

Introduction to Political Theory

Tuesday and Thursday, 11:00am-12:15pm

Instructors:

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Course Description:

This course is an introduction to the history of modern political theory. The texts that we study raise important questions about: the nature of a good political society, individual rights, the roots of government authority, the circumstances of legitimate revolution, the justification of free expression, 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 the texts that we will study are widely regarded as canonical is because they continue to provide useful ways of conceptualizing important political phenomena. The categories and concepts created, clarified, and challenged in these works can deepen our understanding and assessment of our own 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. It will also introduce students to sophisticated defenses of a diverse set of viewpoints about basic questions of political life, from Hobbes's defense of a regime of unlimited power to Marx's radical critique of capitalist society.

Second, the texts that we will read are rich and multifaceted. This is part of why they have captured audiences' interest 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 texts.

Third, studying the classic treatments of important 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 (including equality, liberty, legitimacy, and justice).

As much as circumstances allow, *I will run the course synchronously rather than recording lectures for 'on demand' consumption.* The hope, as much as possible, is to retain the relatively lively discussions that are an important feature of the course under ordinary circumstances.

Understanding the texts requires active engagement with the ideas, and this is much more likely to transpire in a setting in which it is possible to have an interactive discussion.

Required Texts:

Students should 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. Translations vary considerably in their quality, accuracy, and readability. Poor translations can make the books unnecessarily difficult to understand.

- Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan* (Oxford World Classics).
- 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. Simon (Hackett).
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett).
- John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard/Belknap) (Original or Revised Edition).

Because these are very widely used texts, fairly cheap used copies are available. Please have the relevant text in class so that we can easily consult it. 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 Response Papers (20%)
2. First Paper (20%)
3. Second Paper (20%)
4. Final Exam (30%)
5. Attendance & Participation (10%)

Reading Response Papers:

Students are required to write a weekly reading response. Responses, which are to be submitted via the recitation section's NYU Classes Page, are due on Thursdays by 10:30am. These essays, limited to three hundred words, will answer a specific question posed at the beginning of the week. Since the purpose of the exercise is to engage with the readings prior to class discussion, late papers will not be accepted.

However, in order to provide leeway for the inevitable illness, family emergency, etc. that arises over the course of the semester, each student will be permitted to miss *one* response without penalty or justification. If there are extenuating circumstances that are ongoing throughout the semester (e.g., significant illness), please discuss them with your teaching assistant. While relaxation of general policies is possible in exceptional cases, this will require documentation.

Although students may discuss response paper questions with one another, students should write responses on their own.

Recitations:

The material that we cover 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 who turns them in. 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:

The readings listed under a day's class will be the subject of that meeting's lecture. Students are to have completed that reading *prior* to class. Please note that this schedule is aspirational: it 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 (1/28)
2. Hobbes: Introduction and the State of Nature (2/2)
 - a. *Leviathan*, Hobbes's Introduction and Chapters 11, 13-14.
 - 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? What is the state of nature? Why is life there "nasty, brutish, and short"?
3. Hobbes: The Social Contract (2/4)
 - a. *Leviathan*, Paragraphs 1-9 of Chapter 15 and Chapters 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?
- 4. Hobbes: The Argument for Absolute Sovereignty (2/9)
 - a. *Leviathan*, Chapters 18, 29-30.
 - 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?
- 5. Hobbes: Representation & Democracy (2/11)
 - a. *Leviathan*, Chapter 19.
 - b. Mancur Olson ‘Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development’ (NYU Classes).
 - c. Reading Questions: Is Hobbes’s preferred form of government representative? Is Hobbes’s doctrine compatible with democracy? What are Hobbes’s reasons for disliking democratic government? Is Olson’s argument for democratic government compatible with Hobbes’s premises? Why or why not?
- 6. Locke: Natural Law & Punishment (2/16)
 - 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?

No Class, Legislative Day (2/18)

- 7. Locke: Property (2/23)
 - a. *2nd Treatise*, Chapter 5.
 - 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?
- 8. Locke: Social Contract and Revolution (2/25)
 - a. *2nd Treatise*, Chapters 9, 11, 14, and – from Chapter 19 – paragraphs 211-227 and 240-243.
 - 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?
- 9. Locke: Consent and Political Obligation (3/2)
 - a. *2nd Treatise*, Chapter 7, paragraphs 87-94 and Chapter 8.
 - b. Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (NYU Classes)
 - c. Reading Questions: Is it possible, on Locke’s account, to avoid consenting to the government under which one lives? How does Locke’s position on obedience to the law differ from King’s?
- 10. First Paper Due (3/4)
- 11. Rousseau: Introduction (3/9)

