Course Title

Political Theory

Course Number
POL-UA.9100001

SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Lecturer Contact Information
Dr. Christian Wöhst
christian.woehst@nyu.edu

Course Details
Monday: 5:15 pm to 8:00 pm
Room: tbc

Prerequisites
None

Units earned
4

Course Description
This course offers an introduction to the major intellectual traditions in the history of Western political thought. Proceeding for the most part chronologically, we will read and discuss the ideas of some of the major political theorists from the ancient Greeks to the 21st century. The primary focus will be on examining the historical origins of those concepts that shape our contemporary understanding of political institutions and practices. In our discussions we will uncover the conceptual underpinnings of modern forms of political organizations, such as the nation-state and democracy. Furthermore, we will discuss and critically evaluate divergent views on freedom, equality and justice.

Course Objective
Students should, after having completed this course, be familiar with the arguments of various political theorists and be able to assess their historical and philosophical significance. Furthermore, students will have learned to critically analyze, compare and evaluate those arguments in relation to their coherence and philosophical merit, and to assess the relevance of those arguments for current political problems. Finally, students should be able to argue for and defend their own critical position regarding the political problems that the theorists address.

Assessment Components
Students are expected to do the readings, attend all sessions, participate in discussions, and complete written assignments. Student performance will be evaluated on the basis of four
components: class participation, presentation & reading responses, a midterm essay and a final writing assignment.

(1) Participation 10%
(2) Class Presentation & Reading Responses 30%
(3) Writing Assignment I: Midterm 20%
(4) Writing Assignment II: Final Paper 40%

(1) Participation in discussions constitutes an important component of course activities and makes up a significant portion of student grades. You will have the opportunity to further explore the course readings, seek clarification, express your views, and engage in peer discussion.

(2) In order to prepare for discussion in class, students are required to submit 10 short reading responses (250 words each) before each class by uploading them to NYU Classes. These reading responses serve to develop a habit of critical engagement with the texts and regular writing practice. They can also help to identify your research interests early on. Furthermore, students will convey their negotiations of a reading by giving one in-class presentation of 10 to 15 minutes, which incorporates exemplary close readings of selected passages and the development of critical discussion questions for the seminar.

(3) The course is also writing-intensive. Students will write a midterm paper (5 pages), based on discussion questions, which will be provided one week before the deadline.

(4) Finally, students will write a critical essay (final paper of 10 – 12 pages) on a topic of their choosing. This work can be an extension of the midterm paper but demands argumentative writing. Please arrange to meet with me at the earliest opportunity to discuss your research interests and final project.

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 their work. The student writes comprehensive essays / answers to exam questions and their 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:

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<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>90-93</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>84-86</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>80-83</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>74-76</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70-73</td>
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<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>67-69</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>F</td>
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Alternatively:

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<td>B+</td>
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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 (equaling 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 (equaling 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 (https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/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 Text(s)**
All required texts are available as PDF or Word documents on NYU Classes.

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

**Supplemental Text(s) (not required to purchase)**

**Internet Research Guidelines**
To be discussed in class.

**Additional Required Equipment**
None

**Session 1 – 28 Aug 2017 - General Introduction**

We will discuss the characteristics of political theory as a discipline, distinguish between normative and empirical arguments and discuss the relationship between the two. We will consider the key questions that political theory deals with and reflect on the nature and the limitations of an introductory survey course.

Reading:


**Session 2 – 4 Sept 2017 – Plato and the Philosopher’s Rule**
Plato’s *Republic* stands at the beginning of our journey through the history of political thought. We will start with a brief look at the historical context and the particularities of the so-called “Socratic method” of dialogic writing. Afterwards, we will be looking at Plato’s conception of the best form of government and his classic critique of democracy. Finally, we will discuss whether Plato’s argument uncovers some inherent tensions of democracies that still apply today.

Reading:


**Session 3 – 11 Sept 2017 – Aristotle and the Nature of Citizenship**

Aristotle’s work *Politics* is considered to be the founding document of Western political science. We will start this session with an examination of the Aristotelian understanding of politics in relation to his conception of the human nature. We will then discuss Aristotle’s conceptions of citizenship, asking ourselves whether citizens need to be virtuous and what kind of virtues citizens should have in a democracy. Finally, we will trace the Aristotelian roots of our contemporary understanding of politics.

Reading:


**Session 4 – 18 Sept 2017 – Niccolò Machiavelli and the Conflict between Politics and Morality**

In the beginning of this session we will situate Niccolò Machiavelli in the context of Renaissance political thought and ask how his ideas shaped our modern understanding of politics. Furthermore, Machiavelli’s text will be the basis of a discussion about the role of morality in politics: Is politics a domain where moral rules don’t apply? Should the good politician act morally or follow a different set of rules? What does a “Machiavellian” perspective on today’s politics reveal?

Reading:


Thomas Hobbes was one of the first theorists of the modern nation state and laid the foundations of the social contract theory. In this session, we will discuss Hobbes’s conception of the state of nature and ask how humans would live if there were no state. Why does Hobbes argue that it is rational for humans to sign a contract and submit to state authority? We will also have a closer look at the role of the sovereign in the social contract and we will discuss how Hobbes has influenced our understanding of the modern nation state.

