Seminar in Political Theory

Instructor: Keith Shaw
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Office Hours: Friday, 2:45-3:45
Course Location: 726 Broadway, Rm 747
Course Time: Friday, 4-6pm

Course Description:
This seminar explores key theorists in the history of political thought, and discusses interpretations of their work along with its relevance to modern politics. Because one semester can’t do justice to the full scope of the subject matter, the seminar somewhat arbitrarily concentrates on modern political thought, and especially those thinkers who even non-theory specialists will encounter with frequency in the discipline of political science. The course is designed with the transition from student to professional in mind, and emphasizes workshop-style presentations and the development of quality essays to that end.

Books Required:
- Machiavelli, Niccolo: *The Prince.*
- Marx, Karl: *Marx/Engels Reader.*
- More, Thomas: *Utopia.*
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques: *Basic Political Writings.*

Note on the books: These readings, except for those by Marx and Rawls, are available for free at [www.constitution.org](http://www.constitution.org) (scroll down to the “Local Search Engines” link to find them). You may forego buying these books if you would prefer to print the assigned readings instead. I do insist, however, that you bring some version of these texts with you to the seminar on the days we’re
discussing them. (Also, if you already own these books, but in different editions, feel free to use them rather than buy the editions in the bookstore.)

Course Requirements:

- Participation in the seminar, including reading preparation and regular contribution to discussion (20% of final grade).
- Two in-class presentations (10% each). Each presentation will instigate a discussion on the relevant theorist(s) concerning a particular problem with or application of the ideas covered the previous week. While the pedagogical point for the seminar is to stimulate discussion, your aim is to advance and defend an argument. The amount of prep work should be analogous to crafting a detailed outline of a paper that would make such an argument. Sample presentation topics are listed on the syllabus below, but I encourage you to develop your own ideas, and use the presentations as sounding boards for arguments to be used in the paper assignments. You must send me a rough outline of your ideas no later than the Thursday before a presentation so that I can get comments back to you in a timely fashion, and ensure that there is no overlap with other presenters.
- One 6-8 page “mid-term” paper (20%). You are to develop your own topic, which must involve an interpretation, evaluation, or application of some aspect of the works we have read. These papers may involve comparisons among theorists, or be narrowly focused on one. Outside research is not required. You are welcome to build a paper from one of your presentations, or as a response to another student’s. Due in class on November 4th.
- One 15-20 page seminar paper (40%). Again you are to develop your own topic, which may derive from a presentation. If the trajectory of your first paper warrants it, you may develop it into your seminar paper (see me about this). Must be emailed to me no later than December 16th.

Note on the papers: I will be grading your essays for both quality of argument and quality of writing. For the former, this means advancing a clear thesis and defending it throughout. For the latter, it refers not only to basic grammar and style, but also to the lucidity of presentation and coherence of structure. I don’t care what footnote format you use, but use some formal style and be consistent throughout. I encourage you to discuss your papers with me before writing them
(esp. the final paper), and I’m happy to review outlines assuming they aren’t sent to me at the eleventh hour.

**Course Topics:**

**Introduction:** 9/9

**Section I: Machiavelli and More**

*Writing on the fulcrum point between medieval and modern political thought, Machiavelli and More could not have responded more differently to the dangers and opportunities of their age. But the easy line to draw between the realist on the one hand and the utopian on the other obscures the nuance of these thinkers. We open the seminar by contrasting their two most notorious works to ask questions about the nature of political theorizing.*

- Interpretation: 9/16
- Presentations: 9/23

Sample Presentation Topics:

- In a sense, by combining critique of the real world with visions of a better one, all political theory is “utopian.” Yet Machiavelli’s reputation paints him as a “realist” or “anti-utopian” political philosopher. Which position is closer to the mark for this theorist?
- Beginning with the metaphor of “sheep that eat men,” *Utopia* advances a barely concealed critique of the institution of private property. How persuasive is it?

Readings:

- Machiavelli: *The Prince.*
- More: *Utopia.*

**Section II: Hobbes**

*Hobbes’ Leviathan might be characterized as the first landmark statement of a liberal political philosophy, but few modern liberals would endorse his autocratic regime. We will ask*
in what ways Hobbes is and is not a liberal, the utility and relevance of his “state of nature,” and what lasting impact he has had on political theorizing.

