

# PH251C Political Philosophy

Syllabus for Spring 2026  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Aberdeen

Course Coordinator & Lecturer: Eilidh Beaton

## Course Description

Why do many of us think that it is acceptable for states to make laws and coercively enforce them? How should we conceptualise political freedom? Given the flaws with electoral representative democracy, is it really the best practicable form of government? Should states redistribute wealth from the affluent to those who are less wealthy?

These are examples of central questions in Western political philosophy, which will be our object of study in this course. Example topics we may cover include: state legitimacy, racial injustice, liberty, democracy, distributive justice, and equality. Readings will include both historical and contemporary texts.

Throughout the course, students will be encouraged to think deeply, discuss complex and sometimes sensitive political topics openly and charitably, and explore their own views about the meaning of political concepts and how our political institutions and political life should be structured.

## Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Required Reading
Week 1	The Social Contract: Thomas Hobbes	Thomas Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> . Selected passages from Chapters 6, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18.
Week 2	The Social Contract: John Locke	John Locke, <i>Second Treatise of Government</i> . Selected passages.
Week 3	The Social Contract: Jean-Jacques Rousseau	Jean-Jacques Rousseau, <i>Discourse on the Origin of Inequality</i> . Selected passages.  Jean-Jacques Rousseau, <i>The Social Contract</i> , Book 1 §1 and §6-9, Book 2 §1-4, Book 4 §1-2.
Week 4	The Social Contract: John Rawls	John Rawls, <i>A Theory of Justice</i> (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1971). Chapter 1: Justice as Fairness, sections 1-5; Chapter 2: The Principles of Justice, section 11; Chapter 3: The Original Position, section 26.

Week 5	The Racial Contract: Charles Mills	Charles W. Mills, <i>The Racial Contract</i> (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997/2022). All of Chapter 1: Overview; and pp. 62-89 of Chapter 2: The Racial Contract underwrites the modern social contract and is constantly being rewritten.
Week 6	READING WEEK	No lectures, tutorials, or required reading
Week 7	Liberty: Positive, Negative, and Republican	Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in his <i>Liberty</i> ed. by Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Introduction and Parts 1 and 2 of the essay only.  Philip Pettit, <i>Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997/2002). Introduction pp. 4-7 only; Chapter 1: Before Positive and Negative Liberty, sections 1 and 2 (pp. 17-27); Chapter 2: Liberty as Non-Domination, section 1 (pp. 52-66).
Week 8	Nozick's Libertarianism	Robert Nozick, <i>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</i> (Malden MA: Basic Books, 1974). Chapter 7: Distributive Justice, only section 1 'Entitlement Theory' (excluding the part entitled "Sen's argument") is required.
Week 9	Equality	Elizabeth Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?', <i>Ethics</i> 109:2 (1999), 287-337.
Week 10	(Electoral Representative) Democracy & Its Alternatives	Alex Tuckness and Clark Wolf, <i>This is Political Philosophy: An Introduction</i> (West Sussex: Wiley & Sons, 2017), Chapter 5: Democracy, pp. 105-131.  Alexander Guerrero, 'Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative', <i>Philosophy &amp; Public Affairs</i> 42:2 (2014). Up to the end of section 1 (p. 154).
Week 11	(Electoral Representative) Democracy & Its Alternatives	Alexander A. Guerrero, 'Against Elections', <i>Philosophy &amp; Public Affairs</i> 42:2 (2015) - complete the text this week.  Kal Hailu Kalewold, 'Every Day an Election Day', <i>Free &amp; Equal</i> 1:2 (2025), pp. 394-423.

## Further Reading

### Introduction to Political Philosophy

- Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), Introduction.
- Dudley Knowles, *Political Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2002), Introduction.
- Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Introduction.
- David Miller, *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Chapter 1 - Why do we need political philosophy?

### Week 1 – Thomas Hobbes

- Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 1, The State of Nature - pp. 6-18 only.
- Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* ed. by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007), Hobbes II – Human Nature and the State of Nature, and Hobbes IV – The Role and Powers of the Sovereign.

### Week 2 – John Locke

- Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 1, The State of Nature - pp. 18-26 only; and Chapter 2 – Justifying the State.
- John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* ed. by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007), Locke I - His Doctrine of Natural Law.
- David Hume, 'Of the Original Contract' and 'Of the Origin of Government'.

### Week 3 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 1, The State of Nature - pp. 26-32.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book 1 §2-5, Book 3 §1-3. Available [here](#).
- Christopher Bertram, 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 edition) ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Available [here](#).
- John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* ed. by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007), Rousseau I – The Social Contract, Its Problems, Rousseau II – The Social Contract, Assumptions, and the General Will, Rousseau III – The General Will (II) and the Question of Stability.

