

GOVT 1615 (PHIL 1920)
Cornell University
Spring 2020

Professor Patchen Markell
White Hall 311
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INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THEORY

Lecture: MW 8:40–9:55 AM, McGraw Hall 165

Discussion sections led by TAs Alexia Barbaro (ara238@cornell.edu, Tu 9:05–9:55 and Th 12:20–1:10) and Samuel Rosenblum (smr335@cornell.edu, Th 9:05–9:55 and F 2:30–3:20)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course offers an introductory and selective survey of political theory from ancient Athens to modern Europe and North America. We read and discuss works by a number of canonical political theorists, including Aeschylus, Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, the Mills, Marx, and DuBois. Throughout the course, we attend to the particular problems and crises these theorists addressed in their work: the rise and decline of Athens as an imperial democracy, the English Civil War, the French Revolution, the development of industrial capitalism, the persistence of white supremacy after slavery, and many others. We also explore the broader philosophical and political issues these works continue to pose to us now. Our approach is at once historical, textual, and conceptual, providing students with an understanding of political theory as a distinctive form of political inquiry.

IS THIS COURSE FOR ME?

This is an introductory course and there are no prerequisites. The course is meant for a wide variety of undergraduate students, including: students considering a major in Government, but who want to know more about the field; Government majors who need to complete another introductory course; students majoring in a related field in the humanities or social sciences, such as (but not limited to) Philosophy or History; students who are already focused on political theory, but who are interested in taking a survey course, or in rereading some familiar works in a different context; and, last but not least, students—from any major, in any Cornell school or college—who want to take a step back from the immediacy of today's political news to reflect on the meaning of basic political terms and ideas, like “the state,” “freedom,” or “politics” itself, in longer historical perspective.

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE

The following books are available for purchase at the Cornell Bookstore. Please use these specific editions if at all possible, in print rather than e-book format, so that we can literally all be on the same page. If you must use a different edition, please consult with your TA. Additional material, marked with an “*” on the syllabus, will be available electronically on Canvas.

Aeschylus, *Aeschylus II: Oresteia*, trans. Lattimore (Chicago)
Plato, *Republic*, trans. Grube and Reeve (Hackett)
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Curley (Hackett)
Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Laslett (Cambridge)
Rousseau, *Major Political Writings*, ed. Scott (Chicago)
Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Pocock (Hackett)
Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill*, ed. Schneewind (Modern Library)
Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Stedman Jones (Penguin)
DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Gooding-Williams (Bedford)

WHAT WE HOPE YOU'LL LEARN

This course gives you an opportunity to gain several different kinds of knowledge and understanding. Some straightforwardly involve “knowing stuff”: for example, you’ll become more familiar with the ideas of several writers, from the ancient Mediterranean world to modern Europe and north America, whose works have helped shape the terms in which people still think, talk, and argue about politics today. You’ll also learn about the historical circumstances that motivated and informed their reflections. Beyond that, however, you’ll also learn *how* these texts work—that is, how these theorists put their ideas into written form, and how they hoped through their writing to provoke their readers to see and do things differently. Understanding this, in turn, will help you reflect critically on these texts, evaluating the cogency of the arguments they make, examining their assumptions, and asking what facts about the world, and what perspectives on politics, they might ignore or distort in order to achieve their effects. All of this, we hope, will accustom you to being a more active, discerning, questioning, and imaginative participant in discourse about politics, both inside and outside the university.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

This is a lecture course accompanied by weekly TA-led discussion sections (beginning in Week 2). The reading will average 80–100 pages per week. Keep in mind that this reading can be dense, and that you will be expected to read closely: being able to “summarize the main point” is not the point, so start reading early, leave time to re-read—and bring the week’s texts with you to lecture and to section.

You will have opportunities to demonstrate what you’ve learned in this course in several different ways. (The proportion of your final grade determined by each kind of assignment is given in parentheses.)

