Introduction to Political Theory

Political theory is the study of how we ought to organize the forces that shape our lives. Among the most immediate and controversial of these forces is government. What is a government? Why should (or shouldn’t) we have one? How should it be organized? When does it become illegitimate?

Of course, government is a classic topic (for many fields) and these are classic questions. But! We theorists are an ambitious bunch and we’ve made sure our field has broader horizons. This course will therefore consider the whats, whys, and hows of the economy, culture, ecology, race, gender, spirituality, education, and most everything else that forms our social and political experience.

Our project this semester will be to get to know the field of political theory in all its sprawling, weird, fun, challenging vastness. This will involve both historical and contemporary components. The first third of the course will engage the tradition of political theory and philosophy, the second will engage some tensions between basic concepts as they have evolved from this tradition, and the final third will consider a number of pressing topics in contemporary politics. In this way we will lay a historical groundwork that can help us critically engage the core political questions we face in our own lives.

I hope that we can read and discuss each of our course materials in three unique (but connected) ways. First, these texts arise from, and shape, history. In reading them, we will consider the way theorists’ works arise from their context while also generating new contexts for subsequent scholars and political practitioners. Second, these texts contain challenging and provocative arguments in which writers are often telling us how we ought to live. We need to be able to understand and address their (perhaps presumptuous) claims if we want to understand and defend our own politics. Finally, these texts are often beautiful in their own funny ways. I love political theory, not just for the history and arguments, but also because the texts are often well-written, charming, and weird. We’ll talk more about this threefold attention to history, argument, and beauty soon.

Required Texts
All of this course’s readings will be made available to you electronically, either in the form of .pdf documents posted on the course’s webpage or as journal articles accessible through the library website. From time to time you will be responsible for locating these articles on your own. I realize this is a bit of a pain but I promise that it’s a good skill to practice!

We are going to try two risky things this semester. First, you will be allowed to bring readings to class on your laptop, iPad, Kindle, or whatever other electronic device you prefer. We all have to learn how to participate in a discussion with a glowing screen in front of us. That’s just the world we live in. That said, I reserve the right to shift us back to the printed word if this proves too distracting (if you are having problems with other students surfing the internet during class, slip an anonymous note under my office door and I’ll issue a warning). Second, we will have less reading than comparable courses (generally around 20 pages/day, opposed to the typical theory seminar load of
40 pages/day). You should know that this is a trap: the reduction in pages corresponds to higher standards for reading comprehension. Take your time with the pages assigned!

**Classroom Expectations**
A good classroom environment takes work from everyone. This is particularly important in a discussion-based class in which everyone will be expected to participate on a weekly basis. Those of us who tend to speak up more than others may need to consciously step back and allow other people a chance to contribute. Those of us who tend to be more reserved or hesitant may need to make efforts to share our thoughts in order to do our part in the classroom. Every respectful voice helps us all learn more, and I will expect you to behave accordingly.

In order to establish a good classroom environment, I hope to observe a few guidelines:

- Come to every class. I’m not going to be a fastidious attendance taker but it’s going to help everyone’s comprehension (and your final grade!) to have you there and engaged.
- Bring all assigned materials to every class.
- We will start with the assumption that we will raise hands before we speak in class. If this does not feel necessary, we can reassess.
- If you’re likely to get sleepy in class, bring whatever provisions you need to stay engaged.

**Assignments and Assessments**
Your final grade for the course will be calculated based on five assessments:

1. Presentation – 15%
2. Micro-essays – 15%
3. Midterm exam – 25%
4. 8-10 page final essay – 25%
5. Discussion participation and attendance – 20%

**Presentations**
Every student will be responsible for an in-class presentation during the “topics” section of the course. Presentations should aim to:

1. Offer a (brief) summary and (longer) critical interpretation of one reading, focusing on issues that are significant in the larger context of the course.
2. Present two or three questions for class discussion.
3. Do this in less than ten minutes (really, it’s pretty low-key).

**Micro-essays**
Fifteen times over the course of the semester, I’ll ask you to write an in-class micro-essay. These essays should fit on the front and back of one index card (I’ll bring the index cards). My goal is not to “catch” you for failing to comprehend the readings. Instead, I hope to provoke you to critically engage a key topic from the readings and pose questions to me about our discussions.

The essays will be graded on a generous pass/fail basis. Basically, if you show up having done the readings, can fill up an index card, and repeat this fifteen times, you’ll ace this section of the course. Think of it as a free A for 15% of your grade just for showing up and having something to say.
Class Schedule
Note: this schedule is liable to change a little bit over the course of the semester. In practice, this really means I’m likely to cut some articles and selections, particularly later in the semester. I wanted to warn you about this at the outset. If a change happens in the syllabus, I'll pass word along both in class and through email.

