

POLI.2310 INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Presentations & Papers: Materials & Instructions

You must choose the same topic for your presentation and final paper. On the assigned date of your presentation, you must be prepared to lead an informative discussion of your topic. Although you may use PowerPoint, you are not required to incorporate any technology. You must also submit a polished thesis statement on the day of your presentation (even if you have chosen a thesis statement from the list below). In addition, you must include a citation for at least one web-based source that you located on your own. Please paste the URL of your additional source at the bottom of your thesis statement.

An easy way to approach the presentation would be to read your thesis statement, then highlight specific themes or details, then comment on your central conclusion. If you still have questions about your topic at the time of your presentation, feel free to raise them with me and your fellow students. However, your presentation should be designed to show that you have already engaged in significant research.

Your final paper must be at least five pages long (double-spaced; eleven or twelve-point type; one-inch margins). Please e-mail a *polished and complete first draft* (formatted in Word). If you do not submit a carefully written draft on time, I will not be able to help you, and your first draft will be graded as your final draft.

Keep in mind that you will be evaluated according to your ability to convey accurate information in college-level prose. Consequently, if you have writing problems, please visit the Writing Center to obtain assistance with proofreading and correcting your draft before you send it in.

If you hope to earn a higher grade than the one you received on the midterm, regular attendance, active class participation, and significant improvement of your writing skills are essential. If you have fallen short in any of these areas, it will weigh down your final grade.

Formula for thesis statements:

General observation: "Scholars once believed..."

Qualification: "However, recent studies suggest..."

Statement of strategy: "By examining...this paper will show..."

Sample Thesis Statements:

Note: you may use any of these statements as is, revise any according to your liking, or compose a thesis statement on your own.

1. The Foundations of Western Political Thought

- Although Plato and Aristotle are both identified as founding figures in Western political thought, their visions of government were diametrically opposed. Plato famously presented a theory of politics based on [epistemological idealism](#), that is, the premise that ideas provide the basis of all knowledge. In contrast, Aristotle maintained that [gathering empirical evidence](#) allows us to discover the universal principles of human nature. By comparing [Plato's idealistic philosophy](#) with the empirical standpoint adopted in [Aristotle's *Politics*](#), this essay will explain how their epistemological perspectives inform their divergent approaches to government.
- Although we do not ordinarily associate popular movies with ancient philosophy, Plato's "[Allegory of the Cave](#)" has been recognized as the [inspiration for several films](#). Of these, the [Matrix Trilogy](#), a series by the Wachowskis that began in 1999, was especially successful, garnering praise from popular and academic critics alike. By first summarizing Plato's "Allegory," then describing how it informed the [Matrix Trilogy](#), this essay will explain why Plato's parable provided such fertile ground for the Wachowskis' cinematic exploration of the problem of knowledge in contemporary life.
- Although Aristotle regarded democratic rule as inherently [unstable](#), he is frequently cited as a major influence in the development of democracy in the United States. By summarizing key conclusions from Aristotle's [Politics](#), this essay will explore his role in shaping the [Federalists' approach](#) to framing the Constitution and establishing a new form of representative government.
- Aristotle was celebrated for nearly fifteen centuries as the founding figure in the evolution of scientific inquiry. However, in recent decades, historians have increasingly emphasized the distorted assumptions that informed [his scientific point of view](#). These distortions are especially apparent in his analysis of the biological basis of gender inequality. By summarizing the central tenets of his [biological explanation for women's ostensibly natural inferiority](#), this essay will explain why his reputation as a scientific theorist has been shattered by the rise of feminist political thought.

2. Machiavelli & Hobbes

- Although Niccolò Machiavelli's name became synonymous with evil soon after his landmark work, *The Prince*, was published in 1532, he has also been regularly defended by scholars who maintain that he never deserved his popular reputation as an apologist for the abuse of power. For example, in "[What Machiavelli Knew](#)," which appeared in the *New Statesmen* in 2013, philosopher John Gray celebrates Machiavelli's virtues, taking the position that the rule of law in the modern world would collapse if political leaders failed to follow Machiavelli's maxim that the end justifies the means. [Many other scholars](#) have similarly praised Machiavelli as a potent and positive influence in Western political thought. Without attempting to summarize all of this recent scholarship, this essay will highlight some of the arguments made by Gray and others in order to explore why Machiavelli continues to be seen as an invaluable resource in the study of politics.
- In "[American Machiavelli](#)," published in *The American Conservative* in 2014, James Burnham argues that U.S. lawmakers could rescue the nation from its current morass if they adopted the strong-arm approach to politics outlined in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. According to Burnham, if American political leaders embraced Machiavellian tactics, the U.S. could overcome the threats presented by terrorism and other destabilizing forces. By examining Burnham's argument, this essay will explore whether his arguments in favor of Machiavellianism would increase national security or further erode the strength of American democracy.
- In "[Leviathan Then & Now](#)," published in the Hoover Institution's *Policy Review* in 2008, Peter Berkowitz argues that the authoritarian political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) provides much more effective solutions to present-day political problems than democratic theorists have generally assumed. More specifically, Berkowitz maintains that the violence that bedevils the global system today invites us to reconsider the merits of Hobbes's contention that individual preservation is best achieved by the surrender of liberty to absolute power. Without dismissing Berkowitz's argument out of hand, this essay will show that his embrace of Hobbes's authoritarian approach to government proceeds from the post-democratic assumption that military force is the only means available to prevent the leaders of non-Western nations and political groups from committing violence within and beyond their borders.

