

**Fall, 2013, Government 406-01: THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATISM
Wednesday, 5-7:30PM, Morton 4**

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Office Hours: 9-10:30am Tuesday and Thursday

Course Overview

What did it mean to be conservative before “conservatism”? Rather than treating conservatism as a coherent ideology or set of doctrines, this seminar will examine it as a distrustful disposition towards some of the more radical changes wrought by political modernity. Achieving critical insight into this disposition will require us to step back from our current vantage point in twenty-first century America and immerse ourselves in eighteenth-century Europe, at a moment when many of the developments we now associate with “modernity” were accelerating. These include, but are not restricted to, the entrenchment of a market economy, European imperial expansion, the revolutionary overthrow of traditional social hierarchies, the rise of modern ideologies, and the increased importance of the modern scientific method. Many of these features of modernity are only too familiar to us now. By imaginatively placing ourselves in the eighteenth century, we can appreciate something of what made them alarming (and occasionally alluring) to the political theorists under discussion here.

This is not a survey course; we will not attempt to canvass the entire range of thinkers and texts that have been labeled “conservative” at one time or another. Instead, our primary aim will be to study in some depth three political theorists whose contributions have proved of enduring importance: David Hume, Edmund Burke and (from the twentieth century) Michael Oakeshott. Only the last of these was a self-proclaimed conservative - the term did not enter common usage until the nineteenth century - and even in his case the label is disputed. Far more certain is that conservatives today have adopted each as either a founding father (Hume and Burke) or a philosophical ally (Oakeshott). As we shall soon discover, however, there is much that separates these three in terms of political and theoretical temperament: David Hume was a Scottish philosopher, historian and essayist, some of whose writings (particularly those pertaining to religion) were so corrosively skeptical that he withheld them from publication during his life time. Edmund Burke was an Irish member of the British House of Commons, master Parliamentary rhetorician, staunch critic of British Imperial abuse, derider of “atheistic” philosophers (Hume included) and author of the single most influential denunciation of the French Revolution. Michael Oakeshott, described by his student Bernard Crick as a “lonely nihilist,” was a Professor of Philosophy at the London School of Economics and lifelong opponent of what he called “political rationalism.”

What, if anything, makes these disparate theorists “conservative”? We will inquire into what unites and divides their approaches to political questions such as the following: what is “tradition” and why might preserving it matter for politics? What is the origin of

political authority? Do human beings possess natural rights independently of their participation in society? How much deference should be paid to historical precedent in political deliberation? And how might the modern quest for theoretical certainty harbor dangers for the realm of politics?

Evaluation

The breakdown of grades in the seminar will be as follows:

- 10%: Participation and Attendance
- 20%: Two Response papers (10% each)
- 10%: Presentation of Final Research Paper
- 60%: Final Research paper

Participation and Attendance (10%): This is a seminar, so please arrive prepared to actively discuss the assigned readings with your peers. I will occasionally begin our sessions with a short presentation to frame questions and themes for our collective consideration, but generally I will not be lecturing. Your attention needs to be focused at all times on your interlocutors, not on a screen, and for that reason laptops should not be brought to class. It is imperative that you bring the assigned readings with you each week. Readings posted on Blackboard should be printed so that we all have a ready to use hard copy in front of us. As should go without saying, students who miss class repeatedly can expect to have their participation grade lowered. I will distribute a sign-in sheet each week to keep tabs on attendance.

There will also be a Blackboard component to the participation grade. Starting from week 2, on weeks where you are **not** submitting a response paper (see below), each student will post **one question** arising from the readings on Blackboard and **one response** to a fellow student's question.

Response Papers (10% x2): Each student will write two (4-5 page) papers in response to the readings. These response papers should frame the discussion of that week's seminar by addressing a theoretical or conceptual problem arising from the texts under consideration. The response papers should be delivered into my mailbox in Morton Hall by **5pm on the Tuesday before class**. One response paper should be related to a set of readings in Part I or II of the course (see reading schedule below). The second should pertain to readings in Parts III and IV.

Final Research Paper (60%): The final research paper will be about 20-25 pages in length and can be devoted to any topic of relevance to the seminar. You must discuss your proposed topic with me in person during office hours before you start writing. By contrast with the brief response papers, the final research paper should move into the secondary literature and engage a problem using your own reading of the theorist(s) in

question and the viewpoints of other scholars (including sources not listed in the syllabus). The Final Papers are due in class on **December 4th**.

Paper Presentation (10%): Each student will present their research topic on the final day of class. The presentation should be no more than 10 minutes in length. In it you will explain the problem or puzzle you have been engaged with, indicate your hypothesis or primary claim, and describe the evidence you have assembled to support that claim. The presentations will all take place in class on **December 4th**.

Course materials

All of the books you will need are available to buy at the campus bookstore. Other readings, marked with an asterisk (*) in the reading schedule below, will be made available on Blackboard in the folder for that week.

Books to Buy:

Edmund Burke, *Empire, Liberty and Reform: Speeches and Letters*, David Bromwich ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000)

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, L. G. Mitchell ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, Eugene F. Miller ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985)

Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991)

Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and other Political Writings* Mark Philp ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Sylvana Tomaselli ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Course Understandings

Late Papers: The deadlines listed in the syllabus should be treated as firm. Late written work will lose a third of a letter grade for each day overdue. If you encounter difficulties with a deadline owing to religious observance, a medical emergency, or a family emergency please get in touch as early as you can. The earlier you get in touch, the easier it will be to make accommodations or alternative arrangements.

