17th Century Political Philosophy: Hobbes and Spinoza

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Last updated October 21, 2021

Meeting Times: This course is expected to meet in-person, Tuesday and Thursday, 11:00 am to 12:20 pm, Central Time.

Student Hours: The times are Tuesday, 9:00 am to 10:50 am, in Stuart 222 (knock if the door is closed), and Friday, 1:00 pm to 2:50 pm, on Zoom.

Summary:
This course is an examination of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Benedict Spinoza, two controversial thinkers of the 17th century. Each thinker wrote embedded in contemporary political crises—Hobbes in the wake of the English Civil War, and Spinoza in the turbulent Dutch Golden Age. Perhaps partly in response to these crises, each thinker emphasized the role for the passions in human action, and developed a political philosophy which appears to emphasize the absolute sovereignty of the state. However, many interpreters have also found currents of democracy located in these thinkers.

This course has two parts. The first is a close reading of the primary texts of these thinkers, with a focus on Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*. We will examine their different theories of passion, and the conceptual conditions for the formation of the state. The second part of the course is an examination of some recent secondary literature on these thinkers. We will focus on their accounts of popular sovereignty and explore whether either thinker has room for the possibility of radical democracy.

This course has no prerequisites.

Texts: I have ordered the following two texts for purchase at the Seminary Co-op. All other readings will be posted on Canvas.


There are many other editions of these works available. I strongly encourage you to buy Curley’s edition of Hobbes, since I will be referencing passages using his section numbers.

We will also be reading significant parts of the following book. It’s available through the library, but you may wish to purchase a physical copy:


Course Requirements:
1. 20%: Participation. Participation in this course has two elements.
   1. I expect everyone to participate regularly in seminar discussion.
   2. I ask you to complete 3, brief, reading responses over the course of the term.
      Please email me no more than a paragraph raising a question or point about
something in our reading. These are due at 9 pm the day before our next class.

Please complete one during weeks 1–3, one during weeks 4–6, and one
during weeks 7–9. It’s up to you when to do this.

2. 35%: Midterm Exam: A take-home midterm exam during Week 5, covering Hobbes.
3. 45%: Final Exam: A take-home final exam, during Finals Week, covering all of the
material in our course.

Policy Statements:

1. Late Papers and Extensions: For each day that a paper is late, it will be penalized
2/3rds of a letter grade. Late papers will only be accepted up to three days after the
assignment is due. For reasons of fairness, extensions will only be granted in cases of
clear need. Please contact me as soon as you think that you may need an extension
so we can work out an appropriate plan.

2. Plagiarism and Academic Integrity: You must document all of your source material.
   If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear the text is being
   quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which
   you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. If you have any questions about what
does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be
   treated according to university policy. It is also your responsibility to make sure you
   have turned in a readable pdf or docx for all paper assignments.

3. Disabilities: Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments
   or accommodations is requested to email me by the end of the first week of class. All
discussions will remain confidential.

4. COVID: Unfortunately, the University of Chicago has refused to decide on a general set
   of policies to manage COVID cases and quarantining in our classrooms. This means
   that all your classes will have a patchwork of different policies, chosen by people
   who are not experts! Tentatively, I intend to approach it in the following way: Per
   university policy, mask-wearing is required. I will hold a mixture of online and offline
   office hours, but may move them all online if that seems wise. If you are quarantining,
   I will do my best to set up an option for you to join class remotely; if you are sick,
   you are not obligated to join us live. If a critical mass of us have to quarantine, or if
   I have to quarantine, the class will move online for a one-week period.

Tentative Schedule:

1. Course Introduction
2. The Rationalist Background: Zara Jacob
   • The Treatise of Zera Yacob.
3. Hobbes on Passions and Manners
   • Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapters 1, 6, 10, 11, 13.
4. Hobbes on Natural Law and the Commonwealth
   • Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapters 14–18, 21.
5. Hobbes on the Commonwealth
   • Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapters 17–22
6. Hobbes on Institutions
   • Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapters 23–26, 29–30
7. Hobbes on Religion
   • Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapters 12, 31–33, 44
8. Hobbes and the People

9. Spinoza on God and the State
• Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Preface, Chapters 1–6
• Spinoza, Letter 50 to Jelles (pp. 406–407 in Curley’s edition)
• Spinoza, *Ethics*, Appendix to Part 1

10. Spinoza on Scripture
• Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapters 7–11

11. Spinoza on Religion
• Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapters 12–15

12. Spinoza on the State
• Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapters 16–20
• Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p37s.

13. Spinoza’s Mature Politics

14. Spinoza on Monarchy, Aristocracy, Democracy
• Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Chapters 6–end.

15. Spinoza and Hobbes on Contract and the State

16. The Multitude

17. Freedom, Religion, and the State