POLT 231: European Political Theory: Plato to Machiavelli

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Course Description

In this course we will survey political thought from ancient Greece to Renaissance Italy, from Plato to Niccolò Machiavelli—a little slice of history covering approximately 2,000 years that forged the foundations of what many today call “Western Civilization.” How did political thought evolve during this formative period? Was it, in fact, formative—does it still matter today? We will attempt to answer these very big questions through careful attention to the works of Plato, Sophocles, Aristotle, Christine de Pizan and Niccoló Machiavelli. We will explore such central themes as the significance of human nature for politics; the foundations of political authority; the purposes of political life; the relationship between politics and philosophy; and the often troubled relationships between the individual, the family, and the political community. These authors wrote in a number of different genres—dialogue, treatise, dramatic tragedy—and we will also pay some attention to the significance of these genres for thinking about politics.

Course Objectives

First Objective: Get excited. For those of you taking your first political theory course, I want to introduce you to the field (or at least a snippet of it) and to get you as excited about it as I am. I want us to discover together the thrill of grappling with important texts and ideas, and of arguing about politics in a theoretically informed way. Your experience in the class might encourage you to continue with the department’s historical sequence (POLT 232 and 234). The parts of this course that excite you may also guide you in further explorations of political theory in higher level courses and private readings. For those who have some prior familiarity with the history, politics or intellectual life of the ancient and Renaissance worlds, the course offers a more in-depth and sustained look at this fertile period in the history of political thought.

Second Objective: Think dangerously, not recklessly. In this course you will learn to cultivate your analytic skills: You will learn to read carefully, think critically, and to speak and write thoughtfully and clearly about difficult topics. Together I hope that we will come to appreciate the subtlety and intricacy of these texts, their arguments, their ambiguities, their tensions and contradictions. And I hope that we will also learn how to treat texts respectfully, but not reverently; to engage thoughtfully and constructively with their arguments; but also to seek out actively those moments where the arguments seem
to falter, and to try to understand how and why. We will learn, that is, to think dangerously, but not recklessly.

**Third Objective:** *Say what you mean, mean what you say.* In addition to careful reading and critical thinking, the ability to *express* those thoughts clearly and concisely is a vital skill. In this course we will learn how to make arguments: How to state a claim and defend it with evidence. Moreover, we will learn the value of clarity in both speech and thought. We will be dealing with some difficult texts and ideas, and one of our major tasks will be to clarify them—though without simplifying them so much that they lose their force.

**Expectations**

**What you can expect of me:**
This class depends on the quality of our discussions. You will not “learn” political theory by listening to me talk at you about it. These texts are much more interesting than I am. I can promise you that nobody will be talking about me over 2000 years from now. You should treat these texts as invitations to discussion, not as subjects for lectures. I will not lecture except where some context seems appropriate, and never for long. I am here to read with you, to help guide our conversations, and to participate in them when and as it seems important to do so.

Outside of the classroom, I will hold regular office hours which you are encouraged to attend. This can be a useful time to bring up questions or confusions that we do not address in class, or to discuss any concerns about your progress in the course.

You can also expect assignments to be graded and returned promptly, with comments and questions about what you’ve written, and suggestions about how to improve.

**What I expect of you:**
This course is both reading-intensive and writing-intensive. It is reading-intensive because I want to strike a balance between, on one hand, allowing us to probe beneath the surface of these texts, to uncover questions, problems, and inspirations in them; and, on the other, to give you a broad sense of the trajectory of a long history of political thought. The course is writing-intensive because writing is a discipline best improved through regular practice. You will learn it best by doing it.

This class demands regular, thoughtful and constructive participation. I expect you to come to each class having read and thought about the material for that session. You may find it helpful to take notes on the readings, and to jot down questions to pose in class as they occur to you.

In addition, you will be responsible for two kinds of writing assignments: Essays, and a course reflection
Short Essays (500-750 words): You will be responsible for three short essays over the course of the semester. This will be focused on quite narrow questions that I will provide in advance. Their purpose is to focus you on a crucial issue in the text, and to force you to write about it very concisely: What does the author mean when she says X? Or, how does she explain Y? Short essays are harder to write than they sound. As the 17th century French thinker Blaise Pascal wrote in one of his “Provincial letters,” “I have made this [letter] longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter.”

