

Political Science 359  
Liberalism and Conservatism  
Spring 2015  
Professor Alan Wolfe

For the political polemicist Ann Coulter, any of the major commentators on Fox News, and newly elected Congressmen associated with the Tea Party, nothing is worse, when it comes to politics, than a liberal – and no one is better for the future of the country than a conservative. Listen to the other side, say, perhaps, in the comments of a Paul Begala or a James Carville, and you will most likely hear the reverse: liberals are trying to improve the lives of all Americans, and only reactionary Republicans are standing in their way.

Implicit in the arguments of all such discussions are a number of assumptions that may, on reflection, prove not as clear-cut as they at first seem: Are both liberalism and conservatism coherent bodies of ideas with suggestions for how to make the world better or are they best thought of as dispositions whose content may change depending on time and place? Are they both American ideas or were they developed in Europe, where their meaning is quite different than one finds in this country? What differentiates a conservative from a reactionary or a liberal from a radical? Is it true that, as a character in the Italian novel *The Leopard* proclaims, that if we want things to stay the same, we will have to change? Are libertarians primarily conservatives or liberals? Should politicians tie themselves firmly to any set of ideas, whatever they are called, or keep their distance from them?

This course has two purposes. First, it aims to introduce students to some of the classic texts that established those political philosophies now known as liberal and conservative. It then examines contemporary thinkers who use those terms to characterize themselves with the aim of evaluating whether, in doing so, they are faithful to the traditions they wish to embody. In this sense, this course is neither one in political philosophy nor one in contemporary politics but an attempt to rely on both areas of inquiry.

There will be a conventional mid-term and final meant to test how well students have read and understood the assigned books. In addition, each student will be asked to write a 15-25 page paper examining the ideas of a leading contemporary writer, pundit, politician, or film-maker, judging that person's work against the body of ideas that have made up the tradition he or she claims to be representing. Examples of such figures are Paul Ryan, Barack Obama, Karl Rove, Michael Moore, Ann Coulter, Jonah Goldberg, Paul Krugman, David Brooks, Ross Douthat, Andrew Sullivan, or other names that will be discussed during the course.

These books are required:

Joseph deMaistre, *The Executioner*

John Locke, “Two Treatises of Government” and “Letter Concerning Toleration”

Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Edmund Burke*

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*

Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*

Mark Levin, *Liberty and Tyranny*

Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

Alan Wolfe, *The Future of Liberalism*

#### Reading Assignments:

January 12, 2015

Joseph DeMaistre, *Executioner*, whole book

January 26, 2015

John Locke, “The Second Treatises” and “Letter Concerning Toleration,” whole book

February 2, 2015

*Portable Edmund Burke*, pp. 63-81 “The Sublime and the Beautiful”, pp. 94-98 (“Repeal of the Marriage Act”), 131-150 “Present Discontents”), 155-57 (“Bristol”), 194-212 (“Scarcity,”), and 213-29 (“Noble Lord”).

February 9, 2015

*Portable Edmund Burke*, pp. 259-273 (“Conciliation with the Colonies”), 388-406 (“Warren Hastings”), and 416-474 (“Reflections”).

February 16, 2015

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, whole book

February 23, 2015

Midterm exam

March 9, 2015

Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, pp. 1000-1069.

March 16, 2015

Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, pp. 1-286.

March 23, 2015

Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, pp. 287-583.

March 30, 2015

Freidman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, whole book

April 6, 2015 \*\*please note: class will begin at 4PM\*\*

Mark Levin, *Liberty and Tyranny*, whole book

April 13, 2015

Alan Wolfe, *The Future of Liberalism*, whole book

April 27, 2015

Review and Summary, no reading

Final Exam: May 7, 2015 9AM @ Boisi Center, 24 Quincy Road.