



Mahidol University  
International College

## ICIR 203 Foundations of Political Thought

### Course Description & Aims:

This course consists of a historical survey of the major paradigms in the Social Sciences (History, Political Science, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, Psychology) during the twentieth century. Emphasis will be on the political aspects of such areas of activity as economics, sociology, etc. Students will understand; analyze; assess schools and paradigms of political thought. They should also be able to understand the relationship between politics, economics and social phenomena. The primary aim is to introduce students to foundational political and social theories, and to enable them to apply these to contemporary problems.

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### Assessment

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Classroom participation                     | 10% |
| Student activities                          | 10% |
| Quizzes                                     | 20% |
| Group presentation                          | 25% |
| Reading summaries with discussion questions | 15% |
| Final paper                                 | 20% |

### Course Learning Outcomes:

At the completion of the course, the students will be able to

1. Demonstrate basic knowledge of concepts and methodologies of political philosophy
2. Articulate these concepts and relate them to contemporary political settings and contexts
3. Read critically and write critically about political theories

| Topic No. | Topic  |
|-----------|--|
| 1         | Introduction: What is political thought and why study it?          |
| 2         | Foundational thinkers (600-400 BC: Socrates, Siddharta, Confucius) |
| 3         | Political and the Political (Aristotle, Macchiavelli, Ibn Khaldun) |
| 4         | The State of Nature and the Social Contract                        |
| 5         | Happiness and Welfare  |
| 6         | Review and Assessment  |
| 7         | Liberty  |
| 8         | Equality   |
| 9         | Justice  |
| 10        | Postmodern Approaches to the State                                 |
| 11        | Postcolonial Perspectives and Political Philosophy                 |
| 12        | Review and Concluding Discussion                                   |

### Assessment Criteria:

**1. Classroom Participation 10%**

Classroom participation is based on attendance, preparation for class and the quality of students' participation in class discussions.

**2. Student activities 10%**

Students can receive up to 10% for their written work as part of the student activities.

**3. Quizzes 20%**

There will be regular quizzes throughout the term. Students can receive up to 2% per quiz and 20% maximum in total.

**4. Group Presentation 25%**

Students will present a selected issue in political philosophy, applying one or several theoretical perspectives that were discussed in the class. After the presentation, the students are expected to answer questions from the audience and to trigger and moderate a discussion about their presentation topic.

**5. Reading summaries with discussion questions 15%**

Students are expected to submit short summaries (500 words max) of the weekly assigned readings plus one or two discussion questions relevant to the reading.

**6. Final paper 20%**

The final paper is a response of 2000 to 3000 words to one of several proposed essay questions. The paper should be well organized, make a clear and compelling argument, contain a thesis statement, and fully cite all sources. Students should incorporate course readings as sources and adhere to academic conventions when writing their paper.

### Introduction: What is political thought and why study it?

**Topic description:** This week's class will familiarize students with the subject of political thought and its role in the field of international relations and global affairs. It will also introduce the course mechanics and allow students to comment and suggest changes to the syllabus and schedule. Students will be introduced to key concepts in the discussion of philosophical arguments.

**Expected learning outcomes:**

- students will be able to describe key features of the field of political philosophy and understand how political philosophy relates to other fields within international relations and global affairs
- students will be able to explain the concepts of premises, arguments and conclusions in political philosophy.

**Readings:**

- Charles Larmore. 2012. 'What is Political Philosophy?' *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. DOI 10.1163/174552412X628896.
- Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. 2018. *Think Again: How to Reason and Argue*. Oxford University Press.

**Student activities:**

1. Students will be brainstorming and formulating questions they consider key questions of political philosophy.
2. Students will formulate very basic theories about a posed question and analyze their own theories in terms of premises, arguments and conclusions.

**Foundational thinkers (600-400 BC)**

**Topic description:** This week begins with an introduction to Gautama Siddhartaha, Confucius and Socrates as key foundational thinkers, who raised questions and issues which have continued to shape the political cultures of the places where they lived. Students will explore how Confucian political thought can help to understand the role of ritual in modern politics and how Buddhist political ethics might be relevant for contemporary environmental political thought.

**Expected learning outcomes:**

- students will be able to engage with the concept of “foundations” in the context of political thought
- students will understand differences and similarities between Siddhartaha, Confucius and Socrates’ political ideas

**Readings:**

- **J. Babb. 2018. *A World History of Political Thought*. Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing. pp. 25-48 (“The foundational thinkers (600-400 BC)”).**
- David Wong. 2011. ‘Confucian Political Philosophy.’ In George Klosko (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*. Online publication. <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238804.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199238804-e-48?print=pdf> (21 August 2020).

**Student activity:**

1. Students will identify a particular ritual in politics, discuss it from a Confucian perspective, and present their results to the class.