Longer Essays (1500-2000 words): These are longer essays in which I will expect sustained, critical engagement that will delve more deeply into a topic than the shorter essays allow. In these assignments you will have a choice of 3 or 4 topics.

Course reflection: The purpose of this assignment is more “therapeutic” than pedagogical. Did this course challenge you to think about yourself and the political world you inhabit? If so, how? If not, what is the most surprising idea or argument that you encountered during the course? Has your response to it changed over the course of the semester?

Please submit all writing assignments electronically. I will comment on them in the document and email them back to you. This is my first time trying this. I am doing so partly to save trees and partly because my handwriting is illegible. I should have been a doctor.

Grading

There are three components to your course grade: Participation, essays, and course reflection
They will be weighed as follows:

Participation—25%
Short Essays—20%
Long Essays—45%
Course Reflection—10%

Plagiarism

The use of other people’s words or ideas without proper acknowledgment is a serious academic offence, for which you may be subject to a range of sanctions by me and by the College. Do not bother trying—I will catch you. If you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism, please see Page 2 of the document “Students’ Rights and Responsibilities:


If you still have questions, please discuss them with me.
Late submission policies: Missing deadlines creates a lot of headaches for you and for me. Don’t do it. Late assignments will be penalized **ONE HALF LETTER GRADE PER DAY, INCLUDING WEEKENDS.**

Disability: If you require specific accommodations because of a disability, you must come speak to me and provide a letter from Disability Services by September 12, the end of the Add/Drop period.

Books for Purchase

Plato, *4 Texts on Socrates* (trans. West and West)  
Sophocles, *Antigone*  
Christine de Pizan, *Book of The City of Ladies* (trans. Richards)  

Course Schedule

Tuesday, Sept. 3: Introductions, and a conversation about justice

Thursday, Sept 5: *Republic*, Bk. I, Bk II through 368b

Tuesday, Sept. 10: Bk II 368c to end; Bk. III 401b-403d, 412a to end; Bk IV

Thursday, Sept. 12: Bk V to 471e

Tuesday, Sept. 17: Bk V 471e- Bk VII 521c  
**Response Paper Due**

Thursday, Sept. 19:  Bk VII 531d-Bk IX 576b

Tuesday, Sept. 24: Bk IX 576b-592b; Bk X 608b-621d

Thursday, Sept. 26: *Apology*

Tuesday, Oct. 1: *Crito*

Thursday, Oct. 3: *Phaedo* to 88E

Tuesday, Oct. 8: *Phaedo*, 89A-end  
**First Long Essay Due**
Thursday, Oct. 10: Antigone to 720

Tuesday, Oct. 15: Antigone, 720-end

Thursday, Oct. 17: Aristotle, Metaphysics Alpha, 1; Politics, Bk I chs. 1-3, 4-7; Bk II chapters 1-5, 7-8

Tuesday, Oct. 29: Bk III

Thursday, Oct. 31: Bk IV chs. 1-2, 4-9, 11, 12; Bk V chapters 1-2, 5-9; Bk VI, ch.5

Tuesday, Nov. 5: Leo Strauss, “On Classical Political Philosophy”

Response Paper Due

Thursday, Nov. 7: City of Ladies Part 1 to 1.26.3

Tuesday, Nov. 12: to the end of Part 1

Thursday, Nov. 14: Part 2 to 2.35.3.

Tuesday, Nov. 19: 2.36.1 to 2.52.2

Thursday, Nov. 21: 2.53 to the end of Part 2.

Tuesday, Nov. 26: Part 3

Second Long Essay

Tuesday, Dec. 3 Prince Letter, chs. I-VI; Discourses Letter, I Preface, 9-10, 19-20, 58, II 2, III 30.1

Thursday, Dec. 5 Prince chs. VII-XIV; Discourses I 11-12, 18.4, 27

Tuesday, Dec. 10 Aristotle's Politics Book V chs.10-11; Prince chs. XV-XIX; Discourses III 40-42

Thursday, Dec. 12 Prince Chapters XX-XXVI; Discourses III 9.

Third Response Paper

Final paper AND course reflection due Wednesday, December 18 by 11am.