August 26 – Introduction to the Course
• Syllabus

August 28 – Framing the Course
• Ruth W. Grant, “Political Theory, Political Science, and Politics.”
• Niccolo Machiavelli, “Letter to Vittori.”

August 31 – Plato
• “Crito.”

September 2 – Plato
• Republic, Book 1.

September 4 – Plato
• Republic, Book 2.

September 7 – Plato
• Republic, Book 4, 8.

September 9 – Aristotle
• Politics, Book 1.

September 11 – Aristotle
• Politics, Book 2-3.

September 14 – The Old Testament
• Genesis, Book 1-4, 6-9, 11, 18, 19.
• Exodus, Book 18.
• Deuteronomy, Books 16-17.
• Exodus, Books 20-23.

September 16 – Luther and the Reformation

September 18 – Thomas Hobbes
• Leviathan, Author’s Introduction
• Ibid. Chapters 10-13.

September 21 – Thomas Hobbes
• Leviathan, Chapters 14-18.
September 23 – Thomas Hobbes
• *Leviathan*, Chapters 19-21, 26, 29, 30

September 25 – John Locke
• *Second Treatise on Government*, Chapter 1
• Ibid. Chapter 2, paragraph 4-8, 13-end.

September 28 – John Locke
• *Second Treatise on Government*, Chapters 3-5.
• Ibid., Chapter 8, sections 95-104.

September 30 – John Locke
• *Second Treatise on Government*, Chapter 6, paragraph 57.
• Ibid. Chapter 7, paragraph 77, 85-90.
• Ibid. Chapter 8, 95-99, 119-122.
• Ibid. Chapter 9.
• Ibid. Chapter 10, paragraph 132.
• Ibid. Chapter 11, paragraph 134-140.
• Ibid. Chapter 12, paragraph 143-144.
• Ibid. Chapter 13, paragraph 149-150, 155.

October 2 – John Locke
• *Second Treatise on Government*, Chapter 15, paragraph 169-171.
• Ibid. Chapter 18, paragraph 199, 201-204, 207-210.

October 5 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau
• *Discourse on Inequality*, part 1.

October 7 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau
• *Discourse on Inequality*, part 2.

October 9 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau
• *Social Contract*, Book 1, chapter 1-3, 4, 6-8.

October 12 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau
• *Social Contract*, Book 1, chapter 7.
• Ibid. Book 2, chapter 1, 3-4, 6-7.
• Ibid. Book 4, chapter 1-2.

October 14 – John Stewart Mill
• *On Liberty*, epigraph from Von Humboldt and p. 5-18.

October 16 – MIDTERM
• IN CLASS MIDTERM!
October 19 – BREAK

October 21 – BREAK

October 23 – BREAK

October 26 – Socialism v. Liberalism
• Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” p. 66, 70-78.

October 28 – Socialism v. Liberalism
• Fredrick Engels, “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific.”

October 30 – Socialism v. Liberalism

November 2 – Leadership v. Democracy
• James Madison, et. al., Federalist Papers #9, 10, 51, 78.
• Brutus, Anti-federalist Papers, Brutus #1.

November 4 – Leadership v. Democracy
• Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 77-95, 115-128.

November 6 – Liberalism v. Democracy
• Robert Nozick, Anarchy, the State, and Utopia (selections forthcoming).

November 9 – Liberalism v. Democracy
• Jürgen Habermas, “Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?”

November 11 – Democrats v. Democracy
• Jacques Rancière, “10 Theses on Politics,” Theory & Event 5:3 (2001), 1-10

November 13 – Democrats v. Democracy
• Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community.”

November 16 – Feminism
• Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (selections forthcoming).
• Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex; “Introduction.”

November 18 – Feminism
• Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl.”

November 20 – Race in America

November 23 – Race in America
• Frantz Fanon, Black Skin/White Masks (selections forthcoming).
• Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet* (selections forthcoming).

November 25 – THANKSGIVING!

November 27 – THANKSGIVING!

November 30 – Environmentalism
• Robyn Eckersley, “Green Politics: A Practice in Search of a Theory?”

December 2 – Environmentalism
• William Cronon, “In Search of Wilderness.”

December 4 – Rebellion
• Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”
• John Brown, “Explanation of His Raid, 1859.”

December 7 – Rebellion

December 9 – Conservatism
• Russell Kirk, “Ten Principles of Conservatism.”

December 11 – Conservatism
• U.S. House of Representatives Republicans, “The Republican Contract with America.”

December 18 – FINAL PAPERS DUE AT 5:00 PM