PSC 550.01: Political Theory Seminar - Approaches to Political Theory

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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: after successfully completing the course work, the student should be able to:

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 be 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 before you are scheduled to orally present it. Late essays will not be accepted. Each graduate student must also complete a political theory field exam. The final & field exams will be take home & due on Thursday, May 8th by 3:10pm.

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

January 28th  Introduction to the Course: Approaches to Political Theory

Recommended Readings:
February 4th

**Political Theory as Normative Inquiry**

Read: Strauss, *Natural Right & History*; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (**due 2/1 by 1pm**): What for Strauss is the purpose of political theory? According to Strauss, what is ‘historicism’ and how has it harmed political theory?

Essays (**due 2/1 by 1pm**): 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?

**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*


February 11th

**Strauss: the Conservative Justice-seeker?**

Read: Strauss, *Natural Right & History*; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (**due 1/8 by 1pm**): 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”?
Essays (due 1/8 by 1pm): Jeffery Hart lists one variety of conservative thought as "Natural law conservatism," which deduces principles of behavior from the fact of 'human' nature as distinct from other kinds of nature, and on that account resists moral change based on fashion, historical accident, or false analogies between human nature and other kinds. Conservatism of this kind, he thinks, "is found in Aristotle, Aquinas, Burke, and today in Leo Strauss (italics added.) Discuss Hart's thesis. Do you agree with it, why, why not?

Recommended Readings:
Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997);
George Bruce Smith, “Leo Strauss and the Straussian: 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 18th * * * * * * Presidents' Day * * * * * * No Class

February 25th * * * * Political Theory as Empirical Inquiry
Read: Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*

Essays (due 2/22 by 1pm): Is Skinner a political theorist?, and if he is, what makes him so?

Essays: (due 2/22 by 1pm): 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?
March 3rd

**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


**Political Theory & Scientific Inquiry**

Read: start Fromm's *The Sane Society*

Essays: *(due 2/29 by 1 pm)*: If Skinner had his way, we must choose between science and democracy. Is he correct? Why, why not?

Essays: *(due 2/29 by 1 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 10th

**Normative Inquiry & Empiricism**

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

Essays *(due 3/7th by 1pm)*: "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*) What difficulties are involved in making an "empirical" view of human nature the basis of a political theory?
Essays (due 3/7th by 1pm): 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 for either empirical investigation or as an analytical tool?

Recommended Readings:
Birnback, Neo-Freudian Social Philosophy, 1961
Bartlett & Schodall, "Fromm, Marx, and the Concept of Alienation, Science and Society, Summer 1963
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

Fromm's Humanist Vision of Freedom
Recommend: Andrew Smookler, The Illusion of Choice

Essays (due 3/14 by 1pm): Is there such a thing as a "just price" or a "fair wage?" Would you join Fromm (& Schmookler) in establishing a rational economic system?

Essays (due 3/14 by 1pm): Man is rational, says Fromm, not because he always thinks or acts rationally but because he has this need to rationalize whatever he does. What does Fromm mean? What does it mean (to you) to say that people behave or fail to behave in a rational way?

Recommended Reading:
Briggs, "From Slaves to Robots," New Statesman and Nation, 23 June 1956
Burston, The Legacy of Erich Fromm, 1991
Ellul, The Political Illusion
The Technological Society
March 31st

**Liberal Doubts & Justice-Seeking**

Read: Krutch, The Modern Temper; and see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Chap. 1 sections 1-4; Chap 2 sections 11-17; and all of Chap. 3.

Essays (due 3/30 Sunday by 12pm): What does Krutch's account of modern art, modern science and modern knowledge suggest about human dignity? Does it make sense to speak of individual "freedom" and "rights" given what we've learned from modern science, history, and philosophy?

Essays (due 3/30 Sunday by 12pm): Rawls could be characterized as the 'liberal justice-seeker.' How does his form of justice-seeking contrast with, say, a Plato or an Erich Fromm?

**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


Goodwin, *The Lottery State*

Perry, "The Modern Distemper," *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 1929

Kateb, *Utopia & Its Enemies*, 1963

Locke, Second Treatise on Government


April 7th

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

Essays (due 4/4 by 1pm): 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 4/4 by 1pm): 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
Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*
Arendt, *On Revolution*  
*Between Past and Future*  
*The Life of the Mind*

April 14th

Arendt’s Analytical Inquiry into Politics cont.
Read: *The Human Condition*

Essays (due 4/11 by 1pm): How does Arendt’s distinction between public and private relate to her distinction between work and labor... or does it?

Essays (due 4/11 by 1pm): 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?
April 21st

**Analytical Inquiry: Negative & Positive Liberty**


*Essays (due 4/18 by 1pm):* 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 4/18 by 1pm):* 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:**
John Diggins, The Promise of Pragmatism, 1994


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


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**Analytical Inquiry & Contemporary Theory**

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

Essays (due **4/25 by 1pm**): Ignatieff appears to move between all three approaches to political inquiry. Does his work stress one approach more than another?

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Essays (due **4/25 by 1pm**): 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?

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**Recommended Readings:**


