FIELD SEMINAR IN POLITICAL THOUGHT
Fridays, 3:15–5:40 pm Eastern time

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES:

Among all of the subfields of political science, political theory probably maintains the closest, most self-conscious relationship to its own history. Political theorists, trying to make sense of politics in the present, often do so in part by reading, invoking, interpreting, and/or criticizing the work of earlier writers we also identify as political theorists (even if they did not use that term themselves, or wrote before the formation of political science as an academic discipline, or were not professional academics at all). And when we introduce our subject to students, we also often do so by way of courses in the history of political thought.

At one level, this field seminar is an example of this approach: we will read works by several authors long treated as part of a retrospectively constructed “canon” of political thought, including Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx. We will ask what we can learn from these works about political questions of enduring significance—questions about power, sovereignty, violence, justice, the state, democracy, revolution, capitalism, and the nature of the “political” itself, among others. And we will consider some of the ways in which these works have been interpreted, used, and criticized by others.

At another level, however this seminar is also an occasion to ask what we are doing, and why, when we read the history of political thought, especially when we do so with reference to a “canon” that has itself been shaped by such forces as white supremacy, patriarchy, and hostility to popular power. Is it enough, in response, to expand the canon? What is gained and lost by focusing on “political questions of enduring significance,” as opposed to those that might be seen as of merely momentary or local import? By assuming that political theory worth studying is the product of exceptional individuals? By making familiarity with a canon into a marker of professional distinction and academic authority? Do the answers to these questions depend on how we read this history and what we do with it? What are the alternatives?

This course is not a complete survey—there is no “complete” survey—of the history of political thought; but it will introduce students to important theoretical terms and concepts; to phenomena that have been of fundamental concern to political theorists; to continuities and differences between theories of politics over time and space; and to varying approaches to the interpretation of theoretical texts. It will provide a foundation for further study in preparation for the field examination in political thought, and it will prepare students to reflect critically on the politics of the practice of political theory as they do this.

TEXTS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE:

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. Curley, Hackett Publishers
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Major Political Writings, Scott trans., University of Chicago Press
Karl Marx, Later Political Writings, ed. Carver, Cambridge University Press
Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, University of Minnesota Press

Please use these specific editions of these texts, so that we will be working with the same translation and can stay (literally) on the same page in our discussions. Other readings are available in the “Files” tab of our Canvas site and via the live links on the syllabus (links to Canvas will require authentication; for links to JSTOR and journal websites, use Cornell’s Passkey).
SEMINAR FORMAT AND PROCEDURES:

This is a seminar course; there will be no lectures. Each week, at the scheduled 135-minute class time, the seminar will meet on Zoom. (A Zoom link will be distributed to all students registered for the course in advance of the first meeting.) Each session will be divided into two roughly equal parts, with a 10-minute break between them. After the first week, the first half of each seminar will be guided by a short (max 10-minute) presentation by one student on the week’s reading, which should identify one or more salient issues in the reading for discussion, explain where these issues arise in the texts and why they matter, and suggest possible avenues for further discussion. The second half of each seminar, which might sometimes begin with brief questions or comments by me, will provide an opportunity to continue this discussion, to shift focus to other issues in the reading, to step back and synthesize, etc. as appropriate. You should come prepared to pose constructive questions based on one or more of the week’s readings, and to explain the stakes of these questions for the rest of us, even if it is not your week to present. These sessions will not ordinarily be recorded, though under special circumstances I may ask the class if they are willing to have the session recorded to help an absent colleague, and will only do so if everyone agrees.

In addition to the weekly Zoom session, all members of the seminar will be invited to a Slack workspace to use for informal off-hours conversation about the material and the issues raised in the seminar; this will be a good way to refine ideas, to sustain continuity in the conversation from week to week, and to discuss issues that we didn’t have time for in class. Participation is voluntary; this is meant to be a resource, not a burden. A transcript of the Slack workspace will be preserved as part of my instructor’s record of the course, but the workspace itself will be permanently deleted after the end of the semester.

SHAPING THE SYLLABUS AND COMPILING A BIBLIOGRAPHY:

I’ve assigned readings to accompany the texts by Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau and Marx in the first two weeks of each three-week unit, but not in the third week of each unit. (I call these “side dishes” rather than “secondary” readings, since the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” works is a little fuzzy.) During the first two weeks of each unit, each student should spend some time surveying journals available online (especially academic journals in political theory*, though sources from other disciplines, as well as non-academic sources, are also welcome) looking for promising articles that seem like they might shed light on the work we’re reading or on issues we have discussed in class. These will often be about the author in question, but they can be relevant without being focused on the main text we’re reading. By 8pm on the second Friday of each unit, each student should email me to nominate one or more articles as side dishes for the following week, with a link or PDF included; your email should include a brief explanation of why these items are especially interesting to you and relevant to the class. I’ll draw on these nominations to flesh out the reading assignments for the third week. I encourage you to share these nominations, and other interesting material you find, in the Slack workspace; at the end of the semester, I will compile links to all the material shared on Slack into a bibliography, with some additions of my own, which will be a useful starting point for exam preparation.