**Politics and the Political (Aristotle, Machiavelli, Ibn Khaldun)**

**Topic description:** This week will introduce students to different perspectives towards what it means to be political. Students will learn about Aristotle’s view of human beings as essentially “political beings”, Macchiavelli and Weber’s conceptualization of politics as a fight for power and influence, and Ibn Khaldun’s concept of *asabiya* and social solidarity as the core of political culture. The class will also discuss the re-discovery of the “political” in the intense discussions of civil society in the contemporary context.

**Expected learning outcomes:**

- Students will be aware of different approaches towards the “political” and able to describe different perspectives on “political life”
- They will be able to compare and contrast different political thinkers.

**Readings:**

- Alfred Gierer. 2001. ‘Ibn Khaldun on Solidarity (“Asabiyah”) – Modern Science on Cooperativeness and Empathy: A Comparison.’ *Philosophia Naturalis*. 38. pp. 91-104.

- Lawrence Rosen. 2005. 'Theorizing from Within: Ibn Khaldun and His Political Culture.' *Contemporary Sociology*. Vol. 34. No. 6. pp. 596-599.

#### **Student activity:**

1. Students will be brainstorming about the question what a good political leader is like.
2. Students will work on a comparison of excerpts from Macchiavelli's text "The Prince" and a contemporary opinion piece (<https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/text-to-text-the-prince-and-why-machiavelli-still-matters/>).

### **The State of Nature and the Social Contract**

**Topic description:** This week will prepare students for the discussion about the state by first asking: What would things be like without it? Students will learn about Hobbes' pessimistic depiction of the state of nature as a war against all, about Locke's insistence that even in the state of nature a life in peace can be possible, and Rousseau's argument about the essential innocent and compassionate nature of the human being. Students will learn about how theories about the state of nature have inspired the political school of anarchism. They will then turn to consent theory and utilitarian theory as approaches to the moral defense of the state.

#### **Expected learning outcomes:**

- Students will understand what concepts are underlying the Social Contract Theory
- Students will be able to discuss John Locke and Thomas Hobbes' perspectives on natural rights and the nature of government

#### **Readings:**

- Ian Adams and R. W. Dyson. 2007. *Fifty major political thinkers*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 46-54 ("Thomas Hobbes"); 57-64 ("John Locke"); 73-80 ("Jean-Jacques Rousseau").
- Jonathan Wolff. 2016. *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 6-60.

#### **Student activities:**

1. Students will read short excerpts from Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan and paraphrase them in succinct one-sentence summaries.
2. Students will discuss the US Declaration of Independence in the light of John Locke's philosophy.
3. Students will compare and contrast Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's philosophies in a Venn diagram.

### **Happiness and Welfare**

**Topic description:** This week's class explores the question why we should have a state by examining arguments that focus on the role for legal and political institutions in promoting happiness, peace, and human welfare. Students will discuss happiness and John Stuart Mill's harm principle, collective action problems and public goods, and the role of the state in promoting particular concepts of happiness.

#### **Expected learning outcomes:**

- students will be able to explain and discuss the notion of utilitarianism
- students will be able to demonstrate how utilitarianism can be understood as a consequentialist theory.

#### **Readings:**

- Russel Hardin. 'The Free Rider Problem.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-rider/> (21 August 2020).
- Tyler Cohen. 'Public Goods'. *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*. <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicGoods.html> (21 August 2020).
- John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty*. Ch. 1, 4, and 5.

### **Student activity:**

1. Students form small groups and develop a critique of Mill's Harm Principle.

## **Review and Assessment**

### **Liberty**

**Topic description:** During the previous weeks, the class has engaged with the question of why we should have a state. This week, the class turns to the question of once there is a state, how much power should it have? Or, changing perspectives, how much liberty should its citizens have? Building on the previous week's discussion of happiness as a goal of government, this week's class turns to the notion of liberty itself and introduces students to the distinctions between positive and negative freedom and the political theory of liberalism. In the second part of the class, students will engage with G.A. Cohen's critique of negative liberty and Quentin Skinner's depiction of positive liberty as a republican liberty.

#### **Expected learning outcomes:**

- Students will understand the concepts of positive and negative freedom.
- Students will be able to describe the characteristics of classical liberalism.
- Students will be able to compare and contrast the concepts of individual and community freedom.

#### **Readings:**

- Isaiah Berlin. 1998. *The Proper Study of Mankind*. London: Pimlico, 1998. pp. 191-242 ('Two Concepts of Liberty').
- **Colin Bird. 2006. *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 176-200.**
- F.A. Hayek. 2001. *The Road to Serfdom*. London: Routledge.
- Jonathan Wolff. 2016. pp. 104-132.
- Quentin Skinner. 1984. 'The Paradoxes of Political Liberty.' In S. M. McMurrin (ed.). *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values VII*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

### **Student activity:**

1. Students will be presented with a range of different scenarios. They will discuss in small groups whether those scenarios are examples of positive or negative freedom. They will then share their results with the rest of the class.

