

POL320H
Modern Political Thought: The Constitution of Freedom
Fall Term 2025

Instructor: Professor Melissa S. Williams
3040 Sidney Smith Hall

Office hours: Tuesdays, 2-4 PM or by appointment

Email: melissa.williams@utoronto.ca

Lecture location: Ramsey Wright Laboratories, 25 Harbord Street, Room 117

Lecture time: Wednesdays, 5:00-7:00 PM EST

Tutorials: TBA

Teaching Assistants:

Thilo Schaefer (Head TA)
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Course description:

This course examines central themes in the political thought of the modern era through the careful reading of texts that date mostly from the 18th and early 19th centuries. This pivotal period in the formation of global modernity, commonly referred to as the “Age of Enlightenment” and the “Age of Democratic Revolutions” in Euro-American political tradition, was also an age of European imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. Through the close reading of “canonical” texts from “Western” political thought in conversation with key texts in Indigenous and Creole political thought, we will explore contrasting accounts of the meaning of freedom, the idea of the social contract as a device for imagining how a free political order can come into being, the role of revolution in human emancipation, the modern state as an instrument of freedom or unfreedom, and the problems that orders of power based on gender, race, or class pose for our understandings of freedom.

Readings:

This course proceeds through the close reading of written texts (though we will also problematize the conventional practice of treating only written texts as significant sources in the study of political thought). We will situate these texts in their historical contexts, aiming to understand them on their own terms. But our purpose is also to reflect deeply on whether the

visions of politics they express offer guidance for our political judgment here and now. Every text is open to multiple interpretations, and the goal is for to develop *your* interpretation through careful reading and lively debate with your peers. In other words, the course will cultivate your ability to think like a political theorist, able to present a convincing interpretation of the texts *and* articulate your judgment about whether the account of political life that you find in the texts is appealing or compelling *to you*.

For each text, we have prepared a set of reading questions to help focus your encounter with it, and these will be posted in Quercus in advance of the scheduled reading assignment. We encourage you to keep a reading journal of your notes on the text, and to take the time to write out your answers to a few of the questions (or to your own questions) each week. If you do this as part of your regular study regimen, you'll be well prepared for essays and exams. We've also identified key passages each week for close reading and will post these each week in a Discussion page under the Quercus Module for that week. One mode of participation in this class is to offer your reflections on these passages in the Discussion.

The following required texts are available for purchase at the UofT Bookstore (new, used, and/or digital editions) or from online booksellers. Some of them (as indicated) are available electronically through the UofT Libraries system (see the "Library Reading List" in the left-hand column of the Quercus portal for the course). There are many different translations and editions of many of these texts. Be sure to read these particular editions and use them in your course assignments. I strongly encourage you to get your own copy of these texts so that you can mark them up as you read them, an important way of interacting with the text and making them your own. All other readings will be posted on the course portal in the Module for the week in which they're assigned.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*. Hackett 2012 edition translated by Cress (ISBN-10: 1603846735 / ISBN-13: 978-1603846738) (Available online through UofT Libraries: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=1014682>).

Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political Writings*. Edited by Hans Reiss. Translated by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991 (ISBN-10: 0521398371, ISBN-13: 978-0521398374).

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Edited by L.G. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 (ISBN-10: 9780199539024, ISBN-13: 978-0199539024)(Available online through UofT Libraries: <https://oxfordworldsclassics-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/10.1093/owc/9780199539024.001.0001/isbn-9780199539024>).

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women and A Vindication of the Rights of Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 (ISBN-10: 019955546X, ISBN-13: 978-0199555468). (Available online through UofT Libraries: <https://oxfordworldsclassics-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/10.1093/owc/9780199555468.001.0001/isbn-9780199555468>).

Lectures and Tutorials:

This course combines lectures and tutorials to orient your reading of the texts and to deepen your understanding through class discussion. In lectures, Professor Williams will provide historical context for each text, outline its key arguments, identify some challenges for interpretation, and link back to the overarching themes of modernity and human freedom. Attending lectures is important for your success in the course, as they will help make the texts more accessible and prepare you for your tutorial discussions, essays, and exams. You should make time to *do the readings and review the reading questions before the lecture on a given text*, every week.

Tutorials are also essential to your learning, and tutorial attendance is mandatory. See below for further details.

Normally, both lectures and tutorials will be held in person. However, we will be making special arrangements for Week 2 (September 10), when I will be traveling for the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting. Stay tuned for further information.

