Field Seminar in Political Theory

During the past quarter century political theory has exploded into a great variety of ways of thinking about politics and society, each with its own underlying assumptions and unique approach to its subject matter. Nevertheless, despite the remarkable creativity of political theory it is possible within the span of a semester's course to acquire a clear understanding of the dimensions of the field. In the three months that follow we will consider the field of political theory according to the terms by which political theorists currently understand their discipline and their work within it, including their special interests, assumptions, the histories of their respective orientations to politics and society, and the ways in which they distinguish their own approach to political theory from those of other political theorists. Importantly, the various forms of political theory will not be treated as emerging independently of one another, but will be examined as forms of contestation that developed in relation and also in opposition to each other and to the field of political science to which political theory belongs. At the same time, we will make an effort to determine the extent to which each form of political theory seeks to universalize its own approach, that is, to argue for the greater value of its own approach relative to competing theoretical approaches. While it is not possible to avoid entirely the impression that one or more approaches to political theory are being privileged over others, we will make every attempt to study each approach to political theory on its own terms. Among the approaches to be examined are Critical theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism, Interpretive theory, Democratic theory, the History of Political Thought and the "Canon," Identity theory, and others. At this early stage of the field seminar students should bear in mind that in the work of political theorists more than one of these approaches are often found together, which means that the terms used to describe their theoretical approaches are not entirely accurate and are somewhat artificial.

Required Reading (all on Blackboard Learning System)


3. Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy," from What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies, 9-55.


**Requirements for the Course**

Among the requirements for this course, the most important is student participation in class discussions. Every graduate student is expected to participate on a regular basis, posing questions, answering questions, contesting or arguing on behalf of the views of other students in the course and, certainly, challenging the views of the instructor. If there is one prejudice that I harbor, though openly, with regard to the nature of political theory and what distinguishes it as a form of thought, it is that political theory is "speech," and has been from its very origins, at least to the extent that Socrates is considered to be our “founder.” Students cannot receive a passing grade in this seminar without a record of regular class participation.

In addition to class participation on a regular weekly basis, graduate students will be asked to make class presentations based on the reading material assigned weekly. The number of class presentations expected of each student will be determined by the number of students enrolled in the course (the smaller the total enrollment, the greater the number of presentations for each student, and vice versa).

Finally, students will be asked to write three papers of moderate length during the course of the semester. Each paper will be 8-10 pages in length, and the topic will be assigned by me, though individual topics proposed by students and approved by me will be considered as viable topics for their papers. Papers will be based on the reading material. Due dates for papers indicated in the syllabus. No late papers will be accepted.

**Weekly Assignments**

February 2. Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation."
    Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy."

February 9. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man."
    Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas."
    **First paper topic assigned.**

February 16. Classes suspended.

    **First Paper Due.**


March 9. Schoolman, “Pluralism ‘Old’ and ‘New’."
    Schoolman, “A Pluralist Mind.”

    Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy."
    **Second paper topic assigned.**

March 23. Foucault, "Two Lectures" & "Truth and Power."

March 30. Classes suspended.

April 6. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (excerpts)
    **Second paper topic due.**

    “Communicative Rationality and the Theories of Meaning and Action,” from *Moral
    Consciousness and Communication*,

April 20. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy.”

    **Third paper topic assigned.**

May 4. Last day of classes. Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 42-82, and
    concluding course summary and discussion – Topic: What is Political Theory?

May 11. Third paper topic due.