht (eds.), *Re:Thinking Europe Thoughts on Europe: Past, Present and Future*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

### Suggested readings

Here we discuss the relation between Hobbes and liberalism. Hobbes is also considered a founding father of "political realism", but what does that mean? Robin Douglass tries to answer that question in:

- Douglass, R. (2016). Hobbes and political realism. European Journal of Political Theory. First Published 20.11.2016 https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885116677481

This is a paper written by an undergraduate student from the great American state of Minnesota. It's published in *COMPASS: An Undergraduate Journal of American Political Ideas*

Soper, D. (2018). The role of Christianity in Hobbes's Political Project. *COMPASS: An Undergraduate Journal of American Political Ideas* http://startingpointsjournal.com/role-christianity-hobbess-political-project/

## Task 3: The development of liberalism 2: freeing people, limiting the state

Hobbes may have set the foundations of modernity, but almost nobody was happy about it. Conservatives (political and religious) only saw a revolutionary reformulation of the basic ideas that had anchored European politics for two millennia, while liberals (at least, those who would come to be called liberals), saw little that was emancipatory in the mere "right to one's life" left to subjects. Worse, liberals saw much to fear in the incredible power afforded to the state. The history of liberalism, is the history of working within Hobbes's conceptual framework to augment the freedoms of the individual while setting limits on the powers of the state.

One way to think about these developments is to look at the idea of freedom. Freedom is a celebrated aspect of liberal democracies. Freedom of thought and consciousness, religious freedom, freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of contract and trade, and freedom of sexual self-deliberation are but a few items that liberals demand all governments of the world to grant to their people.

However, freedom cannot be limitless, right? That is why in most countries smoking is banned from restaurants and bars, why some countries forbid burkas, why some countries require that kids get an education, etc. We tend to accept that government is a restriction of individual freedom. Think of driving licenses, taxes, visas, health and safety regulations or any other policy. Do we have to make a trade-off between the benefits of government and individual self-determination? How do we justify those tradeoffs? And if so, what should this trade-off be? According to you, what would be a viable principle on which state power could be *rightfully* exercised over any member of a community, *against* his or her will? We have done a fairly good job and pushing back against brute violent sovereign power, but what about the power of popular opinion? The raw power of democracy (the idea that the demos, the people, would be capable of doing things at their own behest, which is the core idea of democracy) scared many liberal thinkers in Europe. As a result of his trip to the United States the French political thinker and aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville noted:

> I accept the intellectual rationale for democratic institutions, but I am instinctively an aristocrat, in the sense that I condemn and fear the crowd. I dearly love liberty and respect for rights, but not democracy (Alexis de Tocqueville, New York Daily Tribune, June 25th, 1853).

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) has a lot to say about this. What do you think? Do we only need freedom from governments? What about freedom from social norms? We spend a lot of time speaking about changing social norms that most people find distasteful, or harmful, or just mean. But should we? How do we justify doing this? By the way, what would Hobbes say about all of this? What would Pericles say?

These early-modern readings also bring into stark resolution another problem inherent to the tradition of political thought that was quite clear in the Ancient's and persist today. Namely, gender. Mary Wollstonecraft—one of the greatest minds in a generation of great minds—takes liberals and conservatives to task on exactly this question. However, Wollstonecraft is no mere liberal. Pay attention close attention to Wollstonecraft, and reflect on liberalism today. Is it really just a lack of rights that, for Wollstonecraft, kept women oppressed? If not, what is it? What does Wollstonecraft tell us about education, virtue, power, and politics?

For this week, it is strongly recommended that a few students try to read one of the recommended readings. They're great, give it a shot.

**Required readings:**
Start with Wollstonecraft (2010b, pp. 10–13, 2010b, pp. 20–34, 2010a, pp. 6–13). Take your time with Wollstonecraft. Her language is sometimes hard to grasp, in a way she is both antiquated and modern at the same time. Then read Bentham (1988, pp. 52–55) and Mill (2003a, pp. 88–98).

