

Introduction to Western Political Thought
Professor Mithilesh Kumar Jha
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati
Lecture No. 1
Introduction: General Outline and Method

Hello, and welcome everyone. This is the first part of two introductory lectures in this course, Introduction to Western Political Thought. And in this lecture today, we are going to discuss what is thought? What is political thought? How is it different from political philosophy and political theory? What is its subject matter? What is its significance? and What is its method?

However, on method, we are going to have one separate lecture in the next class, but today we will briefly discuss the basic approaches and methods to study political thought as well. And in the second part of the lecture today, we will discuss the basic outline of the course and the assessment or the evaluation process; and then before concluding, we will discuss the references for this particular lecture as well.

First of all, I welcome you all in this course, and I hope over the course of twelve weeks, we will discuss the major thinkers in Western political thought. And through them, we will try to understand how political thought plays a very significant role in not just the political discourse of our time, but also understanding those discourses and critically evaluating our own assumptions or supposition about the politics.

So, the study of political thought enables us not just to make sense of the world in which we live and how to improve it, but also to critically reflect upon our own assumptions and approaches to politics. And over the course of twelve weeks, we are going to discuss some of the major thinkers and the key themes which shaped the discourse of political science over the millennia.

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➤ Political thought is systematic thinking and theorizing about the political problems. As such, political thought is as old as human society. Its subject matter concerns with the common affairs of the whole society or community. It primarily deals with the questions of order, state, government, sovereignty, legitimacy, citizenship, and the role of politics.

➤ Thought emanates from the human capacity to reason; to seek better answers; to find ideal order. All of us are engaged in thinking in one way or the other by responding to our circumstances and in our attempts to improve them. Political thought emerges out of our pursuits to answer how to better govern ourselves? Which form of government or state is ideal?

➤ In their pursuit to answer these questions, political thinkers have responded to both their actual socio-historical as well as the intellectual context. In this way political thinking or thought is far from conclusive or unanimous as we shall see later while discussing different thinkers included in this course. However, we often find them more often than not speaking to each other and that is how political thought or for that matter any thought grows or evolve over centuries and even millennia.

Let us start with the idea of political thought and how to understand it. Is political thought different from, say, political philosophy or political theory? Or, political thought is unique to just one particular tradition, or it exist in all societies, in all communities, and all traditions across the ages. If you look at the study of political thought as systemic or systematic thinking and theorization about political problems, we find it as old as human society.

From the very beginning, human society continuously tries to think about or reflect upon the collective problems they face, and how to organize the collective life or manage the collective life, have been the central issue in theorization or thinking about political problems. So, political thought is systematic thinking and theorization about political problems. And as I have said that as a discipline or as systematic thinking about the political problem, it is as old as human society, and its subject matter concerns the common affairs of the entire society or community.

So, what thought or what kind of thought and thinking we regard as the political thought? And there, we have to distinguish political thought from other types of thinking and theorization. The subject matters or the concerns of political thought are those issues or problems, which concern the common affairs of the whole community. For instance, when we discuss about the order, how to maintain order in the society, and you can think of order as the opposite of chaos or anarchy.

A decent life or a life which is secure or which can pursue whatever is desirable or dignified in the life, require a form of society or community which is well ordered. The question is how to ensure

that order, how to have the ideal form of government, these are some of the core concerns in political thought. It distinguishes it from the concerns of a householder, or a religious preacher, or from those who are involved in other pursuits in life.

The subject matter of political thinkers is those political issues that concern the whole community or the entire society. So from the very beginning, the question of order, state, government, sovereignty, legitimacy, citizenship, and the role of politics has been the central distinguishing feature of political thinking and political theorization. In most of the societies from the very beginning, we have different forms of the state over the centuries and the millennia.

However, human beings or human communities began to organize or manage their life, and in organizing and managing their life, they require systematic thinking or theorization about politics. And in doing that, they develop a specific language, certain modes of inquiry, and these modes of inquiry and thinking over the years constitute what we call political thought.

And in this course, we are going to discuss how these thoughts evolve from Greek or Roman times through the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli, and then Hobbes Locke Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Kant, and Mill. How over the millennia, they theorize about these problems of order, state, sovereignty, citizenship, political obligation and the role of politics?

And we will also see in this course that the nature of the political is debatable. There is no conclusive understanding about the political. So as I have said, that political thought and thinking revolve around the problem, which concerns the political. But then, what is the role of politics and political in society?

We will see in this course, over the next few weeks, the major disputations on understanding the nature of the political. For instance, for many scholars or thinkers, political thought is something which will help us improve our collective life, and politics is that mode of thinking which enables the human beings or the community to organize themselves better, to live a decent life, to lead an ideal life. Political, for them, is then an independent or supreme issue or concern that governs the whole society or the entire community. So in that sense, political is seen as something which has its own autonomy, which has its own independence in thinking or theorizing about the issues that concern the whole society.

