

University of Alaska Fairbanks  
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## *CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY*

### Political Science 494 / Philosophy 494

#### *Course Description*

Our contemporary political world is a complex one, characterized both by tremendous promise and enduring human misery. Political theory is a realm of intellectual inquiry where we examine our most basic concepts and definitions, engage in normative judgment of our existing systems of government, and articulate and defend a vision of the system of political organization we envision to be ideal. The goal of this course is to familiarize you with important themes within contemporary political theory and the ways in which they relate to the world in which we reside. We will accomplish this through surveying the most influential political theorists of our time. To the extent that this course has an overarching theme, it is the issue of difference in contemporary political societies (whether that difference is encountered in the form of ascriptive identities such as gender and ethnicity, or simply deep disagreements in a more ideological sense). The goal of this class is to demonstrate the ways in which political theory provides us with not only the foundations of our political system, but guidance in understanding, evaluating, and coping with on-going navigation of difference in deeply pluralistic societies.

Organizationally speaking, the course is split into two parts. The first part reviews foundational works by thinkers writing in the historical period ranging from the inter-war years to the post-War and anti-colonial eras. Authors include Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, John Rawls, Leo Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Theodor Adorno. The second part of the course turns to more recent currents in political theorizing, taking up a genealogical study of the ways that these canonical thinkers influenced feminist, environmental, postcolonial, anti-essentialist, democratic, and posthuman political theory.

#### *Learning Objectives*

The goals for student learning in this course can be divided into two broad categories: one bearing on student knowledge, the other emphasizing student skills. The following list of objectives stresses both:

- Students should be fluent with the texts we have read, have a comprehensive view of the arguments presented, and understand the historical context within which those arguments are situated.
- Student should possess a fluency with the main debates in contemporary political theory, and be acquainted with the empirical examples that manifest these debates.

- Students should be able to critically assess ideas and analyze arguments synoptically.
- Students should be able to clearly and effectively communicate their own ideas, both verbally and in writing.

### *Course Mechanics*

This is an advanced course in political theory. Every student should come to class prepared to engage in lively conversation based on the week's reading. There are several components central to the course's core dynamic: attendance, quizzes, lectures, readings, discussions, writings, and office hours.

***Attendance and Participation:*** Attendance is required. Be on time. Student absences will be excused by permission only. Each unexcused absence will result in a student's attendance/participation grade being docked an entire letter grade. Participation means speaking up at least once in each class (see "*Discussions*" below). Students who do not speak will be docked a third of a grade per class. Attendance and participation comprise 10% of the overall grade.

***Quizzes:*** Weekly reading quizzes will be administered. These quizzes will be short exercises designed to gauge whether or not students are maintaining regular reading habits. Performance on these quizzes comprises 10% of the overall grade.

***Lectures:*** My in-class lectures are an integral resource for your discussion meetings and your papers. Bring your copy of the text well marked up for lecture. Laptop computers or other electronic gadgets are not to be used during lecture, even for note-taking, with the exception of devices for audio recording lectures. Those devices should be placed on the front table of the lecture room while in use.

***Readings:*** The readings are the foundation of the course. If you like to read, and to discuss what you read with your fellows, you are likely to succeed in the class. That said, the material is dense and difficult. The course therefore requires that you practice "slow reading," which takes time, concentration, patience, and reflection, *before* attending lecture and discussion. If you have taken these steps and are still having difficulty engaging in the course materials, arrange to visit me in office hours.

***Discussions:*** Students will be expected to share in an ongoing conversation about what excites/troubles/frustrates/enlivens/disappoints/engages them about what they are reading, writing, and thinking. In my experience discussions are key to student success insofar as they allow a space for the articulation of and argumentation around the ideas they are engaging with. I will strive to foster a classroom space for the expression of dissident views, and expect students to help me safeguard that space.

**Presentation:** In the second half of the course each student will facilitate one discussion of reading materials on a day of their choosing. Students are also required to see me at least once during office hours, or some other specified meeting time, to discuss their preparation and strategize around effective communication, organization, and presentational development. I also highly recommend visiting the Speaking Center (located in the Communications Department on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of Gruening).

**Essays:** The goal of the essays (one, a midterm essay is due March 14; the other, a final essay is due May 2) is to promote careful reading, synthesis of the readings with other course activities, and above all, scholarly articulation of your views of the readings. The essays you write in this course are works of theorizing; they are not research papers. I will provide you with a few prompts for each essay. I strongly encourage you to choose among these topics, but if you wish to write on the topic of your choosing, you must compose a prompt of your own, that your essay will address, equal in scope and detail to those distributed by me. Your essays will be evaluated by your use of textual evidence and argumentation, your originality, and the style and grace of your exposition (see below for my grading schematic). Improvement of these skills from the midterm to the final essay is an important course objective. An “8 page essay” ends on the essay’s 8<sup>th</sup> page. I have found three books particularly valuable as we all work to improve our writing. Regarding argumentation, I suggest *A Rulebook for Arguments* by Anthony Weston (Hackett). In matters of composition, I recommend *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams (Chicago). When it comes to the nuts-and-bolts of standard written English, as well as for advice on how to handle the challenges of advanced writing, I consult *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* by Bryan A. Garner (Oxford). You are accountable for submitting essays that work toward the standards outlined in these references. I also highly recommend visiting the Writing Center (located in the English Department on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of Gruening), which bears valuable resources worth plumbing, including writing counseling.

