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PSC 550.01: Political Theory Seminar - Approaches to Political Theory

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Political Theory Seminar:  
Approaches to Political Theory  

Course Description:  
Whether we have reached, as Judith Shklar conceded, ‘the end of political theory,’ is a question that continues to plague political theorists. Political theory’s impeding demise is, however, complicated by the fact that political theorists have never agreed to what it is they do, or should be doing, and their disagreements affect the way they approach political questions. But rather than rehashing an old debate, one that resurrects what John Gunnell has called ‘the myth of the tradition of political theory,” perhaps we ought to consider applying a different conceptual framework for understanding political theory, one that does not focus on the causes that political theorists have championed or condemned, or on how political theory has been affected by specific events (real or imagined). Instead, I propose this semester that we raise an even more fundamental question: what is the purpose of political inquiry? A fundamental question precisely because what people take to be the purpose of political theory determines what they study, who they study, and how they study it.

Course Objectives:  
1. Distinguish between a normative, a scientific/historical, and an analytical approaches, and recognize how political theorists often combine each of these approaches in their work.

2. Develop concise, analytic essays on the assigned readings. Specifically with regards to an analytic perspective, the student will consider their own position with respect to different approaches to studying political theory (i.e. what consequences follow when one emphasizes text over context when studying political theory.)

3. Evaluate a political theory in terms of its analytic, empirical, and normative claims, and its strengths and/or weaknesses.
Course Grading:
PS 550 will be taught as a seminar. Short essays (about 6 per student) will be assigned and critiqued in class (50% of course grade.) Class participation (20% of course grade) will evaluated according to each student’s contribution to discussions on reading assignments. The final (30%) will be a take-home essay examination.

In addition, students will be expected to assess the merits and weaknesses of their colleague’s essays. To give us time to prepare questions, copies of your essay must be distributed the Friday by 12pm before you are scheduled to orally present it. Late essays will not be accepted. Each Political Science M.A. graduate student must also complete a political theory field exam. The final & field exams will be take home & due on Thursday May 13th by 3pm.

Required Tests:
Leo Strauss, Natural Right & History
Erich Fromm, The Sane Society
B.F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom & Dignity
J.W. Krutch, The Modern Temper
Brian Berry, Why Social Justice Matters
Arendt, The Human Condition
Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty
M. Ignatieff, The Needs of Strangers

January 25th
Introduction to the Course: Approaches to Political Theory

Recommended Readings:
Russell Jacoby, The End of Utopia, New York: Basic Books
February 1st

*Strauss: the Conservative Justice-seeker?*
Read: Strauss, *Natural Right & History; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.*

Essays (due 1/29 by 12pm): What for Strauss is the purpose of political theory? According to Strauss, what is ‘historicism’ and how has it harmed political theory?

Essays (due 1/29 by 12pm): John Gunnell finds that “many of the commentaries on the history of political theory have become a kind of political theory which itself requires interpretation.” If so, then what does Strauss’ depiction of theory’s decline reveal about his own political perspective?

Essays (due 1/29 by 12pm): It’s argued that the Bush administration neo-conservatives are students of Leo Strauss. In what sense, can we say they understand and/or misunderstand Strauss’s conception of “natural right”?

**Recommended Readings:**
Alfred Cobban, “The Decline of Political Theory,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 68, no. 3 (September 1953), 321-337
John Gunnell, *Political Theory, Tradition & Interpretation*
Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*
Herbert Storing (ed.) *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*
A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*
Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997);
George Bruce Smith, “Leo Strauss and the Straussians: An Anti-democratic Cult?”, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 3 No. 2 (June 1997);
Seymour Hersh, “Selective Intelligence,” *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2003;

February 8th

**Liberal Justice-Seeking**

Read: Krutch, *The Modern Temper*; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

**Essays (due 2/5 by 12pm):**
What do you find to be the “justice-seeking” elements, if any, in Krutch’s analysis of modern art, science, and knowledge? What are the “liberal” values that Krutch seems to embrace and do they compliment his justice seeking? Discuss

**Essays (due 2/5 by 12pm):** What must Krutch ignore or distort, if anything, to make his indictment of modern science appear absolute?