**Recommended readings:**
(Skorupski, 2006) *Highly recommended by former students
(Paine, 2000, pp. 1–47)
(Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 26–52)
(Burke, 1988)

**Additional readings on utilitarianism specifically**:
(Bentham, 2003)
(Mill, 2003b)
(Rawls, 1999a, pp. 19–24)
(Nussbaum, 2015)

## Task 4: Justice as fairness

What makes a society just? This question—an old question—was raised by Plato in his dialogue *The Republic,* still occupies us when we try to give reasons for our ideas about justice. Plato argued that there was a pure form of justice, that was the true just. The catch, for Plato, was that only the philosophically inclined could ever access it. The rest of us, lost in the shadows, needed a "noble lie" to trick us into approximating justice. Plato also tells us about Thrasymachus, a citizen who only cared about his own interests and pleasures and who skeptically rejects any conception of justice that goes beyond the self-interest of citizens. For Thrasymachus, justice was the will of the strong. Aristotle had his own views on this topic: justice was defined in part by the virtues of the regime type. Hobbes, of course, had a very clear answer: justice is whatever the sovereign says it is. These are all good, or, at least, they are answers. But what would a liberal conception of justice be? That's not so clear.

We intuitively know that justice should somehow balance the—sometimes conflicting—interests of all citizens, but how do you take account of these? Is Hobbes's answer sufficient? Is Mill's? The American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002), one of the most influential and important political thinkers of the last 50 years or so, proposes an interesting way to do this. Rawls wanted a way to arrive at a conception of justice that everyone could agree on regardless of the many differing notions of the Good that circulated and co-existed legally in a liberal society. In other words, Rawls sought to get around the problem of a "metaphysical ground" for a theory of justice, by grounding justice in overlapping agreement. He called his conception of "justice as fairness", it developed from an ingenious thought experiment which we are going to emulate in this assignment.

The idea is that people—say you all as members of the tutor group—have to decide what makes this society a just society, that is, fair for all the people who live in it. The trick is to think about what principles would be chosen by people who do not know what position they obtain in a society that is governed by these principles. I.e. they decide the rules of the game before they know whether they will be baker or butchers, dishwashers or directors. If you know beforehand that you will own a steel factory, then your choices regarding liberty and equality will perhaps differ from a person who is dependent on welfare. But what if you don't know which family you will be born into, or even what your IQ is going to be in real life? The idea is to help us think about a viable definition of an ideally just society and its governing principles without the prejudices that arrive from our interest in benefitting from our accidental advantages or overcompensating for our contingent grievances. What would happen if people were deprived of all knowledge that might distinguish them from one another—such as wealth, age, sex, race, talent, religion, and if these people were to get together and figure out how they wanted their society to be organized? Rawls calls this situation the "Original Position", in which people deliberate from behind a "veil of ignorance". In the Original Position they also do not know their "conception of the good", a philosopher's way of saying that they don't know what they believe about what makes life valuable of worthwhile (arts, sport, or living in accordance with the rules of the Lord).

Here's the task: imagine you are in this original position. What principles of justice would you come up with? What political, economic, and social systems would you create? That is, today you get to make the world anew. What rules will you make? Remember, you must create rules that you think every rational person would accept despite the myriad of differences between us.

**Required readings:**
Start with Rawls (1999b, pp. 130–53) and focus all of your attention on this text. It is an essential text for this class and you must understand it. No joke. Everything henceforth will refer to this text. Swift (2014, pp. 11–31) is a good text to read as a secondary source. However, be cautious. Swift is very critical and sometimes misleading, but he does open up some important points of criticism.

**Recommended readings:**
(Rawls, 1999a, 2001, 2007)
(Wolin, 1996) *Highly recommended

## Task 5: Down with Justice! Up with freedom and community!

Rawls believes that a certain measure of material equality (and hence distribution) is a necessary ingredient of any theory of justice. Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992) rejects the whole idea of social justice and Robert Nozick (1938–2002) believes that we must give up on the ideal of substantive equality if we want to respect people's rights and liberties. He asks how inequality comes into the world in the first place:

> Now suppose that Wilt Chamberlain [who was in 1974 the Michael Jordan of basketball] is greatly in demand by basketball teams. He signs the following sort of contract with a team: in each home game, twenty-five cents from the price of each ticket of admission goes to him. The season starts, and people cheerfully attend his team's games; they buy their tickets, each time dropping a separate twenty-five cents of their admission price into a special box with Chamberlain's name on it. They are excited about seeing him play; it is worth the total admission price to them. Let us suppose that in one season Chamberlain winds up with $250.000 [to adjust to the situation now: one million persons pay $5 extra, leaving Chamberlain with a total amount of $5 million]. This sum is much larger than the average income and larger even than anyone else has. Is he entitled to this income? (2013, p. 161)

Nozick claims that since we own ourselves, we also own the fruits of our talents and efforts. He further thinks that any outcome of a just transaction must itself be just and needs no redress, even if we all end up with very disparate levels of material comfort.