In contrast to that, many scholars and thinkers argue that political is not the ultimate aim and objective of human life or the community. In fact, the grandeur than the political and more desirable than the political is the issue of salvation. Thus, for them, the religious or spiritual realization is more desirable than the politics. Political, in this kind of thinking and theorization, is subordinated to the religious or the spiritual modes of living and thinking about the Salvation. And in the ideological debates there are multiple conceptions of politics among the feminists, among the liberals, socialists or environmentalists. They have very different conceptions of politics, which we will discuss over the course of twelve weeks.

But to begin with, we have to understand the political thought or thinking as a systematic mode of inquiry about the issues that concern the whole society or the entire community are the subject matters of the political. Now, how thought emanates? Is it innate to human nature or human society? Or is there an effort or an approach is needed to develop one's thought or thought in the community?

If we try to understand political thought in a systematic and rigorous manner, we will find that the political thought emanates from the human capacity to reason. So in that sense, a human being as a rational subject is capable of reflecting upon his or her circumstances. They have the ability to reflect upon their circumstances and to improve those circumstances, if they use the rational, logical modes of inquiry in first making sense of or understanding the circumstances, and then the possibility of improving them. Once an individual involves in those kinds of inquiry, thought originates and emanates out of that.

Thought in that sense, including the political thought, emanates from the human capacity to reason, to seek better answers. So, we have a given situation or given circumstances, for many of us, that circumstances or the given society may not be ideal, or maybe far from ideal, perhaps chaotic, possibly disruptive. Now the challenge for the political thinker and political thought, as we will discuss in this course, is how to respond to those circumstances and provide the alternatives or the better answers to the central questions of their time.

So, for instance, when Hobs was thinking about politics, there was a civil war that was going on in England; and there was a decay in Greek and Roman society, when Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and later on Machiavelli was thinking about new modes of politics. So political thought, besides the

human capacity to reason, emanates from our innate capacity to search for better answers to the challenges that we face collectively in our lives.

And ultimately, the political philosophy or the political thinkers that we will discuss are constantly trying to have the ideal order or the ideal state or the ideal government. So, the overall objective in the political treatise or treatises of many political thinkers in the course which we have included is to form an ideal order, form an ideal state. And what are those ideals? And there, we have to understand that political thought and politics in general deals with the question of ethics.

And what is ethics? It is the idea of what is desirable or what is undesirable? What is good, or what is bad? And in political thought and thinking, this idea of desirable or undesirable, good and bad, is the central theme in any discourse on the state, order, government, citizenship, and so on. So political thought, in a sense, then, is in a constant interplay of the moral and ideal, and also what is called the pragmatic or the real.

One of the lamentations against the political thought and thinking is that these are mere speculations or reflections of few thinkers in the classical antiquity or in the medieval times which have very limited application in our times or in responding to the challenges that we face in the twenty-first century. Why should we study political thought or worry about the reflections of the few thinkers and their treatises, written in another times, in another contexts; and more so, when they deal with the *ideal* - and ideal, you can think of the questions which lead us to think about or argue about what *ought to be*, rather than *what is*. And political science is considered a pragmatic science, which deals with the real question. What is reality? And then we try to respond to those reality or those given circumstances. However, in political thought or political philosophy, there is a robust approach to think about the ideal, to think about the ultimate reality of society, state, individual, and how to realize them in this life. So in political discourse or political philosophy, we will see that political thought is the result of this constant search or inquiry into this interplay of ethics and politics.

So, the thought, coming back to this question of how thought emanates, is from the human capacity to reason. The search for better answers and also to find the ideal order in the given circumstances. And political thought, most of the time, is the result of these three things coming together. And we will see, and we will discuss Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, that how through a

reasonable, rational approach, they were responding to their circumstances, and in responding to their circumstances, they were trying to create the ultimate ideal kind of society or the state and so on.

Then, thinking or thought is not just unique to the few individuals and a particular tradition of thought. In fact, we all are engaged in thinking in one way or the other. So, thinking or theorization is not unknown to us. All of us constantly think about the repercussions of our actions, try to make sense of the world that surrounds us, try to understand or identify the major problems that we face as a collective group or society or nation-state, and how to make this society, state a better place to live in, so that it allows the individual an ultimate, dignified, or decent kind of life.

Political thinking and theorization in that sense, is not something which is confined to only a few individuals, all of us are engaged in this. However, the difference is that most of us do not sustain our own reflection in a way, as these thinkers have done, and that we will discuss in the second class when we will discuss about the classics; and how to study classics. So if the idea is, if all of us are involved in thinking, why should we give priority to Aristotle or Hobbes?

And if we all are rational, then what is the need for reading these treatises? The answer to these questions is to understand what are classics and that we will discuss that in the next lecture. But what makes us read these classics is their timelessness, is their relevance even today. So, Plato wrote in the classical time in the third or fourth century B.C. Greek, but his treatise, *Republic* makes sense even in the twenty-first century.

