POS 103, Introduction to Political Theory  
Peter Breiner

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—among them the meaning of political justice, equality, democracy, political economy, power, and political responsibility.

At this point you are probably asking yourself two questions: first, what is political theory and second, why do you have to study it as part of political science? The first part of this question does not have a simple answer. While most political theorists agree that political theory involves making sense of the meaning of and relations among such concepts like justice, equality, power, freedom, citizenship, and political accountability, they often disagree on what we should do with these concepts. Some argue political theory is the study of those political concepts and ideas so as to tell us something about the way the political world should be—a just political order, a genuinely democratic community, a fair distribution of property, the moral duties of political actors. For those who hold this position, a political theorist can make us aware of the meaning and coherence of our political concepts—of, say, the relation of justice to equality or political freedom to political power—and in this way teach us to criticize a given political “reality” for its deficiencies. Others argue political theory can do more than that. It can test our concepts of what the political world should be against the empirical reality of politics itself. And it can tell us whether we have overlooked certain desirable possibilities or alternatively whether we have asked more of political reality than it will allow. For example according to this view political theory can reveal opportunities for more citizen participation or fairer distribution of political resources; or it can tell us that the desire to import our own constitution to other countries that understand politics differently may prove self-defeating. Finally, some political theorists argue that political ideas and concepts have the potential to change the very understanding that ordinary political actors have of social and political institutions. According to this view, political theory can potentially change political reality itself—by designing new political orders, demonstrating to us the need for political changes, makes us more effective political actors. We will see this aim in such different theorists as Plato, Machiavelli, and Marx. In this course we will study political theory from all of these points of view, and it will be up to you to come up with a well-thought idea of the relation of political thinking to political reality.

As for the second part of the question, the relation of political theory to political science, we will discover in this course that political science—the study of the ways political actors, institutions, and political communities engage with each other—cannot escape political theory questions. One very simple reason for this is that the concepts of political theory are used by political actors themselves. People rebel because of injustice; political actors defend or decry inequality in the distribution of goods, both political and economic; we are constantly trying to figure out ways to hold political actors accountable for their misdeeds, and they in turn are relentlessly trying to escape such accountability. A more complicated reason is that even when political scientists claim they are merely studying the ways politics works and not how it should work, the very concepts political theorists use are part of—indeed constitutive of—the political reality they are studying. For example, some political scientists claim not to be the studying
different ways freedom is realized in politics because freedom cannot be measured; but they do study the way power and domination are used so that political actors can get their way. But if political actors use forms of domination such as political parties, bureaucracies, and the state to get their way, they are most surely exercising a kind of freedom for themselves that is only possible because of the fact that others are being dominated. If power is a “fact” about politics so is freedom. Similarly, when ordinary citizens feel that power is being used “unfairly,” they are assuming that their own membership in a political community depends on a proper understanding of justice. Thus the questions of political theory are all over the things political scientists study, even if political scientists don’t always make this clear. In short, political theory is political science by other means. I hope you will see this by the end of the course.

**Required Books**
Plato *The Republic* (Hackett) trans. by Grube and Reeve
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)
John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Hackett)
Robert Dahl, *On Political Equality* (Yale)
Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Chicago)

**Additional Readings on E-Reserve** (the password: pos103)
John Rawls, Selections from *A Theory of Justice*
Joseph Schumpeter, “Another Theory of Democracy” from *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*

**Course Outline**
I. Introduction to the course and to political theory (August 31st)

II. Thinking about justice and equality

Does justice require rule by those who by nature have superior character and insight or is social and political inequality “unnatural”? 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 and what should justice look like if the answer is no? What should justice look like if the answer is yes?

a. Plato, *The Republic*
Sept. 2, Book I (Ordinary concepts of justice: paying debts; helping friends and harming enemies; right of the stronger; power vs. right—what does it mean to rule well?)
Sept. 4, No class.
Sept. 9, End of Book I and Book II (Understanding justice as building most perfect polis in theory. Polities as forms of education. Political education and the need for fictions)
Sept. 11, Book III (Completing the education of the guardians and selecting rulers)
Sept. 14, Book IV* (A new definition of justice. A new definition of happiness.)
Sept. 16, Book IV* (Isomorphism of just city/polis and just soul—inseparability of just human being and just city)
Sept. 18, Book V (The completion of the kallipolis: communal ownership, the rule of
philosophers, and the differences in genuine knowledge vs. opinion) (The superiority of theory to practice).

Sept. 21, Book VI* (Justice as knowledge of the good and why only philosophers have access to it. Knowledge of forms vs. knowledge of appearances.).

Sept. 23, 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. 25, Book VII-VIII (Summing up: If justice requires the polity replicate the soul is justice as equal political membership indefensible?)

Sept. 28, No class.

September 30 First Essay on Plato and Justice due in class.

b. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program” in The Marx-Engels Reader. Justice as each according to ability to each according to need. Injustice as exploitation.