Is it true that equality loses out in comparison to other political norms like justice and freedom? Is the demand for equality only the envy of the looser? And are Nozick's premises correct?

Hayek and Nozick are libertarian philosophers: they prize individual freedom above all and consider social justice to be a highly problematic idea. Social institutions—like a state with its laws, a society with its rules, and a community with its duties—pose strong demands on their individual members. For philosophers like Hobbes and Rawls, such social impositions can be justified only as a voluntary agreement (a social contract) that any rational individual would consent to. They believe that individual rights and liberties are more fundamental than social duties.

In Rawls's thought experiment, individuals behind the veil of ignorance are stripped of all their characteristics (tastes, religious convictions, talents, family relations and group memberships). Rawls does not say that such individuals could ever exist or that these empty human drones would be able to make any intelligible decision. Being a thought experiment, the original position is addressed to *us* as fully socialized beings. *We* are asked to imagine how we would choose if we did not know who we really were. But this experiment implies that we can reflect on our core as naked, independent, unprejudiced, and socially un-entangled individuals. Is this true?

Communitarians like Hannah Arendt (1906–75), Charles Taylor (b. 1931), and Michael Sandel (b. 1953) challenge the idea that social duties can only be justified as the (logical) product of free individual choice (we will just be reading Sandel, but you are of course welcome to also read Arendt and Taylor). Such a view contradicts their understanding of the relation between the individual self and its social context. They imagine the self as an onion, its layers constituted through social rules, roles and values that we internalize during our lifetime. Rawls's rational self then seems like a fiction that cannot provide a strong standard for public argumentation. The layers of our onion contain rights as much as duties and liberties as much as commitments and we will never find a core when trying to peel it.

**Required readings:**
Everyone should read Sandel (1984) this is an important critique of Rawls. Students should choose to read either Hayek (1978, pp. 57–68) *or* Nozick (2013, pp. 149–64) – or both of course.

If you can explain what Nozick's critique of Hayek is, then you're on your way to understanding both texts. Swift (2014, pp. 31–56) is relevant to the libertarian arguments. Regarding communitarian approaches the Swift in the recommended reading list is highly recommended. However, only read Swift *after* you've read the primary sources because he is very critical.

**Recommended readings on communitarianism:**
(Arendt, 1998, pp. 7–37)
(Taylor 1989, pp. 25–52)
(Swift, 2014, pp. 143–86)
(Etzioni, 1991)
(Walzer, 1990)
(Kymlicka, 1989)

## Task 6: Two concepts of liberty. . . or three?

In the midst of the Cold War, and in a very influential piece of political philosophy, Isaiah Berlin (1909 – 1997) mapped out the difference between what he called 'positive' and 'negative' freedom. Whereas negative freedom is concerned with the question: "How far does government interfere with me?" positive freedom is about: "Who governs me?" For example, who decides what is good for me, the government or some other institution which claims to know what is best for me? When parents decide for their children what is good for them, we are not alarmed, but paternalism is not restricted to what parents do. Should government tell us what we should want to eat, whether we should want to smoke or not, or should this be left to our own choices?

At first sight there seems to be no difference between the two questions: in both cases, we are talking about how much freedom I have to do the things I want to do. But according to Berlin it is dangerous to conflate the two questions. This can happen particularly when positive freedom is interpreted in such a way that someone else, or the state or some bureaucratic institution "governs you", decides what is good for you, tells you what is 'rational' to do, protects you against your 'irrational' self.

Berlin is strongly suspicious of notions of "positive freedom". Two contemporary philosophers, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (also a Nobel prize winning economist) have developed what they call a "capabilities approach" to "real" and "substantial" freedom. Their basic idea is that freedom entails capabilities to pursue projects and goals that individuals decide upon. Is the capability approach an example of positive or negative freedom? And what does the capabilities approach try to tell us about the relation between freedom and equality.

The recent hype around the work of the French economist Thomas Piketty (2014) has underscored the importance of equality, a political value, which is more controversial than justice. Most philosophers believe in equality in some sense, in what the philosopher Will Kymlicka has called an 'egalitarian plateau'. In a political community everyone should be treated equally. This sounds quite simple, but what does this equal treatment amount to? Take equality of opportunity, which seems very plausible at first sight. What do we need to do, or should the government do in order to work towards more equality of opportunity, for instance in education or at the work floor? Is it sufficient to make sure that people's race, gender or religion does not affect access to education or a good job? Or should we do more?

