
Introduction to Political Theory

Benjamin BOUDOU

Presentation

Political theory is not meant to be abstract, it starts and ends with empirical problems. Why do the many obey the few? What is the best way to legitimate a political regime? What is the difference between democracy and liberalism? Why do we need a constitution after all? What is the role of the state? Do we all mean the same thing by "liberty"? Where do rights come from? Why property matters? Is ethics necessary detached from politics? Who should be a proper member of the political community?

These are some questions that modern political thinkers kept asking because they disagreed on the understanding of men as "political animals." But they all shared the idea that human reason should guide our moral and political inquiries. We are today no more certain to know how to describe our political existence, but at least we have inherited from those great thinkers (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Mill, etc.).

Evaluation

1. **Oral presentation (25%):** Two students prepare a problematized and structured presentation of the text. An oral presentation is not be a text summary, it doesn't need to be exhaustive. During your presentation, you should present the main concepts related to your topic, and explain them in the context of the author's main argument. Each topic should be reformulated into a new research question. Between 10 and 15 minutes. Do not forget it is an oral performance, keep in mind that your audience should easily follow your demonstration (please provide a Powerpoint presentation or an outline sheet). Include a bibliography.
2. **First essay (20%):** Topics for the first essay will be handed out in class a week before it is due. You will have to compare two of the authors studied in class on a specific question (you can choose from a list of questions). It will not be necessary to include outside sources in your essay, but it is authorized. Between 1,000 and 1,500 words.
3. **Second essay (30%):** Topics for the second essay will be handed out in class two weeks before it is due. It will be similar to the first essay, except that you will have to compare three or more authors and counts between 3,000 and 3,500 words.
4. **Quizzes (15%):** No more than 10 minutes each, consisting in a few questions on the mandatory reading(s).
5. **Class participation (10%):** Discussion of the weekly readings, participation to the debates, class attendance (attendance is mandatory, more than two absences in the semester would lead to fail the class).

SEPT.
3

Session 1 • What is modern about modern politics?

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), *The Prince* (entire)

SEPT.
10

Session 2 • Why do we need a government?

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), *Leviathan* (1651), Introduction, Ch. 13-17

SEPT.
17

Session 3 • What kind of government do we need?

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 18-21, 30

SEPT.
24

Session 4 • Do we have rights by nature?

John Locke (1632-1704), *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1689), Ch. 1-9

OCT.
1

Session 5 • Are we entitled to resist political power?

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, Ch. 10-19

OCT.
8

Session 6 • What if political institutions made us bad?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), *Discourse on the Origins and foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1754) (entire)

OCT.
15

Session 7 • How political institutions should make the best of us?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762), Books I-III, Book IV: 1-3; 8-9

OCT.
22

Session 8 • Three kinds of criticism: What if Machiavel, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were wrong?

David Hume (1711-1776), "Of the Origins of government" (1741), "Of the Original Contract" (1748)
Edmund Burke (1729-1797), "A Letter To A Member Of The National Assembly" (1791)
Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), "The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns" (1819)

NOV.
5

Session 9 • Should politics be built on self-interest?

Adam Smith (1723-1790), *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) (selection)
Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)

NOV.
12

Session 10 • Is power a good tool to control power?

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (1787-1788), 10, 51
Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), Intro, Vol.I, Part 1, Ch. 3-4 ; Part 2, Ch. 7, 9

NOV.
19

Session 11 • Why do we care about equality?

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), Vol.II, Part 2, Ch. 1-7 ; Part 3, Ch. 1, 2, 8 ; Part 4, Ch. 6

NOV.
26

Session 12 • How to articulate political power with individual freedom?

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), *On Liberty* (1859), Ch. 1, 2, 4, 5