Sept. 30, pp. 525-541.


Oct. 5, 7, 9 (the problem of justice—dealing with deep inequalities; the original position and the social contract; the two principles of a just political society; justice and the fair value of political liberty). 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)? How might Plato react to this? How might Marx?

II. Thinking about democracy

Is democracy merely a means of protection through civil liberties or the enjoyment of full citizenship through participation in fundamental decisions affecting common life? What is the difference between negative vs. positive freedom? Should democracy realize only the former or also the latter? How should we combine equality with freedom? What does the realization of political equality require under modern conditions of politics?

a. Rousseau, Social Contract

Oct. 12, Book I

Oct. 14, Book II*


Oct., 19 (The reconciliation of “democracy” with party competition and elitism.)


Oct. 21, Finish Schumpeter, begin Dahl.chs. 1-3

Oct. 23, Dahl, chs. 4,5.

Oct. 26, Dahl, chs. 6,7.
III. Thinking about the relation of politics and property:

What is property and why do we not own it in common? What is the justification for private property? Why does Locke think private property and equal consent to produce government are compatible? Why does Rousseau think it is not? Why does Rousseau think the Lockean contract was a deception? Why did Marx in *The Manifesto* glorify the achievements of capitalism? Why is capitalist property not natural but merely necessary for a certain historical phases? Why can it be overcome for Marx? Why does Marx’s claim that socialism was an attempt to win the struggle for democracy? How would Marx view Locke’s theory of labor? How would he view Rousseau’s theory of the deceptive social contract?

Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*

Oct 30, chs. 7-9
Nov. 4, ,chs. 10, 11, 13, 19*

Midterm: November 2

b. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*

Nov. 6, Preface and Part I Why can we never discover our natural state? An attack on Locke?
Nov. 9, Part II A hypothetical history of the origins of social and political inequality.
Nov. 11 Part II (last part), The political contract as deception–inequality of property and power in the modern state as the height of injustice. Restoring equality of political membership?


Nov 23, Second essay on Locke, Rousseau and Marx due in class.

IV. Thinking about power

How should we define power? How do we know someone has it? Is political power having the political means of getting others to do what you want despite their resistance; is it the collective energy and activity of people acting together against those with power under the first definition; or is it forms of control that we don’t perceive because they are so intertwined with what we take to be reasonable order? What definition of politics accompanies each definition of power?

a. Nov. 20, Max Weber, selection from “Politics as a Vocation” in *The Vocation Lectures* (32-39, and selection on “Power and Domination” and “Types of Legitimacy” from *Economy and Society* (E-reserve)

Thanksgiving break so no classes Nov, 25-27.

V. Thinking about politics and moral life.

Can political actions accord with moral choices? What necessities in politics force political actors to violate accepted morals? What forces in politics allow them to act in accordance with
morals? Why does Machiavelli argue we must learn “use” good and bad according to necessity and fortune if we want to be “effective” matters of state? Why does he think we cannot avoid using laws, force, and appearances in matters of state?


VI. Summing up:
Dec 7 Last class.

*means you should read with extra care.

**Assignments and Course Obligations:**
First off, you will have two short essays (of approximately 5-6 pages) on some of the classical political thinkers we have read. These essays will be due on the Monday of the week in which they are assigned in class. In the week the paper was handed in you will have the option to rewrite the paper, though *there is no guarantee that your grade will improve*. These optional revisions must be handed in no later than the end of the week in which the paper is handed in. In addition, the teaching assistants will at their discretion assign short 1 page reaction papers to the reading as a way of helping you to clarify your thoughts on a particular topic and generating discussion. These papers will not be graded ABCDE but checked off, though you will be penalized for not turning these papers in.

There will also be an in-class midterm on Monday, Nov 2nd and a final exam on Tuesday, December 14th at 10:30-12:30 in LC2.

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. It will fall by one half for each additional absence.

**Grading:**
Grading will be as follows:
The papers will count 45% of your grade, the midterm and final 45% of the grade and 10% of your grade will consist of discussion section participation and reaction papers. Grading will take improvement into account.

**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.

**Teaching Assistants and Office Hours:**
The teaching assistants for this course are Johannes Morrow (johannesmorrow@gmail.com), Vincent Commisso (vin64eu@gmail.com), and Marcus Schulzke (ms155136@albany.edu). You should feel free to see them in their office hours or talk to them after class. 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 myself or the TA’s in dialog on the course material. You are also welcome to see me at my office hours: MW 11:30 to 12:30 am or the hour before class. I am also happy to meet with you in my downtown office Milne 204 on Monday or Wednesday afternoons or answer your question and comments through e-mail: breiner@albany.edu.

E-Reserve:
As mentioned above, a number of the readings are on E-reserve. E-reserve can be found by going to the SUNY Albany Library site and clicking on e-res. To find our course and then click the password: pos103 (lower case). Here you will find not just the additional readings but also a sheet on how to write political theory papers and the syllabus. 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.