Nussbaum and Sen, have criticized traditional theories of justice and equality. These theories only ask how well off someone is in terms of resources, satisfaction, or the ability to choose what one prefers. They try to establish general rules and to propose ideal institutional arrangements, but they are not very successful in assessing and evaluating individual well-being in specific socio-political circumstances. What does inequality mean, for instance for this woman in India:

> Consider Vasanti, a small woman in her early thirties who lives in Ahmedabad, a large city in the state of Gujarat, in Northwestern India. Vasanti's husband was a gambler and an alcoholic. He used the household money to get drunk. When that money was gone, he got a vasectomy to take advantage of the cash incentive that government offered to encourage sterilization. So Vasanti had no children to help her, a huge liability, given the fact that a childless woman is more vulnerable to domestic violence. Eventually, as her husband became more abusive, she left him and returned to her own family. (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 2)

Sen and Nussbaum's 'Capability Approach' starts out with asking what one is effectively able *to do or be*. This allows seeing individual well-being in the context of natural conditions and social arrangements. For example, even if a woman has the same opportunity to gain a university degree as any man, she may still be worse off if she lives in a society that values degrees of men higher than those of women. Their approach has been used in the United Nations Development Index because it helps to acquire better information about the development of a country than do the GDP and GNP.

**Required readings:**
Start with Berlin (1969, pp. 118–34). Students wishing to read another seminal essay on Freedom may also want to read Benjamin Constant's essays on "The freedom of the ancients" (on the student portal).

Then read Nussbaum (2013, pp. 1–45).

If you wish to read further about how Nussbaum's approach would like closer to the ground read the Green article (2016). Finally, read Robeyns (2005) in order to clarify your thinking about Nussbaum. Everyone should also poke around this website http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi . It is an example of how the ideas that we're discussing in class get used in the so-called "real world".

You can also go back and read some of the suggested readings by Nussbaum in Task 1.

**Some more recommended readings:**
(Swift, 2014, pp. 95–115);
(Nussbaum, 2007);
(Sen, 2000);
(Jahan, 2015).

## Task 7: Global (in)justice – debate task 1

Justice is a political value which is not only hotly debated in the context of the state, but also in a global context. When it comes to global justice, Peter Singer probably takes the most radical position.

> If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening [like the death of people in East Bengal from lack of food, shelter, and medical care – the example Singer uses in 1971] without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By 'without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance' I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, of failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. (1972, p. 231)

> For Singer, helping the people of East Bengal is on a par with helping a drowning child:

> If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing. (1972, p. 231)

Proximity/distance are morally irrelevant.

> Stephen T. Asma clearly disagrees:

> One of the architects of utilitarian ethics, and forerunner of Singer's logic, was William Godwin (1756 - 1836), who formulated a famous thought experiment. He asked us to imagine if you could save only one person from a burning building. One of those persons is Archbishop Fénelon and the other is a common chambermaid. Furthermore, the archbishop is just about to compose his famous work 'The Adventures of Telemachus' (an influential defense of human rights). Now here's the rub. The chambermaid is your mother. (2013)

Asma's conclusion is that we'd all same our mother and let Fénelon fend for himself. His implication is that we don't care about global justice, we care about our own clan.

Singer defends a cosmopolitan position with respect to global justice, but you do not need to be a utilitarian to do this. Thomas Pogge extends the arguments of Rawls about distributive justice (which Rawls only applied to the nation state) to international relations and international economic systems. According to Pogge, we cannot confine redistribution to the nation state; we need to do more to assist the global poor.

> By contrast, David Miller argues that,

> we have two conflicting intuitions, one telling us that when we look at the relative positions of people living in different places, the inequalities between them are radically unjust, and the other telling us that such inequalities are both unavoidable and fair if we hold national communities responsible for the choices and decisions they make. (2007, p. 385)

The first intuition supports cosmopolitanism, the second national responsibility. Can the conflict between the two be resolved?

We will set up a debate. After a short pre-discussion, we will split up into three groups: Singerians, Millerians, and Poggians. Each group will meet before the next class to get organized. Each group must write and submit a précis to their instructor before the post-discussion. The précis must include an account of probable criticisms, and retorts.

Break into teams: Team Singer, Team Miller, and Team Pogge. Each team must defend their positions *using the various ideas we have encountered already*. Again, your own politics don't matter today, what matters is whether you can apply the ideas we've been thinking about to a new topic. After the pre-discussion, and after you've done the readings, but before the post-discussion, meet and refine your position in preparation for the debate. As a group, you must prepare a précis of your topic which includes short accounts of plausible attacks and counter-attacks from the other team. In the post-discussion, we will debate! Each group must submit a précis to their instructor before the post-discussion and it will be the basis of your grade. The stakes are Periclean: the winning team receives eternal glory; the losers will never be spoken of again.