So, the timelessness and the relevance and the approaches that they have to understand the political is something which makes them distinct from our own everyday sense of thinking and arguing about politics. However, in this contemporary terms, one must take note that most of us, especially in this era of the constant bombardment of the information with this social media or new social media; as a species, human beings have become more responsive. Most of the time, when we respond, when we like something or dislike something or when we share something, the response comes instantaneously.

We hardly engage in thinking or crosschecking. And as a result of those instantaneous likes, dislikes, and sharing, the circulation of the fake news have become a major challenge and hinders

or obstructs our understanding. So, political thought and thinking are something that we all need to be involved in. We constantly think about it.

However, when we have a kind of systematic approach to our likes, dislikes, to understand our circumstances, it requires a particular approach. And I hope over the course of twelve weeks, by engaging with these thinkers and their texts, we will develop a better capability to understand the circumstances in which we live and how to respond to them. And more than that, we will be able to better understand our own assumptions and approaches to the politics of our time.

So, political thought emerges out of our pursuits to answer how to govern ourselves better. This is the central question for any community or any society. It is the question of governance and how to govern oneself. What is the ideal form of government? And thinking and theorization about that lead to the composition of many political treatises across the traditions.

We are going to focus in this course on the Western tradition. However, this question of how to govern oneself, which form of the polity - monarchy or democracy, or elite rule is the best suitable, or which form of control is desirable? When should we resist the control of the state or the authority, are central concerns in political theorization and thinking. In their pursuit to answer these questions, political thinkers have responded to both – their actual socio-historical as well as the intellectual context. And this, we need to understand while we discuss political thought as a discipline. All the thinkers that we are going to discuss in this course are responding to these questions of what is order? Which form of order is desirable or ideal order? And in responding to these questions, they have also responded to their own socio-historical contexts.

Plato was responding to the moral and political decay in the ancient Greek city-states. Hobbes was responding to the English civil war. So was Locke and Rousseau to formulate a more accountable and responsible form of government. When these thinkers were responding to the question of what the government is, they were also responding to their actual social, historical context. And in responding to those social, and the historical context, they were also responding to the intellectual context. And those responses to the intellectual context, make or shape political thought historically and form a tradition.

So, we will discuss how Aristotle is responding to Plato, how Locke is responding to Hobbes, and how Rousseau is responding to Locke and Hobbes, how Hegel is responded by Marx. And this

conversation and argumentation and counter argumentation over the centuries, over the millennia, formulate what is called political thought in a particular tradition. And the nature of political thought, therefore, is historical.

However, in contemporary times we also talk about global political thought or the comparative political thought. Still, political thought as a discipline, by and large, we are going to discuss this again in the next lecture, is historical. So, there is historicity to studying political thought in any tradition. And the reason being that political thought emerges or evolve over the centuries, over the millennia in a tradition when the intellectuals or those who are involved in thinking about the political challenges of their time, not just respond to their own immediate social, historical context, but also to the intellectual context in which they were writing, reflecting, and theorizing the political problems.

So in this way, political thinking or thought is far from conclusive and unanimous, as we shall see a little later while discussing the thoughts or the key themes in many political thinkers, which we have included in this course. While they are responding to their socio-historical context or intellectual context does not mean that there is a unanimous or settled answer to the political problems.

There is a vast disputation and differences. And these disputations and differences lead to the development of political thought as a discipline, and the history of political thought in any tradition. They also make the study of political thought such a fascinating discipline. So, there is no unanimous or settled answer to the problem of the political. However, we often find them more often than not speaking to each other. And that is how political thought, or for that matter, any thought grows or evolves over the centuries and even millennia.

Political thought, as a discipline, emerges out of this kind of thinking and theorization and having a conversation across the ages from the ancient to the modern times. So political thought as a discipline, as I have said, is historical.

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What is political thought?

➤ Political thought as a discipline is historical. Political thought engages with numerous political treatises within a tradition or across the traditions produced over the centuries. Thus we often divide political thought geographically into Chinese, Indian, African, Arab, and Western tradition; and temporally into ancient or classical, medieval and modern political thought. In the recent years there have been growing attentions to the study of comparative political thought or global political thought.

➤ However, in this course our focus is on the Western tradition of political thought. It is just one of the many other traditions of political thought. However, the major ideas and concepts in the political discourse that we have in the modern world such as state, sovereignty, citizenship, political obligation, justice, order have their roots in the Western political thought. Thus it remains an important tradition of political thinking and theorizations. Separated by centuries even millennia, political thinkers in the Western tradition have developed a common language or set of concepts to engage with the political problems.

The nature of this subject is historical. Thus when we talk about political thought, we necessarily mean how it evolved over the centuries or even millennia. So, political thought engages with numerous political treatises within a tradition or across the tradition, and by tradition, I mean, say we now have a kind of settled understanding of constituting this tradition, and this is for the heuristic purpose - that is, for the purpose of the study. You do not have to take it as a unanimous discourse or theorization about the politics.

