

**From Great Books to Serviceable Course Texts:
A Review of Recent Introductory Political Theory Textbooks**

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Books reviewed in this essay:

Ebenstein, William and Alan O. Ebenstein, eds. **Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present**. 5th ed. Fort Worth: Holt Reinhart and Winston. 1991. 1082 p. \$ 29.00.

Ebenstein, William and Alan O. Ebenstein, eds. **Introduction to Political Thinkers**. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1991. 372 p. \$15.00.

Losco, Joseph and Leonard Williams, eds. **Political Theory: Classic Writings, Contemporary Views**. New York: St. Martin's. 1992. 753 p. \$44.00.

Morgan, Michael L., ed. **Classics of Moral and Political Theory**. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1992. 1278 p. \$27.50.

Nelson, Brian R. **Western Political Thought: From Socrates to the Age of Ideology**. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. 1982. 367 p. \$35.25.

Sheldon, Garrett Ward. **The History of Political Theory: Ancient Greece to Modern America**. New York: Peter Lang. 1991. 253 p. \$42.50.

Wiser, James L. **Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order**. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. 1983. 418 p. \$36.00.

Renewed interest in political theory and resurgent demands to teach the great books of western civilization as part of encouraging cultural literacy have led to increased interest in college political theory courses.

Consequently, there is a need for suitable class texts. For many instructors this means that students must purchase six to ten or more books by the great thinkers. This approach is often expensive, can limit time given to secondary commentary, and may not be suitable for some students. However, professors searching for introductory texts will find a ready supply of alternatives. Herewith, a review of some texts for the basic, or introductory, political theory course, most published within the last two years.

The seven texts surveyed fall into two basic types. One is the anthology that consists for the most part of excerpts of selected classic writers, such as the two Ebenstein volumes, Morgan, and the work of the Losco and Williams. The other type of text is composed mainly of the author's commentary with copious excerpts from original works. In general, the former are more sophisticated and geared more to middle and advanced political theory classes, while the latter are clearly intended for introductory or first year political theory classes.

Another notable feature of these texts is their very traditional approach. Despite recent debates about multiculturalism, none included any female political theorists, such as Wollstonecraft or devoted any significant attention to family or gender issues. For example, only Ebenstein's Great Political Thinkers and the Losco/Williams volumes include Mill's Subjection of Women, and none of the commentary books include more than a brief mention of this work. Neither Sheldon, Wiser, nor Nelson even cites Subjection of Women in the appendix. Additionally, some texts such as Losco/Williams omit the chapter on the family in Locke's Second Treatise, and no book examines the differences in education between men and women in Rousseau's Emile.

These texts are also stronger in addressing the core Greek-Christian-liberal tradition than they are in exploring the marxist and continental traditions of philosophy. Generally, the books approach political theory in terms of some type of Ancients versus Moderns debate. With the exception of Wiser's one chapter on Bacon and Descartes, none of the books directly address the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, nor do any explore the role of science in challenging Christian and Greek thinkers or the view of the universe that sustained the political vision of both. Ignoring this is clearly a major gap in all the books reviewed.

Finally, for those searching for texts that look at recent trends in political theory, e.g. twentieth century Marxism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, feminism, or post modernism, these texts also disappoint.

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Examination of Lenin and the democratic socialist alternative to Soviet marxism should be included in any text published at the close of the twentieth century. In fact, none of the books address twentieth century issues very well.

I now examine each text on its own merits. Losco and Williams' **Political Theory: Classic Writings, Contemporary Views** is the most interesting and perhaps the most sophisticated of all the editions. It presents excerpts from Plato through Arendt, Rawls, and Habermas, while also providing for each thinker excerpts from two contemporary and contrasting interpretations on that thinker, often from the journal literature. Thus, to select Marx as an example, excerpts from the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," the "German Ideology," and Capital are followed by abbreviated essays by Bertell Ollman and William James Booth that offer interesting analyses of Marx.

The editors seek to move away from a simple set of historical readings and introduce contemporary writings that would bring to life the issue of how or why these theorists have something of import to say to politics, especially contemporary politics. The book also offers an introductory exposition that defines the nature of political theory and its role in society. Following a discussion of Leo Strauss' and Sheldon Wolin's views on political theory, the editors note that in selecting their readings they wished to "take a problem-solving orientation" to political theory because "We regard political theory as an effort to understand the meaning and significance of political life" (p. 3). Hence the excerpts and readings are designed to help students see them in light of particular problems a thinker sought to resolve.