**Recommended Readings:**
Cowley, *Exile’s Return*, 1959
Diggins, *Up From Communism: Conservative Odyssey In American Intellectual History*, 1975
Frankel, *The Case for Modern Man*, 1955
Perry, "The Modern Distemper," *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 1929
Kateb, *Utopia & Its Enemies*, 1963

* * * * Monday February 15th No Class * * * * * * President’s Day * * * *
February 22nd

**Political Theory as Empirical Inquiry**
Read:  
Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*

Essays (due 2/19 by 12pm): Is Skinner a political theorist and if he is, what makes him so?

Essays: (due 9/19 by 12pm): What claims (findings/hypothesis/laws/arguments) does Skinner make that may be called scientific? What claims (etc.) does he make that he calls scientific, but are anything but?

**Recommended Readings:**
J. Weinberger, “Science and Rule in Bacon’s Utopia: An Introduction to The Reading of the *New Atlantis*,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 70 (September 1976): 865-85

Steven Smith, “Political Science and Political Philosophy: An Uneasy Relation,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 33 (June 2000): 189-91


March 1st

**Political Theory & Scientific Inquiry**
Read: start Fromm’s *The Sane Society*

Essays: *(due 2/26 by 12 pm)*: If Skinner had his way, we must choose between science and democracy. Is he correct? Why, why not?

Essays: *(due 2/26 by 12 pm)*: “Skinner’s work is more like theology than like science.” Discuss Novak’s comment.

**Recommended Readings:** see other secondary sources on Skinner as well
J.W. Krutch “Ignoble Utopia,” in *The Measure of Man*, 1953, 55-76

Skinner, “Freedom, Control, and Utopia” in Payton Richter, *Utopias: Social Ideals and Communal Experiments*
March 8th

*Normative Inquiry & Empiricism*

Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.*

Essays *(due 3/5 by 12pm)*: Fromm, in common with other writers on the left, has a concept of alienation. What is it? Has the concept of alienation become outdated, too blunt as an analytical tool?

Essays *(due 3/5 by 12pm)*: "What is good or bad for man is not a metaphysical question, but an empirical one that can be answered on the basis of an analysis of man’s nature and the effect which certain conditions have on him." (266 - *Escape From Freedom*) Critics, like John Schaar, find many problems with Fromm’s "use of an empirical" view of human nature as a basis for his political theory. How might one go about defending Fromm’s diagnosis & prescriptions? Is one easier to ‘empirically’ defend than the other? Why, Why not?

Recommended Readings:

- Fromm, *Man For Himself*
- *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*
- Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*
- Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*
- Schaar, *Escape From Authority: The Perspectives of Erich Fromm*, 1961
- Wells, *The Failure of Psychoanalysis: From Freud to Fromm*, 1963
March 15th

**Fromm's Humanist Vision of Freedom**

Essays (due 3/12 by 12pm): Is there such a thing as a “just price” or a “fair wage?” Would you join Fromm (& Barry?) in establishing a “moral” economic system?

Essays (due 3/12 by 12pm): Does it make any sense to you to distinguish (as Fromm does) between interests and real interests? Is the separation of interests from real interests elitist, and therefore unacceptable?

Recommended Reading:
Briggs, "From Slaves to Robots," *New Statesman and Nation*, 23 June 1956
Ellul, *The Political Illusion*
*The Technological Society*
Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*

March 22nd

**Brian Berry & Justice-Seeking**

Read: Brian Berry, *Why Justice Matters*; *and see Rawls, A Theory of Justice*, Chap. 1 sections 1-4; Chap 2 sections 11-17; and all of Chap. 3.

Essays (due 3/19 by 12pm): Please compare/contrast Fromm and Barry’s diagnosis of our modern predicament. Does one thinker make a more compelling, relevant, or moral case for political change than the other? Why.

