



PHIL 1800. Modern Social and Political Thought

Instructor of record: J. Joseph Porter
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 Office hours: by appointment

Fall 2026
 Baker (BKER) E112
 M/W 3:35-4:50 PM

Course Description

Are all men—and women—created equal? Must government be founded on a social contract of some kind? Should we seize the means of production? We will explore these and other social, ethical, political, and philosophical questions through a survey of great thinkers from the Renaissance to the present. We will focus on primary-source excerpts from some of the most influential works of all time, including Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the Declaration of Independence, Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*.

Content Warning: In this course, we will discuss controversial topics which may affect you or your peers personally. Please let me know if you have questions or concerns about any element of the course.

Course Requirements

Perusall	15%	
Engagement	15%	
Assignment 0	5%	Wed., Sep. 2 (in class)
Assignment 1	15%	Wed., Sep. 23 (in class)
Assignment 2	20%	Thurs., Nov. 19, 11:59 PM
Assignment 3 (Final Exam)	30%	Wed., Dec. 9, 4:30-7:00 PM (in BKER E112)

Perusall: You are expected to complete the Perusall assignment for each class session **BEFORE class (even if you will be absent from class)** so that you can come to class ready to discuss it. Completing a Perusall assignment involves actively, carefully, and critically reading (and/or watching) the materials included in it and commenting on them. Perusall is an online social reading platform which allows you to read collaboratively with each other (and us) by commenting on course readings—either anonymously or not—and reading and replying to each other’s comments. You are encouraged to watch [this short video](#) and consult [this annotation guide](#) to learn more about Perusall.

Perusall will provisionally grade your Perusall assignments. **So long as you add substantive comments to assignments and complete them carefully and without rushing, you should receive full credit on them.** At the end of the semester, all your assignment grades will be reviewed (and, if necessary, revised upwards) to ensure that your final overall Perusall grade is fair. However, **it is ultimately your responsibility to ensure that you receive credit on Perusall assignments.** The best way to do that is not to procrastinate on them, skim through them, or add only one or two brief comments on them. (We recommend planning on one hour and three or more substantive comments per assignment.) You can always check your assignment grades on Perusall by clicking on My Scores in the lefthand sidebar. (Note that there may be a slight delay before assignment grades are updated.) If you ever believe Perusall has failed to give you the credit you deserve, please let us know.

Perusall assignments can be completed late for up to half credit (and possibly more if completed excellently and very soon after their respective deadlines). You will have until the final exam to make Perusall assignments up. (Note that you won’t be able to respond to quiz questions after assignment deadlines, but you will still be able to complete and comment on readings.) It is your responsibility to keep track of which Perusall assignments you may need to make up. **A final Perusall grade lower than 50% may result in automatic failure of the course.**

Attendance: Punctual attendance is expected at all class sessions. **Absences and tardies will result in a lower engagement grade, and six or more absences may result in automatic failure of the course.** You can make up absences during the add period and up to two additional absences over the course of the semester. Unless otherwise indicated, you cannot make up any further absences. **It is your responsibility to communicate with me proactively about absences during in-class quizzes and exams.** (It is also your responsibility to ensure that your attendance is recorded whenever a physical attendance sheet is distributed in class.) Unless otherwise specified, you can make up an absence by submitting three or more full pages of handwritten notes and/or reflections on the topic of the class session from which you were absent to me by email. (Please confer with me if you are interested in making up an absence in another way—for instance, by recording a video reflection.) You will have until the final exam to make absences up. If you believe exigent circumstances (e.g., an extended illness) may entitle you to further accommodations (e.g., the opportunity to make up more absences), please let me know as soon as possible.

Engagement: You are expected to engage with this course both in class—by listening attentively, asking questions, and so on—and outside of class—first and foremost, by engaging with Perusall assignments. Note that **your final Engagement grade will be determined not only by your attendance and punctuality but also by your overall engagement with the course**—including Perusall engagement.

Electronics: Unless otherwise indicated, **the use of electronics is prohibited during class**. Please let me know if you may require an accommodation to use electronics during class.

Extra Credit: You can receive up to three points of extra credit on your final grade. You can do so first and foremost by attending specific approved events in person during the semester. (If you are a Benson Undergraduate Fellow or Freytag Fellow, note that your attendance at an event cannot count both towards your fellowship requirements and towards course extra credit.) You can receive up to one point of extra credit for each event you attend (depending in part on your punctuality and engagement). Information on additional extra credit opportunities may be found [here](#).

Respect: You are always expected to treat your peers (and me) with respect regardless of their (or my) ethical, political, or religious views, sex, ethnicity, or anything else. One important skill we will train in this course is understanding other people's views and taking them seriously even when we think they are incorrect, immoral, or otherwise objectionable. (I myself will sometimes play devil's advocate in class and temporarily defend views we think are incorrect.) This skill cannot be developed properly unless we collectively foster an environment of curiosity, open-mindedness, and respect in which all of us can express our views freely.

