MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

“Modern Political Philosophy” encompasses the period in European political thinking that begins in the late 15th century and ends in the later 18th century. It is the period in which Europeans were faced with fundamental revolutions in the way they understood God and the universe, the nature of political power and authority, and the proper structure of political community. These revolutions – associated with the Renaissance, Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the emergence of the Modern Sovereign State, and the beginnings of Capitalism – produced a transformation in the ways politics was understood. Political philosophers identified a broad crisis of authority and identity created by these revolutions, and attempted to respond by rethinking the fundamental questions of politics and society. Our contemporary traditions of political thinking are an outgrowth of these responses.

In this class, part of the Cluster “Enlightenment and Revolution,” we will survey the whole tradition, but focus on the political philosophy of 17th century England. During this century England experienced fundamental conflicts over the role of religion in politics, endured a Civil War in which the structure of political power collapsed, executed a King but then restored a Monarchy, and finally settled the question of political power in ways that set British (and later American) politics and political philosophy off in different directions from that in the rest of Europe. In the process, we will explore different reactions to this political history, how the reactions were shaped by both English tradition but especially the new currents of religious and political thought in Europe more generally, and evaluate their impact on the ways we currently think of politics and its place in the human condition.

COURSE OUTCOMES:

At the end of the semester, each student will be expected to demonstrate the following abilities:

- an understanding of the central problems and arguments in modern political philosophy;

- to explain the intersection between religious and philosophical expression in the tradition of modern political philosophy;

- to engage effectively in a critical discussion of some of the normative claims of this tradition.

- to demonstrate the relationship between philosophical debate and political conflict in 17th century England.
COURSE READING:

The following texts are required for the course:

- Niccolo Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*.
- Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*.
- David Wooton, ed., *Divine Right and Democracy*.
- Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.
- John Milton, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings*.
- John Locke, *The Political Writings*.

I will be adding occasional reading over the course of the semester. These sources may be available on D2L, the Internet, and/or a good Library.

COURSE OUTLINE:

In this outline, I organize the readings by weeks, and will provide more specific assignments when necessary. I hope to keep to the schedule, but will remain flexible to allow the flow of discussion to take us in new directions when necessary. Essays that are not in the course texts will be distributed in class, left on reserve, or can be found on-line.

A) – The Renaissance and Reformation Foundations.

September 4-6 – The Renaissance and Political Thought.

Reading: Machiavelli, *The Prince and The Discourses* (selections).

September 11-13 – The Reformation and Political Thought.

Reading: Luther and Calvin, *On Secular Authority*.

B) – The Radicalism of the English Civil Wars.

September 18-20 – The Background to Crisis.

Reading: Wooton, ed., Parts One, Two, and Three (selections).

September 25-October 4 – Radical Themes and Innovations.

Reading: Wooton, ed. Parts Four, Five, Six, and Seven (selections).

Reading: Hobbes, Leviathan (selections).

C) Restoration, Revolution, and the Making of Modern Politics.

October 30-November 8 – Restoration and the “Glorious” Revolution.

Reading: Locke, The Political Writings (selections)


Reading: Selections From David Hume and Adam Smith.

November 27-December 6 – Commonwealthmen, Revolutionaries, and Power in America.

Reading: Hamilton, et al., The Federalist Papers.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Your grade for this course will be based on your performance on the following assignments:

1. Each student will lead the class discussion once during the semester. The student will be responsible for summarizing the main ideas in the reading, identifying links to other class readings, raising key questions for discussion, and leading the discussion. (10%)

2. Each student will submit two short essays in response to reading questions distributed over the semester. These essays will be no longer than five pages in length, focused on a particular argument in one of the readings, and must be directed at two different readings. (20% total)

3. There will be a midterm exam in this class, on Wednesday, October 18, which will be a short answer and essay exam. (20%)

4. Each student will be responsible for submitting a substantial research paper, about 20 pages in length, on one of the major 17th century thinkers we discuss over the semester. The paper will be due on Monday, December 11. This assignment will require the development of a clear question regarding the arguments(s) of this writer, the use of classic and current scholarly sources regarding that writer, and careful close analysis of a text or set of writings. (30%)

5. There will be a final exam in this class, a short answer and essay exam, which will emphasize the material of the second half of the semester. (20%)
NOTE: This course will be organized as a seminar so regular participation – based on careful reading of the material before class – is expected of all students. I have not included a specific item for class participation, but poor preparation and/or participation will negatively affect your overall final grade.

