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[Modern Political Culture: Ideas and Discourses in Context](#)

Courses & curriculum 2021 - 2022

As a master's student in Modern Political Culture, you will explore present-day phenomena of political culture by going beyond their surface appearance and reaching into the past to explain their incubation and gestation. For that purpose, you will engage with three interrelated areas of modern political culture: (1) political ideas (ideologies and sets of beliefs); (2) political languages (discourses and rhetoric); (3) political symbols and rituals (e.g. statues, monuments, commemorations, festivities, and election campaigns).

Course summaries

SEMESTER 1

Period 1 (8 weeks):

Political Culture: Entering the Field (12 ECTS)

Political culture is widely deployed as an analytical concept by scholars from different disciplines, ranging from political science to philosophy, sociology, history, and cultural studies. Quite what is meant by it, however, is often assumed to be self-evident rather than in need of explanation. In practice, scholars often understand the concept in divergent and sometimes contradictory ways. This course explores some of the major ways of thinking about political culture. It introduces students to the theoretical literature on the subject, tracing the ways in which the concept has evolved in the last sixty years since it was first popularised in the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. Many scholars have now moved past Almond's and Verba's positivist notion of juxtaposing different political cultures through a quantitative approach that seeks to explain why some states are more democratic than others. By tracing this shift, the course will focus on the ways in which the humanities have integrated and modified the concept since the 'linguistic turn' and through the gradual inclusion of culture as a main analytical category in empirical work on 'the political'. It will explore how scholars have hitherto addressed the symbolic, discursive, and performative elements of politics, including themes such as the staging of political festivities, the rituals involved in elections, and the symbolic representation of the state vis-a-vis the people. For that purpose, the course will combine an examination of fundamental conceptual texts with a discussion of influential case studies that have demonstrated the ways in which political culture can be studied in practice.

Period 2 (8 weeks):

Course summaries

Researching the Field: Democracy, Identity, and Communication (12 ECTS)

By now, most of us have moved past the idea that democracy began in classical Greece, receded, and then slowly emerged again in Europe with the rise of the Italian city-state republics in the early modern era and moments like the reigning in of royal power with the signing of the Magna Carta. If democracy is loosely understood as governance through active consent, then the historical record, including the writings of European colonists, has now shown us that forms of it have emerged in various places around the world and at various times. But how do we know a democracy when we see it? Is it something specific, having necessary and/or sufficient conditions? Or is it rather more like a set of practices and institutions bearing what we might call a family resemblance, wherein the key notion of active consent can be manifest in various ways? What characteristics mark it as a specific form or forms of political culture and how do we study these characteristics? In this course, we will explore how to research political culture in practice by examining how ideas of democratic rule, including its virtues and drawbacks, have developed in the twentieth century. We will also explore what methods scholars have used to understand those peculiar characteristics of democratic political culture and two of its most important constituent components: social identity and communication. These two related ideas are central to the vibrant and sometimes raucous contemporary debates surrounding democratic political culture. Democratic politics in the twentieth century have in large part been characterized by attempts to create, maintain, and mobilise forms of identity. Political theorists, scientists, sociologists and psychologists are just beginning to understand the roles that social identity plays not only in the dynamics of political behaviour, but also in affecting our cognition and beliefs about the world. And the question of how the flows of information within a society – communication – mediate social identity formation and hence cognition, belief, attitudes, and political behaviour within democratic cultures is one of the central questions of our time. We shall take on this question in this course.

Period 3 (4 weeks):

The Politics of National Identity (5 ECTS)

The concept of national identity is a characteristic and contested element of modern political culture. Since the end of the 18th century, states have legitimized their (internal and external) policies and mobilised their citizens with reference to the supposedly essential characteristics of their nation. Expectations at the end of the twentieth century that processes of globalisation would soon end the political relevance of national identities have turned out to be short-sighted. Indeed, the last twenty years have witnessed a strong rise in political discourse on national identity, especially by right-wing politicians but also by left-leaning politicians, and by mainstream and populist parties alike. Many politicians again consider cultivating national identities a solution for societal problems (rather than a problem in itself). The course analyses these politics of national identity by taking a constructivist perspective. It discusses the contested concept of 'national identity' itself as well as the way national identities are constructed through political discourse, the creation of collective memory, and through works of history, art and literature. The course will address the tensions between elite efforts at constructing national identities and 'nationhood from below', and it will discuss how conceptions of race and gender are an integral part of representations of national identity.

Research and Writing (1 ECTS)

SEMESTER 2

Period 4 (8 weeks):

Course summaries

A Dark Century: Political Violence and its Legacies (12 ECTS)

War and mass violence have shaped the contours of society immensely. This holds true for modern and contemporary history, and will most likely continue to be the case in the future. While some have argued that, when seen from a long-term perspective, more recent history has witnessed a dramatic decline in human violence of any kind, a vast majority of scholars refute this perception and draw attention to the uninterrupted realities and to the new and multifaceted forms of mass violence. Its huge impact and long-term consequences cannot be denied, neither for the individual lives of millions, nor for societies as a whole. This course will examine the origins and nature of some pivotal examples of collective and political violence throughout recent history (20th-21st centuries), such as modern warfare, revolution, genocide, civil war, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, and state repression. But it will also take a step further by looking at the mechanisms of overcoming the legacies and effects of mass violence. Which measures have been taken to come to terms with the past and prepare societies for a new post-conflict arrangement? Societies have explored various tools and models to master violent pasts: by promoting forms of transitional justice, by civic education and public debate, through museums and monuments, by renegotiating heritage sites and landscapes, and by creating new political, social and legal frameworks. In exploring these questions, the course introduces students to the wider field of peace and conflict studies.

OR Internship (12 ECTS)

Period 5-6 (12 weeks):

Thesis (18 ECTS)

Disclaimer: The specialisation Modern Political Culture: Ideas and Discourses in Context starts in September 2022. The course titles and descriptions given here are indicative and have yet to be approved by the Faculty.