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 what do we mean by justice and equality and how should we distribute political goods; what is the relation of freedom and equality to democracy; what is property and who should own it; what is the difference between political ethics and ordinary morals; and what does it mean to exercise political power? In reading a variety of political theories you will 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.

**Political Theory and Political Science**

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. In general, 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 ethics. But different thinkers differ on what we should do with these concepts. Some argue political theory is fundamentally 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, an account of 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 of distribution or political freedom to political power political equality to democracy. In doing this, they argue, political thinking can 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 than presently provided; 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, or make us more effective political actors. We will see this aim in such very different theorists as Plato, Machiavelli and Marx. In this course we will study political theory from all of these points of view. It will be up to you to come up with a well-thought out 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. And we are constantly trying to figure out ways to hold political actors accountable for their misdeeds or mistakes, 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 often claim it is impossible to study the different ways freedom is realized in politics because freedom cannot be measured; but they then claim it is possible to study the way power and domination are used because we can observe the degree to which 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—maybe not always explicitly—that they know what it means to realize justice in politics. 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.

Course Objectives:

■ Refine capacity to analyze political concepts for their meaning and political arguments for coherence on fundamental questions of politics with special focus on justice, democracy, property, and political ethics.
■ Learn to interpret political theory texts—their strategy of argument, style, and levels of meaning.
■ Learn to understand differences between older political arguments and present ones.
■ Learn how abstract political arguments apply to day to day politics.

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 (*means you should read with extra care.)

I. Introduction to the course and to political theory (August 28th)

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? Is justice identical with the greatest happiness for the greatest number? 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?


August 30, Book I and Book II until (363). (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?; the story of the Gyges Ring.)

September 4, Rest of Book II (Understanding justice as building the most perfect polis in theory. Polities as forms of education. Political education and the need for fictions)

Sept 6, Book III (Completing the education of the guardians and selecting rulers)


Sept 13, 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 20, Book VI* (Justice as knowledge of the good and why only philosophers have access to it. Knowledge of forms vs. knowledge of appearances.)

Sept 25, 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”? 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?)

First Essay on Plato and Justice due in class October. 2nd.

b. Justice as Fairness: John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (E-reserve) (the problem of justice–dealing with deep inequalities; the two principles of a just political society; the original position and the social contract; 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 Socrates react to this? How might Thrasymachus? Why would Rawls reject both of their arguments?

Sept. 27, The Two Principles of Justice. Chs 1-3, 11*,
Oct 4, chs. 4, 20, 24, 26 the Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance.
Oct 9, ch. 36. Justice and Political Liberty. Criticisms of Rawls?

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? Why is the pursuit of private interest a threat to political freedom? Is private liberty compatible with political liberty? How should we combine equality with freedom? What does the realization of political equality require under modern conditions of politics—the 1/n problem?

a. Rousseau, Social Contract
Oct 11, Book I
Oct 16, Book II*
Oct 18, Book III, chs. 1, 13-15, 18, Book IV, ch 1*.

Friday, October 19th, Paper on Rawls due in sections.

b. The attempt to reconcile “democracy” with party competition and elitism.’
c. A synthesis of participatory and elitist democracy? How should we judge modern democracies?
Oct 25, chs. 1-3.
Oct, 30, chs. 5-7.

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?

a. Locke, Second Treatise of Government
Nov 1, chs. 1-5 (read chs 2, 3, 5* very carefully, especially ch. 5) (Property as self-ownership, property as labor. Is there a natural right to property?)
Nov 8, chs. 7-10, 13, 19* rec. ch 11 (the contract to produce government–life, liberty, and property.)

November 6, Midterm Exam on Theories of Democracy (Rousseau, Schumpeter, Dahl)
b. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*
Nov. 13, Preface and Part I. Why we can never discover our natural state? *Amour de soi* vs *amour propre.*
Nov. 15, Part II (A hypothetical history of the origins of social and political inequality. The political contract as deception—inequality of property and power in the modern state as the height of injustice. An attack on Locke? How should we restore equality of political membership?)


IV. 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? Virtù vs. Virtue.

Dec 4, Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (entire)* (Focus on chs 1-12).
Dec 6, Finish *The Prince* (re-read chs. 15-19, 25-26)
Dec 11, Final discussion of Machiavelli. Catching up and Summing Up.
**Final exam** on Wednesday December 19th—8-10 a.m.

**Assignments and Course Obligations:**
1) You will have **two short essays** (of approximately 6 pages) on different theories of justice—the first on Plato, the second on Rawls. **The first essay on Plato and justice will be due in class on Tuesday October 2nd. The second essay on Rawls and justice will be due in sections on October 19th.** Topics will be handed out at least a week before the papers are due.

2) In addition, every other week on Tuesday (to be put on e-reserve), I will suggest a **political theory puzzle or question in class and ask for a one to two paragraph answer by Thursday of that week** which you will bring to class—these puzzles are meant to jar your thinking about the theory of that week. Typically we will begin class discussing the puzzle. The teaching assistants may collect the puzzles either in class or at section depending on the week. Puzzles will only be graded check +, check, or check- and will count as part of your section grade. However, failure to do the puzzles or handing in only some of them will diminish your section grade. Alternatively, should you hand all of them in, this will count strongly along with participation and attendance in the section grade.
2a) Also, the teaching assistants may 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.
3) Finally there will also be an in-class midterm on November 6th on theories of democracy (Rousseau, Schumpeter, and Dahl) and a final exam on Wednesday December 19th–8-10 a.m. in LC 18 on political theory and property (Locke, Rousseau, and Marx) and on political ethics (Machiavelli).

4) 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.

Grading:
Grading will be as follows:
The two papers will each count 20% of your grade (total of 40%), the midterm 20%, and the final 30%. 10% of your grade will consist of discussion section participation and puzzles. 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. 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 your essays out from the texts at hand through clear arguments and proper citations. It is not our job to demonstrate you haven’t!

Teaching Assistants and Office Hours:
The teaching assistants for this course are Sean McKeever (smckeever@albany.edu), Eileen Brino (ebrino@albany.edu), and Yeu-Fen Hsieh (yhsieh4@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 me or the TA’s in dialogue on the course material. You are also welcome to see me during my office hours: Tu Th 11:40 to 12:40 in HU B016 or the hour before class. I am also happy to meet with you in my downtown office Milne 204 on 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. Find our course, RPOS 103, Introduction to Political Theory, 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, the syllabus, and occasionally lecture outlines. I will also put the bi-weekly puzzles on e-res on Tuesdays. 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!