

PLSC 214. Liberty, Ancient and Modern
(Symposium in the History of Political Thought)
Prof. Daniela Cammack
Spring 2021
3-hour weekly graduate seminar

In a classic lecture of 1819, Benjamin Constant represented the “liberty of the ancients” as collective public liberty—that is, direct political power—predicated on war and slavery, combined with citizens’ total subservience to the community as private individuals. By contrast, he represented modern liberty as a tissue of private liberties, such as liberty of speech, religion, and association, predicated on peace and commerce, combined with political representation—that is, in effect, a division of political labour between rulers and ordinary citizens.

How plausible was this account? In the first part of the course, we’ll study the conceptualization of liberty (*eleutheria*, *libertas*) and its opposite, slavery, and some aspects of both public and private life in ancient Athens, Sparta, and Rome. In the second part, we’ll explore how a selection of canonical early modern authors approached the idea of liberty, paying special attention to the role that claims about ancient Greece and Rome and the concepts of public and private played in their thought. In the process, we’ll consider how far these men’s writings suggest the existence of two distinct theoretical traditions (one more “political,” foregrounding the concept of sovereignty, the other more “economic,” foregrounding natural sociability). We close with two weeks on the French Revolution, asking how far it constituted an attempt to return to the politics of the ancient world (as some claimed), and finally, a return to Constant in the light of what we’ve learned.

Requirements will be class participation, a one or two-paragraph forum contribution every week and 20-25 pages of formal writing—either two 8-12 page papers or one longer one. While the course is aimed at graduate students, advanced undergraduates with adequate background are very welcome with permission of the instructor.

Draft syllabus:

1. Introduction: Constant, “The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns”
2. Athens I – Two “Constitutions of the Athenians”
3. Athens II – *Dissoi Logoi*, Plato, Demosthenes and others
4. Sparta – The “Constitution of the Lacedaemonians” and other selections
5. Rome I – Livy (selections)
6. Rome II – Polybius, Cicero, Sallust (selections)
7. Machiavelli – *Discourses on Livy* (selections)
8. Hobbes – *De Cive* and selections from *Leviathan*
9. Hume – “On the populousness of ancient nations” and other essays
10. Rousseau – *Discourse on Political Economy* and *Social Contract*
11. Smith – Selections from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations*
12. The French Revolution I – Sieyès and the Constitution of 1791
13. The French Revolution II – “Gracchus” Babeuf and the Constitution of 1793
14. Concluding discussion: Constant again