

## Vesalius College

### Course description

**Course title:** History of Political Thought from Machiavelli to Marx

**Course code:** POL 251 / POL 251E

**Teacher responsible:** Huysseune, Michel

**Course description:**

In this course we will analyse texts by Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Rousseau, de Tocqueville and Marx. Their writings are considered to be classics in political philosophy and modern political science. They have played a crucial role in reflecting upon liberty and equality, on the legitimacy of political authority, the rationality of political leadership, and on understanding political systems in relation to human nature. They also have proposed the first elements of a more systematic and scientific study of political systems. Each of the thinkers studied in this course has offered crucial contributions in these fields. Machiavelli emancipated the theory of power and governance from the traditional conceptions of Christian ethics. Hobbes developed a contractual theory of politics whose precision surpassed all existing conceptions of political science. Montesquieu countered Hobbes's contract theory with a comparative theory of political regimes. Rousseau based his theory of political freedom on a democratic conception of sovereignty and general will. De Tocqueville proposed a theoretical analysis of the conditions in which the realization of a representative democracy would be possible. Marx was convinced that philosophical concepts such as liberty or equality, or philosophical problems such as the relationship between individual and society should be analysed on the basis of historic experience and not with the help of abstract speculation. He stressed the importance of scientific disciplines such as history and political economy.

**Course objectives:**

- Acquire knowledge on major political thinkers, the history of political thought and the early development of a science of politics
- Getting critical acquaintance with classics in political thought
- Getting critical acquaintance with key concepts and problems of political philosophy and political theory
- Being able to draft a 3,000 words paper that includes a critical reading of the texts of a political thinker and an analysis of a specific concept/notion/problem in these texts.

**Grade weighting scheme:**

- Presence and participation in classes: 10 %
- First written assignment: 20 %
- Midterm Exam: 25 %
- Term Paper: 20 %
- Final Exam: 25 %

**Used course material (handbooks, readers, readings, newspapers, magazines) and references:**

Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1991.

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1999.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985.

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968.

Eugene Kamenka, Introduction, *The Portable Karl Marx*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1981.

David McLellan (Ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.