Ancient and Modern Political Theory: The Dialogue Between History and Theory

In this course we focus on the way political theory and political history are related. We study three formative moments of political theorizing: the birth of democracy in ancient Greece; the emergence of modern statecraft in Renaissance Europe; and the rise of modern democracy in the age of democratic revolutions. In addition, we also consider the 19th century critique of the emerging democratic (or ‘bourgeois’) order. By reading key texts in their historical context, from Thucydides and Plato; Machiavelli; Hobbes and Locke; and Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche, we seek to understand how political philosophy both grasps its time in thought and revolutionizes it in turn; how political regimes shape human character; and how political institutions work to procure normative ideals such as justice, community, and freedom.

The course has two main objectives. First, we shall seek to better understand the origins of our ways of thinking by tracing them to the history of political thought as it developed in the defining moments of western history. Secondly, by studying ideas in their historical context, we shall seek to understand how thinking is bound to history at the same time as it may rise above it to achieve universality. For these purposes we read successively historical studies and works in political theory, relying for guidance on a western civilization textbook.

Books required for Purchase:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Basic Political Writings, ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987)

Required books will be available for purchase from Barnes and Noble, 105 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 and to submit weekly response papers to the readings (no longer than two double-spaced pages). These short assignments will form the basis of class discussion and are also meant to extend the dialogue beyond class. They must be sent before every Sunday at 5 pm, if you decide to address Monday’s reading, or before Tuesday at 5 pm, if you want to address Wednesday’s reading. (The responses should be emailed to my account: ChacR167@newschool.edu.)

In addition, there will be four short papers (5-7 pages). The papers will be due on October 10, October 31, November 21, and December 21.

Grading:

Half of the grade will be based on attendance, preparation, and participation in the seminar, including regular submission of the weekly response papers. Late response papers will not be accepted, and the same will hold for papers that do not demonstrate a serious attempt to thoughtfully engage with the readings. (Allowing for emergencies, each student will be given one free ‘pass’ on a response, but all others must be submitted (even if you cannot come to class).)

The four short essays together will comprise the other half of the grade. Late papers will be penalized by half a letter grade (thus the highest grade for a late paper would be an A-).

A note on Attendance:

“80% of success is showing up.” Heed this advice and bear in mind that, according to university policy, more than three absences may result in a failing grade for the course.
**Schedule of meetings and required readings:**

- **Week 1 (September 7):** Course introduction
- **Week 2 (September 12-14):** Historical context: ancient Greece
  - B. Meier, 375-506
- **Week 3 (September 19-21):** Thucydides
  - A. *The Peloponnesian War*, Book I: 1.1; 1.17-23; 66-87; Book II: 34-65
  - B. Book III: 36-50; Book V: 84-116; Book VI: 8-32; VI.32-42
- **Week 4 (September 26-28):** Plato
  - A. *Seventh Letter* (xeroxed copy available at Fogelman Library)
  - B. *Republic*, Book I
- **Week 5 (October 3-5):**
  - A. Books II-III
  - B. Book IV- V
- **Week 6 (October 10-12):** Historical context: The Renaissance
  - B. Burckhardt, 98-110; 120-123; (recommended: 185-229); 271-351
- **Week 7 (October 17-19):** Machiavelli
  - A. Machiavelli, Letter to Vettori; *The Prince*, Dedicatory Letter; chapters 1-12
  - B. Chapters 13-26
- **Week 8 (October 24-26):**
  - A. Perry, 120-137; Machiavelli, *Discourses*, selections TBA (I 1-7; 9-12; 26; 34; 58; II.2; III.1)
  - B. *Discourses* continued
- **Week 9 (October 31- November 2):** Historical context: early modernity
  - A. Perry, 410-428 (recommended: Ch. 14: The Reformation, 323-347; Ch. 16: The Rise of Sovereignty, 378-410); additional reading TBA
  - B. Continued
- **Week 10 (November 7-9):** Hobbes
  - A. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Author’s Introduction; Chapters 1; 4-6; 11
B. Leviathan, 13-14; 17-18; 21

Week 11 (November: 14-16): Locke

A. Locke, *Second Treatise*, chapters 1-5
B. Chapters 7-9, 11

Week 12 (November 21): Historical context: the age of the democratic revolution

A. Perry, 428-490; additional reading TBA

Week 13 (November 28-December 30): Rousseau

A. Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, Author’s Introduction; Part I
B. Part II

Week 14 (December 5-7):

A. *The Social Contract*, Books I-II
B. Books III-IV

Week 15 (December 12-14): Marx

A. Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*
B. Marx, *On the Jewish Question*

Week 16 (December 19-21): Nietzsche

A. Nietzsche, selections of *Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil* TBA
B. Continued