This seminar provides an overview of some fundamental questions and fundamental texts in political theory, both past and present though focused around a particular problem in political theory. The theme of the seminar this semester is the meaning of “realism” in political theory. Recently, there has been a fierce debate in the field on what political theory should look like: Should political theory focus on normative arguments laying out what a just or egalitarian polity might look like (for example the work of John Rawls)? Or alternatively should our political principles (justice, equality, democracy) be made subject to “realism” in politics, that is the typical features of ordinary politics (power, coercion, conflict, ideological struggle, political effectiveness, judgment) and the political sociological dynamics of politics (for example, conflicts over power in the state, the struggle between politicians and administrators, the problem of political legitimation, conflicts over citizenship inclusion and political equality, the logic of collective movements). We will read examples of both kinds of political theory as well as commentators who argue for and against the “realist” turn in political theory. We will start with John Rawls’s argument for ideal theory based on the convergence of political principles in an overlapping consensus and his claim that we can reach this consensus through the mutual exercise of political reason. We will then read Bernard Williams attack on this kind of political theory as rational dialogue from the viewpoint of the inescapability of political realism. We will then read a number of political theories with differing arguments on what counts as political realism and how we should test political principles against “political reality: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Karl Mannheim, and Hannah Arendt. We will then return to the recent debate reading the defense of realism by Raymond Geuss and numerous articles criticizing and adding new features to what a political theory should look like. For us the question will be whether the present debate with ideal theory lacks, merely replicates, or improves upon the earlier theorists we have read. Needless to say, the debate over what counts as “reality” in political theory is also very much a debate within political science as a whole. So students in other subfields should profit from the seminar as well.

**Required Books**

Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (“Politics as a Vocation” and “Science as a Vocation”) (Hackett)  
Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago)  
Jonathan Floyd, Marc Stears eds, *Political Philosophy versus History*  
All other readings will be on Blackboard, though you are invited to purchase Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin).

**I. The Initial Problem: Ideal Theory as Rational Dialog versus Political Realism as Power, Legitimacy, and Historically Grounded Political Commitments (September 7)**

John Rawls, “Overlapping Consensus” and “Political Reason” from *Political Liberalism* (on Blackboard)
Bernard Williams, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,” from In the Beginning Was the Dead (on Blackboard)

Recommended:
Matt Sleat “Bernard Williams and the Possibilities of a Realist Political Theory” European Journal of Political Theory 9/4, Oct 2010 (a realist criticism of Williams for replicating errors he criticizes) (Blackboard)

II. Varieties of Political Realism in Modern Political Theory

A. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” “Science as a Vocation” in The Vocation Lectures” ( Sept 14)
B. Max Weber, “The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy” ( Sept 28)
C. Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political ( Oct 5)
D. Karl Mannheim Ideology and Utopia ( Chs 2-3 on Oct 12; ch 4, Oct 19)
F. Michel Foucault, “The Study of Discourse” and “Governmentality” from The Foucault Effect. (Blackboard) (Nov 2)

III. The New ‘Realism” Debate:

A. The Defense Ideal Theory and its critics. (Nov 9)
   G. A. Cohen, “Facts and Principles” (Blackboard)
   William Galston, “Realism in Political Theory” European Journal of Political Theory 9/4 Oct 2010 (Blackboard)
   Marc Stears, “The Vocation of Political Theory” European Journal of Political Theory, 4/4, 2005 (Blackboard)
B. Realism as power, ideology, conflict, and force:
   Raymond Geuss, Philosophy and Real Politics (Blackboard) ( Nov 16)
C. Realism as Coercion, and as Mass Movements: (Nov 30)
   Marc Stears, “Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion” British Journal of Political Science 37/3, 2007 (Blackboard)
   Marc Philp, “Resistance and Protest” in Political Conduct ch. 8 (Blackboard)
   Marc Stears, Mathew Humphrey, “Public Reason and Political Action: Justifying Citizen Behavior in Actually Existing Democracies” Review of Politics, 74, 2012. (Blackboard)
D. Realism and Reading Political Theory:
   A. Reading Political Theory Historically:
Jonathan Floyd, Marc Stears eds, *Political Philosophy versus History* chs 5-7 (essays of Monk, Lane, Sabel).

B. Must realism be deflationary of ideals in politics? (Dec 7)

Bonnie Honig, Marc Stears, “The New Realism from Modus Vivendi to Justice” ch 8 in Jonathan Floyd, Marc Stears eds, *Political Philosophy versus History*


Reread Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* “Politics as a Science” or “Utopias”


**IV. Beyond Realism versus Ideal Theory: Political Theory as Political Ideology**

Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (extra session to make up for lost one)

**Assignments**

There will be three small writing assignments and one larger paper:

1. At least two exercises comparing canonical political theorists and their approaches to political “reality”—Weber, Schmitt, Mannheim, Arendt, and Foucault (5-6 pages). The purpose of these papers is to help you clarify differences between their competing political arguments.

2. A third paper (6 pages) assessing whether the contemporary debate on political realism improves upon, diminishes, or provides new perspectives on the earlier grand theorists we have read. Of particular importance here will be whether the debate with “ideal theory” in philosophy gives us something the “grand political thinkers” we have discussed earlier failed to understand or is of a different order distinct from the more comprehensive political theory.

3. A larger 15-20 page paper going more deeply into either into one of the political theorists we have read earlier in the course or into one of the problems raised by the more recent (academic) debate over political realism. Alternatively, you may write a paper comparing some aspect of one of the major political thinkers we have read with some aspect of the present debate for example how they understand political conflict, political compulsion, or legitimacy, or for that matter whether the present debate on political realism opens or closes the possibilities for realizing political principles.

4. Lastly, everyone will be asked to make at least two presentations on the readings in the course. At the time you give your presentation. The presentation must raise at least two questions for us to discuss based on some problem you see in the work at hand. 80% of the grade will be based on the papers. 20% will be based on the presentations.

**A Note on Presentations:**

While I am not asking you to provide us with a copy of your presentation it should be written out in some form. This said, I want you to speak your presentation not read it. You should think of a presentation as you would a lecture in which you need to engage the audience. The presentations
need not recite every bit of the argument you are presenting. Rather they should elicit the most salient parts of the piece under discussion and should point to the central questions the piece is addressing. Lastly, they should point to ambiguities, slippages, or incompletely answered questions in the argument being discussed.