

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
Department of History  
November 1990

History 572

Sommerville

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT: COURSE  
DESCRIPTION

Modern political ideas have their roots in theories expressed during the later Middle Ages and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Theories of liberalism, communism, pacifism, democracy, republicanism and state authoritarianism were all formulated by thinkers in those centuries. The aim of this course is to examine such theories in their historical context. Discussion and reading will focus on a number of the great seminal texts of modern political thinking - including the whole texts or selections from such classic works as Machiavelli's Prince, More's Utopia, Hobbes' Leviathan and Locke's Two treatises of government.

The course will begin with the ideas of the great medieval thinker Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argued that a number of ethical and political truths can be read off from human nature. The purpose of the state, he claimed, was to fulfil the goals of human nature, and in particular to promote the public good. Aquinas was ambiguous on the question of who ought ultimately to hold authority in any state - the people or the ruler. Later theorists debated this problem. Calvin and Hobbes argued that rulers were not accountable to the people, but other theorists sometimes justified resistance to rulers by claiming that the people held sovereign authority and that the powers of governments were defined by contractual limitations which the people had imposed upon them. Some also argued that individuals possess inalienable natural rights which no government can infringe. Ideas like these were used in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century to mount arguments in favor of democracy and of the deposition and execution of the king. In the same period, Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers argued for the abolition of private property. Not long afterwards, John Locke constructed his classic defence of liberalism around the notion of an inalienable natural right to property. These theorists were largely concerned with the relationship between the power of the state and the rights of the people either as individuals or as a group. Other thinkers viewed politics as a matter of what was expedient (Machiavelli), or what was appropriate to a particular set of economic and social circumstances (Harrington). The course is intended to show how all of these various theories arose, and to sharpen skills at analyzing and criticizing political arguments.

Course requirements: grades will be assigned on the basis of (a) contributions to discussion; (b) two papers of approximately 8-12 pages each; (c) a classroom presentation lasting about twenty minutes.

Interview times are:

Wednesday, 5 Dec. 11-12:30  
Friday, 7 Dec. 11-12:30, 2-5  
Monday, 10 Dec. 11-12:30

Wednesday, 12 Dec. 11-12:30  
Friday, 14 Dec. 11-12:30, 2-5