Within a tradition, there are so many complexities, contradictions, or contestations that is there. However, for the purpose of understanding, or for the purpose of study, we divide the political thought in terms of tradition and also in terms of temporality. And we often divide it into Chinese political thought or Indian political thought, African political thought, Arab and Western tradition of political thought. This is merely to have a comparative understanding of political thought in different traditions. But that does not mean within Indian, Arab or Chinese tradition there is a unanimity or there is a coherence in political thinking and theorization. Hence, within a tradition, there are many traditions.

But for the purpose of understanding, we divide the political thought geographically in terms of Chinese, Arab, African, and the Western tradition of political thought and also temporally into ancient or classic tradition of political thought, medieval and modern political thought. So, this is also a kind of temporal division of political thought across the ages, from classical antiquity to modern times.

In recent years, there have been, as I have said, a growing interest in the study of comparative political thought or political thought across the traditions and global political thought. So, that is the recent development in thinking about political thought. However, for a very long time when we discuss in the academic disciplines about the political thought, it is the Western political thought which dominated, but over the years, Indian, Arab, Chinese, and African, and now there is a kind of growing interest in thinking across the traditions and develop a broader, much more comparative and complex understanding of the political rather than a simplistic, narrow, and restricted sense of the political, keeping in mind these different traditions of political thought and their temporal division.

In this course, we are going to discuss, as the title of the course suggests, Western political thought. And it is just one of the many other traditions of political thought, as I have said, Chinese, Indian and African. However, the major ideas and concepts that shape the political discourse in the modern world, whether we discuss the state, sovereignty, citizenship, political obligation, justice order, you find that when we discuss these ideas or these concepts, these are embedded in the political treatises produced in the Western tradition.

So as I said, that political thinking and theorization is not something unique to the Western tradition. There are Indian, Chinese, Arab traditions of political thought. However, the modern discourse on politics is dominated by the concepts and ideas that has its roots in the Western tradition of political thought. Thus the Western political thought remains an important tradition of political thinking and theorization, and we will discuss in the course how it has evolved.

Separated by centuries, even millennia, political thinkers in the Western tradition have developed a common language or set of concepts to engage with the political problems and which we study over the course of twelve weeks that how these things together shape the understanding of political and distinguishing political from the other realms of human life. And the set of ideas that we find in Plato constantly shapes the thinking of major other political thinkers in medieval and also in modern times.

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➤ Plato and Aristotle in Greek city-states were arguing about the nature and the forms of ideal polis or city-states; Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau laid the foundation for the emergence of modern political thought; similarly the political thought of Machiavelli is reflection of political problems in late medieval and early modern era; Mill, Kant, Hegel and Marx, while reflecting upon the political challenges of their times, were also engaging with the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. In this fashion there is an unbroken conversation between and among these political thinkers in the Western tradition. And political ideas from one era are passed on and modified to meet the requirements of the another era, and in this fashion the political ideas of the past become part of the political consciousness for the later generation.

Political philosophy and thought

➤ Political thought as a discipline shares a lot and often used interchangeably with political philosophy. Philosophy is the foundation of all knowledge; highest truth or ultimate reality of a phenomenon. It consists of logic, esthetics, ethics, politics, and metaphysics.

➤ Political philosophy engages with the question of political. And the question of ethics or morality and politics are at the very core of political thinking and theorizations. Over the centuries, within a tradition, political thinkers have tried to redefine or extend the boundary of the political. However, the definition of the political is still far from settled.



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Plato and Aristotle in Greek city-states were arguing about the nature and forms of ideal polis and city-states. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau laid the foundation for the emergence of modern political thought. So, we cannot think of modern political thought without engaging with the thoughts of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Similarly, the political thought of Machiavelli is a reflection of political problems in the late medieval and early modern era. Mill, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, while reflecting upon the politics of political challenges of their times, were also engaging with the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and that is how political thought in particular tradition evolve.

So, as I said, these thinkers are responding to the immediate challenges of their time. But in responding to those, they are also having a conversation with the political thinking and theorization that happened before, and that is a kind of link that we can find from Plato in the Greek city-states to James Mill, Hegel, Kant in the modern European political thinking and theorization.

So in this fashion, there is an unbroken conversation between and among these political thinkers, and political ideas from one era are passed on and modified to meet the requirements of another era. And in this fashion, the political ideas of the first become part of the political consciousness of the later generations. So, what political treatises and theorization are there in Plato and Aristotle helps in thinking about the political thought in modern times. And that is how the ideas and concepts from one generation moves and shape the thinking of the next generation. However, while they think about their times, they not just go back to Plato and Aristotle, but also expand the

boundary of political thinking or the understanding of the political. And that is how political thought has evolved.

