Course Title

Introduction to Political Theory

Course Number
POL-UA.9100001

SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Lecturer Contact Information
Boris Vormann
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Course Details
Monday: 2pm to 4:45pm
Location of class: Academic Center, Room "Prenzlauer Berg"

Units earned
4

Course Description
What is a just society? Which type of government can be called legitimate? What is the role of the state in providing public goods? These are just some of the key questions of political theory that this course engages. Surveying a body of work spanning five centuries, it traces different strands of Western political thought through the analysis of primary canonical texts. Each session will deal with one author and their work in depth and seeks to point out longer traditions of thought.

The course is subdivided into four major parts, each subsuming a particular intellectual lineage. The first section examines state theory of the (early) enlightenment period. The focus will be on different understandings of the state of nature and the state of society and their implications for political life. The second segment of the course turns to the liberal tradition and explores its core tenets, putting a particular focus on the distinction between political and economic liberalism. The course then shifts its attention to the critique of liberalism and to the critical tradition more generally, exploring Marxian and (Neo-)Polanyian texts. In the final section, the focus will lie on more contemporary works that both illustrate the ongoing development of some core ideas and give expression to countercurrents.

Course Objective
The course familiarizes students with central debates in political theory and permits them an overview of the works of some of the discipline’s most pertinent thinkers. It does so by pointing out long term traditions of thought as well as implications for contemporary politics and political science. Students will learn to critically engage with canonical texts, to compare them analytically, and to translate what they mean for the present. In so doing, students will acquire the critical analytical vocabulary to address political questions in a reflected and theoretically informed way.
Assessment Components
This seminar involves thoughtful and active participation in class discussions. Students are expected to complete written assignments on time. The overall grade will be determined as follows:

1. 15% of the total grade are based on **class participation**. Please see below for details on attendance policy.

2. 25%: **10 weekly Reading Response Papers** (of 1 page each, double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font).
   
   I expect a short abstract of the texts’ main tenets, an analysis that embeds the reading in earlier class discussions, and the articulation of one central synthetic question that engages the issues and debates addressed in the reading. The question should target a key aspect of the reading that you would like to debate in class and should serve as a starting point for broader discussion.
   
   ➢ Response papers need to be submitted as an **email-attachment on the evening before the respective session**.

3. 15%: **Mid-term Essay** of 4 pages which has to be submitted in print on **March 6, 2017** (double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font).

4. 45%: **Final take-home exam** of 8-10 pages **to be submitted on May 15, 2017** (double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font)

Failure to submit or fulfill any required component may result in failure of the class, regardless of grades achieved in other assignments.

Assessment Expectations

**Grade A:** The student makes excellent use of empirical and theoretical material and offers well-structured arguments in his/her work. The student writes comprehensive essays / answers to exam questions and his/her work shows strong evidence of critical thought and extensive reading.

**Grade B:** The candidate shows a good understanding of the problem and has demonstrated the ability to formulate and execute a coherent research strategy.

**Grade C:** The work is acceptable and shows a basic grasp of the research problem. However, the work fails to organize findings coherently and is in need of improvement.

**Grade D:** The work passes because some relevant points are made. However, there may be a problem of poor definition, lack of critical awareness, poor research.

**Grade F:** The work shows that the research problem is not understood; there is little or no critical awareness and the research is clearly negligible.
Grade Conversion

Your lecturer may use one of the following scales of numerical equivalents to letter grades:

\[
\begin{align*}
B+ &= 87-89 \\
C+ &= 77-79 \\
D+ &= 67-69 \\
F &= \text{below 65}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
A &= 94-100 \\
B &= 84-86 \\
C &= 74-76 \\
D &= 65-66
\end{align*}
\]

Alternatively:

\[
\begin{align*}
A &= 4.0 \\
A- &= 3.7 \\
B+ &= 3.3 \\
B &= 3.0 \\
B- &= 2.7 \\
C+ &= 2.3 \\
C &= 2.0 \\
C- &= 1.7 \\
D+ &= 1.3 \\
D &= 1.0 \\
F &= 0.0.
\end{align*}
\]

Attendance Policy

Participation in all classes is essential for your academic success, especially in courses that meet only once per week. Your attendance in both content and language courses is required and will be checked at each class meeting. As soon as it becomes clear that you cannot attend a class, you must inform your professor by e-mail immediately (i.e. before the start of your class). Absences are only excused if they are due to illness, religious observance or emergencies. Your professor or NYU Berlin's administration may ask you to present a doctor's note or an exceptional permission from NYU Berlin's Director or Wellness Counselor as proof. Emergencies or other exceptional circumstances must be presented to the Director. Doctor's notes need to be submitted to the Academics Office, who will inform your professors. Doctor's notes need to be from a local doctor and carry a signature and a stamp. If you want the reasons for your absence to be treated confidentially, please approach NYU Berlin's Director or Wellness Counselor.

