**MA in Social and Political Thought**

**Text and Critique in Social and Political Thought (946M1)**  
Core course, Autumn Term 2009, 30 credits

Seminars: Thursdays 2.00-4.00 in D741

Sussex Direct site: https://studydirect.sussex.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=8832  
Course syllabus page: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sociology/syllabus/2009/18973.html

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**Convenors**

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**Introduction**

*Text and Critique*, the core course of the SPT MA, will introduce you to a number of exemplary texts in social and political thought. The course brings together a variety of material in ancient, early modern, modern, and contemporary social and political thought. The approach taken in the seminars will vary depending on the tutors, and their different interests and disciplines. They will look at some of the following questions:

1. The origins, nature and purpose of human association.
2. The grounds of the legitimacy of the state.
3. The nature of political obligation.

The topics are arranged chronologically, usually, though not always linked to the work of an author. They provide a series of snapshots, rather than a development. The course is designed to explore the critical reception and reinterpretation of earlier ideas by later writers. Course literature is divided into essential primary reading (A) and essential reading (B) and further reading (C). Seminar questions are provided. In preparing for the seminars, you should not only answer the seminar questions, but try to formulate at least one question of your own, even if it is only a demand for clarification. (Jot these down on paper, for this helps the thought process.)

**Week 1:** Introduction

**Week 2:** Aristotle (Andrew Chitty)

**Week 3:** Hobbes (Andrew Chitty)

**Week 4:** Rousseau (Andrew Chitty)

**Week 5:** Hegel (Andrew Chitty)

**Week 6:** Marx (Andrew Chitty)

**Week 7:** Georg Simmel (Darrow Schecter)

**Week 8:** The Critique of Everyday Life: Lefebvre and Castoriadis (Darrow Schecter)

**Week 9:** Jürgen Habermas: The Rational Telos of Communication (Daniel Steuer)

**Week 10:** Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer* and the State of Exception (Daniel Steuer)
Assessment

The course is assessed by a 5,000 word term paper to be submitted in January. For this, you should develop your own topic. You should submit a short proposal (no more than one page) for a term paper by the end of week 6 to one of the tutors.

General reading

A good introduction to the topics of the first half of the course is:

Guide to the reading list

[el] = available via the Electronic Library journals collection at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/electronic](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/electronic). For articles use the QuickSearch facility on the left of the main page to locate the item.

For weeks 1-6 readings are given in chronological order or publication within each topic.

For some of the figures in this course there are further readings in the following bibliographies.
  Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, Habermas: [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/sefd0/bib/polphil.htm](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/sefd0/bib/polphil.htm)
  Hegel: [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/sefd0/bib/hegel.htm](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/sefd0/bib/hegel.htm)
  Marx: [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/sefd0/bib/marx.htm](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/sefd0/bib/marx.htm)

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Aristotle (Andrew Chitty)

In his *Ethics* Aristotle says that all human beings seek happiness, and that happiness or 'the good life' consists in realising your nature as a human being, which in turn consists in living on the basis of reason. The rest of the *Ethics* enumerates the 'virtues' or specific excellences which we need to cultivate in order to be live in a rational way: justice, courage, generosity and so on. So morality, the practice of these virtues, is bound up with realising our essential human nature. But at the end of the *Ethics* Aristotle says that the virtues can only be cultivated within a *polis* (state) and correspondingly in the *Politics* he defines the state, by contrast with the household or the village, as that form of association which enables human beings to realise their nature as human beings. For Aristotle 'man is a political animal', an animal that can only realise itself within the polis. This is the basis for his recommendations in the rest of the *Politics* about how the state should be organised. We will look critically at the connections between Aristotle's accounts of human being and state, and at his justification of the state.

Seminar Reading:


Seminar Questions:

1. What is the meaning of Aristotle's claim that 'man is by nature a political animal'?
2. Can Aristotle's idea that some people are natural slaves be reconciled with this view?
3. What does Aristotle mean when he says that the state exists by nature?
4. What are the different kinds of constitution and how does Aristotle rank them?
5. Is there a connection between his account of the polis in book 1 and his view of the best constitution in books 3 and 4?
6. What, according to Aristotle, is the role of women in a polis?
7. Does Aristotle think that political participation is necessary to achieve *eudaimonia*? Does he mean participation in the community or participation in government?

