POLT 130: Being Political: Political Theory and Political Action

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Course Description

In this course we will examine diverse answers to a deceptively simple set of fundamental questions about political life in order to understand our histories, our presents, and our possible futures: What is politics? When and where does it occur, and what does it look like? How is it related to other areas of human endeavor such as art and science, economics and religion, history and philosophy? What might its future hold? We will critically investigate these questions by taking an improbably, outrageous, and hopefully entertaining whirlwind tour of Western political thought from ancient Greece to the present.

Course Objectives

First Objective: Get excited. I want to introduce you to the field of political theory 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. The parts of this course that excite you may also guide you in further explorations of political theory in higher level courses.

Second Objective: Think through history. By the end of the course you should have at least a preliminary sense of the trajectory of political theory over the past two millennia. We will survey a broad range of ideas about what politics entails, by reading historical and contemporary texts carefully and critically; by considering what light they might shed on politics of the past and present; and by beginning to imagine a politics of the future.

Third Objective: Think dangerously, not recklessly. You will learn to cultivate your analytic skills, especially careful reading and critical thinking. 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.
Fourth 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 2,000 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 help guide the conversations, and to participate in it when and as it seems important to do so.

Outside of the classroom, I will hold regular office hours which you are encouraged, but not required, 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 what the field of political theory is like—its development, its enduring problems, and some of the approaches taken in addressing those problems. 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 a number of writing assignments:

Weekly response papers (1-2 pp., single-spaced.): These are opportunities to respond thoughtfully and critically to any of the readings for that week. A “critical” response may, but need not, consist of a disagreement with the author. Did something jump out at
you as especially interesting or important? What on earth does that odd claim mean? Do you see some apparent contradictions in or between works? Then write about that! There will be no assigned topics or questions, but you must start each response with the question you plan to address. These papers should not simply summarize the author’s argument. Rather, they should make an argument in the form of an answer to the question with which you begin. There will be no response papers due when the longer essays are due.

_Essays_ (6-8 pp., double-spaced): You will be responsible for two longer, comparative papers that answer questions that I will prepare. They will ask you to compare the work of two thinkers. They will address broad themes that emerge in the texts we read. In these essays you will take a position, stated in the form of a thesis—the claim you are going to defend. In the body of the essay, you will defend that thesis.

**Note:** After I return your first essay, you MUST make an appointment to discuss it with me.

_Course reflection:_ The purpose of this assignment is more “therapeutic” than pedagogical. Did this course challenge how you 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?

**Grading**

These three components—participation, weekly responses and essays—will be weighed as follows:
Participation—30%
Responses and Course Reflection—40%
Essays—30%

All written assignments, with the exception of the final paper and course reflection, should be submitted in class on the due date.

**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 unclear about 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 13**

**Books for Purchase** (at the Campus Bookstore)

Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *4 Texts on Socrates*
St. Augustine, *Political writings* (Hackett)
John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge),
John Locke, *Letter on Toleration* (Hackett)
Robert Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*
Carl Schmitt, *Concept of The Political*
Max Weber, *Vocation lectures* (Hackett)

**Course Schedule**

Week 1:

- **September 4** Course Introduction
- **September 6** Plato, *Republic* Book I; Book II, 357a-358a; Book VII, 514a-517e
  Euthyphro, 2a-3e

Week 2:

- **September 11** Plato, Apology
- **September 13** Plato, Crito

Week 3

- **September 18** St. Augustine, *City of God*: I (Preface, 1, 8, 9, 11, 35); II (1, 7); V (10, 19); VIII (3, 8); XI (27, 28); XIII (14); XIV (4, 6, 12, 13, 25, 28); XIX (4, 15, 17, 25); XX (1); XXII (30) (B)
- **September 20** St. Augustine, *City of God*: III (10); IV (3, 4, 15, 33); V (22, 24); XV (4); XIX (5-7, 12-14); XXII (7) (B)
St. Augustine, *Political Writings*: Letter 138 (Marcellinus); War: Introduction, Letter 189 (Boniface); Against Faustus; On True Religion; Letter 93 (Vincentius): 1-5, 8, 10, 17, 18, 20, 53) (B)

**Response Paper Due**

Week 4

**September 25** Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

**September 27** Machiavelli, *The Prince*

**Response Paper Due**

Week 5

**October 2** Locke, *First Treatise* (Preface, I (1, 2); *Second Treatise*: I (1-5, 7, 9, 10-13)

**October 4** *Second Treatise* (14-15, 18-19) Locke, Letter on Toleration

**Response Paper Due**

Week 6

**October 9** Marx Reader, 12-15, 144-5 (Theses 2, 3, 8, 11) 70-81, 148-200

**October 11** Communist Manifesto

**First Essay Due**

Week 7:

**October 16** Weber, “Science as a Vocation”

**October 18** “Politics as a Vocation”

**Response Paper Due**

Week 8:

**October 23** Schmitt, *Concept of The Political*

**October 25** Schmitt, *Concept of The Political*

**Response Paper Due**

Week 9

**October 30** Catching our Breath

**Midterm Course Evaluation**
November 1 Hannah Arendt, “Preface” to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; “The Gap Between Past and Future,” “Tradition and the Modern Age,” in *Between Past and Future* (B)

Response Paper Due

Week 10

November 6  Arendt, *The Human Condition*, “Prologue” and ch.5 (B)
November 8  Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”

Response Paper Due

Week 11

November 13  Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformations of The Public Sphere*, ch. 1, pp. 27-43, 141-159, 236-250 (B)
Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter-Publics*, ch.2 (B)
November 15  Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* Introduction, chs.1-2 (B)
Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” (B)

Response Paper Due

Week 12


November 22-26 OFF FOR THANKSGIVING

Week 13:

November 27  Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* ch. 1, 2, 8 (B)
Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* ch. 1 (B)
November 29  Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, chs. 1-2 (B)
Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, ch. 2 (B)
Robert Gooding-Williams, “Fugitive Slave Mentality” (B)

Response Paper Due
Week 14

December 4 Arendt, “Preface,” “Thoughts on Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times* (B)
Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *The National Interest* (B)

December 6 Fukuyama, “After ‘The End of History’” (B)
Wendy Brown, “Introduction” in *Politics out of History* (B)
Tracy Strong, “Introduction” in *Politics Without Vision* (B)

****Dec 14 Final Essay, Course Reflection Due****