

Varieties of Liberalism: Transformations, Justifications and Refutations (PHIL V3731)

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Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:10-2:25pm - Hamilton 303

The syllabus provides a list of the main topics and of the individual class sessions for the course “Varieties of Liberalism: Transformations, Justifications and Refutations.” It is accompanied by a Reader that contains required and suggested reading for the course. The readings follow the syllabus in that they are organized under the same five rubrics. The Reader is available for purchase at the Village Copier which is located on the east side of Broadway between 111th and 112th Street. To the degree to which the course is carried out as a lecture and discussion course, the readings for each section form the basis for class discussion. To the degree to which the course may be carried out as a seminar-style course with student presentations, there would be additional suggested readings. In any event, the interest of students can help to shape the latter parts of the course for which additional readings can be distributed to all students.

The decision as to the basis for grading the students in the course, that is, required papers or a midterm and final exam, will be announced in the opening sessions of the course. There will be student participation in arriving at this decision.

The assumption of the course is that the opposition between liberalism and conservatism has been a significant one that has divided the intellectual and political universe. In some contexts it is clear that the universe may be considered as divided between liberals and conservatives. In other contexts, it has also been evident to historians of political thought to be divided between those who consider such a polar opposition to be crucial and those who do not. The course does not aim as much at clarifying the actual policies that have divided liberals and conservatives, but to identify the grounds in political philosophy that have been the basis for varieties of Liberalism and of Conservatism.

I. The relevance of the nature of human nature for political philosophy.

1. The dystopian view of the state of nature provides a basis for one account of the nature of human nature in political society. A classic and succinct formulation of the dystopian view is available in Chapter XIII of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. An analysis of this text is relevant for political liberalism through its justification of the contract theory of the state and is also relevant for political conservatism in its justification of political realism in international relations

The course reader provides the focus for a discussion of the dual character of **Hobbes**’s political philosophy. This focus is sharpened by being limited to one chapter of *Leviathan*. Thus, the reader contains only Chapter XIII of *Leviathan*.

2. A sketch of historical progress with the implication of human perfectibility provides a basis for one account of the nature of human nature in political society. There have been many formulations of utopian thought in political philosophy ranging from Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit* to Lenin's *State and Revolution*. Condorcet's arguments for human perfectibility at the end of the eighteenth century is relevant to the analysis of political liberalism and political conservatism.

The course reader provides an abridged and selected text from **Condorcet's** concluding chapter of *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit*.

3. A non-dystopian and non-utopian view of the state of nature provided a basis for one account of the nature of human nature in political society. Locke's *Second Treatise* developed a classic formulation of this neutral version of the State of Nature. Locke's interpretation of the State of Nature was relevant for Liberal theories of the contractual nature of the State as well as for subsequent conservative theories of property rights.

The course reader contains selections from **Locke's** *Second Treatise* which provide materials for the relevance of Lockean theory for liberalism and conservatism.

4. An analysis of the view that all theories of the State of Nature, whether utopian, dystopian, or neutral, are conceptually incoherent. One corollary of such an analysis points to the significance of historical institutions and historical traditions in political philosophy. One formulation of this "historical" view is available in Michael Oakeshott's essay "Rationalism and Politics." Oakeshott's critique of Rationalism became a fundamental plank of contemporary conservative thought. Although the issue of justification on grounds of "the tradition" remained contested.

The course reader contains a major portion of **Oakeshott's** essay "Rationalism and Politics."

5. The analysis of the issues involved in the confrontation between Condorcet and Oakeshott includes the issue of the possibility of social sciences as well as the criticism of an appeal to Tradition as an arbiter for social policy.

The class discussion on these issues requires the students to have read the texts in the reader of Condorcet and Oakeshott.

II. The nature of political obligation and the theory of social contract.

The division between liberalism and conservatism can be characterized by reference to the strength or weakness of the concept of "political obligation" as compared to the strength or weakness of the idea of a "social contract."

1. The earliest account of the nature of political obligation is found in Plato's dialogue the *Crito*. The Socratic argument represents a position that is contrary to most modern theories of the social contract. Plato's argument is considered to be at an extreme in the history of the justification of political obligation. It may be relevant to point out at the outset that some contemporary scholars have argued that Plato or Socrates do not sincerely believe the Socratic view that is being developed in the dialogue. Their argument is that it represents a position that persuades Crito to permit Socrates to carry out his desire to become a martyr for philosophy.