**Further Reading:**

**From Aristotle:**
Aristotle, *Politics*, books 7.1, 7.13-7.15 (more on the best constitution)

**Introductions:**
Morrall, J.B. (1977) *Aristotle*, ch. 4

**More advanced:**
Keyt, D. and Miller, F. D. Jr., eds. (1991) *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*
Swanson, J. A. (1991) *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy*
Barnes J. et al., eds. (1997) *Articles on Aristotle, 2, Ethics and Politics*

**On human nature and the state:**
Develin, R. (1973) 'The good man and the good citizen in Aristotle's Politics', *Phronesis* 18 [el]
Mulgan, R.G. (1974) 'Aristotle's doctrine that man is a political animal', *Hermes* 102(3) [el]
Everson, S. (1988) 'Aristotle on the foundations of the state', *Political Studies* 36(1) [el]
Nederman, C.J. (1994) 'The puzzle of the political animal: nature and artifice in Aristotle's political theory', *Review of Politics* 56(2) [el]

**Week 3: Hobbes** (Andrew Chitty)

For Hobbes unlike Aristotle him human beings do not have a rational essence which they are trying to realise and which it would be good for them to realise. They are just bundles of desires, and reason for them is simply a matter of working out the best way to satisfy those desires. Morality ('the laws of nature') is nothing but a set of rules of enlightened self interest for humans who find themselves having to share the same territory. From this starting point Hobbes uses a social contract argument to justify the existence of the state and obedience to any existent state. We will reconstruct and examine his argument, with particular attention to the idea that the state gains its legitimacy from the consent of its citizens.

**Seminar Reading:**

A: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapters 13-22, 29, review and conclusion. Please give special attention to chapter 16. There are many editions available; two of the best are by R. Tuck (Cambridge U.P., 1991) and by E. Curley (Hackett, 1994).


**Seminar Questions:**

1. What is the state of nature? What is the opposite of the natural for Hobbes?
2. Does Hobbes's argument that a state of nature becomes a state of war depend on unduly pessimistic assumptions about human nature?

3. What is the 'right of nature', according to Hobbes? In what sense is it a right?

4. What is the relationship between natural right and natural law in Hobbes?

5. What does Hobbes mean by saying that the members of the commonwealth are 'one person'?

6. Is Hobbes's justification of the state plausible?

7. Is Hobbes's argument for obedience to the state plausible?

Further Reading:

Introductions:
- Oakeshott, M. (1946) 'Introduction' to Leviathan, ed. M. Oakeshott, repr. in his Hobbes on Civil Association
- Taylor, M. (1976) Anarchy and Cooperation (or 2nd ed. 1987 as The Possibility of Cooperation) ch. 1, ch. 6 sec. 1

More advanced:

Representation and the state as a 'person':
- Copp, D. (1980) 'Hobbes on artificial persons and collective actions', The Philosophical Review 89(4) [el]

Week 4: Rousseau (Andrew Chitty)

Rousseau constructs his idea of a legitimate state from the starting point that humans are intrinsically free and that they can only be under such moral obligations as they freely put themselves under. He concludes that a legitimate state can only come about if it is a radically democratic one. He furthermore uses his starting point to set limits in advance to what kinds of laws can be legitimate. Thereby he initiates a 'constructivist' strand of political thought, in which the bare idea of freedom provides the basis for a new kind of natural law. We will ask what Rousseau means by the general will and whether he succeeds in combining democracy with legality in his vision of the legitimate state.

Seminar Reading:

Seminar Questions:
1. Why is a contract of slavery illegitimate for Rousseau?
2. Who are the parties to the social contract?
3. How does the social contract bring about a ‘remarkable change in man’?
4. What is the general will?
5. Does Rousseau successfully justify direct democracy?
6. Are there limits to what the general will can will?
7. Is Rousseau's thought 'totalitarian'?

Further Reading:

Introductions:

More advanced:
Cassirer, E. [1932] *The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau*
Bosanquet, B. [1899] *Philosophical Theory of the State*, chs. 4-5

The general will:
Runciman, W.G. and Sen, A. (1965) 'Games, justice and the general will', *Mind* 74 (section 1 of the article, pp. 554-558) [el]
Barnard, F. M. (1984) 'Will and political rationality in Rousseau', *Political Studies* 32 [el]

Week 5: Hegel (Andrew Chitty)