Course requirements:

Tutorial participation (weekly)	15%
Weekly passage selection (10 in total) (due at 4:45 PM before class, Weeks 2-11)	10%
Essay: Preliminary Analysis (due October 17, by 11:59 PM)	15%
Final Essay Essay (due October 24, by 11:59 PM)	20%
Final Exam (December Exam period)	40%

1. Tutorials & Participation (15%)

Regularly scheduled tutorials are crucial for your learning experience in this course, and tutorial participation is therefore a course requirement. Tutorials will be led by skilled doctoral candidates who are deeply knowledgeable about the history of political thought. Through tutorial discussion, you will refine your interpretation of the texts we are studying and your judgment about whether the visions of politics they offer are convincing or appealing. In addition to your participation in tutorials, you can participate by offering reflections on the passage selected for close reading each week at the beginning of the week's Reading Questions (this is distinct from your Weekly Passage Selection assignments).

2. Weekly Passage Selection (10%)

Each week (Weeks 2-11), transcribe a passage of between 50 and 100 words from the assigned version of text for the week, providing the page reference) that you think is central

to the meaning of the assigned reading. This passage **must be different** from the passage identified in the Reading Questions for the week. This exercise should not take more than about

- In one or two sentences, explain the key idea expressed by the passage in your own words.
- Pose a question (no more than 2 sentences) raised by the passage you have selected. For example, you might:
 - Identify a problem, puzzle, or paradox raised by the selected passage.
 - Identify another passage in the same text that seems to contradict the meaning expressed in your selected passage.
 - Question a premise of the selected passage.
- Points available: 1% per assignment (10 points each; 100 points in total for 10 weeks, counting for 10% of final course grade)
 - 50% for selecting a good passage (5 points/10)
 - 25% for explaining the key idea (2.5 points/10)
 - 25% for raising an interesting question (2.5 points/10)

Due: 15 minutes before lecture, every week, via Quercus. **No late assignments accepted.**

3. Essay: Preliminary Analysis (15%) (due October 10)

The essay assignment will require you to compare the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace with Rousseau. Essay topics will be distributed by October 1, 2025 via the Essay Module on Quercus. See that Module as well for guidance on writing interpretive essays in political theory and for the Academic Integrity Checklist that you will need to submit with your final essay.

The preliminary analysis component of the essay assignment is due **two weeks** before the final essay. Its structure builds on the Weekly Passage Selection assignments by asking you to identify 4 passages (two from the Great Law, two from Rousseau) that you think are important for the passage you have chosen. However, this assignment requires you to go beyond what you have been doing in the weekly assignments by writing a brief interpretation of each of the passages you have selected. It also asks you to prepare an outline of the argument you will be making in your final essay. In short, you will be asked to:

- Identify which topic you'll be writing on and offer a provisional thesis statement;
- Select 4 passages that you think are important for the topic you have chosen, 50-100 words, 2 from each of the authors/texts you are discussing;
- Write 250 words interpreting each passage (1000 words total)
- Write a draft outline of your essay (1 page, approximately 200-250 words)
- Grading scheme: 100 points (for 15% of final course grade)
 - Passage selection: 20 points (5 points each per passage)
 - Interpretation: 40 points (10 points per passage)
 - Outline: 20 points

Further details will be provided when we distribute the essay topics.

4. Final Essay (20%) (due October 24)

An interpretive essay of 2000-2500 words on an assigned topic based on the readings from the first six weeks of the course. If your thesis has changed from the one you articulated in your Preliminary Analysis, add a paragraph at the end explaining why. This explanation should be clearly labeled (e.g., “Explanation for Changed Thesis”), and should be no more than 250 words. This does not count toward essay word count.

5. Final Exam (40%)

The in-person final exam will focus on material from the second half of the course and will comprise two sections: a short-answer section focused on text identification, and two short essays. Further details will be provided closer to the exam period.

Lateness and related policies

1. **We will not be able to accept late Weekly Passage Selection assignments. If you miss an assignment for reasons of illness, contact your TA *before the class in which it is due*.** This is partly because the purpose of the assignments is to reflect on the text on your own, without cues from lecture, and this purpose would be defeated if you hand them in after lecture. It is also because grading stray assignments takes additional TA time that we do not have. These assignments should be easy to complete quickly if you do the readings.
2. Late essays (including the Preliminary Analysis) will be penalized at the rate of 1 percent per day of lateness, including weekends. Extensions will be granted only with a valid medical excuse, and only if your TA has given express written permission for late submission before the final essay deadline.
3. Your essay will not be graded until you have submitted the Academic Integrity Statement.
4. Essays will be penalized for exceeding the maximum word limit at the rate of 2 points per 100 words over the limit.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is fundamental to learning and scholarship. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the University of Toronto degree that you earn will be valued as a true indication of your individual academic achievement, and will continue to receive the respect and recognition it deserves.