Reading:


Session 6 – 02 Oct 2017 – John Locke and the Liberal Tradition

MID-TERM QUESTIONS ARE HANDED OUT IN CLASS

In this session, we will have a close look at the social contract theory of John Locke, who formulated the basis of modern liberalism. We will examine how his theory differs from that of Hobbes, especially in its understanding of the state of nature and the limits of state power. Furthermore, we will trace the impacts of Locke’s thoughts on the US constitution and discuss how much he has shaped our understanding of modern constitutionalism.

Reading:


Session 7 – 09 Oct 2017 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Republican Tradition

MID-TERM PAPER DUE IN CLASS

The Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau stood between ancient and modern thought about democracy and formulated a different understanding of the social contract. We will start our session with a discussion about his critical perspective on human nature and the corrupting influences of society. Subsequently, we will examine Rousseau’s understanding of freedom and his conception of the social contract. Finally, we will discuss how Rousseau has shaped our modern understanding of Republicanism.

Reading:


16 Oct 2017 – Fall Break – No Class
Session 8 – 23 Oct 2017 – Alexis de Tocqueville and the Ambivalences of Modernity

Alexis de Tocqueville’s seminal work *Democracy in America* reflects upon the transition of modern societies into democracy and is considered to be a masterpiece of comparative political science. In this session, we will have a close look on Tocqueville’s rather critical view on democracy, his fear of the tyranny of democratic majorities as well as his conception of the conflict between freedom and equality. We will also discuss whether Tocqueville’s critique on democracy still applies today.

Reading:


Session 9 – 30 Oct 2017 – John Stuart Mill and the Limits of State Power

The English philosopher John Stuart Mill understood liberty to be the strongest desire of human nature and had a lasting influence on our modern understanding of the limits of state power. In this session, we will have a close look at Mill’s understanding of individual liberty, especially at his understanding of the freedom of thought and discussion. We will also discuss those cases in which Mill would argue against the complete freedom of individuals. Finally, we will examine how some of Mill’s arguments might have been influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville.

Reading:


Session 10 – 06 Nov 2017 – Immanuel Kant and the Perpetual Peace among Nations

In his philosophical essay on the perpetual peace, the enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant asks whether a legal order on the national level is enough to guarantee peace and freedom. He proposes to supplement national constitutions with a law of nations, founded on a federation of free states. In this session, we will reconstruct Kant’s argument and have a closer look at his conception of cosmopolitan citizenship. Afterwards, we will discuss Kant’s proposal in light of the experiences of the 20th and 21st century.

Reading:


Session 11 – 13 Nov 2017 – Hannah Arendt and the Human Condition
Hannah Arendt was one of the most influential political theorists in the 20th century and her reflections on concepts such as freedom, totalitarianism, authority and revolution offer a sharp analysis of the human condition in the modern age. In our session, we will discuss Arendt’s interpretation of the relationship between freedom and politics as well as her distinction between the public and the private realm. Secondly, we will explore how much Arendt has been influenced by the political thought of the Ancient Greeks. Finally, we will discuss how Arendt helps us to formulate a critique of modern mass societies.

Reading:


Session 12 – 20 Nov 2017 – John Rawls and Justice as Fairness

In his by now classical work “A Theory of Justice”, John Rawls invites us to a thought-experiment to design the basic institutions of a just society. In this session, we will examine how Rawls ties up to some core assumptions of the social contract tradition and combines them with insights of rational choice theory. We will discuss how according to Rawls a just society should look like and we will critically assess the method he uses to justify his two principles of justice.

Reading:


Session 13 – 27 Nov 2017 – Carol Pateman, Iris Marion Young and the Feminist Critique of Liberalism

In this session, we will use Carol Pateman’s Book “The Sexual Contract” to reconsider the liberal tradition of political thought in the light of feminism. In her book, Pateman argues that the genesis of liberal rights comes along with a certain form of modern patriarchy. Subsequently, we will discuss Iris Marion Young’s text about the “Five Faces of Oppression” to uncover those structural forms of suppression that appear to be inherent in modern liberal institutions. We will conclude our session with a discussion about how feminist political theory helps us to reevaluate the arguments of the authors we have been reading so far.

Reading:


Session 14 – 04 Dec 2017 – Jürgen Habermas and a Deliberative Conception of Democracy

Not only because he bridges European and Anglo-American traditions of political thought, Jürgen Habermas is one of the most influential philosophers of our present time. His extensive work addresses topics stretching from philosophy to political science, sociology epistemology and language theory. In this session, we will have a close look at Habermas’ understanding of the internal relationship between democracy and the rule of law as well as his deliberative conception of democracy. We will conclude our session with a discussion about the implications of Habermas’ theory on some current debates about modern democratic societies.

Reading:


Session 15 – 11 Dec 2017 – Summary

**FINAL ESSAY DUE IN CLASS**

In our last session, we will review the major milestones of our seminar and take a brief look at the final projects.

Classroom Etiquette
To be discussed in class

Suggested Co-Curricular Activities
None

Your Lecturer
Christian Woehst has studied Politics, History and German Literature at the University of Munich and the London School of Economics and Political Science. In 2016, he received his Ph.D. in politics from Dresden University, where he teaches Political Theory and the History of Ideas. His research focuses on 18th and 19th century intellectual history as well as contemporary political theory on liberalism, constitutionalism and democracy.