Unexcused absences affect students' grades: In content courses each unexcused absence (equalling one week's worth of classes) leads to a deduction of 2% of the overall grade and may negatively affect your class participation grade. In German Language classes two or three (consecutive or non-consecutive) unexcused absences (equalling one week's worth of classes) lead to a 2% deduction of the overall grade. Three unexcused absences in one content course and five unexcused absences in your German language course may lead to a Fail in that course. Furthermore, your professor is entitled to deduct points for frequent late arrival or late arrival back from in-class breaks. Being more than 15 minutes late counts as an unexcused absence. Please note that for classes involving a field trip, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student's responsibility to arrive in time at the announced meeting point.

Exams, tests and quizzes, deadlines, and oral presentations that are missed due to illness always require a doctor's note as documentation. It is the student's responsibility to produce this doctor's note and submit it to the Academics Office; until this doctor's note is produced the missed assessment is graded with an F and no make-up assessment is scheduled. In content classes, an F in one assignment may lead to failure of the entire class.

Attendance Rules on Religious Holidays

Members of any religious group may, without penalty, excuse themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. Students who anticipate being absent due to religious observance should notify their lecturer AND NYU Berlin's Academics Office in writing via e-mail one week in advance. If examinations or assignment deadlines are scheduled on the day the student will be absent, the Academics Office will schedule a make-up examination or extend the deadline for assignments. Please note that an absence is only
excused for the holiday but not for any days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday. See also http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html

**Late Submission of Work**

(1) Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.

(2) Late work should be submitted in person to the lecturer or to the Academics Office, who will write on the essay or other work the date and time of submission, in the presence of the student. Another member of the administrative staff may also personally accept the work, and will write the date and time of submission on the work, as above.

(3) Work submitted late receives a penalty of 2 points on the 100 point scale for each day it is late (excluding weekends and public or religious holidays), unless an extension has been approved (with a doctor's note or by approval of NYU Berlin's administration), in which case the 2 points per day deductions start counting from the day the extended deadline has passed.

(4) Without an approved extension, written work submitted more than 5 days (excluding weekends and public or religious holidays) following the submission date receives an F.

(5) End of semester essays must be submitted on time.

(6) Students who are late for a written exam have no automatic right to take extra time or to write the exam on another day.

(7) Please remember that university computers do not keep your essays - you must save them elsewhere. Having lost parts of your essay on the university computer is no excuse for a late submission.

**Provisions for Students with Disabilities**

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 or see their website (http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-andwellness/students-with-disabilities.html) for further information.

**Plagiarism Policy**

The presentation of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally, constitutes an act of plagiarism. Proper referencing of your sources avoids plagiarism (see as one possible help the NYU library guide to referencing styles: http://nyu.libguides.com/citations).

NYU Berlin takes plagiarism very seriously; penalties follow and may exceed those set out by your home school. Your lecturer may ask you to sign a declaration of authorship form.

It is also an offense to submit work for assignments from two different courses that is substantially the same (be it oral presentations or written work). If there is an overlap of the subject of your assignment with one that you produced for another course (either in the current or any previous semester), you MUST inform your professor.

For a summary of NYU Global's academic policies please see: www.nyu.edu/global/academic-policies
Required Texts
Unless otherwise specified, all readings will be made available on NYU Classes.

NYU Berlin Library Catalogue: http://guides.nyu.edu/global/berlin or follow the link on NYU Berlin's website (Academics/Facilities & Services).

Supplemental Texts (not required to purchase)

Internet Research Guidelines
To be discussed in class

1. Introduction

Session 1 – 30 Jan 2017 // General Introduction
The first session will offer us time to get to know one another and to familiarize ourselves with the overall subject of the class. The two texts serve as an entry point into some of the field’s central questions. Jonathan Wolff’s short introduction gives us a good sense of the contours of political theory and philosophy. The distinction he makes between normative and descriptive academic work will accompany us throughout the term. The first chapter of Wendy Brown’s newest book provides us with a very tangible example of how political theory remains crucial until today. Her juxtaposition of homo politicus and homo economicus is a helpful analytical distinction for us to think about the sometimes contradictory rationales and logics of political life and economic exchange.

  ➢ pp.1-5.

  ➢ Ch. 1, pp. 17-44.