Interpretation: 9/30
Presentations: 10/7

Sample Presentation Topics:

• International relations theorists often compare the interactions between nation-states as analogous to that between individuals in Hobbes’ state of nature. How accurate is this comparison?
• By participating in the social contract, individuals choose to give up their rights to the sovereign power. But future generations of Hobbesian citizens make no such choice. Why should they be similarly bound?

Readings:

• Hobbes, Thomas: *Leviathan*. (Parts I and II. Read chapters 13-21 closely; you may skim the rest.)

Section III: Locke

*More than any other theorist we study in this course, we find the stamp of John Locke’s thought on modern political practice. In reviewing his Second Treatise, we discuss Locke’s arguments for private property and the proper relationship between citizen and government. We also question his legacy as a founding theorist of both capitalism and liberal democracy.*

Interpretation: 10/14
Presentations: 10/21

Sample Presentation Topics:

• Locke argues that the limitations on an individual’s right to acquire private property are largely overcome by the introduction of money in the state of nature. Evaluate this claim.
• The *Second Treatise* provides a checklist of provisions that must be met to justify political insurrection. On Lockean grounds, was the American Revolution legitimate? The French? The Russian?

Readings:

• Locke: *Second Treatise of Government*. 
Section IV: Rousseau

Perhaps the most ambitious theorist of the past millennium, Rousseau set out to harmonize the ubiquitous tensions between humanity’s natural and social halves. The results were conceptually brilliant, rhetorically powerful, and mired in contradiction. In exploring the call-and-answer dynamic of his Discourse on Inequality and Social Contract, we question the extent to which Rousseau succeeded in resolving the paradoxes of political life, what might be learned from his failures, and what relevance, if any, his work retains today.

Interpretation: 10/28
Presentations: 11/4 (First paper due.)

Sample Presentation Topics:

- Rousseau marks a careful distinction between the “sovereign” (i.e. the general will) and the “government” (the agency tasked with enforcing the laws). Given this distinction, does anything prevent Rousseauian citizens from elevating a Hobbesian autocrat?
- We learn from the Discourse on Inequality that political society was a trick the rich successfully played on the poor, and from the Social Contract that legitimate politics could only come about as a fair contract among equals. All real-world politics is therefore fraudulent. Is Rousseau right or wrong?

Readings:


Section V: Marx

One might plausibly interpret 20th century history as the spectacular failure of Marxism to move from theory to practice. Whether or not we buy into this analysis, we cannot deny Marx a real-world relevance that demands a close investigation of his work. In this section we read several of his more famous essays with an eye toward the idea of political theory as class struggle, Marx’s critique of bourgeois society, and his utopian vision of socialism.

Interpretation: 11/11
Presentations: 11/18

Sample Presentation Topics:
• History as class struggle has fallen largely out of fashion in America, but is it still a useful way of seeing the world? Are the bourgeoisie and proletariat still the locus of the relevant antagonism? Even if so, has the character of that antagonism changed?

• Marx’s theory of history is explicitly driven by material forces; ideas are essentially irrelevant. Is Marx right? If so, what does this say about the power of the human will (individually or collectively) to change society (and hence the relevance of studying politics)?

Readings:
• Marx: selections from Marx/Engels Reader

Section VI: Rawls

The 1971 publication of Rawls’ A Theory of Justice revitalized the study of political theory, and its ideas continue to dominate the discipline to this day. We conclude the course with a look at the final articulation of Rawls’ theory of “justice as fairness,” published shortly before his death. In particular we question its basis in moral philosophy, its institutional requirements, and review some of the major lines of objection.

Interpretation: 12/2
Presentations: 12/9

Sample Presentation Topics:
• Reflective equilibrium asks us to deduce the consequences of our principles, and then change them if we’re intuitively unsatisfied with the outcomes. Is this cheating? If we rely on reflective equilibrium, how stable can our principles ever be?
• Is Rawls right that we should use only the terms of public reason when making political arguments designed to sway our fellow citizens?

Readings:
• Rawls: Justice as Fairness.

Final Papers Due: December 16th