CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY
AND ITS HISTORIES

Tuesdays, 10:10 am–12:35 pm, Uris 254

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

What is the relationship of history to the practice of contemporary political theory? What role does attention to history—or its neglect—play in the reproduction and contestation of theoretical authority? What is the relationship between the history of political thought (whatever that is!) and other modes of historical research and writing? What relevance might methodological disputes among historians (of political thought and of other things) have for theoretical engagement with the present? What light do the histories of academic institutions, of the disciplines, and of canon-formation shed on contemporary theoretical practice? This graduate seminar will consider these and related issues through an idiosyncratic and selective survey of important recent work in the field, chosen and supplemented with an eye toward the disclosure of its own historical contexts, and toward the critical evaluation of its investments in, stances toward, and, sometimes, disavowals of history.

In 2019, the seminar will be organized into four units, one centered on an author (Machiavelli), one on a concept (neoliberalism), one on a contested approach to the integration of history and theory (genealogy), and one on concrete institutions and practices of scholarship (archives, canons, and disciplines).

TEXTS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE:


Other readings will be available electronically, via Canvas (for photocopied book chapters) or via direct links on the syllabus (for journal articles).
SEMINAR DISCUSSIONS:

Please come prepared to pose at least one constructive question based on one or more of the week’s readings, and to unpack the stakes of each question, as you see them, for the rest of the participants. At the beginning of the seminar, I will ask everyone to share their questions as a way of building a common agenda for our discussion, I will also offer some questions and thoughts of my own (though not in the form of an extended lecture).

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT AND GRADES:

Your grade for the seminar will be based on a seminar paper of 20–25 pages, on a topic of your choice. The topic and the paper must have more than a nominal connection to something on the syllabus, but you are welcome to pursue topics that take you well beyond our common reading, too. You should discuss your plans for the paper with me at least once, ideally before Thanksgiving. Papers are due by December 15, 2019. Please submit papers by email attachment to markell@cornell.edu; I prefer .doc or .docx files (for making marginal comments) but will also accept pdfs.

INFERNAL CONTRAPTION POLICY:

You’re welcome to use a laptop or tablet to access course materials or take notes during the seminar; but please don’t use these devices for any other purpose, including research, in the seminar. In fact, I’d prefer that you disable your wireless connections altogether. Cell phones should be silenced—fully silenced, not put on “vibrate”—and kept in a bag or pocket while in seminar.

OFFICE HOURS:

I will hold office hours regularly from 2:30–4:30 pm on Tuesdays; unless these become overcrowded, they will be first-come, first-serve, and do not require an appointment. If you cannot make these hours, you are welcome to email me for an appointment at another time.

WEEKLY READING ASSIGNMENTS:

WEEK 1 (September 3): Introduction (no reading)

WEEK 2 (September 10): Machiavelli, I

WEEK 3 (September 17): Machiavelli, II


WEEK 4 (September 24): Machiavelli, III


WEEK 5 (October 1): Machiavelli, IV


WEEK 6 (October 8): Neoliberalism, I

WEEK 7 (October 15): FALL BREAK; NO CLASS

WEEK 8 (October 22): Neoliberalism, II

1. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (all)

WEEK 9 (October 29): Neoliberalism, III

1. Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe* (all)

WEEK 10 (November 5): Genealogy, I


WEEK 11 (November 12): Genealogy, II

1. Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Genealogies of Terrorism* (all)

WEEK 12 (November 19): Genealogy, III

1. Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data* (all)

WEEK 13 (November 26): Archives, Canons, Disciplines, I

WEEK 14 (December 3): Archives, Canons, Disciplines, II

1. Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas* (all)

WEEK 15 (December 10): Archives, Canons, Disciplines, III