### **Equality**

**Topic description:** This week's class examines how more recent thinkers of political philosophy have raised equality as a key concept to be considered. Students will explore different approaches to defining equality, including the equality of status, equality of treatment, equality of opportunity, and equality of outcome, and examine how the idea of equality has been criticized by political philosophers.

#### **Expected learning outcomes:**

#### **Readings:**

- **Harry Frankfurt. 1987. 'Equality as a Moral Idea'. *Ethics*. 98. pp. 21-42.**
- Derek Parfit. 1997. 'Equality or Priority?' *Ratio*. 10. pp. 202-21.
- Samuel Scheffler. 2003. 'What is Egalitarianism?' *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 31. pp. 5-31.

### **Student activity:**

1. Students will write a short reflection paper of about 500-750 words about a way in which the principles of equality and freedom might be in tension with each other, especially when the state gets involved. In their reflection paper, they can engage with the distinction between luck and strict egalitarianism, the notion of equality as a

constraint versus equality as an objective, the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of welfare, the distinction between positive and negative freedom, and the distinction between individual and community freedom.

## Justice

**Topic description:** This week builds on the discussion from the previous week on equality by examining how the emphasis on equality of opportunity has stimulated an intense debate on the normative implications of utilitarianism. Students will explore the notion of distributive justice and discuss its significance within utilitarianism. They will then turn to Nussbaum's capabilities approach, Nozick's entitlement theory and John Rawl's theory of justice as fairness.

### **Expected learning outcomes:**

#### **Readings:**

- Martha Nussbaum. 1988. 'Nature, function, and capability: Aristotle on political distribution.' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. pp. 145-164.
- ---. 2011. 'What Makes Life Good? Measurements of economic growth fail to capture many facets of well-being.' *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/what-makes-life-good/> (17 August 2020).
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Robert Nozick's Political Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nozick-political/#Bib> (17 August 2020).
- **Jonathan Wolff. 2016. pp. 153-215.**
- John Klosko. 2005. *Political Obligations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- **John Rawls. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.**
- Jeremy Waldron. 1993. 'Special Ties and Natural Duties'. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 22. pp. 3-30.

#### **Student activity:**

1. Students will form small groups and debate one of the following ideas:
  - a. "Future generations are outside the scope of justice."
  - b. "Social justice is equality."
  - c. "Social justice is primarily about social relations, rather than the distribution of goods."
2. Students will familiarize themselves with Elon Musks SpaceX project. They will then engage in a thought experiment in which they participate in the first human colonization of Mars, based on information and tasks provided on a handout.

## Postmodern Approaches to the State

**Topic description:** While the class so far has centered on key arguments in classical political philosophy that theorize the state, this week's class turns to critical postmodern perspectives on power. Students will explore Foucault's argument that power extends well beyond the state into institutions such as schools, hospitals and even families, and that power and knowledge are inseparable and mutually constituted.

### **Expected learning outcomes:**

- Students will understand how Foucault challenges classical theories of state sovereignty.
- Students will be able to explain the concept of power/knowledge by giving examples from everyday life.

#### **Readings:**

- **Scott Applerouth and Laura Desfor Edles, *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era: Text and Readings*: (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), pp. 392-419.**

- Verena Erlenbach. 2015. 'From Sovereignty to War: Foucault's Analytics of Power.' *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/12/12/from-sovereignty-to-war-foucaults-analytic-of-power/> (17 August 2020).
- Michel Foucault. 2004. "*Society Must be Defended*": *Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*. Penguin Books.

**Student activity:**

1. Students will apply Foucault's ideas to the phenomenon of fitness gyms in the contemporary period.

**Postcolonial Perspectives on Political Philosophy**

**Topic description:** This week's class builds on the notion of power/knowledge that was discussed in the previous class and shows how postcolonial perspectives challenge the role of the state as the primary concern of political philosophy.

**Expected learning outcomes:**

- students will become aware of how political philosophy has been embedded in distinct historical and geographical contexts
- students will understand how postcolonial criticism can enrich the study of political philosophy within the field of global studies

**Readings:**

- Uday Chandra. 2013. 'The Case for a Postcolonial Approach to the Study of Politics.' *New Political Science*. Vol. 35. No. 3. pp. 479-491.
- Frantz Fanon. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press. pp. 35-55.
- Jonathan Hill. 2005. 'Beyond the Other? A postcolonial critique of the failed state thesis.' *African Identities*. Vol. 3. No. 2. pp. 139-154.
- Navid Pourmokhtari. 2013. 'A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: the contradictory legacy of a "West-centric" discipline.' *Third World Quarterly*. Vol. 34. No. 10. pp. 1767-1793.

**Student activity:**

1. Students will formulate a postcolonial criticism of the concept of the "failed state".

**Review and Concluding Discussion**