Now, if you look at these, some of the questions like political philosophy, political thought, and political theory, so in the discipline of political science, the political thought is central. Whether it is politics in any country, say Indian politics, or US politics, or comparative politics, or political theory, and political philosophy, you will find that they all discuss the politics or the political problems. But the language, the vocabulary, the concepts, and the terms they use to make sense of politics or interpret the politics or provide a better solution to the challenges that a country or a society face, they rely on the political thought and the political theorization.

So, the connecting ground or thread among the political philosopher, thinker, theorist, or those who are experts in the political development in a particular country, say Indian politics or US politics, they are all discussing the politics. But while discussing politics, they rely on the concepts, ideas, terms that are produced by these political thinkers. And political thought, in that sense, plays a very significant role in the discipline of political science.

Political thought as a discipline share a lot and often used interchangeably with political philosophy. And philosophy, as you know, is regarded as the foundation of all knowledge. So in any discipline, the philosophy is considered to be the ultimate source of knowledge. It is true in the natural science, so it is true in the social science. It deals with the highest truth or the ultimate reality of the phenomena – natural, or social, or political.

Political philosophy, however, deals with the question which is related to the political or the temporal or the material, practical life of the community, in the society at any given point of time. I do not want to go much into detail about what philosophy is. Still, you can think of philosophy as a discipline that is constitutive of logic, aesthetics, ethics, politics, and metaphysics. Briefly, let's understand what logic is? Logic is the approach or epistemology or a method of inquiring about something or producing some knowledge about something. It may be inductive; it may be deductive; it may be dialectics. So, the logic deals with the methods or the epistemology of knowledge. Aesthetics is the ideal form or beauty or truth. Ethics is the knowledge of conduct, good conduct or bad conduct, a good society, or a bad society.

Politics deals with the ideal form of social organization, democracy, authoritarianism, and so on. The metaphysics, however, is a bit complex, which deals with the ultimate reality of anything and political philosophers' deals or the philosopher deals with the metaphysics, the absolute, the ideal form of reality. So philosophy is constitutive of these five things – logic, aesthetics, ethics, politics, and metaphysics.

Political philosophy mainly engages with the question of the political and the question of ethics and politics are at the very core of political thinking and theorization, as I have discussed at the beginning of this lecture. Over the century, within a tradition, political thinkers have tried to redefine or extend the boundary of political. The understanding of political, however, among the political philosophers is not settled.

Political thinkers over the centuries, within the tradition and across the traditions, have extended the definition of the politics, and that we will discuss as we move along with the theories and text of prominent political thinkers in Western political thought. We can also make a quick comparison between political theory and thought.

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Political thought and theory

- Political theory as a discipline is heavily dependent on political thought. Particularly the normative tradition of political theory is embedded in the history of political thought. Its major concepts and disputations have their roots in political thought. However, political thought is limited to the reflections or articulation of political phenomenon carried out by individuals or a group of political thinkers together within a tradition. Political theory in comparison to political thought is much more broader, general, and systematic explanation and analysis of politics.

Major concerns of Political thinkers

- Major concerns of political thinkers and philosophers across the ages and traditions have been the questions like - how to better govern ourselves? Which form of state or government is best or ideal? What is justice? How to establish order? When dissent and even revolution are permissible and justified? These are essentially political questions. In answering them, there have been major disputations among the political thinkers. So Aristotle differs from Plato; Rousseau differs from Hobbes and Locke; Hegel differs from Kant; and Marx disputes Hegel. Sheldon Wolin characterizes this modes of progression of political thought and thinking in the Western tradition as continuity and innovations. The later thinkers in this way not only revisit the question of political but also extend its boundary.

Political theory, as a discipline, is heavily dependent on political thought. For a very long time, it was very hard to distinguish the history of political thought from political theory because most of the ideas, concepts – equality, liberty, state, sovereignty, citizenship were derived from the political thinking and theorization in a tradition. Western political thought or the history of Western

political thought was equated with political theory or the discipline of political theory. Because the concepts, the ideas that we use to explain the society or interpret the society, particularly the normative tradition of political theory are embedded in the history of political thought, and its major concepts and disputations have their roots in political thought or the history of political thought.

However, if you look at political thought in comparison to political theory, in contemporary times, political thought is limited to the individual or group of thinkers and deals with their reflection or theorization about the political problems and challenges. However, political theory in contemporary times, which is not just about the normative political theory, but also exploratory or explanatory political theory, helps us making sense of political circumstances or political problems. Political theory as a discipline in comparison to political thought to which it is dependent on for concepts, ideas, and terminology, is much more systematic, broader, and also generalized understanding of the political situation. So in political theory, we try to explain or interpret political phenomena by using the concepts which are derived from the political thought.

But political theory helps us to have a broader, generalized, or systematic understanding of political phenomena. In contrast, political thought, when we take it as a discipline, is about the reflection or inquiry of political phenomenon done by individuals or groups of individuals within a tradition. So in that sense, it is limited to the reflection or theorization of a few individuals. In contrast, the theory is much more broader, generalized, and systematic in terms of explaining and interpreting the political problems in any society.

