

POLITICS: POSTMODERN CULTURE AND PRINCIPLES

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[SPRING 2021]

DESCRIPTION

This seminar will explore contemporary political and cultural issues from a classically realist foundation, proposing a genuinely “postmodern” response to the crisis of our time. When the term “postmodern” is used today, it typically denotes what is in practice a kind of “hypermodernism,” that is, an ideology which simply takes modern thinking to its logical conclusion (e.g., complete subjectivism, moral relativism, skepticism, nihilism, etc.). What “postmodern” should signify is something which looks **beyond** modernity, and it is in this sense which we use the term ourselves. Our “postmodern” response against the modern crisis retrieves from pre-modern political philosophy what modernity wrongfully left behind while engaging directly with modern culture.



In the first half of this seminar, we will consider the trajectory of Western political thought from the ancient to the modern era. Here, we shall try to understand how political philosophy and culture in the West has developed to its current stage. We will also identify features of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought which could serve us well today. The second half of this seminar will focus on Jacques Maritain’s *Integral Humanism*, as his work provides the basis for our claims in response to modernity. Here, we will consider Maritain’s critiques of modern culture, secular liberalism, and totalitarianism, and his proposals for “integral humanism,” and the “concrete historical ideal.”

METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Each discussion session is structured around a reading from a particular philosopher with a secondary reading at times meant to assist with understanding the primary source. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the discussion session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. As this is an advanced seminar, one *cannot* participate well without a *deep engagement* with the assigned reading. Moreover, *continual discussion* will foster that participation and engagement throughout the week. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis, and will be challenged to do so directly.

READING

Some of the primary texts for this seminar are available online, primarily from the first half of the seminar covering the history of political philosophy. Additional required and supplemental readings will be provided via Teams. These are the online editions we shall use for the older works in the first half of the seminar: [Aristotle's *Ethics*](#); [Aristotle's *Politics*](#); [St. Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on the Ethics*](#); [St. Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on the Politics*](#); St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Secundae, [Question 90](#), [Question 91](#), and [Question 92](#); [Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*](#); [Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*](#). If you would like to purchase your own physical copies, we will be using the following editions: [James Wiser's *Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order*](#); [Jacque Maritain's *Integral Humanism*](#).

LECTURE

Each week there will also be a 20-40+ minute audio lecture, posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing some related issue (perhaps one more general, or perhaps one more specific). The primary (but not sole) purpose of these lectures is to help clarify some of the more difficult concepts and arguments contained within the reading, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions.

There *may* be accompanying visual aids (not necessarily) in order to provide some clarity as to textual points, but one *should* be able, in most cases, to simply listen to the lecture (and perhaps consult the visual aids later). This should allow more flexibility: making the lectures suitable accompaniment for a commute, while doing chores, going for a run, etc.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays at 3:00-4:00 pm ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

CONTRIBUTION

It is hoped and expected that each participant in the seminar will provide a contribution: a piece of writing, recorded presentation, or something else, within one month of the seminar's conclusion, as a way of coalescing what has been learned in a demonstrative manner. Topics are suggested, and the instructor is available for discussions and assistance in composing your contribution.

SESSION SCHEDULE

<p>March 20</p>	<p><u>Aristotle and the Beginning of Political Science</u> Lecture 1: What is “political science”? Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle, <i>Politics</i> Book I, Parts 1-2 (pages 3-6). • Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>, Book I, Chapters I-4 (pages 3-6). • St. Thomas Aquinas, <i>Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics</i>, Proemium; Lecture I. • St. Thomas Aquinas, <i>Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics</i>, Book I, Lectures 1-3.
<p>March 27</p>	<p><u>St. Thomas Aquinas and the Reality of Law</u> Lecture 2: What is “law”? Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>, Prima Secundae, Questions 90-92.
<p>April 3</p>	<p><u>Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Nominalism</u> Lecture 3: When politics abandons the common good. Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i>, Chapters VI, XIII, and XVII (pages 31-39; 76-79; 103-106). • James Wiser, <i>Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order</i>, “Thomas Hobbes,” 185-208.
<p>April 10</p>	<p><u>Karl Marx and the Totalitarian Turn</u> Lecture 4: When politics replaces religion. Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Karl Marx, <i>The Communist Manifesto</i>, 14-34. • James Wiser, <i>Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order</i>, “Karl Marx,” 351-377.
<p>April 17</p>	<p><u>Jacques Maritain’s Summary of Modernity</u> Lecture 5: How have we arrived at this point? Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacques Maritain, <i>Integral Humanism</i>, Introduction; Chapter I, 152-173.
<p>April 24</p>	<p><u>Jacques Maritain’s Critiques of Liberalism and Totalitarianism</u> Lecture 6: The crisis of contemporary politics and the need for a “new” humanism. Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacques Maritain, <i>Integral Humanism</i>, Chapters II-III, 174-232.
<p>May 1</p>	<p><u>Jacques Maritain and the “Concrete Historical Ideal”</u> Lecture 7: A realistic ideal for realistic politics. Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacques Maritain, <i>Integral Humanism</i>, Chapters IV-V, 233-284.
<p>May 8</p>	<p><u>Jacques Maritain and the “New Christendom”</u> Lecture 8: The next stage for Western civilization. Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jacques Maritain, <i>Integral Humanism</i>, Chapters VI-VII, 285-336.