### Week 4 – John Rawls

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entries on [Distributive Justice](#) (see esp §3 "The Difference Principle"), [The Original Position](#), and [Rawls](#).
- G. A. Cohen, 'Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26:1 (1997), 3-30.
- G. A. Cohen, 'Incentives, Inequality, and Community', *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Stanford University, 21 and 23 May 1991).
- Tommie Shelby, 'Race and Social Justice: Rawlsian Considerations', *Fordham Law Review* 72:5 (2004), 1697-1714.

- Charles Mills, 'Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 47 (2009), 161-184.
- Tommie Shelby, 'Racial Realities and Corrective Justice: A Reply to Charles Mills', *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1:2 (2013), 145-162.
- Charles Mills, 'Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice? A Critique of Tommie Shelby', *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1:1 (2013), 1-27.

### Week 5 – Charles Mills

- Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997/2022) - whole book.
- Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/Write Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- Charles W. Mills, *Provost Lecture: Liberalism and Racial Justice*, Stony Brook University, 13th September 2012. Available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfYrXSPr\\_Zc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfYrXSPr_Zc)
- Various essays on 'The Racial Contract Today', in *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. Available here (scroll down): <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpgi20/3/3>.

### Week 7 – Liberty

- Ian Carter, 'Positive and Negative Liberty', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition) ed. by Edward N. Zalta. Available [here](#).
- Philip Pettit, 'How Do You Know if You're Truly Free?', Youtube, uploaded by TEDxNewYork 1 Dec 2016. Available [here](#).
- Frank Lovett, 'Non-Domination', in his *The Well-Ordered Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)
- Dorothea Gadeke, 'Does a Mugger Dominate? Episodic Power and the Structural Dimension of Domination', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 28:2 (2020), 199-221.
- Rafeeq Hasan, 'Republicanism and Structural Domination', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 102 (2021), 292-319.
- Jennifer Einspahr, 'Structural Domination and Structural Freedom: A Feminist Perspective', *Feminist Review* 94 (2010), 1-19.
- Jeremy Waldron, 'Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom', *Journal of Constitutional Law* 27 (2019), 27-50.
- Christian List & Laura Valentini, 'Freedom as Independence', *Ethics* 126 (2016), 1043-1074.

### Week 8 – Nozick's Libertarianism

- G. A. Cohen, 'Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty', *Erkenntnis* 11:1 (1977), 5-23.
- Michael Otsuka, 'Self-Ownership and Equality', in his *Libertarianism Without Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Hillel Steiner, 'Liberty and Equality', *Political Studies* 29:4 (1981), 555-569.
- John Rawls, 'Lecture VII: The Basic Structure as Subject', in his *Political Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See especially sections 3-5.

### Week 9 – Equality

- G. A. Cohen, 'Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty', *Erkenntnis* 11:1 (1977), 5-23.
- Michael Otsuka, 'Self-Ownership and Equality', in his *Libertarianism Without Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Hillel Steiner, 'Liberty and Equality', *Political Studies* 29:4 (1981), 555-569.

- John Rawls, 'Lecture VII: The Basic Structure as Subject', in his *Political Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). See especially sections 3-5.

### **Weeks 10 & 11 – (Electoral Representative) Democracy & Its Alternatives**

- Tom Christiano & Sameer Bajaj, 'Democracy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2024 edition), ed. by Edward N Zalta & Uri Nodelman. Available [here](#). See especially section 2, "The Justification of Democracy".
- Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press). See Part II: Ideal Democracy.
- Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy* 10:3 (1999), 3-17. Available [here](#).
- Elizabeth Anderson, 'Chapter 12: Democracy: Instrumental vs Non-Instrumental Value', in Thomas Christiano & Philip Christman (eds) *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell), 213-227.
- Iris Marion Young, 'Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy', *Political Theory* 29:5 (2001), 623-749.
- Robert B. Talisse, 'Deliberativist Responses to Activist Challenges', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31:4 (2005), 395-509.
- Richard Arneson, 'Defending the Purely Instrumentalist Account of Democratic Legitimacy', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 11:1 (2003), 122-132.
- Alexander Guerrero, *Lottocracy: Democracy Without Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).
- Podcast: New Books in Philosophy, Alex Guerrero on *Lottocracy*, with Robert Talisse. Available [here](#).
- Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), see especially Chapters 4 and 5, Legitimacy and Representation Beyond Elections Parts 1 and 2.
- Dimitri Landa and Ryan Pevnick, 'Should We Be Lottocrats?', *Free & Equal* 1:2 (2025), 424-444.