Another area in which this book is strong compared to its rivals is in addressing later marxists such as Habermas. And this volume takes note of the omission of female political theorists in the history of political thought, but the editors indicate that the writers they have included are the ones which "contemporary theorists of both sexes turn when certain questions (of politics) are asked" (p. 5).

They do a better job with the inclusion of several contemporary theorists who address gender or family issues, e.g. Mary Shanley on John Stuart Mill and marriage, and Susan Moller Okin on Aristotle and women. However, many excerpts that might have addressed gender and family issues have been omitted from the selections. Thus, to note an example, Locke's chapter on the family in the Second Treatise is ignored, and excerpts from Rousseau's Emile that compare the education of men and women are not

included. Both easily could have been included to broaden the scope of the book. But overall, this is a very sophisticated book geared to upper class students.

Morgan's edited **Classics of Moral and Political Theory** is a compilation of many of Hackett Publishing's paperback editions of the great thinkers. Morgan tells us that his concern is to offer a collection of classic texts, a classic text being defined as "a work that makes an important difference or at least, from a particular vantage point, is thought to have made and to continue to make a difference" (p. vii). Moreover, he acknowledges that the authors of his classics are white, male, and western but he claims that his selection results in a set of readings that have defined western culture.

This volume contains fifteen theorists from Plato to Nietzsche (no effort to address the twentieth century is made). There is a brief historical introduction to each thinker, and the text that follows is either the complete text of a particular work or the most important or most frequently used section of it. Hence, this volume contains the entire "Crito," "Apology," and Republic by Plato, Locke's entire Second Treatise, all of Machiavelli's The Prince, Rousseau's complete Social Contract and Second Discourse, all of Mill's On Liberty and Utilitarianism, the full text of Kant's Metaphysic of Morals, and the full text of several of Marx's shorter essays. There is also solid editing of Aristotle's Politics and Ethics, Hobbes' Leviathan, and Machiavelli's Discourses, among other works.

Overall, Morgan has done an excellent job in providing an inexpensive one volume edition of the major writings most of us use in our basic history of political thought classes. This book could easily replace the need for students to purchase single texts and Morgan's volume could be supplemented with other primary works or secondary commentary, as appropriate. This book is suitable for all levels of political theory courses but is especially well adapted to traditional great books courses.

Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present is the fifth edition of Ebenstein's forty-year-old classic that is now edited by his son. This book is perhaps the most exhaustive attempt to provide excerpts of the great thinkers in western political thought. The book "present(s) the major turning points of political thought from Plato to the present" (p. viii) and contends that while commentary and critical analysis is good, reading the original works is more important. Hence, the focus on including as much original text as possible.

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Ebenstein sees western political thought as developing out of Greek rationalism, Jewish monotheism, and Christian love. The interrelationship among these three values form the core of western political theory and they also structure Ebenstein's presentation of his thinkers. The book has 34 chapters that run from Plato to Marx, covering thinkers ignored in most other books, including Dante, Marsilio of Padua, Bodin, Montesquieu, Kant, Smith, Freud, Gandhi, Hayek, and Rawls. Unlike the Morgan edition, where the full text is usually provided, Ebenstein places more emphasis on wide coverage through excerpts rather than giving us the entire text of a work. Lenin is also covered but not other marxists. Fascism and the debate among economic and social liberals (e.g., Keynes) in the 20th century is well presented.

This is not an introductory volume; it is a complete text for a standard history of political thought course aimed at a middle-to-advanced-level political theory class. The book could be used in lieu of original texts purchased separately, and the breadth of coverage of this book is so great that it is clearly suitable to a one year lecture course, if one wished to cover the entire text. Alternatively, one could create a one-semester course by selecting a limited number of thinkers.

Introduction to Political Thinkers is an abridgement of **Great Political Thinkers** and it covers 11 philosophers from Plato to Rawls. The same text and commentary on these thinkers found in the larger volume is present in the smaller text. Absent is the statement of the organizing values of western political thought that is found in the larger text. This book is comparable to the scope found in Nelson and Wiser, and perhaps could compliment these books in a course.

