

Western Political Thought: Modern

The world that we inhabit has been substantially transformed over the past 400 years. It is a “modern” world. The transformation has been the result of a self-conscious project led by political philosophers and their followers, a project that is now under attack from thinkers who call themselves postmodern. In its origin, and in the hearts of those who continue to put their faith in it, modernity stood for what we call “progress,” i.e., movement to a commercial society that is not rural, poor, stagnant, superstitious, inhumane, etc., but urban, wealthy, dynamic, secular, and humane. It included a new understanding of nature (as something to be conquered), of justice (as individual rights), of science (as a constructed means to conquest of nature and comfortable self-preservation), of government (as an entity that secures for its citizens a freedom to pursue their goals in a private life rather than an entity that promotes virtue).

This course closely examines key primary texts in the development of modern political philosophy in order to uncover and understand the origins, development, and crises of modernity. The texts we will examine have had a direct impact on the Western World, and now, with globalization, on the whole world. We will read them in three thematic sections of the course. In the first, we will examine the origins of modernity in works by Machiavelli, Bacon, and Hobbes. In the second, we will explore the rise of the left, or egalitarian modernity, in works by Rousseau and Marx. Finally, we will attempt to grasp the origins of the present crisis of modernity in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Leo Strauss’ “*German Nihilism*.”