Academic Integrity: Anyone found to have been plagiarizing or otherwise acting academically dishonest will receive an automatic F grade for the class and be reported to the Honor Council. In case you are in any doubt about what the William and Mary

Honor Code entails you can read the full statement of it here:

<http://www.wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentconduct/documents/studenthandbook.pdf>

Office hours: Make a habit of attending office hours. It is required that you attend at least once in order to discuss your final paper topics. My office is Morton 5D. If you are unable to make it to my regular office hours (9-10:30am Tuesday and Thursday) e-mail me to see if we can find a mutually convenient time to meet.

E-mail: To keep e-mail traffic at a manageable level, I'll ask you to limit your e-mail inquiries to logistical and administrative issues. I check my email fairly regularly, and I will try to respond to your messages within 24 hours. If you have substantive questions on the content of the course, please do attend my office hours and I'll happily go over them with you in person then.

Reading Schedule

Week 1, August 28th: Intro: Conservatism as Ethos or Disposition

Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative" in *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 407-437

PART I: HUME'S POLITICAL SKEPTICISM

Week 2, September 4th: The Sources of Authority

Required:

Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 352-362

Hume, "Of the First Principles of Government," *Essays*, pp. 32-36

Hume, "Of the Origin of Government," *Essays*, pp. 37-41

Hume, "Of the Original Contract," *Essays*, pp. 465-487

Hume, "Of Passive Obedience," *Essays*, pp. 488-492

Recommended:

Andrew Sabl, *Hume's Politics*, chapter 3*.

Week 3, September 11th: Finance, Bankruptcy, and Regime Death

Required:

Hume, "Of the Balance of Trade," *Essays*, pp. 308-326

Hume, "Of Public Credit," *Essays*, pp. 349-365

Hume, "Of the Jealousy of Trade" *Essays*, pp. 327-331

Hume, "Of the Balance of Power," *Essays*, pp. 332-341

Recommended:

Istvan Hont, "The Rhapsody of Public Debt: David Hume and Voluntary State Bankruptcy"*

PART II: BURKE'S REVOLUTIONS

"[R]evolutions or the calamity of kings have not formerly been odious to Mr Burke..." –
Critical Review, November, 1790

"The Revolution of France does not astonish me so much as the revolution of Mr. Burke." - Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Benjamin Vaughan, May, 1791

Week 4, September 18th: Burke the American?

Required:

Burke, "Conciliation with America," *Empire, Liberty and Reform*, especially pages 79-109, 120-22, and 128-131.

Burke, "Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol," *Empire, Liberty and Reform*, pp. 138-183

Recommended:

Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*, chapter 3

Week 5, September 25th: A Tale of Two Revolutions: Burke versus Price

Required:

Burke, "To Charles-Jean-François Depont," (November, 1789) *Empire, Liberty and Reform*, pp. 403-414

Richard Price, "A Discourse on the Love of our Country" (November 4th 1789)*

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 3-35

Recommended:

Iain Hampsher-Monk, "*Reflections on the Revolution in France*"*

Week 6, October 2nd: "Flies of a Summer": Burke on Tradition

Required:

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 35-99

Recommended:

Don Herzog, "Puzzling Through Burke"*

Michael Mosher, "The Skeptic's Burke"*

Week 7, October 9th: Democracy or “A Mischievous and Ignoble Oligarchy”?

Required:

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 99- 164

Recommended:

Richard Bourke, “Enlightenment, Revolution and Democracy”*

J.G.A. Pocock, “Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm” in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture**

Week 8, October 16th: “What is Liberty without Restraint?”

Required:

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 164- 250

Recommended:

Richard Boyd, “‘The Unsteady and Precarious Contributions of Individuals’:

Edmund Burke’s Defense of Civil Society”*

Part III: WOLLSTONECRAFT AND PAINE RESPOND

Week 9, October 23rd: Wollstonecraft’s Feminization of Burke

Required:

Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, pp. 5-64

Recommended:

Daniel O’Neil, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*

Wendy Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Politics*

Linda Zerilli, “Text/Woman as Spectacle: Edmund Burke’s ‘French Revolution’”*

Week 10, October 30th: Paine, Burke and Trans-generational Obligation [Research Proposals due in Class]

Required:

Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Part I*, pp. 59-153

Recommended:

John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, chapter 9*.

Part IV: MICHAEL OAKESHOTT, A “BRILLIANT DISCIPLE OF BURKE”?

Week 11, November 6th: The Character of a Rationalist

Required:

Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 5-42

Oakeshott, “Political Discourse,” *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 70-95

Week 12, November 13th: Oakeshott’s Tradition

Required:

Oakeshott, “Political Education,” *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 43-69

Oakeshott “The Study of Politics in a University,” *Rationalism in Politics*, pp. 184-218

Week 13, November 20th: Is Oakeshott’s Conservatism Anti-political?

Required:

Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” *Rationalism in Politics* pp. 407-437 (Revisit from Week 1)

Hanna Pitkin, “‘The Roots of Conservatism’: Oakeshott and the Denial of Politics,” pp. 496-525*

Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics*, chapters 1 and 6*

Bernard Crick, “The World of Michael Oakeshott: or the Lonely Nihilist”*

Recommended:

Irving Kristol, “America’s ‘Exceptional Conservatism,’” pp. 373-386*

Week 14, November 27th: No class (Thanksgiving break)

Week 15, December 12th: Submission of final papers and research presentations

The Professor reserves the right to alter the syllabus during the semester