The course reader contains the complete text of **Plato's** *Crito*.

2. The interpretation of the nature of political obligation in modern theories of the social contract differs significantly from the platonic theory of political obligation as well as from covenantal theories exemplified in historic religions.

The preceding texts of Hobbes and Locke provide a basis for class discussion of the interpretation of political obligation under theories of social contract. There is no additional text beyond Locke and Hobbes in the reader, but the student might take note of Jeremy Bentham's pejorative phrase for most contractual theories as anarchical fallacies.

3. There is a spectrum of interpretations of political obligations between Platonic or covenantal theories and social contract theories. Along the lines of this spectrum there have been efforts to suggest transgenerational theories of political obligation. Significant theses in this area have developed in the thought of *Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* or in Walter Lippman's *The Public Philosophy*.

The reader contains a short and famous passage from **Edmund Burke** which illustrates his criticism of the social contract theory as supportive of revolution. It also contains excerpts on Burke's political thought regarding what was later termed the "totalitarian potential of democracy" as well as Burke's support for the idea of "Reform" as opposed to "Revolution."

In a more recent and differing formulation, the issue of the nature of the social contract has been developed in Walter Lippman's, *The Public Philosophy*, an excerpt of which will be distributed to the class.

4. One significant index of the distinction between liberalism and conservatism is to be found in their differing analyses of the concept of "Revolution." Changes in the meaning of the term "Revolution" provide a starting point for class discussion of this contrast. Among the background works cited for the analysis of the concept of Revolution is Hannah Arendt's study titled *On Revolution*.

The class lecture will refer to this work but the selection from **Hannah Arendt's** *On Revolution* on the changing meanings of the term "Revolution" which is provided in the reader is background reading as distinct from required reading.

III. The extension of the issue of the nature of human nature to the division between political realism and political idealism in national foreign policy.

1. One of the classic formulations of political realism in the history of political philosophy is identified with the writings of Machiavelli. Isaiah Berlin's essay "The Originality of Machiavelli" is an explication of the relevance of Machiavelli's thought for political philosophy. Berlin's argument moves beyond Machiavelli as a political realist to raise the issue of moral pluralism as well as the issue of the conceptual incoherence of utopianism.

The reader contains an abridged and edited version of "The Originality of Machiavelli" by **Isaiah Berlin**.

2. The debate between political realism and political idealism raises the question of whether there can be a single morality for both the public and the private realms. A significant contribution to this debate was formulated by Max Weber in his essay “Politics as Vocation” with his distinction between a morality of ultimate ends and a morality of institutional responsibility.

The reader contains the relevant excerpt on this theme from **Max Weber**, “Politics as Vocation.”

3. The alternative thesis to political realism has been political idealism. In the American tradition, the contrasting theses can be examined by an analysis of the differences between the foreign policy statement of President John Quincy Adams and the statement of Fourteen Points by President Woodrow Wilson. Since World War II, the extension of natural rights theory to international human rights has been an important aspect of political idealism. The formulation of the human rights-thesis was expressed through the Declaration of Universal Human Rights.

As background for the discussion of political idealism and political realism, the reader contains four texts: an abridged version of the speech by **John Quincy Adams** in 1821; **Woodrow Wilson’s** declaration of Fourteen Points; “**The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**” of 1789, and the “**Universal Declaration of Human Rights**” of 1948.

IV. Liberty and Governmental Intervention in Economic Affairs: Drawing the Line and Redrawing the Line.

1. The relationship between Liberty and Governmental Intervention has been central to the development of Liberalism and Conservatism throughout the modern period in Europe, the United States and in the Global economy. Classical liberalism initiated the debate with its interpretation of Liberty as excluding governmental intervention against the rights of the individual in the economic sphere.

The reader contains three selections representing “Classic Liberalism” on economic issues. The first representative of Classical Liberalism is **Adam Smith** and the reader contains two selections from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. (In one of these selections, the student should note the use of the phrase “Invisible Hand.”) The second representative is **Jeremy Bentham**, the founder of Utilitarianism and a leader of the Liberal movement in England. The selection is Bentham’s provocative essay “The Defense of Usury.”

