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Thousands of American Communists demonstrate in New York City's Union Square in 1929. © Corbis

Liberalism and Its Alternatives

A Seminar in Social and Political Philosophy

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Office Hours: Mon 9:15-11:15 AM, Thurs 11:10-Noon

Introduction:

Following the end of Cold War, many thinkers and pundits argued that liberalism was not merely the only tenable form of political philosophy but that it was the form of politics towards which the world was inexorably moving. With less than successful invasions undertaken in the name of liberalism in Afghanistan and Iraq and with the crisis in the world financial system, these arguments for liberalism's triumph have recently been heard with less frequency. In addition, electoral victories by left-leaning leaders in Latin America and the recognized need to reform our domestic health care system have encouraged many to look beyond liberalism to other political philosophies. This search has been made difficult in Anglo-American thought by the post-World War II consolidation of liberal political philosophy as the only defensible model of political organization. However, this orthodoxy is of relatively recent vintage. In order to assess liberalism's claims to superiority, we would do well to examine this philosophy in its original formulation and development and then move on to carefully consider a time (approximately 1880-1945) when liberalism was just one of many political philosophies competing to become the model for political activity. By looking at the critiques of liberalism offered by Marxism, Anarchism, Fascism, and Pragmatic Progressivism as well as at liberalism's responses to these critiques, we will gain some insight into the range of political organizations that are conceivable as well as these organizations' desirability, achievability, and promise.

Class Format and Expectations

Run as an advanced seminar, this course demands much student participation and independent research. It is imperative that you be prepared each day to discuss the assigned readings and any supplemental research. As these are very difficult texts, sufficient preparation entails going over the texts multiple times and having your original research ready to present. The class will consist of discussions that aim at: (a) gaining an understanding of the text at hand; and (b) applying the issues, ideas and concepts that the texts raise to problems and issues both contemporary and historical. To this end, most class meetings will be divided into two halves. In the first and longer half we will focus narrowly on understanding the text itself. After a short break, we will engage in a critical discussion of the text and will look to its possible applications.

For each class meeting, it is expected that you will arrive having formulated a response to the reading(s) to be discussed that day. These responses should contain a brief summary of the author(s)' points (noting key passages, concepts, moments, etc.) and should then extend to the formulation of original questions or comments. These can be questions regarding your own understanding of the text (such as an attempt to answer the question: "What does Hayek mean by planning?"). Alternately, these comments can be critical of the text, supportive of its argument, or (best) can link texts together and/or apply their insights. In addition to these two elements, better responses may also include:

- A consideration of the context (disciplinary, historical, geographic, economic, philosophical) that informs the work under consideration.
- Comments on whether the piece is relevant to your experience, in what way, and how. If it is irrelevant, then say why it is so.
- A consideration of the piece's relationship to other texts that we have read in class? Does it compliment them, refute them, or supersede them?
- The reconsideration of earlier responses in the light of the new piece.

Each day, I will call on seminar participants to relate their responses to the class. This does not mean that you need to come to class with a paper to read each day. However, a few paragraphs will be necessary. **These responses will be collected about once per week.**

Many of the ideas and texts that we are dealing with in this class are hard to understand on our own. Because of this and because doing philosophy means engaging in discussion, attendance is mandatory and you are expected to take part in all class discussions. This aspect of your performance will be reflected in a portion of your grade that reflects its overall importance to the class and that includes the presentation of your "responses" to each text. This grade is based upon both the quality and quantity of your participation.

Assignments and Value

- 5% Reflection piece on Fukuyama essay
- 10% In-Class Presentation
- 15% Class participation (see above for expectations)
- 30% Paper #1
- 40% Paper #2

To pass the class, all assignments must be completed in the order assigned. No late assignments will be accepted without express permission of the instructor obtained at least 24 hours before the assignment's due date. Violations of the Skidmore College Honor Code will result in an "F" for a class grade as well as all penalties imposed by the Honor's Council.

Required Texts:

Course Packet [CP]
John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*
John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised edition
Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*

Note

I strongly encourage you to see me if, at any time, you are having problems with the readings, with understanding the class discussions, or if you just wish to further discuss issues raised in the class. I am willing to spend time with you in person to help you get as much out of the course as you desire.

SCHEDULE

THE CONSTITUTION OF LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Week 1, September 6-12

Thurs Introduction: Liberalism Triumphant?
•••Fukuyama Assignment Given•••

Week 2, September 13-19

Tues John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Chapters 1-5, [CP].
Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), [CP].
•••Fukuyama Assignment Due•••

Thurs John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Chapters 6-11 [CP].

Week 3, September 20-26

Tues John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Chapters 12-19 [CP].

Thurs John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689), pages 1-20 [CP].

Week 4, September 27-October 3

Tues John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration" (1689), pages 20-44 [CP].

Thurs Adam Smith, *An Inquiry in the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), [CP].

Week 5, October 4-10

Tues Jeremy Bentham *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), [CP].

Thurs John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), chapters 1-2 [CP].
•••FIRST PAPER ASSIGNED•••

Week 6, October 11-17

Tues John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), chapters 3-5 [CP].

CHALLENGES TO LIBERALISM

Thurs Mark Mazower, *The Dark Continent*, Chapter 1 & 2 (1998), [CP].
Walter Adamson, "The Liberal Democratic State: Critics" (2003) [CP].

Week 7, October 18-24

Tues Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), [CP].

Thurs August Bebel, *The Society of the Future*, selections (1879 apx.) [CP].
•••First Paper Due•••

Week 8, October 25-31

Tues Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal* (1898), [CP]
•••Second Paper and Presentation Assigned•••

Thurs Emma Goldman "What I Believe" (1908); "Anarchism: What It Really Stands for"; (1911); and "The Place of the Individual In Society" (1940), [CP].

Week 9, November 1-7

Tues Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, sections 1-5

Thurs Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, sections 6-8

Week 10, November 8-14

Tues John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, preface and chapters 1 & 2

Thurs John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, chapter 3

THE RECONSTITUTION OF LIBERALISM**Week 11, November 15-21**

Tues Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958) [CP]

Thurs John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised edition (1999), §§ 1-4, 8, 11-17, 20-30 [long reading].

Week 12, November 22-28

Tues John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised edition (1999)
§§ 33-35, 39-40, 42-44

Thurs Paper and Presentation Meetings

PRESENTATIONS & FINAL PAPER**Week 13, November 29-December 5**

Tues The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (2007) [CP]

Thurs Presentations

Week 14, December 6-12

Tues Presentations

Thurs Presentations

Week 15

•••Second Paper Due••• date TBA