

202110-SOCI-303.20-Social & Political Thought

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Topic outline

- **Course Materials**

Course Work and Evaluation:

- [Participation](#) – 8%
 - [Questions](#) on the week's reading (10) – 20%
 - Discussions of [Rational Recreations](#) (4) – 20%
 - Due: Feb 1, Feb 8, Feb 22, Mar 1
 - [Debate](#) or [Critical Essay](#) – 20%
 - Due: Mar 23
 - Final Exam (April, 2019) – 32%
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- [Participation - how graded File](#)
 - [Weekly Questions -- how graded File](#)
 - [Rational Recreation File](#)
 - [Rational Recreation - Camera Obscura \(Feb 1\) Assignment](#)
 - [Rational Recreation - Binocular Vision \(Feb 8\) Assignment](#)
 - [Rational Recreation - Theatre of the Mind \(Feb 22\) Assignment](#)
 - [Rational Recreation - Kantian Mirror-Projection \(Mar 1\) Assignment](#)
 - [Paper Writing - All Resources Folder](#)
 - [Essay - Submission Form \(Mar 23\) Assignment](#)
 - [Debate Signup Choice](#)
 - [Debate - How to File](#)

- [Syllabus - Printable File](#)
- [Announcements Forum](#)
- **1 - Enlightenment (Jan 13-21)**

Readings:

- Bacon, Francis. 2017 [1620]. [The New Organon](#): Or True Directions Concerning the Interpretation of Nature, Edited by J. Bennett
 - Preface; Bk 1: 1–68; Bk 2: 89 “Aphorisms Concerning the Interpretation of Nature” (3,000)
- Descartes, René. ([Selections](#)) (1,600)
 - 1954 [1628]. “Rules for the Direction of the Mind (selections).” in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*. Translated by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach. Wikisource: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rules_for_the_Direction_of_the_Mind
 - René Descartes. 1637 *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences (selections)*. Translated by John Veitch. Project Guttenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59/59-h/59-h.htm>.
- Marc Fisher , John Woodrow Cox and Peter Hermann. 2016. "Pizzagate: From Rumor, to Hashtag, to Gunfire in D.C." The Washington Post December 6, 2016. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html). (4,000)

Concepts: Enlightenment; equality of mind; rationalism; empiricism; deduction; induction; epistemological individualism (cognitive sovereignty); media /machine mediation; secret conspiracy

Questions:

- What should we trust: our senses; our reason; machines and instruments; institutions of knowledge; writings of "the ancients"; concepts we inherit from language?
- Why have social scientists been critical of Enlightenment rationality?
- Which, if any, of Bacon's "three idols" obscured the truth for Edgar Welch?
- Why do conspiracy theories thrive in modern societies?

Supplementary Reading:

- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. 1972. "The Concept of Enlightenment." in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Herder and Herder.

- Merchant, Carolyn. 1980. "Domination over Nature." in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- [Enlightenment Quiz](#)
- **2 - Veridical Sight: Camera Obscura (Jan 26-28)**

Rational Recreation: This section will be organized as "rational recreation," an open exploration of period optical devices or "philosophical toys." You will read period descriptions and discussions of the meaning of these devices and be asked to consider them for yourselves.

- [Selections](#) on painting and linear perspective (2,000)
- [Selections](#) on the *Camera Obscura*, the eye and perception (3,000)
- Locke, John. 1836 [1689]. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Glasgow: T. Tegg. ([Selections](#), 5,000).

Concepts: rational recreation; veridical sight; correspondence theory of truth; linear perspective; geometrical optics; painting = representation = retinal image; depth perception; visual cone; angle subtended to the eye; anomaly: the horizontal moon (distant vs local space); anomaly: anamorphosis; reflexivity; the homunculus problem

Concepts (Contemporary Theory): classical episteme (Foucault); *camera obscura* as an epistemological figure (Crary)

Questions:

- Why did (some) early modern theorists believe that vision worked on the model of the *camera obscura*? Were they right?
- Does the experience of the *camera obscura* convince you that light rays are real and follow an exact geometric logic?
- Berkeley argued that we don't actually "see" space or volume; was he right?
- Can we trust unaided vision to give us truth about the world (in other words, should seeing always be believing)?
- Was the *camera obscura* the dominant epistemological figure of the Enlightenment?

Supplementary Reading:

- Foucault, Michel. 1970. "Representing." in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1990. "The Camera Obscura and Its Subject." in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- [Camera Obscura Quiz](#)
- **3 - Veridical Sight: Binocular Convergence (Feb 2-4)**

Rational Recreation: This time we will be using binocular devices to further investigate the mediations involved in vision as well as the principles of a new 18th-century form of representation that was to be used as a mediation of the social.