So, that is the difference between political theory and thought. However, all these three sub-disciplines, like political philosophy, political thought, and political theory, are overlapping and deals with the question of political that you have to keep in mind. Now, if you move on to understand the concerns of political thinker, as we have discussed at the beginning of this lecture, that across the ages and traditions, political philosophers engage with the questions like how to govern ourselves better? Which form of state or government is best or ideal? What is justice? How to establish order? When dissent and even revolution are permissible and justified?

So, these are the questions that political thinkers across the ages or traditions have grappled with. And these are essentially political questions. And in answering them, there have been major

disputes since, as we will discuss over the course of twelve weeks, among the political thinkers as to how to govern oneself. What is the ideal form of government? When dissent or even revolution is justified or permissible?

In answering these questions, there have been huge differences between Plato and Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, and Locke, Hegel and Kant. So, there is a disputation in answering these questions. And Sheldon Wolin has argued and characterized these modes of disputation or progression of political thought and thinking in the Western tradition as continuity and innovation. Continuity, in a sense, when Aristotle criticizes Plato's political thought and thinking. In that criticism, he is not just innovating the new meaning of the political or the new understanding of the state, but also there is a kind of continuity from the Plato. And so is true when we talk about Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, they differ from each other. Similarly, with Karl Marx and Hegel, they disagree, dispute each other's political assumptions. But in that disputation, there is a kind of continuity and also innovation, according to Sheldon Wolin in the Western tradition of political thought. The later thinkers not only revisit the question of the political but also extend its boundary.

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➤ For example, for Plato and Aristotle the question of political or political sphere was different from the questions concerning the householders or the slave owners. In other words it was specific and limited to the public life in the state. Similarly, there had been a well established distinction of public and private in the Western tradition while discussing about politics. However, in modern ideological age, such distinctions have been severely criticized. For example, when feminists assert that 'personal is political' and question the existence of patriarchy. Similarly, religious or ethnic groups, liberal and socialists, and environmentalists have a very different and often conflicting conceptions of the political. Thus, political in contemporary time seems to permeates every sphere of our individual and collective lives. And still a conclusive or unanimous understanding of the political is far from settled.

Significance of political thought

➤ Why should we study political thought especially when these long dead thinkers wrote in a context radically different from our own? Why to worry about what each of them have said on what and why? One of the major reasons we should study political thought is that they raised certain questions about the political which are still relevant. Second, a deeper engagement with their thought help us understand critically our own assumptions and approach to politics in our own age. In other words, it provides us a set of concepts and approaches to better understand and interpret the contentious and complex nature of politics in our own age and in our own society.

For example, for Plato and Aristotle, the question of the political or political sphere was different from the question concerning the householders or the slave owners. In other words, it was specific and limited to public life in the polis or the city-states. So, there is a very limited, restricted understanding of politics.

Similarly, there had been a well-established distinction in Western political thought between the private sphere and the public sphere, and the private sphere is considered as apolitical. The public sphere deals with the question of the political that concerns the entire society. However, in recent decades, we find that this distinction between personal and political is not just questioned but found making little sense to understand the political problems in the twenty-first century.

For instance, when we talk about the feminist assertions of *personal is political* and their questioning of the patriarchy, which differentiates between and among the males and females. This kind of assertion or questioning of a patriarchal order which starts from the family and permeates the other sphere of social, political life, questions this distinction between personal and public, personal and political, as we have seen in the Western tradition of thought.

Similarly, in this era of ideological political thinking, religious or ethnic groups, liberals and the socialist, environmentalists have very different and often conflicting conceptions of the political. Thus political in contemporary times seems to permeate every sphere of individual and collective lives; and still, a conclusive and unanimous definition of political or understanding of political is far from settled.

Therefore, the question of the political constantly renegotiates or extends or includes the newer concerns, newer subjects within its boundaries, within its limit. And that is how it has evolved. We are going to discuss them when we will discuss different thinkers. Now, the obvious question comes, what is the significance of political thought and why should we study political thought, especially when these thinkers are long dead; and they wrote in a context very different from our own.

Why should we worry about studying their thinking, their treatises in the twenty-first century? What is the point? And as you know, during the positivist, within the positivist paradigm, it was thought and argued that political thought makes very little sense to explain our 'objective' reality. And we have to have more scientific, more rational, more data-driven political thinking or political explanation and political interpretation.

And for a very long time in the twentieth century, political thought was regarded as mere speculation or contemplation with very little application in either explaining or interpreting the political problems in our own time. So obviously, the question comes what the significance of

studying Western political thought is? Now the major reason for studying political thought is that they raised certain questions about political, which are still relevant.

So, there is a kind of timelessness in the questions that they have raised. And also the method or the approaches that they have applied to identifying the problem and also responding to those problems. So one of the reasons for studying political thought is to understand those questions, those problems, which are perennial problems in political science that deals with, as I said, the question of ethics and politics.

