

POS 103, Introduction to Political Theory

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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 equality?** This principle may seem abstract, but it is central to a variety of contemporary political debates. Here are a few of them:

1. If democracy assumes all citizens are equal with regard to the opportunity to influence fundamental political decisions, **how should we distribute political resources (money, wealth, political power, and political knowledge) to make sure that political liberty is enjoyed equally? Should those with more wealth and connections have more political influence?** Are there justifications for inequalities of political liberty? Is the person who argues this way an anti-democrat?
2. **What goods must we provide for each member of society to have an equal possibility of choosing her/his life plan?**
3. **How much equality or inequality of property and wealth is acceptable?**
4. **Does liberty to dispose of property as one sees fit trump political equality if this liberty leads to unequal political and economic resources? Does maintenance of political equality as equal political liberty require regulation or redistribution of the right to dispose of property?**
5. **What is the relation of political equality (equality of all citizens) to political authority which may require state have unequal power?** Is governmental authority necessary for the realization of public goods, which we enjoy equally such as aid to education, health care, pensions, environmental regulation, financial regulation, parks, libraries, and security? Does unequal power in government lead to surveillance of citizens?
6. **Would be better off with political inequality i.e. rule by elites or guardians with superior knowledge?**

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—including Plato, Rousseau, de Tocqueville and Marx—each of whom give different answers to the questions above. Plato will claim justice demands unequal political rule and distribution of roles in the community according to function; Rousseau and de Tocqueville will seek to show equality and freedom can only be reconciled when we participate with other citizens equally in making decisions for our community; Rousseau and Marx will show in different ways that private property is a historical discovery that has damaged

the basic equality we all share as human beings. We will close the course with a debate over whether the inequalities produced by the market enhance freedom and social life or undermine it.

Course Objectives:

- Refine your capacity to analyze political concepts for their meaning and political arguments for coherence on fundamental questions of politics.
- 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.
- In general 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.

Required Books

Plato, *The Republic* trans. by Grube and Reeve (Hackett)
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)
Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader* ed. by Tucker (Norton)
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Harper)
Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Farrer, Straus, Giroux)

Additional Readings on E-Reserve now on Blackboard (the password: pos103)

A short section on property from John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, which I will use when discussing property.

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 27th)

II. Inequality as rule by the “best”: Plato, justice, and guardianship

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?

Plato, *The Republic*: Justice as Identity of Polity and Properly Ordered Soul.

-September 1, Book I and Book II until (par 363). (Ordinary concepts of justice—equality vs inequality: 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 3, **no class**.

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

-Sept 10, Book III (Completing the education of the guardians and selecting rulers)

-Sept 15, Book 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 17, Book V (The completion of the kallipolis: communal ownership, the rule of philosophers based on the differences in genuine knowledge vs. opinion) (The superiority of theory to practice).

-Sept 22, **no class**

-Sept 24 Book VI* (Justice as knowledge of the good and why only philosophers have access to it. Knowledge of forms vs. knowledge of appearances.).

-Sept 29, 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”?)

October 1. Book VIII (552d-566d). Finishing up Plato. (Plato’s criticism of politics: How does oligarchy lead to democracy and democracy to tyranny? Why does Plato argue democratic justice as equal political membership is not defensible?)

Essay on Plato on Justice and Inequality due Friday, October. 9th in section.

II. Thinking about democracy I Equality and Political Liberty (Rousseau vs Plato?)

Is democracy equality of individual protection or the equal enjoyment of full citizenship through participation in fundamental decisions affecting common life? How should we combine equality with freedom? Why is liberty as the pursuit of private interest a threat to political freedom? Is private liberty compatible with political liberty? What does the realization of political equality require under modern conditions of politics-the 1/n problem?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*

-Oct 6, Book I

-Oct 8, Book II**

-Oct 13, Book III, chs. 1,2, 4, 10 13-15, 18.**

-Oct 15 , Book IV, ch. 1

III. Thinking about democracy II: Equality of condition--Political Liberty or Democratic Despotism?

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*,

-Oct 20, Vol. I: Introduction (pp. 9-20), Vol I Part II (287, “Influence of Mores...), Part I chs. 3-5 (pp. 50-70) [Townships and Democracy] Yes, I included a short section from Part II here.

