

Great Ideas that Have Shaped our World: from the Axial Age to the Artificial Intelligence Revolution**Language of instruction:** English**Professor:** Associate Professor of Politics - Camil Ungureanu**Professor's contact and office hours:** camil.ungureanu@upf.edu**Monday:** 14.30-15.30 (and by email).**Course contact hours:** 45**Recommended credit:** 6 ECTS credits**Course prerequisites:** There are no prerequisites for this general course.**Language requirements:** Recommended level in the European Framework B2 (or equivalent: Cambridge Certificate if the teaching language is English).**Course focus and approach:**

This course focuses on three types of questions and ideas, ethical-philosophical, political, and scientific, that have revolutionised and shaped our world. We will analyse these revolutionary ideas dealing with the subjective, intersubjective, and natural world as providing resources for understanding and tackling problems in times of radical uncertainty and transformation generated by disruptive technologies (AI, genetic engineering), climate emergency, and populist-authoritarian upheavals.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this course, it will be helpful for students in social sciences, humanities, economics, and hard sciences. The approach of the course will be global, as we will discuss theories, debates, and ideas from different geographical areas.

Primary sources will be granted central importance: original texts from Aristotle, Confucius and Darwin to Gandhi and Einstein will be discussed in the class. We will also use video materials and documentaries on key figures, ideas, and theories (e.g., Einstein's theory of relativity, Jane Goodall on the specificity of human, or the dilemmas posed by Artificial Intelligence and biotech).

Students will be encouraged to write projects based on their previous knowledge and background.

Course Description:

Our world is in a multilayered crisis and transformation: the genetic, robot and AI revolutions challenge the limits between natural and artificial, human and non-human. At once, democratic societies are plagued by (gender) inequality, ecological emergency, and the rise of different forms of authoritarianism, which generate radical uncertainty and raise anew the question of the possibility of leading a good life and organising a free society.

This course starts from the premise of the crucial importance of ethical-political, philosophical, and scientific imagination in developing human societies and tackling these crises. It focuses on critical moral-political, philosophical, and scientific innovative ideas that have revolutionized and shaped society from Antiquity to nowadays. It also provides ways of dealing with crises, uncertainty, and new problems at personal and public life levels.

The course deals with understanding the context of these ideas' emergence and their impact on the contemporary world and mentality. We deal with three interrelated questions: how should I live my life? How should society be organised? How does nature work?

We begin with the “Axial Age” (Karl Jaspers) characterised by a series of ethical-religious, scientific, and philosophical innovations from China and India to Ancient Greece and the Middle East. We move chronologically to Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the current robot and AI revolution.

The substantive and methodological approach is not Euro-centric and reductionist but global and interdisciplinary. We adopt a problem-solving approach based on understanding why and how new and creative ideas - from Buddhism and monotheism to Marxist materialism, genetic engineering, and quantum physics - answer different types of challenges and queries – ethical-existential, political, and scientific.

Learning objectives:

- Critical assessment of fundamental ideas that have revolutionized the world (i.e., Confucianism, liberalism, environmentalism, genetics, the theory of relativity).
- A deeper understanding of the contemporary world, its challenges, and crises.
- Creative use of ideas in building autonomous research and collaborative projects.
- Having a better understanding of the interaction between science and society
- Deeper understanding of the future challenges and of the existing toolkits that can help in dealing with them.

Course workload and materials:

The workload comprises readings (generally one 20-page reading per lecture; sometimes students will have to watch a video/documentary/film). All materials will be made available to the students via Moodle.

The PowerPoint for each class will be also uploaded.

Teaching methodology:

The classes are structured in lectures (1 hour) and open discussions based on texts and videos/documentaries. The emphasis is on discussing primary sources (e.g. texts by Confucius, Darwin, Einstein, etc).

We adopt a problem-solving approach based on understanding why and how new and creative ideas - from Buddhism and monotheism to Marxist materialism, genetic engineering and quantum physics - answer different types of challenges and queries (existential, epistemic, or moral-political).

The methodology is comparative and global (Edward Said 1978; Amartya Sen 2009) and not parochial or Eurocentric; to illustrate, we will explore comparatively the ideas of human excellence in Aristotle and Confucius or the notions of salvation in Buddhism and Christianity.

The methodological approach is based on the importance of interdisciplinarity, namely, on approaching societal phenomena from the pluralist perspective of scientific and humanistic disciplines (Sapolsky, 2017).