- a. *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pp. 45-55, 60-82 and 87-92.
 - b. Reading Question: In what ways does Rousseau think that civilization has rendered people worse off?
12. Rousseau: The General Will (3/11)
- a. *On the Social Contract*, Book 1 (All).
 - b. *On the Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapters 1-7.
 - c. Reading Question: What is the general will?
13. Rousseau: Freedom and the General Will (3/16)
- a. *On the Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapter 11.
 - b. *On the Social Contract*, Book 3, Chapters 1, 3-6, 12, 15, & 18.
 - c. *On the Social Contract*, Book 4, Chapter 1.
 - d. Reading Question: In what sense would a political community ruled according to the general will advance the freedom of its members?
14. Rousseau: Equality (3/18)
- a. Review: *On the Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapter 11.
 - b. Iris Marion Young "Polity and Group Difference" *Ethics* 1989 99/2, 250-274 (NYU Classes).
 - c. Elizabeth Kolbert "The Psychology of Inequality" *The New Yorker* (NYU Classes).
 - d. William Deresiewicz 'Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League' *The New Republic* (NYU Classes).
 - e. Reading Questions: Why can liberty not subsist without equality? What kind of equality does liberty require? Is Rousseau's ideal of equal citizenship problematic? Why or why not?
15. David Hume (3/23)
- a. "Of the Original Contract" (NYU Classes).
 - b. Reading Question: Why did Hume think that the idea of a social contract is unnecessary?
16. Bentham, Mill and Utilitarianism (3/25)
- a. Jeremy Bentham *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapters 1-2 and 4 (NYU Classes).
 - b. John Stuart Mill *Utilitarianism*, pp. 120-126 and 162-168.
 - c. Reading Questions: What is the difference between higher and lower pleasures? How does that distinction differentiate Mill's position from Bentham's?
17. John Stuart Mill: On Liberty (3/30)
- a. *On Liberty*, Chapter 1 (All).
 - b. *On Liberty*, Chapter 2 (pp. 18-27, 29-30, 35-42, 45-48, and 51-54).
 - c. Geoffrey Stone "Free Expression in Peril" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 26 August 2016 (NYU Classes).
 - d. Reading Questions: What is the "one very simple" principle defended by Mill, what kinds of policies does it prohibit, and why does Mill think we should accept it?
18. John Stuart Mill: On Liberty (4/1)
- a. Charles R. Lawrence III "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus" *Duke Law Journal* Jun 1990, pp. 431-438 and 449-466 (NYU Classes).

- b. Zeynep Tufekci "It's the (Democracy-Poisoning) Golden Age of Free Speech" *Wired* <https://www.wired.com/story/free-speech-issue-tech-turmoil-new-censorship/>
 - c. *On Liberty* pp. 55-67, 73-82 and 91-101 and 105-110.
 - d. Reading Questions: Do Tufekci and Lawrence provide reason to think that Mill's position on free expression is too permissive? Why or why not? 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?
19. John Stuart Mill: The Subjection of Women (4/6)
- a. *The Subjection of Women*, pp. 409-411, 422-435, 452-454, and 484-489, 496-500.
 - b. Martha Nussbaum "American Women" *Sex and Social Justice* Ch. 5 (NYU Classes).
 - c. Reading Questions: Reading question: Why does Mill say that "what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing" (428)? What would have to happen for real knowledge of the "nature of women" to emerge?
20. Second Paper Due (4/8)
21. Marx: Historical Materialism (4/13)
- a. Marx *Selected Writings*, pp. 209-213 and 157-176.
 - b. W.E.B. Du Bois "The Planter" *Black Reconstruction in America* (NYU Classes).
 - c. 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"? In what specific ways does Marx's analysis of society and social change inform Du Bois's discussion of the Antebellum South and the causes of the Civil War?
22. Marx: Capitalism, Alienation and Liberal Ideology (4/15)
- a. Marx *Selected Writings*, pp. 1-2, 14-21, 40-53, and 58-68.
 - b. John Lanchester "The Robots are Coming" *London Review of Books* (NYU Classes).
 - c. Reading Questions: Why is the liberty protected by capitalist societies inadequate? In what senses is a capitalist society alienating or dehumanizing?
23. Marx: Capitalism & Exploitation (4/20)
- a. Marx *Selected Writings*, pp. 255-273 and 281-300.
 - b. Reading Questions: What explains the exchange value of a good? Where does the capitalist's profit come from? Is *all* profit exploitative?
24. Marx: The Communist Ideal (4/22)
- a. Marx *Selected Writings*, pp. 301-308 and 315-322.
 - b. Recommended, V.I. Lenin *The State and Revolution* pp. 77-90 (NYU Classes).
 - c. Recommended, F.A. Hayek "The Game of Catallaxy" pp. 115-120 (NYU Classes).
 - d. Reading Question: What is the difference between the lower and higher phases of a communist society? For Marx, is the elimination of exploitation sufficient for justice? Why or why not?
25. Rawls: Introduction: Overview & the Intuitive Argument (4/27)
- a. *A Theory of Justice*,¹ §1-4, 7-8, and 11-12.
 - 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

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)

inequality? Why does Rawls think that the 'Liberal Equality' interpretation of the second principle is unstable?

26. Rawls: The Contract Argument I (4/29)

- a. *A Theory of Justice*, §13, 15-17, 20, 24-26, and 29.
- b. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* Figure 1 and §41-42 (NYU Classes).
- c. Reading Questions: What reasons does Rawls give for preferring his two principles to utilitarianism? Are these reasons persuasive?

27. Rawls: The Contract Argument II (5/4)

- a. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* Figure 1 and §34-40 (NYU Classes).
- b. Tommy Shelby "Crime" *Dark Ghettos* pp. 203-220. (NYU Classes).
- c. What is the difference between restricted utility and traditional utilitarianism? What reasons does Rawls give for preferring his two principles to restricted utility? Are these reasons persuasive? How do they relate to Hooker's argument?

28. Rawls: Legitimacy and Public Reason (5/6)

- a. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* §1 and 11 (NYU Classes).
- b. *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* pp. 131-148 and 175-80 (NYU Classes).
- c. Recommended, Khaled Abou El Fadl "The Place of Tolerance in Islam"
 - i. <http://bostonreview.net/forum/khaled-abou-el-fadl-place-tolerance-islam>
- d. Reading Question: What does the ideal of public reason require? What is an example of what it would prohibit?

The Final Exam will be during the exam period, as set by NYU.