-Oct 22, Vol I: Part II, chs. 4–5(189-199) [Political Association but Mediocre Rulers in US], ch 6 (231-240) [Answer to defects of democracy is more democracy—equality and political energy] Vol I Part II, chs 7 **(246-261) [Tyranny of Majority vs. Political Liberty]

-Oct 27, Volume II: Part I: chs. 1, 2 (429-436) [Equality, distrust of all authority and submission to most general ideas]. Part II, chs. 1-5**(503-517) 7-8 (520-528) [Equality and individualism and how its dangers are offset via associations and self-interest rightly understood]

-Oct 29, Volume II Part II ch 20 **(555-558) [an new aristocracy of industry], Part III, ch. 17 [democracy and inclination toward materialism], Part IV, ch. 3 (“How Feelings and Thoughts in Democratic Nations are in Accord in Concentrating Power”), 6**-8 (690-702) [Dangers of Democratic Despotism].

Do read the assignment to the end! The last chapters are extremely important! (**Should be read with special care).

-Nov 3 Midterm Exam in class on Rousseau and de Tocqueville on Equality and Democracy.

IV. Politics and property I: Is Property the source of Social and Political Inequality?

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

-Nov 5, Preface and Part I. Why can we never discover our natural state? *Amour de soi* vs *amour propre*.

-Nov. 10, 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. How should we restore equality of political membership?) **

V. Politics and property II: Capitalism, Class Inequality and Freedom. What does inequality of property mean for individual and social freedom? What would equality of property mean for individual and social freedom?

Karl Marx. The denaturing of property through history. Class conflict. Capital as Exploitation.

-Nov 12, *The Communist Manifesto*, Opening and Part I (“Bourgeois and Proletarians”) in *Marx-Engels Reader*

-Nov 17 Finish *Manifesto* Part II (“Proletarians and Communists”) (Part III sec 2-3) and Part IV.

-Nov 19, Read short selection from *Capital* on “The Working Day” pp. 361-367. 372-376 in *Marx-Engels Reader*

(Recommended: “Critique of the Gotha Program” pp. 525-541)

Essay on equality and property in Rousseau and Marx will be due in class on Tuesday December 1.

VI. Market Inequality as Freedom vs Equality as shared Public Goods.

-Nov 24, Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, ch. 1 (on Blackboard)

-December 1, Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, ch. 2 (on Blackboard)

- Dec 3, Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, Introduction, chs. 1-2
- Dec 8, Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, chs 3-5

Final exam on Monday, Dec 14th: 10:30am -12:30pm

Assignments and Course Obligations:

1) You will have **two short essays** (of approximately 6 pages) on different accounts of the equality and how the political theorists we have read threat the principle: the first is on Plato's defense of inequality and guardianship due October 9, the second on Rousseau and Marx on property inequality due on December 1. 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 thought pieces. Thus the puzzles will be graded **not on the basis of whether you had a right or wrong answer (often many answers are possible) but on your effort in thinking through the problem. Demonstrate you have given the question some thought and you will do well. Treat the question with indifference and you will do poorly. The puzzles will also help your TA assess your writing skills early, and allow him or her 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) Finally there will also be **an in-class midterm on November 3rd** on theories of equality and democracy in Rousseau and de Tocqueville, and a **final exam on Monday, Dec 14th: 10:30am - 12:30pm in LC 18** on equality, liberty, and the market focusing on Friedman and Sandel.

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. You cannot pass the class if you do not attend sections.*

Grading:

Grading will be as follows:

The two papers will each count 15% of your grade for a total of 30%

The midterm: 20%,

The final: 20%.

Section grade 15%

Puzzles: 15%

Grading will take improvement into account. But note: 30% 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!**

Teaching Assistants and Office Hours:

The teaching assistants for this course are Yuefen Hsieh (yhsieh4@albany.edu) and Nels Frantzen (nfrantzen@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.* You are also welcome to see me during my office hours: Tu Th 2:45 to 3:45 in HU B16 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: pbreiner@albany.edu

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 additional readings for the course as well as a sheet on how to write political theory papers, the syllabus, and occasionally lecture outlines. You *must* download and print off the reading. Reading them on line will simply not do!