Familiarize yourself with the University’s [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). It is the rulebook for academic behaviour at the U of T, and you are expected to know the rules.

For further guidance, see [“How Not to Plagiarize”](#).

To remind you of these expectations, and help you avoid accidental offences, *we will ask you to include a signed Academic Integrity Checklist with every assignment (downloadable from Quercus). If you do not include the statement, your work will not be graded.*

Normally, students will be required to submit their course assignments to the University's plagiarism detection tool website for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their material to be included as source documents in the University's plagiarism detection tool reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the University's plagiarism detection tool service are described on the company web site.

We treat cases of academic misconduct very seriously. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following the procedures outlined in the *Code*. The consequences for academic misconduct can be severe, including a failure in the course and a notation on your transcript. If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact your TA. If you have questions about appropriate research and citation methods, seek out additional information from your TA, or from other available campus resources like the University of Toronto's [Writing website](#). If you are experiencing personal challenges that are having an impact on your academic work, please speak to your TA or seek the advice of your college registrar.

Generative AI

Representing as one's own an idea, or expression of an idea, that was AI-generated may be considered an academic offense in this course. I recognize that in some circumstances there may be valid reasons to use generative AI as part of your learning process. If you believe you have a valid reason to use it, you must request and receive my approval **in writing prior to submitting work that has relied on generative AI**, and include a statement describing your use of AI in a note on the assignment you submit. This rule applies to all written work in the course, including Weekly Passage Selections. In addition to the educational reasons to avoid reliance on AI, please also consider its environmental costs.

Quercus, E-mail, and Communication

All students should ensure that they are registered on the course on Quercus, as reading materials and course announcements will be posted electronically. If you would like to change your Quercus profile (e.g., to make sure that your preferred name appears correctly), follow the instructions [here](#). You should regularly check your utoronto email account to make sure that you receive important email notices.

Please use the Quercus Inbox tool for all course-related email communication. We will endeavour to respond to emails within 72 hours, but please be patient if we are slow to respond, and please do not expect responses on evenings or weekends. Email is for short clarification questions only. If you have concerns or questions that cannot be answered in a short response please see us during office hours.

Course Accessibility and Supports for Students

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please inform Thilo Schaefer (thilo.schaefer@mail.utoronto.ca) and register with the Accessibility Services Office (<https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/department/accessibility-services/>) to obtain an Accommodations Letter as soon as possible. Note that the deadline for Fall registration with Accessibility Services is October 6, 2025. Once you have an Accommodations Letter, please share it with the professor and with your TA via a joint email. If you are unable to complete your assignment within the terms specified in your Accommodations Letter, please contact your College Registrar without delay so that they can support you in meeting your course requirements, and ask them to contact the professor with their recommendations.

If you have preferences regarding your gender pronouns, please inform the professor and your TA.

Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. Information on these services can be found on their website (<http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>). Accessibility Services can also be reached by phone (416-978-8060) or email (accessibility.services@utoronto.ca). The sooner you let them know your needs, the more quickly they can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Other Supports for Students

Students also have access to mental health and safety, and research and writing resources:

Mental Health & Safety

- Guide to available resources (<https://safety.utoronto.ca/>).
- Health & Wellness Centre (<https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc>).
- Crisis Support: Students in distress can access a range of free crisis lines available from the University of Toronto and the City of Toronto, as listed below:
 - University of Toronto: <https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/task/support-when-you-feel-distressed/>
 - City of Toronto: <https://www.toronto.ca/311/knowledgebase/kb/docs/articles/311-toronto/information-and-business-development/crisis-lines-suicide-depression-telephone-support-lines-non-crisis-mental-health-services.html>
 - Most of these crisis lines are available 24 hours a day and some address specific problems that students may be experiencing. Immediate assistance is available as follows:
 - My SSP for University of Toronto Students: 1-844-451-9700.
 - Good 2 Talk Student Helpline: 1-866-925-5454
 - Gerstein Crisis Centre: 416-929-5200
 - Distress Centres of Greater Toronto: 416-408-HELP (4357)
 - The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH): 250 College Street (walk-in)

Research & Writing

- Research and writing guide (<https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/>).
- Chicago Manual of Style citation guide (https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html).
- Writing Centres (<http://writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres/>).

