

Seminar: Liberalism and Its Critics

This class is a semester-long weekly seminar intended for advanced undergraduates. The course has two primary goals. First, it will introduce students to liberalism by examining central statements of liberal political theory, both historical and contemporary. Authors include Locke, Mill, Rawls, and others. Students will come to appreciate the diversity of views thought of as “liberal” and will compare and contrast them. Second, the course will treat major criticisms of liberalism according to schools of thought: Marxist, conservative, feminist, republican, and communitarian. Here we will aim to understand the most important criticisms offered by each school and to establish what version or versions of liberalism they address. Ultimately students should be able to consider what deeper philosophical concerns might create divisions within schools and unite separate schools.

The secondary goal of the seminar is to use these writings as a jumping-off point for in-class discussion of the broad philosophical questions introduced by the first week’s readings. These include: What is a normative political theory? What would count as confirmation or refutation of such a theory? How can a theory change to address its critics while remaining the same theory? What makes these changes successful or unsuccessful?

Course Requirements

Two papers, 10 pages each, each on a topic chosen from a list drawn up by the instructor, or one 25 to 30-page seminar paper on a topic chosen by the student in consultation with the instructor.

Since this class is a seminar, class attendance and participation are required.

Readings*Week 1: Scientific Theories, Normative Theories*

Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs”

Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics”

*Week 2: Classic Historical Statements, I*

John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government, chapters I-XI, XIX; A Letter on Toleration

*Week 3: Classic Historical Statements, II*

Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

*Week 4: Contemporary Statements, I*

Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” chapter three of Four Essays on Liberty

Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism”

Judith Sklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” chapter one of Political Thought and Political Thinkers

Jeremy Waldron, “Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism”

*Week 5: Contemporary Statements, II: John Rawls’s A Theory of Justice*

John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, Part I

*Week 6: Contemporary Statements, III: John Rawls’s Political Liberalism*

John Rawls, Political Liberalism, Introduction, Introduction to the Paperback Edition, Part I

*Week 7: Marxist Critiques, I*

Marx, “On the Jewish Question”; “Manifesto of the Communist Party”; “The German Ideology: Part I”

*Week 8: Marxist Critiques, II*

Marx, Capital: Volume 1, chapters 26-32

G.A. Cohen, “Where the Action is: On the Site of Distributive Justice”

*Week 9: Conservative Critiques, I*

Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France

*Week 10: Conservative Critiques, II*

Robert George, Making Men Moral

*Week 11: Feminist Critiques*

Catharine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory”

Eva Feder Kittay, “Human Dependency and Rawlsian Equality”

Susan Moller Okin, Justice, Gender, and the Family, chapters 1, 2, 5-8

*Week 12: Republican Critiques*

Jurgen Habermas, “Reconciliation through the Use of Public Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’s Political Liberalism”

Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?”

*Week 13: Communitarian Critiques, I*

Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, “Preface”

Michael Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self”; Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, chapters 1, 4

Michael Walzer, “The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism”

*Week 14: Communitarian Critiques, II*

Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice, chapters 1, 3, 4, 12, 13

Alisdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, chapters 1, 4-6, 14-18