- Two or three short, unannounced, in-class quizzes will test basic knowledge about the works we’re reading, their authors, and their historical contexts. These should not require special preparation, as long as you’ve been attending regularly and keeping up with the reading. (10%, graded by percentage)
- Seven short response papers (300–500 words each) will ask you to “unpack” a specific passage in a text, for example by explaining what you think an author is saying or doing in an important but unclear passage, or by drawing connections between that passage and some other aspect of the text, or by making explicit things that the author assumes without stating. These response papers test your skill at close reading. The first one will be due Friday of Week 3 (February 7) by 5pm; the second will be due Friday of week 4 (February 14) by 5pm. You may then do the remaining five response papers during any five of the remaining weeks of the semester (other than Spring Break and week 16); we’ll distribute passages for the following week’s response papers each Friday. (20%, graded “-”, “√”, or “+”)
- Two longer essays (6–7 pages or 1750–2000 words each), due **March 6** and [final due date **TBA**]. The assigned questions will generally pose a puzzle or a problem in understanding one of our assigned texts, or in understanding how two or more of them are related to each other, and ask you to respond to this problem by constructing an argument about the meaning of the text(s), and/or by assessing them critically. While these essays must remain grounded in the details of the texts, they will also give you a chance to reflect on the larger theoretical significance of these works. (25% each, letter-graded)
- Participation and attendance. Attendance at lecture and discussion sections is required, and active, constructive participation in discussion is an important part of the class. You will not be graded on the sheer frequency of your participation, nor on whether you come across as knowledgeable or sophisticated, but rather on how well your comments and questions constructively advance the collective project of understanding a difficult text or a theoretical problem—and this can often be done very well by explaining what you *don’t* know or understand. (20%, letter-graded)

OFFICE HOURS

Professor Markell's office hours are Tuesdays from 3–4:30pm and Wednesdays from 10:30am–noon. There will be a sign-up sheet on the door of his office, White Hall 311, two weeks in advance. Office hours for Alexia Barbaro and Samuel Rosenblum will be announced at the beginning of Week 2.

LATE PAPERS

Except in documentable cases of illness or emergency, late response papers will be penalized one mark per day, e.g. a “+” one day late becomes a “√,” while letter-graded essays will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade per day, e.g. an A- paper one day late becomes a B+. However, because stuff happens, each student may, at their discretion, take a 24-hour extension for *one* of the response papers, and may also take a 24-hour extension for *one* of the two graded essays, *without penalty and with no questions asked*. Simply indicate that you're doing so on the title page of your paper when you submit it.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Although you are permitted to use laptops to take notes, I generally recommend that you not do so: recent research suggests that taking notes by hand rather than on screen is more effective and, importantly, less distracting to those around you. If you use a laptop in lecture, you may *not* use it for anything other than taking notes; disable your wireless if you can't resist. *Cell phone use is not permitted in class*; please keep your phone silenced (not merely on vibrate) and in your bag or pocket during lecture and in section.

PLAGIARISM AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Knowingly representing the work of others as one's own is plagiarism and a violation of Cornell's Code of Academic Integrity; suspected violations will be subject to disciplinary review. If you use the words of others, or if you have drawn on other sources in preparing your work, you must cite your sources clearly and completely. If you have questions, consult *The Essential Guide to Academic Integrity at Cornell* (<https://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/academic-integrity/>).

WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF READING ASSIGNMENTS AND LECTURES

WEEK 1: Introduction: What is political theory?

- *Aristotle, *Politics* (brief selections)
- *Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (brief selections)
- *Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political” (brief selections)

Wednesday, January 22: What is “politics”? What is “theory”?

WEEK 2: Origin stories: Athens

Aeschylus, “The Eumenides,” in *Aeschylus II: Oresteia*, pp. 123–162.

Monday, January 27: Drama and democracy in Athens

Wednesday, January 29: Athena and the Furies

WEEK 3: Politics and philosophy: Plato [FIRST RESPONSE PAPER DUE THIS FRIDAY]

Plato, *Republic*, books I and VII (327a–354c, 514a–541b).
[optional: *Plato, “The Apology of Socrates.”]

Monday, February 3: Philosophy, corrupter of youth?
Wednesday, February 5: Justice, truth, and rulership

WEEK 4: Justifying political authority: Hobbes, I [SECOND RESPONSE PAPER DUE THIS FRIDAY]

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters I–XVI (pp. 6–105)

Monday, February 10: Images of power
Wednesday, February 12: Human nature and political artifice

WEEK 5: The sovereign state: Hobbes, II

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters XVII–XXII (pp. 106–155)
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters XXVI–XXX (pp. 173–233)

Monday, February 17: Sovereigns and subjects
Wednesday, February 19: Hobbesian legacies

WEEK 6: The right to private property: Locke, I

Locke, “Second Treatise,” in *Two Treatises of Government*, pp. 267–349 (§§1–122).
*** Be sure you read the SECOND Treatise, not the First! ***

Monday, February 24: NO CLASS / FEBRUARY BREAK
Wednesday, February 26: “All the world was America”

WEEK 7: Consent and revolution: Locke, II

Locke, “Second Treatise,” pp. 350–428 (§§123–243).

