INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THEORY: ANCIENT, MODERN, AND CONTEMPORARY

Political theory is concerned with the fundamental questions of public life. What is the good human life and the good political order? Is there one political regime which is best? What is authority and what is freedom? Why should anyone obey anyone else? What is justice? Should justice be seen as the first virtue of social institutions?

In this course we consider these questions in relation to the theory and practice of democracy. Our aim will be to use the tradition of political theory as a set of lenses through which to discover the virtues and defects of democracy as a way of life. By focusing on some of the core themes of politics, such as authority, liberty, justice, and the place of science and technology in public life, we will examine the way in which ancient, modern, and contemporary perspectives shed light on the nature of the democratic regime.

Even though our focus will be on how past political ideas have shaped the way we live and think and even feel, we shall set our horizon in the future: thus we intend to discover the value of political thinking as both a diagnosis of the times and as the creative imagining of better futures.

Books required for Purchase:

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (Chicago, 2000)
Recommended books:

From a number of classic surveys on the uses of political thought and its history— including G.H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*; J.L. Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, 2 Volumes; S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*; and L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy*— I strongly recommend the latter two. (If you get Wolin’s *Politics and Vision* be sure that it is the new edition which just came out this summer.)

Required books are available for purchase from Barnes and Noble, 105 Fifth Avenue. The rest of the readings will be available in a packet at the GF Fogelman Library (65 Fifth Avenue).

Course requirements:

The seminar depends on the informed participation of every member in each of the weekly sessions. Students enrolling in the course should be prepared to do all of the assigned readings (in average some sixty pages per week) and to submit a weekly report (no longer than two double-spaced pages) responding to questions about the week’s readings. These short assignments will form the basis of class discussion and are also meant to extend the dialogue beyond class. They are due every Sunday no later than 5 pm, if you decide to address the questions related to Monday’s reading, or Tuesday no later than 5 pm, if you want to address Wednesday’s readings. (The reports should be emailed to my account: ChacR167@newschool.edu.)

In addition, students will write two longer essays (of five to seven pages); the first at midterm (due in class on November 1st) and the second by the end of the semester (due in class on December 20). These essays may either address one of a set of questions that will be handed out a week before, or explore a specific topic of your own choice. (If you choose the latter option you should discuss the topic with me.)

Grading:

Half of the grade will be based on attendance, preparation, and participation in the seminar, including regular submission of the weekly reports. The reports will not be graded, though they will be commented upon. Allowing for emergencies, each student will be given one free ‘pass’ on a report, but all others must be submitted (even if you cannot come to class). The two essays together will comprise the other half of the grade.
Schedule of meetings and required readings:

**PART I: POLITICAL THEORY AS A VOCATION:** Why study politics? Is political theory a scientific project aimed at true knowledge?; a practical project for the realization of human autonomy?; an exercise in civic solidarity – part of being a good citizen?

Week 1 (September 8): Introduction

Week 2 (September 13-15): Why political theory?


PART II: THE CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE

Week 3 (September 20-22): Historical context: the birth of democracy and philosophy in ancient Greece

A. Pericles’ Funeral Oration, from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Bk. II, §§ 34-46
Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, III, XVII
M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks*, pp. 70-82
Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Greek State”
B. Herodotus, *The Histories*, I, §§ 30-33; III, §§ 80-83; V, § 92; V, § 78; VII, §§ 101-105
Pseudo-Xenophon, *The Constitution of the Athenians*

Week 4 (September 27-29): Authority and Political Conflict: Who rules? the household, the city, the gods, or the one who knows?

A. Sophocles, *Antigone*
B. Plato, *Apology of Socrates*

Week 5 (October 4-6): Continued

A. Plato, *Crito*
B. Plato, *The Republic* 488a-489c, 514a-521c

Week 6 (October 11-13): Continued

A. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I, X (chs. 6 to 9)
B. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I (chs. 1-2, pp. 11-14); II (chs. 1 to 5, pp. 30-39); III (1 to 6, pp. 61-70)
PART III: THE MODERN PERSPECTIVE

Week 7 (October 18-20): Historical context: The birth of technology, Enlightenment, and the idea of progress

A. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
B. Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

Week 8 (October 25-27): The Founding of Modern Political Institutions

A. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Author’s Introduction; Chapters 1 (13-15); 4-6 (24-47); 11 (69-74), 13-14 (86-100)

Week 9 (November 1-3): Historical context: Modern vs. Ancient Democracy

A. Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns*
B. Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, Authors’ Introduction, Part I

Week 10 (November 8-10): Modern Democracy and its Discontents


Week 11 (November: 15-17):


Week 12 (November 22):

PART IV: THE CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Week 13 (November 29-December 1): The Radical Critique of Democracy

A. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Preface to chapter 6
B. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, chapters 7-10

Week 14 (December 6-8): Liberal Theories of Democracy

A. Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, pp. 52-79; 83-131 (recommended: 13-33)

Week 15 (December 13-15): Neo-Aristotelian, Neo-Socratic, and Neo-Nietzschean Critiques


Week 16 (December 20-22):

B. No class: final papers due