

## Introduction to Political Theory

### Course Overview:

Who should rule? How free should humans be? What kind of freedom is worth having? How should we organize our political life? What is a 'state'? What limits should be placed on our actions? Who should be included as a member of the political community? What rights can we claim and against whom?

These are some of the central questions of political theory. This course will explore possible answers through an introduction and selective survey of some canonical political theorists, including Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Marx, and Du Bois. We will pay attention to the crises to which these authors responded, such as the advent of industrial capitalism and the persistence of white supremacy long after the legal end of slavery in the United States. Although we examine historical texts, our attention is always We will approach these texts as vehicles to explore philosophical, conceptual, and political problems that we face today. This is an introductory with no prerequisites or expected knowledge of political theory.

### Learning goals

This course offers students a chance to gain several kinds of understanding. At the most basic level, students will learn about a variety of interesting and influential ideas, largely drawn from the Mediterranean, Europe, and North America. In that sense it is an introductory course to what is known as "Western Political Thought." However, students will also gain an understanding of how theory "works." In this sense, it is a course in examining and criticizing systematic moral thinking. By reading these texts, students will learn how the theorists expressed ideas and tried to persuade readers to see and interpret their world differently. This will help them evaluate the cogency of arguments, examine assumptions, and what facts about the world the authors might distort in order to achieve their ends. Collectively, this work will help students become more curious, active, and judicious participants in politics, both within and beyond the college setting.

### Readings:

The texts are rich and diverse. They will require reading with a close eye and will often need to be reread to understand the author's meaning. Please complete all of the readings before the session for which they are assigned, and arrive to class having thought through the material, with questions and comments ready. Always bring the assigned text to class, as our discussions will be directed rooted in passages.

I will include suggested supplemental readings for each of our texts. These are meant to offer a peek into how scholars have interpreted, criticized and appropriated these ideas over time. Political theory is a living and evolving discipline, which has always reinterpreted its own past.

### Grading Policy

Assessment will be based on the following system. See accompanying notes for elaboration.

Participation and Attendance:	15%
Response Papers:	20% (5 papers total)
Argument Reconstruction	5%
First Essay:	30%
Second Essay:	30%

### *Participation & Attendance*

Attendance and participation are mandatory. Students who miss class without instructor permission should expect to have their grade lowered. Repeated unexcused absences will result in a failing grade or a withdrawal from the class. If you are unable to come to class **tell me ahead of time** ([bwm2114@columbia.edu](mailto:bwm2114@columbia.edu)).

This class is focused first and foremost on developing the skills to critically engage with diverse ideas and present clear arguments. These are skills to be developed in both writing and oral presentation. A significant part of your grade therefore depends on your willingness to discuss texts openly in class with peers and the instructor. Students who feel unable to participate in class discussion should discuss this with the instructor in office hours.

### *Response Papers*

All students must complete **five** response papers throughout the term. Each paper will be 1-2 pages total, demonstrating an engaged and thoughtful reading of the text. The paper may reflect on the reading as a whole, or offer a close analysis of a particular passage, idea, or argument.

### *Argument Reconstruction*

This is a class about learning how to think critically, and clear thought is demonstrated by clear prose. Your first short assignment should be no more than 1 page and should reconstruct conceptually the main argument of the relevant books, choosing a significant short passage and paraphrasing, then contextualizing the passage and summarizing the section of the text in which it appears. This exercise would be helpful for you to continue on your own for all the subsequent readings, but I require and will collect only one.

### *Essays*

All students are required to complete two essays. Each essay should be approximately **1500-2000 words**, or **6-7 pages**. They should be written in Times New Roman font, size 12, double spaced, and paginated.

For each essay you will have several prompts/topics to choose from. The purpose of these essays is to allow you to delve deeper into the texts than you are able to in class. In doing so, you are expected to demonstrate a sustained written argument. Do not waste space with unnecessary quotations or summaries of the texts. Instead, you should use every word to respond directly to the prompt and present a clear and forceful argument. Essays should be **proofread** for errors, and edited for clarity, succinctness, and a demonstrated grasp complex social and political problems. Essays should not incorporate any research beyond the assigned readings.

In general, essays will be graded for whether they (a) respond adequately to the prompt; (b) fairly engages with the text and does not grossly (or intentionally) misinterpret; (c) provides a clear and lucid argument; (d) are well they are written and organized.

Before each essay is due, there will be an opportunity to discuss a draft of the paper in one-on-one meetings during office hours. This is an opportunity to discuss an argument you want to make, but not a full editing session on a written draft. I will look at a thesis statement and an outline.

### *Late Assignments*

I have a standard extension policy for all my papers. I allow students to turn in assignments late with a one-level deduction per 24 hours (e.g., B+ to B if turned in the first 24 hours after the deadline). For the second 24 hours, the penalty increases by another deduction (e.g., B+ to B- if

turned in 24 to 48 hours after the original deadline). It is always better to get a paper in on time than to wait to try to improve it, but for a lower grade.

**Class Schedule:** (based on a 14-week semester)

**Week 1: What is political theory?**

Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation"

Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation"

Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political"

**Week 2: Politics, Philosophy, and 'Soulcraft'**

Plato, *Republic*, Books I, VII

**Week 3: Democratic Foundations**

Aristotle, *Politics*, Books I, III.1-5

Pericles, "Funeral Oration"

**Week 4: What is human nature, really? (Hobbes 1)**

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 1-21

**Week 5: What is the state *for*? (Hobbes II)**

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 18-22, Ch. 26-30

**Week 6: Private Property & Political Society**

John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government* (selections)

**Week 7: Self-Alienation in Modern Society (Rousseau I)**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*

**Week 8: Classical Freedom for Modern Society (Rousseau II)**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Social Contract"

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (excerpts)

**Week 10: Social Contract and Exclusion**

Carol Pateman, "The Fraternal Social Contract"

Charles Mills, "Race and the Social Contract Tradition"

**Week 11: The Individual in Society**

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (excerpts)

Harriet Taylor Mill, "The Enfranchisement of Women"

**Week 12: What's Emancipation Worth?**

Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (excerpts)

**Week 13: Emancipation and Double Consciousness Du Bois**

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (excerpts), "The Souls of White Folk"

**Week 14: Looking back: The (in)adequacies of the "canon"**

George Kateb, "The Adequacy of the Canon," *Political Theory* (2002)

Wendy Brown, "At the Edge," *Political Theory* (2002)

Linda Zerilli, "Feminist Theory and the Canon of Political Thought," *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*

Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History," *Cultural Studies* (1992)