- [Selections](#) on binocular convergence (2,500)
- [Selections](#) on a new form of binocular representation (the optical machine with a biconvex lens) (2,000)
- Harris, Joseph. 1775. *A Treatise on Optics: Containing Elements of the Science, Etc.* London: B. White. ([selections](#), 2,500)

Concepts: binocular convergence; trigonometry of the eyes (Berkeley: "lines and angles"); surveyor's transit; tactile spatial perception; conscious rationality /calculability / transparency; opaque machinery of the eyes

Questions:

- In what way(s) did binocular convergence challenge the camera obscura /linear perspective paradigm?
- Berkeley argued that binocular convergence and the trigonometry of the eyes failed to rescue veridical sight; was he right?

- [Binocularity Quiz](#)
- **4 - Mediation: the Artificial Sensorium (Jan 9-11)**

Readings:

- Sheehan, William. 2013. "[From the Transits of Venus to the Birth of Experimental Psychology](#)." *Physics in Perspective* 15(2):130-59
- Burdick, Alan. 2021. "Looking for Life on a Flat Earth." *The New Yorker* May 30, 2018. Retrieved: Jan 4, 2021 (<https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/looking-for-life-on-a-flat-earth>). (5,000)

Concepts: artificial sensorium; science as a social institution; local vs global knowledge;

Questions:

- How important is individual sense data to modern science?
- How do the flat-Earthers use liberal epistemology to defend their views?
- Can the individual, using sense data and reason alone prove that the earth is an oblate sphere?
- Why should we trust large-scale institutional scientific ventures like climate science?
- Are we entering a post-Enlightenment era?

- **5 - Machines of Deception: the Theatre (February 18)**

Readings:

- Selections on the 18th-century Theatre (Porterfield ...Harris) /illusion to individual spectator /theater as world-making

- Hume -- capture within the theatre of the mind
- Berkeley -- to be is to be perceived /transcendent God prestructures space and time

Immersive 3D Illusion: We will be looking at 18th-century optical boxes that attempt to hide the mechanisms of illusion "behind the scenes"

Concepts: manifold in perception; synthesis (of objects, of perceiving subject); the social world as theatre; the cosmos as theatre; God as a theatre impresario

Questions:

- How seductive is 18th century immersive 3D to us? How seductive would it have been to people in the 18th century? Would the experience have varied by social class, or gender?
- How did liberal epistemology lead to Hume's predicament?
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- **6 - Kant: The Reverse of the Camera Obscura (Feb 23-25)**

Rational Recreation: We will be recreating, for the first time since the 18th century, Kant's mirror projection, which suggested to him the idea that the mind projects spatial form on external things-in-themselves

Readings:

- Selections on the dialectical character of 18th-century theatre
- Selections on the social character of the transcendental subject

Concepts: projection; pure forms of space and time; categories of understanding; geometric "schemas"; empirical unity of apperception; transcendental unity of apperception; transcendental unity as a social subject (Durkheim)

Questions:

- How good is Kant's solution to Hume's problem?
- What are the different ways in which Kant's "constructive" work of the mind has been socialized?

- **7 - The Moral Universal and Social Regulation (Mar 2-4)**

Readings:

- Hobbes, Thomas. *Of Man, Being the First Part of Leviathan*. Vol. XXXIV, Part 5. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/34/5/.
 - [Introduction](#) (800)
 - [Chapter XIII “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery.”](#) (1,800)
- Smith, Adam. 1853. [1759] *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Edited by D. Stewart. London,: H. G. Bohn. Reprinted by the Online Library of Liberty.
 - Pt. 3, Ch. 1 “[Of the Principle of Self-Approbation and Self-disapprobation](#)” (4 pp.)
 - Pt. 3, Ch. 2, “[Praise and Praiseworthiness; Blame and Blameworthiness](#)” (19 pp)

Concepts: Equality of mind; moral regulation; egoism (particular); altruism (universal); external constraint; the social body (the state) as a machine; the (individual) spectator; the social spectator (or public); optical principles of self-reflection; the social mirror; internal projection of the social; theatre as a projection machine

Questions:

- What is the role of the theatre in internalizing social (altruistic) virtues, indeed, of the social self, according to Smith?
- In what sense does a technology of representation (the theatre) *produce* rather than merely represent social reality here?
- What is Hobbes's conception of human nature that leads him to support a centralized, authoritarian machinery of government?
- How Hobbesian is the authoritarian thinking of the modern far-Right?