Visit We will pay a guided visit to the [science museum of Barcelona](#) or another relevant temporary exhibition.

Invited Guest The course will also benefit from an invited scientist who will deal with the question of the genetic revolution.

Assessment criteria:

Projects: 30% of the final grade. Students will be encouraged to propose original projects by creatively using the background knowledge of their passions and interests and the knowledge acquired in the class. The project can be individual or involve 2 or 3 students (the latter case entails a proportional increase in work). The project can take a written or video form.

Students will also be provided with an optional list of project themes that may help to guide them. The tutor will provide part of the materials necessary for the projects.

Exams: 50%. (10% mid-term, 40% final exam). The exam format and questions will be announced and discussed in class. Critical reasoning will be encouraged.

Participation: 20%. Students will be encouraged to raise critical questions and participate in class by making short presentations.

Evaluation: English.

INTRODUCTION: The role of ideas and imagination in the development of human societies

Compulsory:

R. Sapolsky, *Behave. The Biology of Humans at Their Best and Their Worst*, Penguin, 2017, Introduction

Jane Goodall, [What separates us...?](#) (short video)

R. Sapolsky, ["The Uniqueness of Humans"](#) (short video)

Optional:

A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2009, Introduction

C. Ungureanu & P. Monti, *Contemporary Political Philosophy and Religion*, Routledge, 2018, Introduction.

PART I. The Axial Age: Religious-Philosophical Universalism and the Inventions of Democracy

1. The democratic idea, the origins of philosophy and scientific thinking

Compulsory:

Plato, *The Apology of Socrates* (excerpts)

Aristotle, *Politics* (excerpts)

[Antigone](#) (film)

[Pythagoras and the string theory](#) (BBC Big Ideas) (short video).

Optional:

[R. Penrose on Plato, mathematics](#) (interview)

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Penguin, 1998, 1-50.

J.-P. Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, Cornell University Press, 1984, ch. 1.

2. The Hindu tradition, the challenge of Buddha, and the origins of philosophy

Compulsory:

Sayings of the Buddha, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 2008, excerpts.

The Bhagavad Gita, Penguin, 2003 excerpts

Optional:

[The Buddha](#) (documentary)

[Zen Buddhism in Japan](#) (documentary)

3. Confucius, Daoism, and the Hundred Schools of Thought

Compulsory:

Confucius, *Analects*, Oxford World's Classics, 2008 (excerpts)

Laozi *Tao Te Ching* (excerpts)

Optional:

[Confucian Philosophy and world affairs](#) (video)

[Confucius](#), 2010 (film)

Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1952.

4. The rise of the idea of one God and the faces of monotheism

Compulsory:

The New Testament (excerpts)

[Science & Islam](#), BBC documentary

Optional:

J. Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*, 2008, Stanford University Press.

K. Anderson, [A History of God](#) (documentary)

P.-P. Pasolini, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 1958 (film)
 M. Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) /film)
 K. Anderson, *A History of God*, Penguin, 2013, ch. 1, 2.

PART II. From Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution to the Crisis of Enlightenment

1. The Renaissance: artistic, political, and scientific

Compulsory:

Galileo Galilei, 1638, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences*, excerpts
 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Penguin, 1999, chs. XVI-XIX

Optional:

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

[The Renaissance - the Age of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci](#), (documentary)

W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

[Hamlet](#) (film)

2. The Invention of Individualism: Th. Hobbes's and J. Locke's liberal revolution

Compulsory:

Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Penguin, 1999 excerpt

Optional:

J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* excerpt

3. The Industrial Revolution and the Emergence of Capitalism

Compulsory

A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Princeton University Press, 2003 excerpt.