You are not alone: To be human is to need the support of others. Please get help if you're experiencing difficulties and are in distress about personal or academic matters.

Schedule of lectures and readings

Part I: Covenants of Freedom

Week 1 (September 3): Introduction: Whose Freedom? Which Contract?

After opening the course with an acknowledgement of the land on which we are meeting to learn together, we will read the UofT Land Acknowledgement as a text in political theory:

We would like to acknowledge this sacred land on which the University of Toronto operates. It has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

- Revised by the Elders Circle (Council of Aboriginal Initiatives) on November 6, 2014.

Recommended reading:

Victor P. Lytwyn, "A Dish With One Spoon: The Shared Hunting Grounds Agreement in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley Region," in *Papers of the 28th Algonquin Conference* (1997), pp. 210-227.

Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), ch. 1 (pp. 12-37).

Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014 [1997]), ch. 1 (pp. 9-40).

Week 2 (September 10): Kayanerenkó:wa (The Great Law of Peace)

Committee of the [Six Nations] Chiefs, “Traditional History of the Confederacy of the Six Nations,” in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3rd Series, Vol. 5, Sec. 2 (Ottawa: Royal Society of Canada, 1912), pp. 195-246. Focus on pp. 197-226, but read the entire text.

Kayanesenh Paul Williams, *Kayanerenkó:wa: The Great Law of Peace* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018), Introduction (pp. 1-23).

Recommended:

Rick Hill, “Hodinohso:ni Governance & the Great Law of Peace” (video lecture; 40 minutes), Six Nations Polytechnic Conversations in Cultural Fluency #4, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DaNMtVANsA>

Week 3 (September 17): The Great Law in Haudenosaunee Tradition

*****Tutorials begin*****

Committee of the [Six Nations] Chiefs, “Traditional History of the Confederacy of the Six Nations,” in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3rd Series, Vol. 5, Sec. 2 (Ottawa: Royal Society of Canada, 1912), pp. 195-246. Focus on pp. 226-246, but read the entire text.

Recommended:

Susan Hill, “Kontinonhsyonni—The Women Who Make the House,” ch. 2 in *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), pp. 53-76.

Week 4 (September 24): Natural Freedom (Rousseau I)

Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (2012 Hackett ed.), Preface and Part I (pp. 39-69 and Rousseau’s notes, pp. 93-116). (Note that the pagination for the 1987 edition is different: 33-60, 83-106.)

Week 5 (October 1): “Civilization” and the Fraudulent Social Contract (Rousseau II)

Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Part II (pp. 69-92 and Rousseau’s notes, pp. 117-120).

Week 6 (October 8): Freedom as Convention (Rousseau III)

On Social Contract, Books I and II; also read Book IV, chs. 1-2 alongside Book II (pp. 156-191, 224-228)

****Essay: Preliminary Analysis due by 11:59 PM on Friday, October 10 ****

Week 7 (October 15): Universal Freedom through *Rechtstaat*? (Kant)

“What is Enlightenment?” (pp. 54-60)

“On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice,’” Part II (“On the Relationship of Theory to Practice in Political Right”)(pp. 73-87)

“Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” (pp. 93-130).

Part II: Freedom and Revolution

Week 8 (October 22): The Representative Republic

Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776)

The Federalist Papers, Nos. 10, 14, and 51 (1787)

Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

****Final Essay due by 11:59 PM on Friday, October 24****

**** Reading Week – No class on October 29****

Week 9 (November 5): Constitution as Conservation

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)

Reflections on the Revolution in France, pp. 3-63, 75-97, 245-50.

Week 10 (November 12): The Revolution in Manners (Wollstonecraft)

Olympe de Gouges, “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen” (1791)

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Prefatory Letter, Introduction, chs. 1-4, 6, 9 & 12 (pp. 65-68, 71-149, 191-197, 241-65)

Week 11 (November 19): The Black Republic

David Geggus, "The Haitian Revolution in Atlantic Perspective," in Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The Haitian Declaration of Independence (1804)

Jean-Jacques Dessalines, "I Have Avenged America" (1804)

The Constitution of Haiti (1805)

Week 12 (November 26): Review and Conclusion: The State and/of Freedom

*****Final Exam: December Exam Period*****