2. The State of Nature and the Social Contract

Session 2 – 6 Feb 2017 // Hobbes
Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is one of the first modern state theorists. While his aim was to defend monarchy on a theoretical basis during a time of upheaval and revolt (the Thirty Years War), his understanding of the state unintentionally created the groundwork for the analysis used by liberal philosophers to demand the exact opposite: the abolishment of monarchies. As you read his text try to answer the following questions: What is the state of nature according to Hobbes and how does the social contract address the problems that it poses? What is the role of the sovereign under the social contract?

  ➢ Chs. 13-18; pp. 82-122.
**Session 3 – 13 Feb 2017 // Locke**

Guest lecturer Prof. Lora Viola (Freie Universität Berlin) is an expert in international relations theory. She will join our class to explore with us the implications of Hobbes's and Locke's writings for colonial expansion and sovereignty.

An English philosopher and early enlightenment thinker, John Locke (1632-1704) formulated the basic tenets of modern liberalism. His iteration of social contract theory differed from that of Hobbes in its understanding of the state of nature. In this session we are particularly interested in Locke's notion of natural rights and contract theory. Where does the law of nature come from and what does it require, according to Locke? What exactly does Locke mean by the state of nature and how does his account differ from that of Hobbes? What role does he envisage for government and why is his account of property so central to his argument?


**Session 4 – 20 Feb 2017 // Montesquieu**

French political philosopher Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689-1755), like Locke, had a significant impact on the formulation of constitutions in modern societies after bourgeois revolutions. Montesquieu is known for his comparative analyses and typologies of different states. Of particular importance is his normative theory of the separation of powers which found its way into many political systems, among them that of the United States. In his ‘Spirit of Laws,’ what are the different types of government that Montesquieu delineates, and what principles characterize them? How does he conceptualize natural laws? How is equality ensured in a democracy, according to Montesquieu? And what are the potential excesses of democracy?

  - Books 1-5, 8.

**Session 5 – 27 Feb 2017 // Rousseau **Mid-term essay questions will be distributed**

Akin to the other social contract theorists we have read so far, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) discerned a state of nature from that of a state of society. Unlike Hobbes, however, Rousseau is more critical of the institutions of human development and notions of civilizational progress. In criticizing earlier contract theorists, Rousseau also became an important figure in what some have called the critical tradition (to which we turn at a later stage in this course). In our discussion, we will be particularly interested in the social utopia that Rousseau outlines at various instances in his texts. How does his account of the state of nature differ from the ones we have already encountered? What types of inequality does he distinguish? How does property and the evolving division of labor impact inequalities according to Rousseau?

- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1755. A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality. 

  - pp. 38-49.
Adam Smith (1723-1790) is best-known and most often cited for his work in political economy. His ‘Wealth of Nations’ marks the transition from mercantilism to classical economic liberalism and constitutes a major shift in how markets have been viewed until today—that is, as self-regulating and self-healing systems which happen to exert a liberating effect on societies. His ‘Theory of Moral Sentiments’ is less well-known but articulates the important counterpart to his economic analysis. What are the characteristics and social behaviors of human beings that he highlights in the two texts? Where do these attributions contradict one another, where do they add up? What do they imply for the organization of societies? Where does Smith see a role for the government in the organization of societies?


13 Mar 2017 Spring Break – No Class

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1459) is often referred to as the founder of comparative political science. The French aristocrat wrote his Democracy in America as a way to reflect on the transition of modern societies to democracy. A classical liberal, Tocqueville was a strong supporter of individual liberty, a sense strengthened by his fears from potentially tyrannical democratic majorities. What are the lessons that Tocqueville draws from the French Revolution? What makes the US context so special for Tocqueville? Where does he see problems with democracy—and why do you think does he emphasize that point? Hartz refers back to Locke and Tocqueville to make a case for the historically distinct development of the United States. Some authors have recently begun to critique the implied American exceptionalism of that reading. As you go through the text, can you imagine why?


Session 8 – 27 Mar 2017 // Mill

As a towering figure of liberal thought, English philosopher John Stuart Mill’s (1806-1873) conceptualization of liberty has had a lasting influence on political theory. In our discussion, we will be particularly interested in Mill’s understanding of individual liberty and the limits of government. In which cases would Mill argue against the complete freedom of individuals? Who does the liberty principle apply to? What does this tell us about the extent of democracy and the role of government in it?

4. The Critical Tradition

**Session 9 – 3 Apr 2017 // Marx**

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is probably best-known for his theory of historical materialism and for his class-based analysis of societies. But much of the reception of his work is somewhat distorted by the experience of ‘actually existing socialism’ in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the interpretations by different schools of Marxism. Students of his work emphasize a transition in his writing in the mid-1840s after which he broke with German idealism and shifted his attention toward social relations and exploitation. Why is the economic structure so important for his social analysis? What does Marx mean by ‘human emancipation’? Which potentials and which dangers does Marx see in industrial society? What problem does commodity fetishism pose for such societies?