Optional:

M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Liberty*, University of Chicago Press 1958, ch. 1

M. Friedman, *Capitalism and the future of freedom*, available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfKghxANGgE> (video)

4. Human rights, the American and French Revolutions: a genealogical and comparative view

Compulsory:

The Federalist (10, 17)

["The Declaration of Independence"](#)

Olympe de Gouges, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen" (1871)

Optional:

S. Schama, *David*, 2015 (documentary)
S. Spielberg, *Lincoln*, 2012 (film)

5. The Darwinian Revolution

Compulsory:

Ch. Darwin *On the Origin of Species*, Penguin, 1999, excerpt
F. de Waal, [Moral behavior in animals](#), (video)
D. Attenborough, [Charles Darwin and the Tree of Life](#) (documentary)

Optional:

F. de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates*, W. W. Norton, 2014, ch. 2.

6. The Revolution of the Unconscious and neuroscience: from Sigmund Freud to cognitive science and the brain research

Compulsory:

S. Freud, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Harcourt, 2001, ch. 1
D. Egelman: *The Brain: The Story of You*, Vintage, 2017, 1-25
[The Brain with David Eagleman - What Is Reality](#) - BBC Documentary

Optional:

D. Egelman: *The Brain: The Story of You*, Vintage, 2017, 1-25
G. Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 2016.

7. Socialism and communism: Karl Marx and the question of commons nowadays

Compulsory:

K. Marx and Fr. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

Optional:

[Karl Marx: The Power of Money](#) (BBC Documentary)

8. The Crises of Modernity: from Nietzsche to Totalitarianism and the Global Disorder

Compulsory:

F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Cambridge University Press.
H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Press, 1996, chapter "Ideology and Terror"
M. Walzer, "Supreme Emergency"

Optional:

C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007, 1-36
["Human, all too Human: Nietzsche"](#) (BBC documentary)

PART III. The Contemporary World: from the Theory of Relativity to the Robot Revolution

1. Albert Einstein, the Theory of Relativity and Beyond

Compulsory:

A. Einstein, *How I see the world*, Penguin, 1956 (excerpt)
[Albert Einstein](#) (short video)

Optional:

[Albert Einstein, How I see the world](#)
(Documentary)
W. Heisenberg, "The Principle of Indeterminacy"
[Quantum Theory](#) (documentary)
S. Hawking on [Black Holes](#) (short video).

2. Anticolonialism, orientalism, and the paradoxes of postcolonialism

Compulsory:

F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin, 2007 (excerpts)
O. Sembene, [The Black Girl](#), (1966, movie)

Optional:

E. Said, *Orientalism* (excerpts)
J. Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (novel)

3. Genetical engineering: beyond humanism?

Compulsory:

Jennifer Doudna on [CRISPR and gene editing](#) (short video)
A. Buchanan, *Better than Human: The Promise and Perils of Biomedical Enhancement* Oxford Univ. Press (excerpts).

Optional:

M. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection*
M. Sandel, "[Designer Babies](#)" (video)
Gattaca (1997, A. Niccol, movie)

4. Artificial intelligence, artificial ignorance and the robot revolution

Compulsory:

Isaac Asimov, "Runaround" (1942, orig.) in *I, Robot*, Oxford University Press excerpt
Tzafestas, Spyros G. (2016). *Roboethics A Navigating Overview*. Berlin: Springer, ch. 1.

Optional:

I, Robot (2002, movie).

5. Environmental justice, eco-feminism, and the future of the earth

Compulsory:

P. Singer, "Environmental Ethics", chapter in *Practical Ethics*, Oxford Univ. Press, 2012.

V. Shiva "[The Seeds of Vandana Shiva](#)" (documentary)

Optional:

J. S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth*, 2007 (2nd edition), Oxford Univ. Press, ch. 1-2

G. Kallis & al., *Degrowth. A Vocabulary for a New Era*, Routledge, 2016

Absence policy

After the add/drop, all registrations are considered final and **BaPIS Absence Policy** begins to apply. For the academic year 2011-2012, such policy is as follows:

Attending class is mandatory and will be monitored daily by professors. Missing classes will impact the student's final grade as follows:

Absences	Penalization
<i>Up to two (2) absences</i>	<i>No penalization</i>
<i>Three (3) absences</i>	<i>1 point subtracted from final grade (on a 10 point scale)</i>
<i>Four (4) absences</i>	<i>2 points subtracted from final grade (on a 10 point scale)</i>
<i>Five (5) absences or more</i>	<i>The student receives an INCOMPLETE ("NO PRESENTADO") for the course</i>

*The BaPIS attendance policy **does not distinguish between justified or unjustified absences.** The student is deemed responsible to manage his/her absences.*

Only absences for medical reasons will be considered justified absences. The student is deemed responsible to provide the necessary documentation.

Other emergency situations will be analyzed on a case by case basis by the Academic Director of the BaPIS.

The Instructor, the Academic Director and the Study Abroad Office should be informed asap by email without any delay.