For Hegel we do not associate in order to meet each other's material needs but in order to become free, and a genuine human association is one that fully realises freedom. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel tries to show that to become properly self-conscious (and so free) a human self must be recognised by another human self as self-conscious. This necessity drives human beings, when they first meet each other, first to engage in a life-and-death struggle for recognition, then to create a master-servant relationship of one-way recognition, and finally to arrive at a society of mutual recognition, in which all see each other as sharing the same essence, namely freedom. Thereby they constitute themselves as a 'people', with a shared national 'spirit' (or 'ethical substance'). Their laws and state are the ways in which they give an objective expression to that common spirit. But the initial community of mutual recognition establishes a freedom that is inherently unsatisfactory because it is based on mutual identity and makes no room for individual difference. In the introduction to the *Philosophy of History* Hegel sees the whole of human history as the emergence of national spirits (oriental, Greek, Roman and 'German', i.e. Northern European) which give a successively greater space to individual freedom, or what he calls 'subjective freedom'. Finally in the *Philosophy of Right* he tries to show how the 'system of Right' of modern European societies (i.e. the set of their basic legal and political institutions) expresses a form of spirit in which collective and individual freedom are both fully developed. These institutions are those that incorporate the ideas of 'abstract right' (individual rights of person and property) and 'morality' (the idea of individual moral responsibility) into a larger framework of 'ethical life' whose components are the modern love-based family, the market and its supplementary legal and welfare
institutions, and the monarchical constitutional state. We shall focus on the role of the idea of freedom in the *Philosophy of Right* and ask how convincing Hegel's claim is that the modern set of social and political institutions is the genuine 'existence of freedom'.

**Seminar Reading:**

A: Hegel, G.W.F. [1821] *Philosophy of Right* ed. T. Knox (or as *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* ed. A. Wood), Preface, §§1-7, 29-31, 35-41, 141-9, 257-67, 279 (Please read the additions to each paragraph too; these are lecture notes in which Hegel explains and develops the points in the main text. In the Wood edition they are printed after the paragraphs, but in the older Knox edition they are at the end of the book)

Hegel, supplementary quotes, available from Study Direct site.

B: Riley, P. (1975) 'Hegel on consent and social contract theory: how does he 'cancel and preserve' the will?', *Western Political Quarterly* 26(1), available from Study Direct site.

**Seminar Questions:**

1. What is the basic message of the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* as you read it?
2. What does Hegel mean by saying that the will combines particularity and universality? (§7)
3. What is the 'free will that wills the free will'? (§27)
4. What does Hegel mean by saying that right is the existence of freedom? (§29)
5. What does Hegel mean by 'ethical life'? (§§142-157)
6. How exactly is the modern state supposed to synthesise individual and collective freedom? (§§257-261)

**Further reading:**

Introductions:


More advanced:


Wood, A. (1990) *Hegel's Ethical Thought*

Cristi, R. (2005) *Hegel on Freedom and Authority*

Hegel on history:

Hegel G.W.F. [1820s] *The Philosophy of History*, pp. 16-40 (‘The inquiry into the essential destiny of reason …’ to ‘… merely animal existence’), or, in slightly different translations, as *Reason in History* tr. L. Hartman, pp. 20-53, or as *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* tr. L. Rauch, pp. 19-42

Freedom, recognition and spirit in Hegel's political philosophy:

Maletz, D.J. (1989) 'Hegel on right as actualised will', *Political Theory* 17(1) [el]

Hardimon, M. O. (1992) 'The project of reconciliation: Hegel's social philosophy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21(2) [el]

Ripstein, A. (1994) 'Universal and general wills: Hegel and Rousseau', *Political Theory* 22(3) [el]
Marx's relationship to Hegel is complex, but we can follow one strand of it by seeing that he takes up Hegel's essential ideal of a society of mutual recognition which unifies individual and collective freedom, describing it as a society of 'species life' which realises the essence of human beings as 'species beings'. For Marx in On the Jewish Question this species life has taken on an independent existence as the modern political state, leaving individuals reduced to a sub-human struggle with each other for existence in their everyday economic lives, and the task is to reclaim this species life from the state and live it out in our economic lives. This reorganisation of economic life through a Hegelian conception of freedom is the positive content that Marx gives to the idea of socialism (or 'human society' as he calls it). In the course of 1844 Marx came to conceive 'capital' rather than 'the state' as the alien being that had absorbed human species-life and in which that life had become an autonomous power reducing individuals to nothing but its own agents. This is the basic idea of 'alienation' (Entäusserung, literally 'emptying-out') and estrangement in the 1844 writings. It reappears in his later writings as the idea of the 'subsumption' of products and individuals by the autonomous power of capital. Accordingly Marx's interest moved from the state to the economy, and he saw the democratisation of the state as useless as long as it operated in the context of capitalism. Yet his basic critique of capital is democratic in that he attacks it for removing collective agency from human beings. We will ask whether Marx is ultimately a democrat, and if so of what kind.

