POLT 130: BEING POLITICAL: POLITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL ACTION

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course we will examine a set of fundamental questions about political life: What is power? What can we do about power and in what ways can one be free? Is power only restrictive, or does power also enable political action? What might the future hold given the strong and ambivalent relationship between power and freedom? We will critically investigate these questions by taking a tour of Western political thought from ancient Greece to present.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

First Objective: Get fired up! I am very excited about the topics in this class. I want you to think about our present time by using the questions and theoretical experience of major political thinkers. You need to approach these thinkers and texts as tools that can help you address YOUR fundamental questions about politics. The parts of this course that excite you could lead to further explorations of political theory in higher-level courses.

Second Objective: Think by utilizing history. The history of political thought is key to understanding the relationship between power and freedom in today’s world. We will survey a broad range of ideas about what politics entails by reading historical and contemporary texts carefully and critically.

Third Objective: Think boldly. I want you to use this class to acquire skills that will allow you to make bold and important claims. You will be able to see the flaws in the best arguments and the strength of the weakest ideas; you will be able to compare and contrast two key authors; you will be able to argue persuasively by using conceptual and historical evidence.

Fourth Objective: Use you experience! I would like you to use your experience and interests when you are writing arguments. Think about theoretical arguments by utilizing your life and knowledge.
ASSIGNMENTS:

1) PARTICIPATION: It is essential that you do the day's reading assignment before each class. Questions will frequently be provided for you to think about as you do the readings. The quality of your oral contributions to the class will also count toward the grade. Good oral participation involves quality as well as quantity. Quality includes your ability to listen to others and thoughtfully to respond to what they say, your ability to develop logical arguments, and to engage in reasoned debate.

2) FIVE to SIX RESPONSE PAPERS (1-2 pages). These short papers are designed to build five important skills. Each of the paper is designed to address and highlight a key skill that is foundational for critical thinking.

   First, Show your evidence! The first paper aims to teach you how to use evidence when making a claim. Second, Challenge the strongest argument! Find the strongest argument in a reading and challenge it! Third, Improve the weakest argument! Find the weakest argument in a reading and show how you can make it better! Fourth, Use your experience! Draw on your experience to address the question that is key to the week’s reading! Fifth, Compare and Contrast! Compare and contrast two political thinkers so you would see where they share common arguments but also where they part company.

3) ONE LONG ESSAY (6 to 8 pages), where I would like to see how you deploy all (or at least most) of the skills that you’ve already acquired!

   OR

   (as an alternative, final paper): Use theory to think about today! How does Judith Butler’s reading of Antigone help you to re-think the relationship between kinship and political freedom? (6-8 pages)"

4) EXTRA CREDIT: COURSE REFLECTION (short 2 to 3 page paper):

   Did this course change your ideas about a particular political question? If so, how? How has your response changed during the course of the semester?

GRADING:

Participation: 30%
Responses 50%
Essay: 20%
WHAT I EXPECT OF YOU:

1. First, I would like to see you talking to each other and responding to different claims that are made in class. I want you to challenge your peers but also to build on an idea or insight that is articulated in class.
2. Second, I would like you to experience the novelty of your ideas when you bring them to class. I want to see you how you discover new things in class and don’t only re-iterate what you already know. In order to do this, you need to let yourself talk and even make mistakes.
3. You should treat these texts as invitations to discussions. I will lecture when I feel that would be appropriate but I would like you to grapple with the texts.

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT OF ME:

1. You should expect me to give you lectures when concepts are difficult to understand. Also, you should expect me to offer guidance about the topics of the class and how to interpret texts
2. Regular office hours; I provide feedback on assignments, but I may be a bit slower than you want me to be.

LATE SUBMISSION POLICIES:

Late assignments will be penalized one half letter grade per day, including weekends.

BOOKS:

Plato, The Apology and Crito in Five Dialogues (Hackett, 2002) (translated G.M.A. Grube)
Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Mask (Grove Press, 2007)

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Week 1:

Feb 3: Course Introduction
Feb 5. Sophocles’s Antigone
Week 2:
February 10: Plato, *The Apology*
February 12: Plato, *Crito*

**Response First Paper Due (Show your evidence!)** [paper is due at the end of the class. It uses material only from Week 1 and Week 2]

Week 3:
Feb 17: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 1 to Chapter 16
Feb 19: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 16 to the end

Week 4:
Feb 26: Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter II and III

**Response Second Paper Due (Challenge the Strongest Argument!)** [paper is due at the end of the class. It uses material only from Week 3 and Week 4]

Week 5:
March 3: Karl Marx: *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (selections on Blackboard)
March 5: Karl Marx: *The Civil War in France* (selections from Part III on Blackboard)

Week 6:
March 10: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (selections on Blackboard)
March 12: Fanon: *Black Skin, White Mask* I (1-5)

**Response Third Paper (Improve the Weakest Argument!)** [paper is due at the end of the class. It uses material only from Week 5 and Week 6]

Week 7:
March 18: Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, Part I (We ‘Other’ Victorians) and Part IV, Chapter One, *Objective*: Foucault, Interview “The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom” (selections on Blackboard)
March 20: Review Session

Week 8: Break
Week 9:

April 2: Hannah Arendt: from *The Human Condition*, “Power and the Space of Appearance” (selections on Blackboard)

**Fourth Paper Response (Use YOUR Experience!)** [paper is due at the end of the class. It uses material only from Week 7 and Week 9]

Week 10:

April 7: Wendy Brown: “Wounded Attachments” (Blackboard)
April 9: Sam Chambers: Introduction, *The Queer Politics of Television* (Blackboard)

Week 11:

April 14, Tracy Strong: Introduction to *Politics without Vision* (Blackboard)
April 16, Hardt and Negri: *Commonwealth* (Selections about “Love and the Common,” Blackboard)

**Fifth Paper Response (Compare and Contrast!)** [paper is due at the end of the class. It uses material only from Week 10 and Week 11]

Week 12: April 21: Saba Mahmood, Preface to the second edition of *Politics of Piety* (Blackboard)  
April 23: Connolly: *Why I am not a Secularist* (excerpts, Blackboard);

Week 13: April 28/ April 30: Feedback on short papers; Discussion

Week 14:

May 5: Judith Butler: *Antigone’s Claim*: Chapter 3, “Promiscuous Obedience” (Blackboard)
May 7: Course Reflection.

**LONG ESSAY or paper on Butler**
**Extra-Credit** paper [both papers are due at the end of the class]