**Office Hours:** Office hours are an important, and often overlooked, component of any class. In *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, regular attendance in office hours is not required, but it is strongly recommended. One on one interaction with your professor will help you to get more out of the class, plain and simple.

### *Course Requirements*

1. *Books (Available at University Bookstore)*

Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*  
 Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*  
 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*  
 Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*  
 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*  
 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*  
 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*

2. *Final Grade Breakdown*

Attendance and Participation.....	10%
Reading Quizzes.....	10%
Presentation.....	20%
Midterm Essay .....	25%
Final Essay.....	35%

2. *Grading Guidelines:*

I have established the following standards for the evaluation of written work in this course:

**A:** Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. The essay should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant grammatical flaws. An ‘A’ paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation.

**B:** Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate evidence, organized and interpreted logically. The ‘B’ paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an ‘A’; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.

**C:** Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The ‘C’ paper meets the basic requirements of a thesis supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but it needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient and appropriate, or the interpretation may have logical flaws. The essay may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The ‘C’ paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate but not noteworthy overall.

**D:** Barely passing work that shows effort but is so marred by serious problems that it cannot be considered a satisfactory paper. Papers without a readily identifiable thesis are liable to be graded ‘D’.

**F:** Failing work -- for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

*Accessibility and Disabilities*

The University of Alaska Fairbanks is committed to equal opportunity for students with disabilities. I will work with the Office of Disabilities Services (208 Whit, 474-5655) to provide reasonable accommodation for such students.

## *Academic Dishonesty*

High ethical standards are essential for maintaining credibility in the field of political science. Every course taught at UAF seeks to maintain these standards, starting with an emphasis on producing original and factual work. If you cite or quote from someone else's work, you must include a proper citation using an established style sheet (to be discussed in class). Plagiarism is defined as appropriating passages or ideas from another person's work and portraying them as one's own. Neither plagiarism nor fabrication will be tolerated. Any student found to have plagiarized or fabricated statements will receive, at a minimum, an automatic "F" for the class. Further action, such as expulsion, will also be considered, per UAF policy.

## *Reading and Lecture Schedule*

*(Note: Readings marked with an '\*' will be posted online on Blackboard)*

### **PART 1 CONTINGENT FOUNDATIONS**

*January 17*

Introduction to Course Thematics, Syllabus, Expectations

*January 20-22*

Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*

*January 24-29*

Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

*January 31-February 7*

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

*February 10-14*

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

*February 17-21*

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

*February 24-28*

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*

March 3-7

John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*

March 10-14

Writing Workshop  
MID-TERM ESSAY DUE, March 14

March 17-21

SPRING BREAK

## **PART 2 CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS**

March 24 – 28

Amy Gutman, “Introduction to *Multiculturalism*”<sup>\*</sup>  
Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”<sup>\*</sup>  
Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition*<sup>\*</sup>  
Sheldon Wolin, “Democracy, Difference, and Re-cognition”<sup>\*</sup>

March 31 – April 4

Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations”<sup>\*</sup>  
Nancy Fraser, “False Antitheses”<sup>\*</sup>  
Wendy Brown, “Postmodern Exposures, Feminist Hesitations”<sup>\*</sup>  
Catherine MacKinnon, “Points Against Postmodernism”<sup>\*</sup>

April 7 – 11

Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man”<sup>\*</sup>  
Iris Marion Young, “Self-Determination as Non-Domination: Ideals Applied to Palestine/Israel”<sup>\*</sup>  
Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>\*</sup>  
Anne Norton, from *Bloodrites of the Poststructuralists*<sup>\*</sup>

April 14 – 18

Seyla Benhabib, “Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy”<sup>\*</sup>  
Bonnie Honig, “Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home”<sup>\*</sup>  
Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy, Power, and the ‘Political’”<sup>\*</sup>  
Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy”<sup>\*</sup>

April 21-25

Jane Bennett, from *Vibrant Matter*\*  
Donna Haraway, from *When Species Meet*\*  
Andrew Dobson, from *Green Political Thought*\*  
John Dryzek, from *The Politics of the Earth*\*

April 28 – May 2

Workshop Papers  
FINAL ESSAY DUE May 5