This course will introduce you to some of the major books of political theory and some of the major problems of politics these books address. The goal of the course is to teach you how to read some of these famous texts, and more significantly, how to think through and argue about some of the central questions of politics. This course is going to focus on one of these central questions: what is justice and what is the role of politics in realizing it? While this question may seem abstract, it is central to a variety of contemporary political debates. Here are a few of them:

1. **Justice and Political Power**: Are appeals to justice merely a cover for political power? Does every ruling group simply invoke principles of justice to justify its use of political power to further its own interests? *What is a just distribution of political power and decision-making? Who should rule in a just society—qualified elites, ordinary citizens, morally superior guardians?*

2. **Justice and Unequal Political Resources**: If democracy assumes all citizens are equal with regard to civil and political liberty defined as the opportunity to influence fundamental political decisions, *what is the just way to distribute political resources (money, wealth, political power, and political knowledge) to make sure that political liberty is enjoyed equally? Under what circumstances if any can one argue that inequalities of political liberty are just? Is authoritarian rule or rule of superior guardians just?*

3. **Justice and Luck**: We know that many people have advantages over others in gaining jobs, income, wealth, and influence on political decisions simply because they had the good luck to be born into the right family, with the right skills, in the right neighborhood, with sufficient resources, and at a moment when they possess abilities and resources they did not produce were in demand. *Is it just that a political society should reward people with such lucky advantages at the cost of citizens without them? Should political institutions intervene to offset unearned advantages?*

4. **Justice and Property**: What is a just distribution of property? Specifically how much inequality or equality of property is compatible with justice? What is the answer if justice means treating each human being of equal worth? What is the answer if justice means rewarding each according to his/her unequal abilities?

5. **Justice and the Market**: Proponents of the market claim that the market distributes resources, goods and incomes according to the principle that if each person pursues his/her self-interest, the outcome will be “fair” and just. However, we can ask, *is the market a form of just distribution or are there principles of justice that deny this claim?*
6. **Justice and Public Goods:** What is the relation of justice to the provision of public goods, that is, goods which we enjoy equally such as education, health care, pensions, environmental regulation, financial regulation, parks, libraries, and security? *Is a just political society required to provide such goods or not?*

These are some of the questions we will debate in this course. As part of this debate, we will be reading a number of major political thinkers who have addressed the question of justice its meaning for understanding different areas of political life—among them Plato, Rousseau, Paine, Marx, and Rawls. Each thinker will have a different answer to the questions above. *It is your job to try to figure out who is right and why.*

**Course Objectives:**
1. Refine your capacity to analyze political concepts for their meaning and political arguments for coherence on fundamental questions of politics.
2. Learn to interpret political theory texts—their strategy of argument, style, and levels of meaning.
3. Learn to understand differences between older political arguments and present ones.
4. Learn how abstract political arguments apply to day-to-day politics.
5. Learn to focus on those arguments that hold a political theory together, the assumptions about human motivation that political thinkers make, how the logic of a political argument can lead to unexpected conclusions and when a political argument is contradictory and when it is merely paradoxical.

**Required Books**
Plato, *The Republic* (Hackett) trans. by Grube and Reeve  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)  

**Additional Readings on Blackboard** (the password: pos103)
A selection from John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*  
A short section on property from John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*  
A short piece by Thomas Paine, *Agrarian Justice*  
Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (chs. 1, 2)

**Course Outline** (*means you should read with extra care.*)

**I. Introduction to the course and to political theory** (August 30th)—no class September 1st.

**II. Justice and Guardianship: Plato’s Soul Based Theory of Justice**

Does justice require rule by those who by nature have superior character and insight? What is a just distribution of political and social goods? What should be politically distributed? What should not? Do we “deserve” the benefits of our natural and social endowments?

-Sept 6, Plato, *The Republic:* Justice as Identity of Polity and Properly Ordered Soul
Book I and Book II until (par 363). (Ordinary concepts of justice—equality vs inequality: paying debts; practicing honesty; helping friends and harming enemies; right of the stronger; power vs. right. What does it mean to rule well? The story of the Gyges Ring—will we act unjustly if given the chance?)

-September 8, Rest of Book II (Understanding justice as building the most perfect polis in theory. Polities as forms of education to justice. Political education and the need for fictions. Creating a stratified polity according to function)

-Sept 13, Book III (Completing the education of the guardians and selecting rulers)

-Sept 15, Books IV* (A new definition of justice. Isomorphism of just city/polis and just soul—inseparability of just human being and just city. Inequality in soul reflected in inequality in political rule.)

-Sept 20, Book V (The completion of the kallipolis: communal ownership, the rule of philosophers based on the differences in genuine “knowledge” vs. “opinion” or “belief”. The superiority of theory over practice.)

-Sept 22, Book VI* (Justice as knowledge of the good and why only philosophers have access to it. (Knowledge of forms vs. knowledge of appearances.)

-Sept 27, Book VII* (The double meaning of the allegory of the cave—political and philosophic. Is dialectic the only way to grasp justice? If justice can only be understood by philosophy can justice be “political”?)

-Sept 29 Book VIII (552d-566d) (Plato’s criticism of politics: How does oligarchy lead to democracy and democracy to tyranny? Is democratic justice as equal political membership defensible? Is democracy unjust?)

Oct 4, no class.

Essay on Plato on Justice due in section October, 7th.

IV. Democratic Justice: Rousseau, The Social Contract and Equalizing Political Liberty

Is Plato wrong in claiming democracy is unjust? Does popular sovereignty (rule of the people) require the equal enjoyment of full citizenship through participation in fundamental decisions affecting common life? If justice is modeled on political equality, how should we distribute power and wealth? Why does liberty as unrestrained pursuit of private interest lead to injustice? Is private liberty compatible with political liberty? What does the realization of political equality require under modern conditions of politics—the 1/n problem? If justice depends on the identity of rulers and ruled, how should we organize the government so that it does not become unjust?

Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Social Contract
-Oct 6, Social Contract  Book I
-Oct 11, Social Contract Book II** Read very carefully.
V. Politics, Property and Justice I: Is ownership of private property just, or is it the source the source of all social and political injustice? Locke, Rousseau, and Paine.


- Oct 27, Nov 1. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* Part II (A hypothetical history of the origins of social and political inequality. Private property as origin of injustice. The political contract as deception–inequality of property and power in the modern state as the height of injustice. How should we restore justice if we are all morally equal?)


Nov 8, Midterm Exam on Locke, Rousseau, and Paine and economic justice.

VI. Politics, property and justice II: Capitalism, Class Inequality and Freedom in Marx. Is capitalism unjust or is justice irrelevant for understanding capitalism? What would equality of property mean for individual and social liberty?

Karl Marx. The denaturing of property through history: Capital as class conflict. Capital as Exploitation. Capital as prelude to communal ownership.


- Nov 17. Finish up Marx.

VII. Modern Concepts of Justice, and Equality

- Nov 22. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* The Two Principles of Justice. sec 1-4, 11 (on Blackboard) (the problem of justice–dealing with deep inequalities; the two principles of a just political society; the original position and the social contract). Why is it that deep inequalities in our life chances “cannot possibly be justified by an appeal to the notions of merit and desert” (TJ, p. 7)?

- Nov 29, Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*: sec 17, 36 (a democratic concept of justice; justice and the fair value of political liberty). (on Blackboard)

Nov 30 (Wednesday) paper on Marx (5-6 pages) due in HUB16 by 3pm!

VIII. Justice and the Claims of Market Liberty. Are markets just?

- Dec 1, Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, chs. 1-2 (on Blackboard)


**Final exam** on Thursday, Dec 11th: 10:30am -12:30pm LC 18.

**Assignments and Course Obligations:**

1) You will have **two short essays** (of approximately 5-6 pages). The first will be on Plato’s argument for why only a polity derived from philosophy and based on guardianship can be just. It will be due in section on Friday **October 7**. The second paper will be on Marx and justice that will be due in HUB16 on Wednesday **November 30**. Topics will be handed out at least a week before the papers are due.

2) Every week or occasionally every two weeks, you will be asked to write a very short two paragraph essay on a political theory puzzle. The puzzle will be assigned on Tuesdays in class, and you will bring in your typed answer on Thursday. We will discuss the puzzle in class and at end of class you will hand your short essay to your teaching assistant. **Puzzles will typically ask you to apply some aspect of the political theory under discussion to a contemporary problem.** They will be considered very much as thought pieces. The puzzles will be graded **not on the basis of whether you had a right or wrong answer (often many answers are possible), but instead on your effort in thinking through the problem.** If you demonstrate you have given the question genuine thought, you will do well. Treat the question with indifference and you will do poorly. The puzzles will also help us to assess your writing skills early, and allow your TA to help you with your writing. **You will be allowed to skip one puzzle during the semester. But if you miss more than one, it will affect your overall grade.**

3) There will be an **in-class exam on Rousseau and Paine’s arguments for why equality of citizenship leads to egalitarian justice with regard to property and income on Nov 8.**

4) There will be a **final exam on Thursday, Dec 19th: 1-3pm in LC 19** This exam will focus on Rawls’s theory of justice and the problem of justice and the market.

5) **You are expected to attend every class and every section. If you are absent from section more than two times without a legitimate excuse, your grade will fall by a half. Two more, it will fall by a half again and so on. You cannot pass the class if you do not attend sections.**

6) You should bring the books or reading to class. I will often refer to passages in these books, and you will be clueless without the books in hand.

**Grading:**

Grading will be as follows:

The two papers will each count 20% of your grade for a total of 40%

The midterm: 20%,

The final: 20%.

Section grade and puzzles will count 20%

Grading will take improvement into account. But note: 20% of your grade will be based on section participation and puzzles.
**Plagiarism**
Plagiarism means to pass off someone else’s work as your own. **Please be warned that should I find you have plagiarized, you will receive an immediate E in the course and further actions will be taken, including sending your case before a university committee. You should also be warned that taking text off internet sites such as Sparknotes or Wikipedia will also earn you an E along with further actions. It is your job to demonstrate to us that you have worked out your essays from the texts at hand through clear arguments and proper citations. It is not our job to demonstrate you haven’t!**

**Office Hours:**
My office hours will be Tu Th 1:15-2:15 in HUB16. If you alert me, I can meet the hour before our class: at 10:45am. I am also happy to meet with you in my downtown office Milne 204 on Wednesday afternoons 2-3:30 if you alert me in advance. I am happy to answer your questions and comments through e-mail: pbreiner@albany.edu

**Teaching Assistants**
The teaching assistants for this course are Nels Frantzen, nfrantzen@albany.edu, and Nathaniel Williams, ncwilliams@albany.edu . You should feel free to see them in their office hours, talk to them after class, or write them e-mails. They will be happy to discuss the class material with you as well as help you with any problems you are having with the class. **Since this is a class that deals with the “big” questions of politics you should not feel any hesitation in engaging either the TAs or me in dialogue on the course material**

**Blackboard:**
As mentioned above, a number of the readings are on Blackboard. Find our course, RPOS 103, Introduction to Political Theory, and then click on it. Here you will find a subdirectory with readings for the course. These directories contain not just the additional readings but also a sheet on how to write political theory papers, the syllabus, and occasionally lecture outlines. You must download and print off the readings on e-reserve, for you will be expected to bring them to section and lecture. Reading them on line will simply not do!