Secondly, a deeper engagement with thought to help us critically understand our own assumptions and approaches to politics. It help us critically understand our own assumptions. And sometimes, when we argue about politics or any issue that concerns the society, we are often unaware of our own subjective biases or prejudices, so engagement with the political thought or political treatises help us understand critically our own assumptions, our own biases or prejudices when we think or theories about the political problem of our time. This is the second reason why we should study political thought. In other words, political thought provides us a set of concepts, and approaches to understand better and interpret the contentious and the complex nature of political or political problems in our own time and our own society.

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Methods

- There are different approaches or methods to study political thinkers and their texts such as historical or contextual; textual and interpretative. We will discuss it in some details in the next lecture.

Outline of this course

- This is a 30 hours course over 12 weeks and is open for UG & PG students in Social Sciences; Science; and Engineering subjects. There is no prerequisite for the course. And for the grading, 25 percentage weightage is given to the weekly assignments and remaining 75 percentage is kept for the final examination.

❖ Introduction and Methods; Text and Context	❖ Locke: Natural Rights; limited government; dissent
❖ Plato: Justice; philosopher king; communism; state	❖ Rousseau: Social contract; general will
❖ Aristotle: Politics; virtue; state; citizenship	❖ Kant: Enlightenment; morality; autonomy and freedom
❖ Machiavelli: <u>Virtu</u> ; Religion and Republicanism	❖ Hegel: Freedom; rights; state
❖ Hobbes: Human nature; political obligation; sovereignty	❖ Marx: Historical materialism; state; class
	❖ Mill: Utilitarianism and on liberty

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Now we are going to have a separate lecture on the method. We can find while studying political thought; there are different approaches; for instance, there is a historical and contextual tradition

where it is said that we can study political thought and political text in its historical context. What is historical context? Why should we study idea in the context? Why is it seen as the most appropriate method of studying political thought? We are going to discuss them in the next class, but that is the one very dominant method and approaches to study political thought. Similarly, there is textual and interpretative tradition or method of studying political thought. We will discuss it in some detail in the next lecture.

Now, I would like to discuss the outline of this course briefly. And as you know, this is a thirty-hour course over the twelve weeks and is open to the UG and PG students in social science and engineering subjects. And for this course, there is no prerequisite. Therefore it is open for enrollment and registration to all of you who are interested in the study of political thought, particularly Western political thought. So, I request you and welcome you to enroll and register for this course.

Regarding grading and the pedagogical approach to the study of Western political thought - for this course, you are going to have three lectures in a week. And for every week there will be an assignment. So, for twelve weeks, you will get twelve assignments, and you are supposed to submit the assignments within the specified time limits. These deadlines will be duly announced on your course webpage. And the final grading for the course is divided into assignments and the final examination. So, every week, you will have one assignment, and there is a twenty-five percent weightage point given to the assignments. The remaining seventy-five percentage is kept for the final examination.

And you have to do well in both assignments and the final examination. The calculation of the marks assigned to assignments is based on your best eight assignments out of twelve, and you have to have at least ten percent out of that twenty-five in the assignments; and thirty out of seventy-five in the final exam to pass this course. So, that is about the grading.

Now, if we briefly look at the contents of this course, there will be two introductory lectures on the outline. We have today the first lecture on the nature of political thought, significance, methods. We will have one more lecture, specifically on understanding the methods and approaches to the study of political thought, and then will move on to the political thinkers and the key themes from these thinkers.

From Plato, we will study the idea of justice, philosopher king, communism, and state. Then we will move on to Aristotle. And in Aristotle, we are going to focus on politics, virtue, state, and citizenship. Then medieval thinker Machiavelli, which is also regarded as the precursor of the modern political thought and thinking we will discuss the concept of virtue, religion, and Republicanism; from Hobbes, who is considered to be the first modern political thinker, we will discuss his views on human nature, the theory of political obligation, and sovereignty.

Then we will move on to Locke and Rousseau, and from Locke, we are going to focus on the natural rights, limited government, dissent; and from Rousseau we will study social contract, and general will. These three thinkers, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, are regarded as the social contract tradition thinkers, and how they differ from each other, we are going to discuss when we will discuss these three thinkers.

And after that, we will start with Kant – the enlightenment thinkers, and the question of enlightenment, morality, autonomy, and freedom will study from Kant. And then, we see how Hegel moves away from or criticizes Kant and also carries forward the Kant in his theory of freedom, rights, and the state. And then how Marx is critical of Hegel and extends the dialectics of Hegel when he talks about historical materialism, state, and class. Finally we will conclude this course by studying the political thought of John Stuart Mill and his idea of utilitarianism and particularly his views on liberty. So, this is the course outline for the Introduction to Western Political Thought.