**Required readings:**
Start with Singer (1972), Pogge (2003), and Miller (2008). Finish with Asma's short newspaper article (2013).

**Recommended readings:**
(Brooks, 2013) *Highly recommended by former students
(Rawls, 2001, pp. 3–10, 2001, pp. 17–19, 2001, pp. 23–43, 2001, pp. 105–15)
(Nussbaum, 2015, 2013, Chapter 4)

**Other useful resources:**
Peter Singer did a Reddit AMA:
https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/32lnif/im_peter_singer_australian_moral_philosopher_and/? *Highly recommended by former students

## Task 8: Migration, democracy, and human rights – debate task 2.

Read this excerpt from the NYT:

> VORRA, Germany—Even as European officials struggle with an unrelenting tide of migrants trying to enter the Continent, tranquil villages like this one in a picture-book valley in northern Bavaria are coping with the legions who have already arrived. It is here, as much as on the choppy seas of the Mediterranean, that Europe's latest migration crisis is playing out.
>
> With the federal authorities expecting a flood of newcomers—an estimated 300,000 will apply for asylum in Germany this year, after 200,000 in 2014 — places like Vorra, population 1,000, are struggling to make room for those who are already here seeking legal status and integration. Housing has been designated, services have been mandated, and volunteers have offered clothing and services like rides and free language lessons.
>
> But along with hospitality, Germans are also showing hostility. In Vorra in December, and in the Saxon town of Tröglitz over the Easter weekend, arsonists set fire to renovated shelters just weeks before migrants were to move in. No suspects have been detained in either case.
>
> And some community leaders ready to accept the new arrivals have faced ugly threats and protests from people who fear or loathe outsiders.
>
> [. . .] prompted by the deaths of more than 1,500 people who drowned at sea this year while trying to reach the Continent, European leaders will try to figure out a way to stanch the flow of refugees fleeing the disintegration of Syria and Libya, or from farther places like Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Mali. (Smale, 2015)

We're not going to resolve the migration crisis today, but we will debate it. Try to put your own politics to the side. The question at hand, is "how can we think about migration conceptually?" That is, how can we apply the ideas of liberalism, communitarianism, positive and negative liberty, and distributive justice to the question of migration? How have politicians and citizens been using these ideas? Break into teams: Team Carens, Team Wellman, Team Walzer.

**Required readings:**
Start with Walzer's chapter (1983, pp. 31–63). This is an old text now, but it remains influential. Then read Carens (1987) and Wellman (2008).

**Recommended readings:**
(Abizadeh, 2008)

## Task 9: The least worst system: Post-democracy? Post-liberalism?

Let's go back to where we started:

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions [. . .] (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 146)

What we've done in this class is trace the changing truths of liberalism. We've seen how a couple small ideas, when giving great rhetorical intensification (recall, Hobbes), can set a foundation for a radical reconfiguration of how the world thinks about politics and society. More, we've seen how those ideas emerged in the early modern period—with new poetic framing (recall Wollstonecraft and Mill)—to become a global paradigm. This global mashup of democracy, liberalism, and republicanism frames our individual aspirations and shared global problems. These liberal truths have great drawbacks—there's plenty that's wrong with liberalism—but there are great advantages as well, the foremost of which is peace (at least, for many of us). Liberalism may be a lie, as Nietzsche would say, but it is an important one.

Which brings us to our final puzzle: are these liberal truths unravelling? Today, many of us still talk the talk of liberal democracy, but few of us seem to care much about liberalism. One of the reasons that made this whole tradition, was that it was always radical. Hobbes wrote against Aristotle and the Church, Wollstonecraft and Mill wrote against authoritarianism, Rawls wrote against crude utilitarianism, etc. Writing *against* is a philosophical move that is interesting in the sense that it tells us something about the history of ideas. More importantly, it is motivating in a real political sense. Liberalism was so motivating because it spoke very clearly about what was wrong about authoritarianism, oppression, and injustice (think about Wollstonecraft). And it won. But what motivates liberalism today? For that matter, what motivates democracy today? Are Hobbes's truths, still true?