Monday, March 2: Contract, Consent, and Political Authority
Wednesday, March 4: Revolution and the “Appeal to Heaven”

*** **FIRST LONGER ESSAY DUE: FRIDAY, MARCH 6** ***

WEEK 8: Equality and corruption: Rousseau, I

Rousseau, “Discourse on Inequality,” *Major Political Writings*, pp. 41–117, 127–133.)

Monday, March 9: The meanings of “freedom”
Wednesday, March 11: The origins of inequality

WEEK 9: The general will: Rousseau, II

Rousseau, “On the Social Contract,” books I–III (all) and book IV (chapters 1–2 and 8–9 only):
pp. 163–247, 263–72.

Monday, March 16: Freedom and subordination
Wednesday, March 18: The “general will” and democracy

WEEK 10: Contract theory and its critics

Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 4–31, 43–45, 51–54, 59–68, 79–87
*Carol Pateman, “The Fraternal Social Contract”
*Charles W. Mills, “Race and the Social Contract Tradition”

Monday, March 23: Revolution and tradition
Wednesday, March 25: Contract and domination

WEEK 11: SPRING BREAK

WEEK 12: The emancipation of the individual: John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 1–112
*Harriet Taylor Mill, “The Enfranchisement of Women,” pp. 178–203.

Monday, April 6: The problem of emancipation
Wednesday, April 8: Liberty, equality, and subjection

WEEK 13: The meaning of human emancipation: Marx, I

*Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” part 1, pp. 26–46.

Monday, April 13: Marx before Marxism
Wednesday, April 15: The trouble with “rights”

WEEK 14: Emancipation and class struggle: Marx, II

Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, pp. 1–52.

Monday, April 20: Communism, capitalism, and private property
Wednesday, April 22: The revolution and the state

WEEK 15: Emancipation and double-consciousness: DuBois

DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 34–89, 133–147, 159–163, 172–194.

Monday, April 27: Double-consciousness and the color line
Wednesday, April 29: Unreconciled strivings

WEEK 16: Conclusion: what is political theory?

Monday, May 4: Final lecture

*** FINAL PAPER DUE [DATE TBA] ***

THE FINE PRINT: DETAILS ABOUT GRADES

Quizzes are multiple-choice and graded on a percentage basis.

Response papers are graded “-”, “√”, or “+”. “-” indicates a response that is perfunctory, or which suffers from other problems, such as a lack of clarity, problematic reasoning, or inadequate connection to the text, that keep it from shedding much light on the passage in question. “√” indicates a good though unexceptional response. “+” indicates a response that is unusually lucid, perceptive, or insightful. At the end of the term, these marks are converted to a percentage grade: Each “-” is worth 11 points; each “√” is worth 12.5 points; and each “+” is worth 14 points. (Response papers that are not submitted at all receive a zero; late penalties accrue at the rate of 1.5 points per day.) There is also a small bonus for improvement: if the average point score of your last three response papers is higher than your average point score of your first three—and if you submitted all 6 of these response papers without late penalties—we’ll add the difference between these two average values to your total score, up to a maximum of 100.

Essays are graded qualitatively, on a letter basis. We are especially attentive to:

- *Responsiveness*. Does the essay actually respond to the specific question posed by the assignment, and does it indicate a grasp of why the question posed by the assignment is challenging, i.e., why its answer isn’t obvious?
- *Clarity*. Does the essay clearly state a thesis? Are the other elements of the essay made clearly relevant to the task of explaining and defending that thesis? Is the essay sensibly organized and written with care and precision?
- *Use of textual evidence*. Does the essay ground its argument well in the details of the text(s) under consideration, including by explicating passages whose meaning is not self-evident?
- *Quality of argumentation*. Does the essay use concepts clearly and consistently, state and defend its assumptions when necessary, make sound inferences, and consider likely counterarguments?

Attendance and participation is determined half by your attendance at lecture and discussion section (on a percentage basis), and half by your TA’s qualitative (letter-graded) assessment of your participation in discussion section.

Letter grades are converted to percentages at the following rate: A = 95, B = 85, C = 75, etc., with a “+” adding 3.5 points and a “-” subtracting 3.5 points. Each these values represents the midpoint of a corresponding grade-space. Thus, while the value of a single assignment graded “B+” is 88.5, for the purposes of **determining final grades**, the “B+” space ranges from 87.0 through 89.9. In other words:

