Introduction to Political Theory

Course Description:

This course is an introduction to the history of modern political theory. We will study many of the great texts of the Western tradition. These works raise important questions about the nature of individual rights, the roots of government authority, the circumstances of legitimate revolution, the justification of religious tolerance, and the meaning of political ideals such as liberty, equality, and justice.

Despite the age of some of the texts with which we will wrestle, the purpose of the course is not primarily historical. Instead, part of the reason that they are widely seen as classics is because they continue to shape and inform analysis of political phenomena. It is through the categories and concepts created, clarified, and challenged by these thinkers that we understand and assess our political lives.

The course has three major goals. First, students should take from the course a substantive familiarity with some of the greatest texts in the Western tradition and a sense of the major lines of argument and schools of thought within that tradition. The course provides a basic introduction to the political thought of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, and John Rawls. This familiarity with core texts provides an important background for further study in political theory—both contemporary and historical.

Second, the texts we will read are rich and multifaceted. This is part of what has allowed them to capture and hold the interest of audiences for many generations. There is great intellectual reward to be had by working through the ideas of the canonical authors. For the same reason, however, they elude simple summary and authoritative interpretation. Thus, the second major goal of the course is to learn to read, understand, and appreciate complex works.

Third, studying the classic treatments of core political concepts should allow us to gain a greater sophistication and perspective in our own deployment of them. In other words, it should make us more reflective and self-conscious about the way that we employ political concepts (such as equality, liberty, legitimacy, and justice).

Required Texts:

Students must purchase the following books. Please pay special attention to securing the correct edition. This is important for two reasons. First, we will be referring directly to the texts in class. This can only be efficiently done if we all have the same pagination. Second, we will sometimes be working with translations. There is tremendous variance in the quality and accuracy of
translations. In some cases, poor translations can make the books unnecessarily difficult to understand.

- John Locke *Political Writings* ed. David Wootton (Hackett)
- John Stuart Mill *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Karl Marx *Selected Writings* ed. McLellan (Oxford)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)

Because these are very widely used texts, fairly cheap used copies are available. Please bring texts to class so that we can easily consult them. Any assigned readings not taken from these books will be available on the NYU Classes Page.

**Requirements & Grading:**

Grades will be determined as follows:

1. Reading Quizzes (20%)
2. Paper (20%)
3. Mid-Term Exam (20%)
4. Final Exam (30%)
5. Attendance & Participation in Discussion Sections (10%)

**Reading Quizzes:**

Over the course of the semester, brief reading quizzes will occasionally be administered prior to the day’s lecture. They will focus on basic questions about the reading, such that they should be relatively easy for students who have done the readings with the required care. The idea is only to ensure that students are coming to lecture having done the necessary work. The schedule of the quizzes will not be announced in advance. Although students will not be permitted to retake the quizzes if they miss class (or arrive after the quiz has been given), we will not count each student’s worst quiz in order to provide students leeway for personal issues that may arise.

**Exams:**

If there are extenuating circumstances (illness or family emergency), please discuss them with your teaching assistant prior to the exam or deadline. Although relaxation of the general policies is possible when circumstances warrant, this will require documentation.

**Recitations:**

The material we will be covering is complex and difficult. It is to your great benefit to discuss the issues and arguments covered in reading and lectures with your peers and teaching assistant. For this reason, attendance of recitation is required. Additionally, in order to maintain a consistent community in discussion sections, students are to attend only the recitation section in which they are enrolled.
Attendance, thoughtful participation and respectful engagement with the ideas of fellow students are means not only towards one’s own learning, but also an important element of the recitation’s overall success. Thus, one has to earn credit for participation. This entails coming prepared with questions, informed criticisms and comments on the readings.

**Academic Integrity:**

It is expected that all assignments will be solely the work of the student. As such, students should be careful to properly reference the ideas and words of others. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.

**Course Schedule & Readings:**

Please note that this schedule is subject to change depending on our progress over the course of the semester. The reading questions listed along with the assignments are meant to help direct students towards important issues in the readings. Although they certainly do not cover everything that is important in the readings, an inability to answer the questions is a sign of not having read with sufficient care.

1. Introduction (1/29)

*The Social Contract Tradition*

   a. *Leviathan* Hobbes’s Introduction and Chapter 11
   b. Reading Questions: Why does Hobbes think that it is important to carefully read oneself when laying out a doctrine of political theory? What does he mean by this?

   a. *Leviathan* Chapters 13-14
   b. Reading Questions: What is the state of nature? Why is life there “nasty, brutish, and short”?

   a. *Leviathan* Chapters 15, 17, and 21
   b. Reading Questions: How does the social contract help address the problems that arise in the state of nature? What obligations does the sovereign incur as a result of the social contract? What is the challenge presented by the “foole” in Chapter 15 and how does Hobbes respond to it?

5. Hobbes: The Argument for Absolute Sovereignty (2/12)
   a. *Leviathan* Chapters 18-19 and 30
   b. Reading Questions: Why does Hobbes think that we should resist any attempts to limit the powers of government? Is he persuasive? Is it ever permissible to resist the sovereign?

   a. 2nd Treatise, Chapters 1-4.
      i. §6 is of particular importance
b. Reading Questions: What does Locke mean when he says that the state of nature has a law of nature that governs it? What does that law require? Where does it come from?

   a. 2nd Treatise, Chapters 7-9, 11, and 14.
   b. Reading Questions: How does Locke's account of the problems in the state of nature differ from that given by Hobbes? How do those differences translate into different accounts of the legitimate role of government? Is it possible, on Locke's account, to avoid consenting to the government under which one lives?

8. Locke: Property & Revolution (2/24)
   a. 2nd Treatise, Chapters 5 & 19
   b. 1st Treatise, §42
   c. Reading Questions: How does one come to own property on Locke's account? What limits are there to the accumulation of property
   d. Distribution of paper assignment

The Utilitarian Tradition

9. David Hume (2/26)
   a. "Of the Original Contract" (NYU Classes Page)
   b. Reading Question: Why does Hume think that the idea of a social contract is unnecessary?

10. Jeremy Bentham (3/3)
   a. The Principles of Morals and Legislation, Chapters 1, 2, 4 & 13 (NYU Classes Page).
   b. Reading Questions: What does Bentham mean when he refers to utility? Can all good things be reduced to pleasure and all bad things to pain? Or, do we have interests in things other than pain and pleasure?
   c. Paper Due

11. John Stuart Mill (3/5)
   a. Utilitarianism pp. 136-143 and 176-201
   b. Reading Questions: What is the difference between higher and lower pleasures? How does that distinction differentiate Mill's position from Bentham's?

12. John Stuart Mill (3/10)
   b. Reading Questions: When does Mill think that it is permissible to interfere with the behavior of an individual? Are there other instances in which you would support interference? When and why?

13. John Stuart Mill (3/12)
   b. Reading Questions: Do you think that Bentham would agree with the main line of argument that Mill pursues in this essay? Why or why not?

Spring Break

14. Midterm Exam (3/24)
The Critical Tradition

15. Rousseau: Introduction (3/26)
   a. Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (All)
   b. Reading Question: In what ways does Rousseau think that civilization has rendered men worse off?

   a. On the Social Contract Book 1 (All) and Book 2, Chapters 1-7
   b. Reading Question: What is the general will?

   a. On the Social Contract Book 2, Chapters 8-12; Book 3, Chapters 1, 3-6, 12, 15, & 18; and Book 4, Chapter 1.
   b. Reading Question: Why would a political community ruled according to the general will advance the freedom of its members?

18. Rousseau: Equality (4/7)
   a. On the Social Contract Reread Book 2, Chapter 11
   b. Reading Questions: Why can liberty not subsist without equality? What kind of equality does liberty require?

19. Marx: Historical Materialism (4/9)
   b. Reading Question: What does it mean to say that “the real basis” of the legal and political superstructure rises from the “economic structure of society”?

20. Marx: Capitalism & Alienation (4/14)
   b. Reading Questions: Why is the liberty protected by capitalist societies inadequate? In what senses is a capitalist society alienating or dehumanizing?

21. Marx: Capitalism & Exploitation (4/16)
   a. Marx Selected Writings, 482-513 & 521-525.
   b. Reading Questions: What explains the exchange value of a good? Where does the capitalist’s profit come from?

22. Marx: Justice & the Marxist Ideal (4/21)
   b. Reading Question: What is the difference between the lower and higher phases of a communist society?

Contemporary Liberalism

   a. A Theory of Justice §1-4, 7-9, 11, and 22.
   b. Reading Questions: What is the original position? What role does it play in Rawls’s position? What are the principles of justice and why do they permit some inequality?

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1 All assignments for A Theory of Justice refer to section numbers. So, §1-4 is equivalent to pp. 3-19 (in the revised edition).
24. Rawls: The Main Arguments (4/28)
   b. Reading Questions: Why does Rawls think that the 'Liberal Equality' interpretation of the second principle is unstable?

25. To Be Announced (4/30)

26. Rawls: The 2nd Principle (5/5)
   b. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* Figure 1 and §34-42 (NYU Classes Page)
   c. Reading Questions: What reasons does Rawls give for preferring the difference principle to a position that prevents people from falling below a given level of resources? Are these reasons compelling?

27. Final Exam (5/7)