***Session 10 – 7 Apr 2017 // The Frankfurt School [Make-up Day]***

The Frankfurt School was a multidisciplinary group of thinkers, often institutionally affiliated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. ‘Critical theory’—an umbrella term also used to describe the work of these researchers in order to avert the easy labelling and prosecution as Marxists during the Third Reich—seeks to point out contradictions between current states of affairs and future social potentials. Max Horkheimer’s (1895-1973) text outlines the distinctive features of critical theory in opposition to traditional forms and methods of scientific enquiry, while Herbert Marcuse’s (1898-1979) piece presents us with a critique of technology and mass society. Where do you see parallels in the lines of argumentation? What exactly is being critiqued in both texts and what are the imagined alternatives to the given state of affairs?

- Marcuse, Herbert. Social Implications of Technology.  

**Session 11 – 10 Apr 2017 // Polanyi**

Guest Lecturer Prof. Margit Mayer (Technische Universität Berlin), who has written extensively on neoliberalism and its implications for urban theory and social movements will be our guest in this session.
Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) is known today above all for his analysis of liberal economies and his concept of the ‘double movement’. His insight that liberal capitalism could not dis-embed itself from society without undermining its social foundations has served contemporary authors such as Nancy Fraser (born in 1947) and Jamie Peck (born in 1962) to articulate their own critical analyses of social development under neoliberalism. What exactly does Polanyi mean by ‘disembedding’? Why does he discern fictitious commodities from other forms of commodities? Do you think his theory of the double movement can be translated into the present? How convincing do you find Fraser’s take? What, if anything, in Peck’s analysis would you describe as Neo-Polanyian?

  ➢ Chs. 6, 12, 21, pp. 71-80, 141-157, 257-268.


  ➢ Ch. 1, pp. 1-37.

17 Apr 2017 Public Holiday – No Class

5. Contemporary Reflections

***Session 12 – 21 Apr 2017 // Robinson [Make-up day]
Political theorist and activist Cedric Robinson (1940-2016) took Marxist critique to Western Marxism and argued that the tradition of thought could not be detached from the bourgeois liberal context from which it emerged. In his search to salvage the black radical tradition we are particularly interested in his notion of ‘racial capitalism’ which has had a lasting effect on a series of fields in social science research. How does Robinson define racial capitalism? How does his understanding of history and social development differ from that of Marx?


Session 13 – 24 Apr 2017 // Rawls – **Final Exam Questions will be distributed**
Our guest Prof. Christian Lammert (Freie Universität Berlin) is an expert on social policy and will discuss the implications of Rawl’s work for comparative welfare state research with us.

In a series of thought experiments, American political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) has articulated a very influential conception of social justice. His argument is firmly rooted in the liberal tradition and we should be able to trace some of his core concepts back to the period of classical liberalism. According to him, what is a just society? And how can we tell? Moreover, why do his principles allow for a certain degree of inequality? And what makes the ‘liberal quality’ interpretation of the second principle unstable, according to Rawls?

  ➢ §§ 3,4,9,11,13, 20-29.
1 May 2017 Public Holiday – No Class

Session 14 – 8 May 2017 // Sen & Nussbaum
In his work, economist and philosopher Amartya Kumar Sen (born in 1933) examines questions pertaining to rationality, democracy and social justice. His essay will help us think through the analytical tool that is the ‘rational actor’ and, more broadly, the role of behaviorism in contemporary social science research. What kind of analysis does the ‘rational actor’ facilitate in your opinion? How would you trace it back in the history of thoughts? What are its potential shortcomings?

The second text examines some of liberalism basic assumptions from a different perspective. Martha Craven Nussbaum (born in 1947) engages the ties between liberalism and feminism to rearticulate the tenets of both. What is her understanding of liberalism and how does it differ from the ones we have encountered in this class? Do you agree that liberal individualism does not necessarily have to undermine feminist activism and thought?

  ➢ Please read entire article.

  ➢ https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12410/The%20Feminist%20Critique%20of%20Liberalism-1997.pdf?sequence=1

Session 15 – 15 May 2017 // General Summary – Final Exam Due

Your Lecturer
Boris Vormann is a professor in political science at Freie Universität’s John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies and an associated researcher at the Chaire de Recherche du Canada en Études Québécoises et Canadiennes (CRÉQC), Université du Québec à Montréal. Vormann has held visiting positions at the CUNY Graduate Center, Harvard University, and New York University. His research and teaching focus on political theory, the relationship between urbanization and globalization; state persistence; and nations and nationalism.