But the problem is deeper still. Quite unintentionally, liberalism has arrived at a series of paradoxes that it can't easily resolve. Consider individualism. As philosophers like Colin Crouch and Sheldon Wolin argue, liberalism seems to have created its own monsters. One of the ideological foundations of liberalism is that it takes the individual as being the fundamental unit of politics. This was a radical claim in a time when people were defined by their social groups and their religious creeds (again, recall Hobbes's criticism of the ancients). This sort of individualism has much to recommend it. But in reaching a kind of perfect individualism, have we only arrived at another sort of totalitarianism? One where we are "imperially alone", surrounded by people who are similarly alone. This is what Wolin believes: it is inverted totalitarianism. The problem of totalitarianism, as

Arendt asserted, was that a "people" became a "movement": that is, a mass of thoughtless automatons, without care for politics, obsessed with the most banal parts of life, unmoored to any tradition, and liable to be blown around by whatever ideological winds are blowing that day. It's this socio-political desert of thoughtlessness that allow totalitarianism to flourish. Again, is our modern radical individualism today all that different? What does "fake news" tell us about who we are? We tend to choose our politics with the same amount of thought that we choose our ice cream. We are all rabidly obsessed with the most banal parts of modern life. Wolin isn't required reading for this task, but the scenario he suggests is required thinking!

And there is a raft of other problems. For example, what does it mean that the modern corporation has more rights than citizens do? What does it mean that the people who tend to win elections, tend to also be from the group that spend the most on advertising? How far have we come from Aristotle's definition of democracy: "rule by the poor"?

Or, consider what it means that we do not think of ourselves as workers anymore (despite working all the time) and find no reason for even thinking about questions of solidarity and exploitation. Crouch argues that the best years of liberalism were, in fact, not those of perfect individualism, but those where the people were organized and made demands upon their governments.

Or, consider the liberal presuppositions regarding power and freedom. Can the idea of the state and the idea of freedom as non-interference allow us to address problem like mass-global surveillance, the migration crisis, or environmental degradation?

In sum, have politics changed so radically that our old liberal categories simply do not matter anymore? Have we spent the last two months studying the fictions of our parents instead of the problems of their children?

**Required readings:**
Start with Crouch (2004, pp. 1–30)

**Recommended readings:**
(Swift, 2014, pp. 187–237)
(Hedges, 2015) *This is a short newspaper article/interview with Wolin that's worth reading.

# Task 10: Beyond "Capitalist Realism"

Over the past seven weeks we've talked a lot about freedom, justice, equality, capability, community, rights and more. All of this has taken place in the context of a broader discussion about English speaking liberal philosophy and the liberal democratic form of governance. What we have not talked a great deal about (although it was very present in the criticisms of Rawls from both communitarians and libertarians) is the economic system that, depending on how you view things is either the inseparable and constant partner to liberal-democratic thinking or its frame: capitalism. Why is that? The British writer, critic, cultural theorist, teacher, and philosopher Mark Fisher (1968-2017) gave a provocative answer in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*: It is easier to imagine the end of the world, he wrote, than to imagine the end of capitalism. Capitalism, its ways of thinking and forms of social interaction, has become so prevalent that it has become impossible to think about emancipation outside of its boundaries. Fisher calls this condition "capitalist realism" – a situation where not only is capitalism "the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, pp. 2). In a global situation where liberal democratic capitalism does not seem to be delivering on its social promises – at least not in a Rawlsian sense, is under threat nearly everywhere, and the planet is seemingly faced with impending ecological catastrophe, how, if at all, can or should we think through the capitalist realist condition?

One possibility: go back to another source of European political and indeed liberal thought, the French revolution. The guiding principles of the French revolution *Liberté, Egalité and Fraternité* may be carved on buildings across France, but, argues Samir Amin, they have been hollowed out to the point of meaninglessness. Somewhere along the way *fraternité* got swapped out for *property* in the development of liberal thinking. Therein lies the point of diversion between Marxist thinking, with its close affinity to the revolutionary triplet and the development of liberalism. Somehow, we've strayed from the emancipatory power of reason and what we are left with is a false choice between Rawlsian so-called liberal egalitarianism, barely distinguishable from utilitarianism (says Amin) and post-modern "culturalism", which takes cultures to be essentialist and unchanging. The core of Western political philosophy isn't liberty and equality, but property. Is it possible to return to the core of liberal thinking and reclaim the emancipatory potential of human rational powers? Do we want to, do we need to? The fate of not just the West but of the world may depend upon it!

**Required reading**

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism*. Lanham: Zero Books (John Hunt Publishing), pp. 1-21; 71-81 (it's pretty fast reading, where you don't understand a reference don't worry, try to figure out what he's on about and plow on)

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