- **8 - Moral Machines: The Panopticon (Mar 9-11)**

Readings:

- Bentham, Jeremy. 1791. *Panopticon*. Dublin: Thomas Byrne. (Read only the following sections)(22 pp.)
 - Letter I, (1-4) “Idea of the Inspection Principle”
 - Letter II, (5-12) “Plan for a Penitentiary Inspection House”
 - Letter V, (23-28) “Essential Points of the Plan”
 - Letter VI, (28-33) “Advantages of the Plan”

Concepts: asymmetric surveillance; atomization; disciplinary inspection; public inspection; transparency; accountability; panopticism; textual mediation; the myth of visibility; social class: bourgeois "gentility", the "lower orders"

Questions:

- In what sense is the panopticon like an optical box or a theatre (consider the empty inspector position as a Kantian "focus imaginarius")?
- Is panopticism a mechanism for social power at the local or the trans-local level?
- Is the panopticon an authoritarian or a democratic figure?

Supplementary Reading:

- Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Panopticism." in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.

• 9 - The Market Mechanism: Distanced Moral Regulation (Mar 16-18)

Readings:

- Smith, Adam. 1776. *Wealth of Nations*. Project Gutenberg ebook.
 - Bk 1, Ch 1 "[Division of Labour](#)" (3,600)
 - Bk 1, Ch 2 "[Principles \[of\] the Division of Labour](#)." (1,700)
 - Bk 1, Ch 3 "[Division of Labour is limited by the Extent of the Market](#)" (2,200)
 - Bk 5, Ch 1, Pt III Art II: "On the Expense of the Institutions for the Education of Youth" (11,000)

Concepts: face-to-face (local) vs distanced social relations; division of labour in detail; deskilling; cheapening of tasks; replaceability; liberal individualism; self-interest; market logic; citizenship; social class: wage workers, independent artisans (petty-bourgeoisie), capitalists

Questions:

- How, according to Smith, are local, face-to-face relations (of workers) in the factory regulated?
- How are relationships between large numbers of (bourgeois) people across vast distance supposed to be co-ordinated by the market?
- How is purely selfish action supposed to lead to the greatest social good?
- How, according to Smith, do people's employments shape their intellectual capabilities? How does the industrial system threaten to undermine democracy?

• 10 - Distant Mediations: Transparency and Deception (Mar 23-25)

Readings:

- Rix, Kathryn. 2014. "[Whatever Passed in Parliament Ought to Be Communicated to the Public': Reporting the Proceedings of the Reformed Commons, 1833–50.](#)" *Parliamentary History* 33(3): 453-7.

Concepts: political deception; conspiracy; textual mediations; the press; coffee houses; the republic of letters; civil society

Questions:

- In what ways do houses of parliament with public galleries function like optical boxes or theatres?
- Do parliamentary assemblies with these sorts of "transparencies" succeed in democratizing power?
- What were the social class implications of allowing the "lower orders" visual access to seats of power through touring optical machines?
- How have such political mediations changed in the US under the Trump administration?

- **11 - Re-Localizations and Democracy (Mar 30)**

Readings:

- de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1835. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Henry Reeve. Project Gutenberg eBook.
 - Ch. V, “[Necessity of Examining the Condition of the States—Part I](#)” (read only the following sections) (4,000)
 - “The American System of Townships and Municipal Bodies
 - “Limits of The Township
 - “Authorities of The Township in New England
 - “Existence of The Township
 - “Public Spirit of The Townships of New England
- JJaniskee, Brian P. 2010. *Local Government in Early America : The Colonial Experience and Lessons from the Founders*. Claremont, Calif.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
 - “Jefferson’s Ward Republics” (4 pp.)
- Tsai, Robert L. 2017. "The Troubling Sheriffs’ Movement That Joe Arpaio Supports." *Politico Magazine* September 01, 2017. (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/01/joe-arpaio-pardon-sheriffs-movement-215566>). (2,600)

Concepts: Local government; direct, decentralized democracy;

Questions:

- What does the localization of government mean? How is it supposed to strengthen democracy?
- Why does this idea have populist appeal to the far-Right?
- Is the valuing of the local (in government decision-making, in epistemological trust) inherently right-wing reactionary?

• 12 - Mediation and Tyranny (Apr 6-8)

Readings:

- de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1835, *Democracy in America*,
 - Ch. XX, “[That Aristocracy May Be Engendered by Manufactures](#)” (1,400)
 - Ch. VI, “[What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have To Fear,](#)” (2,300)
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2018. "Why Technology Favors Tyranny." *The Atlantic* (October). Retrieved: 27 August, 2020 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/yuval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330/>). (4,500)

Concepts: artificial intelligence; deep learning; surveillance capitalism; big data; interests of the capitalist class

Questions:

- As we empower our technological and institutional knowledge systems, do we necessarily impoverish the knowledge capabilities of individuals?
- Is a measure of "cognitive sovereignty" essential for the survival of democracy?
- If we give over knowledge production entirely to the machines, whose knowledge will be produced and whose interests served?