Assignments: You will be expected to complete three major assignments for this course: one in-class, handwritten essay exam (Assignment 1), an electronically submitted essay (Assignment 2), and an in-person, handwritten final exam (Assignment 3). You will receive more information about these assignments over the course of the semester.

Course Materials

No textbooks are required for this course. Unless otherwise specified, all course readings and other materials may be found on Perusall. The Perusall student platform access fee for this course is \$5.

Grading Scale

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
94+	90-93	87-89	84-86	80-83	77-79	74-76	70-73	67-69	64-66	60-63	59-

Mental Health and Wellness

The University of Colorado Boulder is committed to the well-being of all students. If you are struggling with personal stressors, mental health, or substance use concerns that are impacting academic or daily life, please contact [Counseling and Psychiatric Services \(CAPS\)](#) by coming to their office in the C4C or calling their 24/7 support line at (303) 492-2277. Free and unlimited telehealth is also available through [Academic Live Care](#). The Academic Live Care website also provides information about additional wellness services on campus that are available to students.

[University-mandated Syllabus Statements](#)

Course Schedule

As a reminder, you are expected to read and comment on the Perusall assignment for each class session BEFORE class.

Monday, August 24: Introduction

Syllabus

Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books” [selections]

[Selection from Machiavelli’s Letter to Vettori](#)

[Selections from Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?”](#)

Pre-semester Survey

Wednesday, August 26: Machiavelli

Machiavelli, *The Prince* [selections]

Monday, August 31: The Protestant Reformation

MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, Introduction [selections]

Roper, *Martin Luther*, Introduction [selections]

Wengert, *Martin Luther’s 95 Theses*, Introduction and ch. 1 [selections]

*Wednesday, September 2: **Assignment 0** and Hobbes*

[Selections from the SEP’s “Hobbes’s Moral and Political Philosophy”](#)

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.13-14, II.17-18 [selections]

[Monday, September 7: NO CLASS]

Wednesday, September 9: Locke

Syllabus

[Selections on Locke](#)

Locke, *Second Treatise*, chs. 1-3, 7-9 [selections]

[Selections from Fieser’s “The Social Contract”](#)

[Selections from Hoppe’s “The Idea of a Private Law Society”](#)

Monday, September 14: Locke

Locke, *Second Treatise*, ch. 5

Wednesday, September 16: Montesquieu

[Selections from the SEP’S “Baron de Montesquieu”](#)

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Foreword and Books I-XI [selections]

Monday, September 21: Rousseau

[Selections from the IEP’s “Jean-Jacques Rousseau”](#)

Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* [selections]

*Wednesday, September 23: **Assignment 1***

Monday, September 28: Smith [Guest Lecturer: Taylor Jaworski]

Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I.1-3, IV.2 [selections]

Wednesday, September 30: The American Founding

Paine, *Common Sense* [selections]

[Declaration of Independence](#)

[Selections from Hutchinson's "Strictures upon the Declaration"](#)

Monday, October 5: Great Works and the American Founding [Guest Lecturer: Oliver Traldi]

Wednesday, October 7: The American Founding

[Selection from Brutus no. 1](#)

[Selections from Federalist no. 10](#)

[Federalist no. 37](#)

[Federalist no. 51](#)

[Federalist no. 78](#)

[Constitution of the United States](#)

[Bill of Rights](#)

Monday, October 12: The French Revolution

[Declaration of the Rights of Man](#)

[Selections on the French Revolution](#)

Wednesday, October 14: Burke

[Selections from the SEP's "Conservatism"](#)

Burke, *Reflections* [selections]

Monday, October 19: Toleration and the American Founding [Guest Lecturer: Matthew Young]

Wednesday, October 21: Wollstonecraft

[Selections from the SEP's "Mary Wollstonecraft"](#)

Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [selections]

[Selections on Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*](#)

[Monday, October 26: NO CLASS]

Wednesday, October 28: Tocqueville

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [selections]

Monday, November 2: Abolitionism

Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" [selections]

[Selections on Abolitionism](#)

Wednesday, November 4: Mill

[Selections from the SEP's "John Stuart Mill"](#)

Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2, ch. 4 [selection]

Monday, November 9: Carlyle

Wednesday, November 11: Utilitarianism

Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chs. 1-2

[Selections from Mill's *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2](#)

Monday, November 16: Kant

[Selections from the IEP's "Immanuel Kant"](#)

Kant, *Groundwork*, Section I [selections]

Wednesday, November 18: Marx

Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* [selections]

[Selections from Marx](#)

["Remembering the Holodomor"](#)

Pipes, *Communism* [selections]

[Selections on Anti-communism](#)

ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 11:59 PM

[THANKSGIVING BREAK]

Monday, November 30: Darwin

Wednesday, December 2: Nietzsche

[Friday, December 4: NO CLASS]