3. Politics, Government, and the Rise of Capitalism

- In writing the Declaration of Independence, [Thomas Jefferson famously drew from John Locke's political philosophy](#), especially as it was outlined in the *Two Treatises of Government*. By tracing some of Jefferson's well-known phrases back to Locke's work, this essay will explore the roots of American political philosophy. In addition, by outlining the gulf between the egalitarian ideals expressed in [America's founding document with the realities of slavery](#), I will examine the tensions between abstract liberty and material inequality in the United States.

- John Locke has long been recognized as a central influence in the development of American political thought. However, in the course of the twentieth century, Lockean approaches to the pursuit of property and the protection of individual liberty came to seem increasingly irrelevant to American political life. In "[John Locke's America](#)," a contribution to a symposium on Locke published in *Society in 2013*, George Thomas argues that Lockean principles continue to inform American politics, citing as a case in point Lockean influences in the ongoing debate over same-gender marriage. By analyzing Thomas's effort to restore Locke as a vital force in American political philosophy, this essay will show that he exaggerates Locke's contributions to democratic theory in order to make him seem more relevant to the twenty-first century.
- [Adam Smith](#) is frequently [portrayed as optimist](#) whose defense of free-market economics rested on the assumption that the universal pursuit of private interest would improve standards of living for all. While it is true that Smith celebrated the appetite for enrichment as the driving force behind the "[progress of opulence](#)" throughout human history, he never argued that unrestricted markets would allow wealth to trickle down from the few to the many, and he never minimized the damaging effects of specialized labor. By examining the [darker side of Smith's economic vision](#), this essay will show that his reputation as a sunny apologist for free market capitalism is largely undeserved.
- While Adam Smith was apparently never mentioned at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, [numerous scholars have emphasized his influence on the Framers](#), especially [James Madison](#), whose theory of factional competition mirrors the economic vision Smith presented in his landmark work, *The Wealth of Nations*. By summarizing key similarities between Madison's approach to factions and Smith's conception of capitalism as a self-regulating system, this essay will explore the economic principles embedded in early American constitutional thought.
- Although [Adam Smith](#) is widely recognized as the cardinal theorist of modern capitalism, while [Karl Marx](#) is usually seen as capitalism's fiercest critic, these two political economists have more in common than we might assume. Their approaches to the [labor theory of value](#), as well as the damaging effects of the [division of labor](#), provide an especially rich illustration of [the overlap between their contributions to economic thought](#). By comparing and contrasting their views on the role and conditions of labor in industrial society, this essay will explain why Marx maintained that his vision of communist revolution was drawn directly from Smith's work.

4. The Quest for Freedom in the Industrial Age

- Although Karl Marx and Henry David Thoreau are not often studied together, they focused on surprisingly similar themes. [Marx](#) is widely recognized as capitalism's foremost critic, but people generally forget that Thoreau's *Walden begins with a chapter entitled "Economy,"* in which he decries the degradation of labor in capitalist society, and that "[Life without Principle](#)," a lecture he delivered many times during the

last part of his life, fiercely condemned the thoughtless drive for individual enrichment that seemed to animate American society. By comparing key passages from [Marx's work](#) with some of Thoreau's [reflections on capitalist production and consumption](#), this essay will show that these two otherwise divergent thinkers shared a common disdain for commercial competition and free enterprise.

- In view of [Henry David Thoreau's support for limited government](#), advocates of laissez-faire capitalism have often placed him on their side. However, an examination of Thoreau's remarks on capitalist production and consumption suggests that he had nothing but disdain for the pursuit of private property. By surveying his commentary on economic activity in *Walden* and "[Life Without Principle](#)," this essay will show that [Thoreau rejected industrial capitalism](#) as a viable system not because it failed to promote prosperity, but because it lured individuals into meaningless lives.
- In the mid-nineteenth century, when the productivity of labor reached new heights, and industrial workers faced sharply declining wages, [Karl Marx](#) and other radicals concluded that the crisis-ridden nature of capitalism would eventually lead the impoverished majority to overthrow the wealthy elite. While this global revolution never came to pass, twenty-first-century activists such as [Naomi Klein](#) contend that we currently face a similarly revolutionary moment. According to Klein, the self-defeating operation of fossil-fuel based economies, in which the [accumulation of wealth depends upon intensifying climate change](#), has created such a level of crisis that the miseries caused by the free market system can no longer be managed by the ruling class. By examining the arguments made by Klein and others, this essay will explore the notion that the environmental catastrophes that capitalism has set into motion will prove fatal to the system itself.
- In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill argued that the rising power of the masses in modern industrial society endangered social progress by subjecting the intellectual elite to the tyranny of the majority. The threat, Mill argued, was not that the many would seize the property of the few, but that innovative ideas would be smothered by common mediocrity. By exploring Mill's assumptions about the intellectual capacity of the common people, this essay will show that his defense of individual liberty was marred by his [anti-democratic point of view](#).
- In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill maintained that maximizing individual liberty would encourage public discussion of unorthodox opinions, which would, in turn, encourage the selection of the best ideas in the development of public policy. [Mill's argument](#) has long been associated with a popular analogy between free markets, which ostensibly produce the highest quality products at the lowest price, and open public forums, which theoretically separate bad ideas from good. However, the problem with the marketplace of ideas is the same as the problem with markets in general, which is that they don't necessarily yield rational results. By exploring Mill's conception of public discourse, this essay will show that he failed to take account of the structural inequalities that tend to shape public debate.