Essay (due 3/19 by 12pm): “What is the purpose of abolishing inequalities in nurture except to reveal and make more pronounced the inescapable inequalities in Nature.” Discuss Michael Young’s observation with reference to Barry’s prescription for social justice. If it applies, what are the political and social implications?

Essays (due 3/19 by 12pm): Rawls could be characterized as the ‘liberal justice-seeker.’ How does his
form of justice-seeking contrast with, say, a Barry or an Erich Fromm?

**Recommended Readings:**

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Andrew Smookler, *The Illusion of Choice*

*** March 27th – April 3rd Spring Break ***

April 5th

**Normative & Analytical Inquiry: Arendt**
Read: Arendt, *The Human Condition* & see one recommended reading below.

Essays *(due 4/3 by 5pm via email)*: Arendt is critical of Marxism, yet how does her indictment of modern society parallel Fromm’s? Is her diagnosis of modern alienation prone to the same analytic &/or empirical weaknesses?

Essays *(due 4/3 by 5pm via email)*: Arendt argues that in the beginning of the modern period, work had displaced both contemplation and action in the hierarchy of men’s activities; but by the nineteenth century labour had replaced work as the supreme activity. How did this triumph of animal laborans come about according to Arendt?

**Recommended Reading:**
Special Issue on Hannah Arendt, *Social Research*, 1977

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April 12th

**Arendt’s Analytical Inquiry into Politics cont.**

Read: *The Human Condition*

Essays (due 4/9 by 12pm): How does Arendt’s distinction between public and private relate to her distinction between work and labor. . .or does it?

Essays (due 4/9 by 12pm): What do you see as the analytical weaknesses of Arendt’s *distinction between public and private*? On the other hand, what do you find are the strengths of her distinction?

**Recommended Readings:**


April 19th  **Analytical Inquiry: Negative & Positive Liberty**

Read: Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* and one secondary source below.

Essays (due 4/9 by 12pm): Based upon your reading Berlin’s analysis of negative and positive freedom, what appears to be the purpose and goals of political inquiry for the analytical thinker?

Essays (due 4/9 by 12pm): When responding to his critics, Berlin insisted he never meant to give the impression that he preferred one conception of freedom to the other. His task was to clarify the meaning of freedom, not judge the value of either positive or negative freedom. But does Berlin avoid mixing normative claims with his analysis of these two conceptions of freedom? Discuss

Recommended Readings:
Kristjansson, K. "What Is Wrong with Positive Liberty?," *Social Theory and Practice*, Fall 1992

April 26th  **Berlin & the Analytic Approach Continued**

Essays (due 4/23 by 12pm): ‘Berlin’s contribution to our understanding of freedom is to demonstrate the error of assimilating liberty to morality, and of supposing that morality forms a coherent system.’ Discuss.
Essays (due 4/23 by 12pm): ‘As a complete theory of liberty positive freedom leaves much to be desired, but as a series of valid insights and a corrective to negative freedom, it is worthy of consideration.’ (Putterman). Discuss with reference to Berlin’s analysis of negative & positive liberty.

May 3rd

**Analytical Inquiry & Contemporary Theory**

Read: M. Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* and see another secondary source below.

Essays (due 4/30 by 12pm): Ignatieff appears to move between all three approaches to political inquiry. Does his work stress one approach more than another?

Essays (due 4/30 by 12pm): John Stuart Mill identified three tasks that should constitute the vocation of political theory: first, theorists should identify the fundamental or ultimate principles that help determine moral standards in our thinking about politics; second, theorists must also engage in some form of empirical inquiry into the conditions necessary for realizing political ideals; third, (and more controversial) the same theorists must persuade others that their vision of politics is the best, and motivate people to take actions that will make the world a reflection of their theory. How well does Ignatieff satisfy all three tasks? Do you agree that theorists should concern themselves with this third task? If so, why; if not, why not?

**Recommended Readings:**