Wiser's Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order is commentary and description on 16 great thinkers in the west from Plato to Marx, plus a chapter on twentieth century political thought. The book is organized to draw a contrast between the ancient writers of classical Greece and Christianity and the moderns. In Wiser's words, "modern western political philosophy may be seen as the product of a sustained effort to free itself from what is perceived to be the restraints and limitations of its own past. In part, therefore, Western modernity is based upon a negation of Western antiquity" (p. x.) Wiser says that the organizing premise of this book is to show that modernity and modern political thought takes place within a "particular spiritual and cultural context" and that modern political thought and contemporary politics can be best understood by its reaction to the ancients.

There are five parts to the book. The classical tradition includes brief text and commentary on Plato, Aristotle, and the Romans (especially Polybius and stoicism). Part II, the Christian tradition, includes St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Part III is on the Birth of Modernity and the search for a new order as Christianity is questioned. Here, Machiavelli, Calvin, Bacon, and Descartes are discussed. Part IV includes chapters on Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, and Marx, as well as those on the French Enlightenment, the Utilitarians, and pre-marxist socialists. A final chapter on the twentieth century is entitled "Modernity Questioned."

The commentary offers a fairly traditional interpretation of the Ancients versus the Moderns. But conspicuously missing are extended discussions of Socrates as well as a solid treatment of Lenin or the Marxist tradition in the twentieth century. Also missing are discussions of recent movements, including post-modernism and feminism. The book is better on the "core" or mainstream liberal tradition and weaker on dissident voices. It could be used in a first year class. Unfortunately, little effort is made to reach out to students with questions or efforts to stimulate thinking. Thus, those reading this book may find it hard to relate to many of the issues raised in the readings.

Nelson's **Western Political Thought: From Socrates to the Age of Ideology** is geared to an introductory or first year college level political theory class. The organizing theme of the book is directed at the "changing relationship of ethics to politics in political thought from Socrates to the present time" (p. xiii). Nelson believes that all political theories raise certain perennial issues and one of them is the ethics/politics relationship. More importantly, Nelson sees special key periods in which the relationship between the two is significantly changed, and this provides for "key historical junctures" in western political thought. These key junctures are Ancient-Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Political Theory and these three periods determine the organization of the book.

The book contains commentary as well as quotations from major thinkers. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas are covered in the first section. Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are the moderns. Part III labels contemporary political theory as everything from the French Revolution to the present, including: Conservatism, Classical Liberalism, Modern Liberalism (De Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and T.H. Green), Marxism (really Marx, because there is almost nothing on Lenin or the Marxist tradition), and a weak concluding chapter that is supposed to be on the age of ideology but which is really a hodge-podge of

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comments on the history of political thought. Nelson stops with World War I and thus there is no serious effort to discuss the twentieth century, including contemporary Marxism, or any of the issues that would engage students about the world that has evolved to the present.

Organizationally, there are no subheadings dividing the chapters and thus they seem long and overwhelming to students who will ultimately find this style difficult to comprehend and follow. As far as the content of each chapter goes, the treatment of each thinker addresses the philosopher and his times, the definition of his political terms, and the nature of the political society he advocated. The textual discussion does a competent job in addressing the changing politics/ethics issue, yet this presentation is somewhat weak in the final five chapters on contemporary political theory, where too much is covered too quickly and in too little detail.

Sheldon's **The History of Political Theory: Ancient Greece to Modern America** is a short readable book that contains commentary and copious text, covering thinkers from Socrates to Rawls and Benjamin Barber. The stated organization of the book is designed to compare the different thinkers in terms of their views of human nature, the nature of political society, and social ethics, and then relate the thinkers on these three points to the American political tradition. The book has a useful format to organize the discussion of each political thinker and this makes it possible to compare different thinkers in the west on these three points.

The strength of Sheldon's book is the inclusion of writers not addressed in the other commentary books, e.g, Lenin, Freud, Gentile, Rawls, and Robert Nozick, and this gives it a nice twist when compared to the others. The weakness is in its traditional scope for those looking to include discussion of issues beyond views of human nature, ethics, or political organization. For example, the historical context and treatment of the thinkers is not as well developed as it could be. Also, by organizing the comparison of the thinkers around three basic themes there may be too much of a temptation to assume all thinkers are seeking to structure their theories around these three themes or in response to earlier great thinkers. In fact, many of these theorists were more concerned with the issues in their time and they were not addressing issues raised by great theorists from the past. This book is clearly geared to first year students.

To conclude, for those who reject the option of purchasing several separate texts of the great thinkers, the works reviewed above offer those teaching standard Plato to Nato political theory classes many choices, and

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most who teach these classes should find at least one serviceable course text in the lot.