Continental Liberalism as exemplified in the writings of Immanuel Kant also argued against governmental intervention in the economic sphere, although such non-intervention was justified by the distinction between the neutrality of public law as contrasted with the legitimacy of advocacy for private interests.

2. The transition of liberalism from a doctrine which argued against governmental intervention in the economic sphere to a doctrine which supported governmental intervention was one of the striking transformations that have taken place under the rubric of liberalism. Within liberalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, different justifications for the legitimacy of governmental intervention in economic affairs were advanced. In an exposition and strong defense of liberalism, at the turn of the century, L.T. Hobhouse argued the case for the necessity and legitimacy of government intervention as consistent with Liberty.

The reader contains a series of excerpts from **L.T. Hobhouse's** book *Liberalism* in which the main lines of his argument are developed.

In the twentieth century, the most influential economist who supported governmental intervention in economic affairs is generally recognized to be John Maynard Keynes.

The reader contains selected excerpts from **Keynes's** essay "The end of Laissez Faire" in which Keynes both sketches the history of the early adoption of laissez faire economics and develops some arguments for the modification of that approach.

In the United States, the most focused battleground for the issue of governmental intervention took place in the Supreme Court of the United States. The Supreme Court declared New Deal legislation unconstitutional on the ground that such governmental action violated the natural rights, that is, the right of the individual to freely contract the conditions for his sale of his labor. After a bitter dispute with the Roosevelt administration, the Supreme Court reversed its position and the New Deal legislation was judged to be constitutional.

3. The great debate over governmental intervention in economic affairs was deepened and became more complicated with the rise of various theories of socialism, including Marxism. The refutation of the economic theses of socialism, particularly within the Austrian school of economics led by von Mises, von Hayek, and Schumpeter, resulted in new justifications for a revised form of classical Liberalism which became identified with conservatism. In the context of politics, the line was drawn on the issue of the proportion of the gross domestic product of any economy which could be ascribed to the public sector as distinct from the proportion which must be ascribed to the private sector. In philosophical terms, the argument was carried out on such issues as the Rule of Law or the completeness of economic knowledge.

The reader contains three short selections from **von Hayek**. In the first selection, from *The Constitution of Liberty*, "the Rule of Law," von Hayek draws the line between governmental intervention that would violate the Rule of Law, as in a Marxist "command economy" and governmental intervention that is consistent with the Rule of Law. In the second selection, from *Capitalism and the Historians*, titled "History and Politics," von Hayek argues the apparently neutral thesis that the interpretation of historical past influences economic policy toward the future. His illustration, however, is not necessarily neutral since he argues that the historians of the industrial revolution had not correctly interpreted the evidence on the relationship between the early phases of the industrial revolution and the existence or abolition of extreme poverty. The third selection considers the limitations on scientific knowledge in the social sciences.

4. The debate between liberalism and conservatism in the economic sphere has been developed for some contexts as a division between the primacy of the value of equality and the primacy of the value of growth.

The most significant formulation of the thesis of the justification of equality for liberalism in recent decades has been identified with the theory of **John Rawls**. The reader contains Rawls's essay "Justice as Fairness."

The formulation of Rawls's Difference Principle, however, can be developed as a justification of the primacy of economic growth for the abolition of poverty.

V. Issues in Culture and Education

1. The ambiguities in the concept of liberal education range from the traditional interpretation of a liberal education as an education in the classical tradition through the Millian version, which emphasizes the freedom of the individual to develop his own curriculum as distinct from a prescribed curriculum, to a Deweyan interpretation of a liberal education as an education which stresses freedom of inquiry.

The reader contains an essay “On Liberalism and Liberal Education” by **David Sidorsky** that discusses these three variants of liberal education within the theory of liberalism. This essay is intended as introductory for the issues raised by liberalism and conservatism on culture and education. The development of this theme involves differing texts and arguments from J.J. Rousseau, T.S. Eliot, J.P. Sartre, Charles Taylor, and current controversies on the limits of scientific inquiry or multiculturalism.

This part of the syllabus, however, has not been outlined for the course. It is assumed that after the completion of part IV, the class will consider the number of classes remaining and student preferences will be taken into account in the decision regarding the text and issues to be presented for the last topic of the syllabus.