ASSESSMENT:

The assessment of your work on these assignments will be based on your ability to demonstrate competence in the course outcomes presented earlier:

1. “Demonstrating an understanding of the central problems and arguments in modern political philosophy” will be assessed by evaluating each student’s work on each of the assignments above. More specifically, the two exams are especially important here, as they will ask the student to present and explain these key problems and arguments in a focused manner. In the research paper, perhaps more importantly, each student will have to identify one of these problems, explain how a particular thinker approached it, and evaluate their arguments in light of the broader context of political philosophy in which they wrote.

2. “Demonstrating the ability to explain the intersection between religious and philosophical expression in the tradition of modern political philosophy” will also be assessed over the course of the semester’s assignments. In particular, it will be a central task for students on each of the exams. Both the midterm and the final exam will center on the questions of the impact of religious and philosophical expression on this particular era of political philosophy. In addition, my intention is to make this question a central one for each student when she or he leads class discussion. Finally, depending on the topic of the student’s research paper, demonstrating this skill may be essential in the evaluation of the student’s work.

3. “Demonstrating the ability to engage effectively in a critical discussion of some of the normative claims of this tradition” will be assessed in two ways. First, the various shorter assignments across the semester – class presentation and discussion leadership, two short essays – will specifically ask students to evaluate the normative claims of elements of English revolutionary era political philosophy. Second, the research paper assignment will require each student not only to analyze a particular writer’s work, but to evaluate its contribution to the broader normative debates in modern political philosophy.

4. The ability “to demonstrate the relationship between philosophical debate and political conflict in 17th century England” is in many ways the overarching outcome for the course, implied in all our assignments and discussions. To be more specific, however, this ability will be the focus of assessment in the midterm and final exams. As students explore the intersection of religious and philosophical expression in the philosophy of this period, they will be asked to focus their analysis on how this philosophical tradition(s) was shaped and shaped by the radical political conflict of the era. In addition, while the paper topic may concern a writer working prior to or after the 17th century, a key and essential standard for evaluating the student’s work is to show how this writer’s
work is linked to the intersection of philosophical and political contestation in the 17th century.

In addition to these specific outcomes, the following general policy will guide my evaluation of your work:

“In grading your written work, I will be looking primarily at the quality and persuasiveness of your arguments, your ability to clearly support your opinions and conclusions. I am most concerned with your success in understanding some of the perennial problems of politics, and in presenting your own ideas and conclusions concerning these problems. As a result, the quality of your writing, in addition to the quality of your arguments, will be weighed in determining your grade on each written assignment.”

GRADING SYSTEM:

Each assignment will be graded on a point system, with 100 points being the maximum possible. You will then be given a letter grade that matches the score. I will use the following grading scale on each assignment:

- A = 100-93
- A- = 92-90
- B+ = 89-87
- B = 86-83
- B- = 82-80
- C+ = 79-77
- C = 76-73
- C- = 72-70
- D+ = 69-67
- D = 66-63
- D- = 62-60
- F = 59 and below

In figuring your final grade, I will average and weight the numerical totals, and assign the appropriate letter grade.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND HONESTY:

All students should note and consider carefully the following policies:

- Absences from Exams: “Absence from an announced examination results in a failing grade for the examination, unless suitable arrangements are made for a special examination.” (Westminster College Undergraduate Catalog, pp. 71) For this course, a make-up exam will be arranged only if I am notified more than 12 hours in advance of the scheduled exam, and the reasons for missing the exam are sufficiently compelling.

- Plagiarism and Cheating: These and any other forms of academic dishonesty and theft will not be tolerated in this class. They are a violation of the norms of mutual respect,
individual integrity, and the open exchange of ideas, and are subject to severe penalties, including automatic failure in the class. We will discuss the meaning and importance of academic honesty early in the class, and you can also consult the Westminster College Undergraduate Catalog, pages 71-75, for more details on the Westminster College Academic Integrity Policy, which will be in force in this class. One specific element of this policy is worth emphasizing right now. Whenever you submit a piece of writing, it must include the proper citations for all of your sources, including readings used in the course. Failure to appropriately cite your sources will result in a reduction of your grade on the assignment.

HOW TO FIND ME:

Email – cohenes@westminster.edu
US mobile phone – 1-412-445-9303
Office Hours – M, W – 1-2 pm
T, Th – 10:30 am- Noon
Office – 301 Asa Briggs.