Seminar Reading:

A: Marx [1843] 'On the Jewish Question' part 1 (e.g. in D. McLellan, Karl Marx: Selected Writings, first edition 1977, pp. 39-57; second edition 2000, pp. 46-64)
  Marx [1844] 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', sections on 'Alienated/ estranged labour' and 'Private property and communism' (e.g. in McLellan pp. 77-96, second edition pp. 85-104)
  Marx [1844] 'Excerpt-notes on James Mill' (e.g. in McLellan, pp. 114-122, second edition pp. 124-133)
  Marx [1871] The Civil War in France, part 3 'The commune', and 1st draft, section on 'The character of the commune' (e.g. in McLellan pp. 539-557, second edition pp. 584-603)
  Marx [1875] Critique of the Gotha Programme, first few pages of secs. 1 and 4 (e.g. in McLellan pp. 564-566, second edition pp. 610-16)


Seminar Questions:

1. What is a species-being?
2. How does Marx use the idea of recognition in the Notes on James Mill?
3. Is Marx's 1844 conception of socialism dominated by a 'work ethic'?
4. How does alienation come into existence, for Marx?
5. On the evidence of these texts, does Marx care about economic equality?
6. Is Marx a democrat?

Further reading:

On species being:
  Nasser, A.G. (1975) 'Marx's ethical anthropology', Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 25(4) [el]
  Chitty, A. (1997) 'First person plural ontology and praxis', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 97(1) [el]
On alienation:
Tucker, R. (1961) *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, chs. 2-7, esp. ch. 3
Wolff, J. (1992) 'Playthings of alien forces: Karl Marx and the rejection of the market economy', *Cogito* 6(1), available from Study Direct site

On alienation and subsumption in Marx's later works:

On communism in Marx:
Berki, R.N. (1990) 'Through and through Hegel: Marx's road to communism', *Political Studies* 38 [el]

On democracy and Marx:
Marx [1874] 'On Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*', in McLellan
Femia, J.V. (1985) 'Marxism and radical democracy', *Inquiry* 28 [el]
Doveton, D. (1994) 'Marx and Engels on democracy', *History of Political Thought* 15(4) [el]

**Week 7: Georg Simmel** (Daniel Schecter)

Marx's sociology of conflict and Nietzsche's ideas on Ressentiment and the political relevance of individual psychological forces mark important moments in the emergence of what one might call the sociological imagination. Yet Simmel indicates that however important these contributions might be, theorising the social entails going beyond Marxist notions of interest and Nietzschean intuitions about the psyche and values. If Hegel demonstrates that the difference between possession and property is the state, and that the state is the condition of an individual rational will, Simmel suggests that in the course of modernity Hegel's juridical epistemology must cede place to a more contingent and de-centred account of knowledge and action. That is, society replaces the state as the medium of individual and group agency. In this week we look at Simmel's ideas on reciprocal functional exchange, money, and the specificity of the social. How might one compare Hegel's state-centred theory of ethical life and objective spirit with Simmel's theory of society? In what ways does Simmel enrich historical materialism, and in which ways does he depart from it? In what ways do Simmel's ideas on contingency and the reality of social form (as opposed to anthropological essence) anticipate later developments in philosophy and social theory?

**Seminar Reading:**
Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (excerpts)

**Seminar questions:**
1. What does Simmel mean by social form?
2. What is the relation between modernist aesthetics and Simmel's sociology?
3. How does Simmel prefigure themes in Lukacs and the Frankfurt School?

Further reading:


**Week 8: The critique of everyday life: Lefebvre and Castoriadis** (D. Schecter)

This week looks at the critique of everyday life from its origins in Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, to surrealism, situationism, and the ideas of Cornelius Castoriadis and Henri Lefebvre. Special attention is paid to questions of aesthetics, urban life and its possibilities, and forms of resistance inspired by the critique of everyday life, such as those created during May 1968.

**Seminar Reading:**

- Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975)

**Seminar questions:**

1. What is the sociology of everyday life?
2. How and in what ways does the critique of everyday life complement the critique of political economy?
3. What are the theoretical and practical legacies of Lefebvre and Castoriadis?