*Some of the journals you might consult for this purpose, and which are in any case good for political theorists to look at regularly, include Contemporary Political Theory, European Journal of Political Theory, History of Political Thought, Political Theory, and Theory & Event, as well as discipline-wide political science journals that regularly publish good work in political theory, like American Political Science Review, Journal of Politics, Political Research Quarterly, and Polity. You will also find relevant work in a wide variety of journals across the social sciences and humanities; I am happy to make recommendations depending on your interests, but you should also simply spend time browsing journals that have published work you find engaging!
RESPONSE PAPERS:

Over the course of the seminar, each student must complete six short response papers; I strongly encourage spreading these out over the course of the semester. Response papers for each week are due before that week’s session of the seminar (submitted to me by email); you may not submit response papers on the week(s) that you are giving a presentation in seminar, and late response papers won’t be accepted. These papers should be 1000–1250 words in length (around 3–4 pages) and closely tied to one or two (not all!) of the week’s readings. They should use these readings to identify an non-obvious question about the meaning of a text, its theoretical implications, and/or its political significance, explain the larger ramifications of this question, and either propose a possible answer or at least indicate how you would go about answering the question (what other subsidiary questions would you pose? what else would you investigate or read?). These response papers will be graded “plus,” “check,” or “minus”; your lowest-scoring response paper will not count toward your final grade. You are welcome to test out ideas for your response papers in the Slack workspace, and to draw on your own prose from Slack discussions; if you do so, however, be careful not to use others’ words, or ideas that you encountered in someone else’s post, without attribution. If people make use of the collaborative possibilities of Slack to develop ideas, there may be substantive convergence among different students’ response papers; this is fine, as long as you give due credit; but you must still present your own version of the ideas in your own words!

FINAL EXAM:

There will be a 72-hour, open-book, take-home final exam at the end of the semester. Timing is TBA and will be determined based on student preferences; but it must take place some time between 5pm on December 11 and 5pm on December 21. This exam will require you to write three essays that deal synthetically with multiple texts, theorists, and/or concepts from the seminar. It will be similar in form to the Government Department’s Q exam in political thought.

GRADES:

Final exam: 50%
Response papers: 25%
Oral presentation(s): 10%
Seminar participation: 10% (including participation in the Slack workspace if you so choose)
Contributions to the syllabus and bibliography: 5%

OFFICE HOURS:

I’ll hold regular office hours on Zoom on Tuesdays from 3:30–5pm, starting week 2 (and will send a link to members of the seminar after the first session on September 4. These will be “drop-in” to start (with a waiting room); I may switch to an appointment system if these become crowded. I’m also happy to meet online at other times if you can’t make these office hours.

SEMIFINAL WEEK (WEEK 12):

For the Fall of 2020, Cornell has instituted a “semifinal week” prior to Thanksgiving, at the point at which some courses will be switching from in-person to online. We will not be having a semifinal in this class; nevertheless, we are not supposed to conduct instruction during semifinal week. If we are granted an exemption from this policy, we might have class that week after all; or we might have a makeup session at another time, or I might hold voluntary office hours in which students who wish to discuss that week’s material can do so. Whatever happens, students who have semifinals in other classes will not be required to do anything for this class during semifinal week other than keep up with the reading.
WEEKLY READING ASSIGNMENTS:

Week 1 (Sept. 4): Introduction (no assigned reading)

Week 2 (Sept. 11): Aristotle, I: Citizenship, slavery, and the polis


Week 3 (Sept. 18): Aristotle, II: Constitutions and change

1. Aristotle, Politics, books III.6–18, IV–VI.

Week 4 (Sept. 25). Aristotle, III: Utopias, ideals, prayers

1. Aristotle, Politics, books II, VII-VIII.
Week 5 (Oct. 2). Hobbes, I: The state of nature


Week 6 (Oct. 9). Hobbes, II: The sovereign and the commonwealth


Week 7 (Oct. 16). Hobbes, III: The kingdoms of God and of Darkness

1. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, books III–IV (selections): chaps. 41(3–5); 42 (4–11); 43, (1–3, 11, 22–24); 46 (32, 35–36); 47 (all); 47 (Latin version, 28–29); Review and Conclusion.
2. Other readings TBD.

Week 8 (Oct. 23). Rousseau, I: Nature, artifice, and (in)equality

1. Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men,” in *Major Political Writings*, including notes VI, IX, X, XV, XVI.
Week 9 (Oct. 30). Rousseau, II: The social contract

6. Jason Frank, “Rousseau’s Silent Assemblies,” MS.

Week 10 (Nov. 6). Rousseau, III: Law and government

2. Other readings TBD.

Week 11 (Nov. 13). Marx, I: Critique


Week 12 (Nov. 20). Marx, II: Capitalism, labor, and and expropriation

*** Reminder: this is “semi-final” week; see above for information about how we will handle discussion of this material. ***

1. Marx, Capital, vol. 1, chaps. 1, 4–6, 26–27, 31–33. (If you don’t have access to the Fowkes translation, published by Vintage, you can read the Moore/Aveling version at marxists.org.)

Week 13 (Nov. 27). NO CLASS; Thanksgiving break
Week 14 (Dec. 4). Marx, III: Politics and revolution

3. Other readings TBD.

Week 15 (Dec. 11): “Let’s begin at the beginning....”

1. Jacques Rancière, Disagreement (all).

But wait, there’s more!

SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS ON CANONICITY:

These readings in political theory and adjacent fields, including history and literary studies, reflect more or less explicitly on what it means to call a text “canonical,” on why and how political theorists (and others) read “canonical” texts, and on the political, social, and institutional conditions and consequences of canon-formation. These are not required for any particular week in the seminar, but you should read some or all of them over the course of the term.

AN ACCIDENTAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FURTHER READING:

This bibliography includes students’ “side-dish” recommendations from weeks 4, 7, 10, and 14 that did not make it onto the main syllabus; items that happened to have been mentioned in our Slack conversations; and a some supplementary suggestions of my own, including both recent scholarship that speaks to issues we’ve discussed, and a small handful of works that I’ve found particularly useful or stimulating in my own readings of these theorists. I’ve included links for journal articles here when I can, but not for books or book chapters.

I. Aristotle

Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.*

II. Hobbes

III. Rousseau

IV. Marx

V. Miscellaneous

Graeber, David. *Debt: The First 5000 Years.*

Green, Toby. *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution.*