

## **POLI 4096, Fall 2020, TR – 12:00-1:20 via Zoom**

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Virtual Office Hours by Appointment

### **Course Summary**

Modern-Contemporary Political Thought (POLI 4096) is a survey course covering the major figures of modern political thought. As a result, the course overwhelmingly focuses on the concept of “modernity.” Modernity is an oft-cited but seldom understood concept, encompassing a great number of topics: freedom, individuality, the self, God, morality, and the state. This concept was a matter of great concern for a number of German intellectuals, who argue for and against it. We will consider thinkers who practically embody the concept like Descartes, Kant, and Freud; as well as its discontents such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Weber. There are several thinkers as well, like Hegel, Marx, and Hume, whose approach to modernity is more complicated and nuanced who we will cover as well.

The goal of this course is to better understand not only the concepts listed above, including modernity, but to understand how philosophy has conceived of public life in light of modernity’s radical skepticism. Evaluation will depend upon how well these ideas can be applied to different historical and political contexts.

### **Evaluation & Attendance**

While attendance is vital to success in any class, certain conditions beyond one’s control may make it difficult to attend class regularly. Thus, I will be more lenient than usual in allowing absences. However, this is done at your own risk: I will not be very sympathetic if you do not meet deadlines and come to me at the end of the course asking for amnesty. Please make the effort give the current situation to meet deadlines and stay in regular communication with me via email or other means if you cannot regularly attend our Zoom meetings. Due dates for essays two, three, and four will be announced as the class progresses.

This course will have five essay assignments of increasing worth and involvement as the readings advance:

Essay One: What is Modernity? How would you define it? What does it mean to be “modern?” One page, 10% of grade. **Due Sept. 4th**

Essay Two: How do Descartes, Hume, and Kant approach the question of modernity differently? How do they approach it similarly? Two to three pages, 15% of grade. **Due after End of Section “Rationalism, Empiricism, Idealism.”**

Essay Three: How do Freud or Weber deviate from the ideas of Kant and Hegel? How do they attempt to escape from the idea of philosophical systems established by Enlightenment thought? Do they succeed? Two to three pages, 20% of grade **Due after End of Section, “Interlude.”**

Essay Four: Marx and Nietzsche both seek to overcome what they view as the malaise and injustice of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal society. How do they each seek to overcome these conditions philosophically or politically? Three to four pages, 25% of grade. **Due after End of section “The Death and Rebirth of God”**

Essay Five - Final: See section on final. 30% of grade. **Due December 5th**

## Readings

NB: All readings will be placed on Moodle except in the case of Martin Heidegger, whose book, *Basic Writings*, contains both of his readings we will cover in this course and can be purchased at a reasonable cost at the LSU Bookstore, Amazon, Powells, Barnes & Noble, and elsewhere. Further, some of the online versions of these texts have rather arcane translations. If you have a problem understanding a text, please let me know and I can recommend an alternative translation at a reasonable cost.

### Rationalism, Empiricism, Idealism: Descartes, Hume, and Kant

“I think. I exist.”

-Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

“I say, then, that belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain”

-David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

“I freely admit that the remembrance of David Hume was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy.”

-Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5.

Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic* Preface, Preamble, General Question, Solution

## The Enlightenment: Kant

“*Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.”

-Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question What is Enlightenment?”

“The greatest evil that can oppress civilized peoples derives from wars, not, indeed, so much from actual present or past wars, as from the never-ending and constantly increasing arming for future war.”

-Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”

“Out of the crooked timber of man, not one thing was made straight.”

-Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent”

“An Answer to the Question What is Enlightenment?”

Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch

An Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent

## The Modern Critique of Modernity: Hegel

“History is not the soil of happiness. The periods of happiness are blank pages in it.”

-G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*

“The essence of the modern state is the union of the universal with the full freedom of the particular, and with the welfare of individuals.”

-G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*

*The Philosophy of History*, “Introduction,” “The Modern Age.”

*Elements of The Philosophy of Right*: § 34-40, “Abstract Right”; § 142-157, “Ethical Life”; § 182-188, “Civil Society”; § 257-259, “The State”

## Interlude: Weber, Freud, and Marx

“The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental.”

-Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”

“It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement — that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life.”

-Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

“The philosophers have merely interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it.”

-Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”

Weber: “Science as a Vocation”

Freud: “Civilization and its Discontents,” I, III, V, VIII

Marx: “Theses on Feuerbach”

### The Critique of Philosophy: Marx

“Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”

-Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”

“The mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”

-Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Chapters I, III, VI, VII

*A Critique of Political Economy*, Intro

### The Death and Rebirth of God: Nietzsche

“Madness is something rare in individuals — but in groups, parties, peoples, epochs it is the rule.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

*Beyond Good and Evil*, Parts Two, Five, Eight, and Nine

## After Metaphysics: Heidegger

“Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought. Questioning is a knowing search for beings in their thatness and whatness.”

-Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

“Humans act as though we were the creators and masters of language, while in fact language remains the master of us. Perhaps it is, before all else, humankind's distortion of this relation of dominance that drives our nature into alienation.”

-Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking”

*Being and Time*, Introduction

“Building Dwelling Thinking”

## **Final**

In five pages or fewer, apply the thought of someone we've studied this semester (Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Weber, etc.) to one of the following short stories or novellas:

- “The Man Child” by James Baldwin
- “The Machine Stops” by E.M. Forster
- “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka
- “Bartelby the Scrivener” by Herman Melville
- “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison
- “A Good Man is Hard to Find” by Flannery O'Connor

A good paper will make creative and analytic use of both the literary and philosophical texts and conclude with an original thought regarding the text in question. A good paper will also avoid excessive summarization and include specific examples from the texts used in the analysis.

All of these texts are easily accessible online and should be available on Main Campus's library, or through ILL. If you cannot find a copy of the text you wish to read and analyze, please let me know and we'll try to work something out. I would also strongly recommend reading about these texts before selecting one, as they are all very different from one another. **Due Nov. 30<sup>th</sup>.**

## **ADA Compliance**

The University is committed to making reasonable efforts to assist individuals with disabilities in their efforts to avail themselves of services and programs offered by the University. To this end, Louisiana State University will provide reasonable accommodations for persons with documented qualifying disabilities. If you have a disability and feel you need accommodations in this course, you must present a letter to me from Disability Services in 115 Johnston Hall, indicating the existence of a disability and the suggested accommodations.