Further reading:

- Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*

**Week 9: Jürgen Habermas: The Rational Telos of Communication** (Daniel Steuer)

Beginning with *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* in the late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s, Habermas performed his own linguistic turn within the context of a critical theory of society, culminating in the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 [1981]). Since then, he has tirelessly corrected and developed this framework, in particular with respect to legal theory and questions of moral philosophy. At the same time, he has remained the most important and acute observer and commentator of political developments within Germany, and has gained world-wide recognition for his work.

The primary reading offered here has been selected with the purpose of getting a glimpse of Habermas's *conditio sine qua non*, a rationality inherent in human communication, and of how this is conceptualised as well as how it links up with his theory of society and politics.

Habermas's writing is often technical and drawn-out, or cursory and summary. It is therefore helpful, where possible, to have Edgar's *Keywords*, and Finlayson's *Very Short Introduction* at hand when reading!

**Seminar Reading:**

- Jürgen Habermas, 'Three Normative Models of Democracy', in *The Inclusion of the Other* (Polity, 1998)

B: Axel Honneth, *Critique of Power*, chapters 8 and 9

**Seminar Questions:**

1. What is a validity claim?
2. How does Habermas draw the distinction between instrumental and communicative action?
3. According to Habermas, into which fundamental relationships does a speaker necessarily enter with every speech act?
4. What is the meaning of 'lifeworld', and which theoretical role does this notion serve?
5. What is the relationship between language and lifeworld?
6. What is the relationship between system and lifeworld?
7. In what senses does Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* belong to the Marxist tradition?

**Further Reading:**

- Jürgen Habermas, Chapter 3 of *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*
- Lasse Thomassen (ed.), *The Derrida-Habermas Reader* (Edinburgh UP, 2006); esp. the pieces by Simon Critchley, 'Frankfurt Impromptu – Remarks on Derrida and Habermas' (pp. 98-110), Jacques Derrida, 'Performative Powerlessness – A Response to Simon Critchley' (pp. 111-114), and Jürgen Habermas, 'How to Respond to the Ethical Question' (pp. 115-127)

Those who have competence in German may find the following useful:

- Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas. Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Suhrkamp, 2008)

**Week 10: Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer* and the State of Exception, or: The End of Politics?** (Daniel Steuer)

Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project, stretching over at least three of his major works - *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998 [1995]), *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (1999 [1998]), *State of Exception* (2005 [2003]) - but closely related to others, looks at the social and political history of the West, as well as at the history of Western social and political thought under a number of what he calls 'paradigms'. In his understanding, paradigms do not work like philosophical or historical assumptions: "Homo Sacer and the concentration camp, the Muselmann and the state of exception [...] are no hypotheses which are intended to explain modernity, deriving it from something like a cause or an historical origin." Rather, in their essential multiplicity, each one is meant to bring into focus the connection between phenomena across space and time whose family relationship may otherwise have escaped attention. Thus, a paradigm does not indicate "an origin which precedes time, but, by being situated at the crossroads between the diachronic and the synchronic, renders intelligible the present of the researcher no less than the past of his object".

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Despite these methodological claims, it seems that the state of exception (a concept closely associated with Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin) provides a logical structure – that of an inclusion by way of exclusion, and, at the same time, an exclusion by way of inclusion - that informs most, if not even all, of Agamben’s paradigms. This structure inevitably leads back to Agamben's earlier work, and in particular to his reflections on the philosophy of language and the notion of 'potentialities', while his general orientation in biopolitical questions is indebted to Foucault.

The question then is, whether Agamben's biopolitical claims, explicitly intended as political interventions, have enough empirical substance to be politically relevant, or whether we are faced with a situation where the philosophical tail wags the biopolitical dog? How persuasive is the perspective which Agamben, the researcher, articulates between his present and past, i.e. his view of biopolitics as threatening the end of political agency?

Seminar Reading:


The following two essays are to be found in Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (eds.) *Giorgio Agamben. Sovereignty & Life* (Stanford UP, 2007):
   - Ernesto Laclau, 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?' (pp. 11-22)
   - Paul Patton, 'Agamben and Foucault in Biopower and Biopolitics' (pp. 203-218)

Seminar Questions:

1. What does Agamben mean by 'bare life'?
2. What characterises a 'state of exception'?
3. What constitutes the "biopolitical fracture of the West"?
4. What does Agamben mean by 'potentiality'?
5. What is the relationship between his conceptual analyses and his empirical observations?
6. Which values and experiences, do you think, have influenced Agamben's work?

Further reading:

Agamben, *The Coming Community* (University of Minnesota Press 1993 [1990])

Possibly the most balanced account of all aspects of Agamben's work is the following title, unfortunately not available in translation: Eva Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* (Junius, 2005)