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- The basis of including these thinkers in the course is that they are major representatives of the Western political thought since the classical Greek-city states to modern era nation-states. They have reflected upon the central and perennial question of the political - the issue of ethics and politics; and together they helped in the shaping and also extending the boundary of the political. This course, thus, is in no way a substitute to the original writings of Plato, or Aristotle, or Hobbes, or Kant, or Marx. In fact, one of the objectives is to develop interests among you for these ageless classics.
- Thinkers and the themes included in this course are by no means representative, exhaustive or even up-to-date. There are startling absences such as thinkers like Cicero, Saint Augustine in the classical and medieval period, Montesquieu, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Martha C Nussbaum among many others from the modern and contemporary era.
- The objectives of this course is to engage with the major thinkers in Western political thought and their key ideas. Second, such engagements, it is hoped, would enable us to better understand the complexity and many-sidedness of the political argumentations in our own society and polity.



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Now, if you look at the basis of including these thinkers and not including other thinkers in this course, is that, they are first as the major representative thinkers in Western political thought since classical Greek city-states to the modern era. They have reflected upon the central and perennial question of the political, the issue of ethics and politics, and together they help in shaping and also extending the boundaries of political thought. Thus, the basis for including these thinkers are guided by this idea that they together represent the major themes in the Western tradition of political thought and deals with the perennial question of ethics and politics. Together they shape or constitute the idea of political and also extend its boundary over the centuries and millennia.

So this course, thus, is in no way a substitute to the original writings of Plato or Aristotle or Hobbes or Kant or Marx. So, you should not consider this course as a substitute for their original writings. In fact, one of the objectives for me in this course is to increase the interest among you to read for yourself these ageless classics, i.e., the original works of Plato, Aristotle, Marx, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and all the other thinkers that we have included in this course.

Now, thinkers and themes included in this course are by no means representative, exhaustive, or even up-to-date. So again, you should not consider this course as the representative of the rich or complex tradition of political thinking or theorization in the Western tradition. There are startling absences, starting from Cicero in a Roman-era to Saint Augustine in the medieval era. Also, from the modern times, we have not included many thinkers like Montesquieu, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Martha C Nussbaum, and many others.

So in this sense, there are major absences from this course. But that was the limited scope that we have over the course of twelve weeks and thirty lectures to engage with some of the major thinkers who represent the political thought in the Western tradition and also deals with the central question of ethics and politics. And you are free to engage with these other thinkers, like Michel Foucault, John Rawls, Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, and Mary Wollstonecraft, and Martha C Nussbaum.

I encourage you all to use the discussion forum to discuss any of the themes and thinkers that we have included and also those whom we have not included in the course and make those discussions on the discussion forum more meaningful. And for any queries and thoughts that you have, you can put it on the discussion forum, and you will get an immediate reply from my team or me within twenty-four hours. So, let me repeat this point. The objective of this course is to engage with the major thinkers in Western political thought and their key ideas that is the major objective of this course.

And secondly, it is hoped that such engagement with the major thinkers and their text will enable us to better understand the complexity and many-sidedness of the political debates and argumentation in our own times. So, the study of political thought is not just for a kind of antiquarian purpose or an interest in the historical times, or the thinkers in their particular context. But engaging with them help us better understand our own political problems and challenges and also a kind of critical understanding of our own assumptions and biases. So with that hope, I am sure you will find this course exciting. And I look forward to more meaningful engagement over the course of twelve weeks.

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References

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- Forsyth, Murray and Maurice Keens-Soper. 1988. *A Guide to Political Classics: Plato to Rousseau*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- ✓ Jha, Shefali. 2018. *Western Political Thought: From the Ancient Greeks to Modern Times*, Delhi: Pearson.
- ✓ McClelland, J. S. 2005/1996. *A History of Western Political Thought*, London and New York: Routledge.
- ✓ Nelson, B. 2008. *Western Political Thought*, New York: Pearson Longman.
- Ryan, Alan James. 2012. *On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*, New York/London: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- ✓ ✓ Wolin, Sheldon S. 2004/1960. *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Expanded Edition, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Now for this particular lecture, you can refer to some of these books like David Boucher and Paul Kelly's, *Political Thinkers from Socrates to the Present*. Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens-Soper's, *Political Classics: Plato to Rousseau*, Shefali Jha's *Western Political Thought from the Ancient Greeks to the Modern Times*. These two books by Shefali Jha, and David Boucher and Paul Kelly will be the books that we are going to refer to for many or most of the thinkers that we have included in this course.

But besides them, the other texts that you should refer to are McClelland's and B Nelson's texts on Western political thought, Alan Ryan's *On Politics: History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*, and Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Particularly for the themes on the difference between political philosophy and political thought, political theory, and political thought, I will suggest you go to the first chapter of this text by Sheldon Wolin's, *Politics and Vision*.

That is all for today's lecture, and I hope you enjoyed it. Please do give your feedback. We will be happy to hear from you and respond to your queries and comments. I thank you for listening. Thank you all.