PSCI 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 theory? 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 normative, scientific/historical, and analytical inquiry, and recognize how political theorists often combine each of these types of inquiry in their work.

2. Develop concise, analytic essays on the assigned readings. Specifically with regards to an analytic perspective, students 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 Wednesday May 15th by 5pm.

Required Tests:
Leo Strauss, *Natural Right & History*
Erich Fromm, *Sane Society*
John Gunnell, *Political Theory & Interpretation*
John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*
B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*
Brian Berry, *Why Social Justice Matters*
Arendt, *The Human Condition*
M. Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*
*Classical works of: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Locke, Burke, Rousseau, Hobbes, J.S. Mill, Marx — to be assigned on an individual basis.*

January 28th
Introduction to the Course: Approaches to Political Theory
Recommended Readings:
February 4th

Methods of “Classical” Justice-Seeking: Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Locke or Marx

Essays (due 2/1 by 12pm): Please describe what constitutes ‘justice’ for one of these thinkers, and how and where do they find this justice?

February 11th

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

Essays (due 2/8 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 2/8 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?

Recommended Readings:
Alfred Cobban, “The Decline of Political Theory,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 68, no. 3 (September 1953), 321-337
Diggins, Up From Communism: Conservative Odyssey In American Intellectual History, 1975
John Gunnell, Political Theory, Tradition & Interpretation
Q. Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought
Strauss, What is Political Philosophy?, see title chapter "Strauss, Philosophy, and Politics," (Symposium) Political Theory, August 1987
February 25th

Liberal Justice-Seeking

Read: Rawls, Political Liberalism; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (due 2/15 by 12pm): Rawls could be characterized as the ‘liberal justice-seeker.’ How does his form of justice-seeking contrast with, say, Plato and Marx?

Essays (due 2/15 by 12pm): Rawls appears to engage in a very different form of ‘justice-seeking’ than Strauss. What kind of justice is he seeking? At what point, does he slip in an analytical inquiry into political language?

Essays (due 2/15 by 12pm): Rawls is very concerned with addressing the problem of democratic unity. What is the nature of this problem (is it political, ethical, practical, all of the above?) How does Rawls attempt to solve it?

Recommended Readings:
Cowley, Exile’s Return, 1959
Frankel, The Case for Modern Man, 1955
March 4th

**Political Theory as Empirical Inquiry**

Read: Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*

Essays (due 3/1 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? What model of science should we adopt when studying human behavior?

Essays: (due 3/1 by 12pm): Is more scientific or empirical knowledge always better for individuals and/or society? Is there any tension between a social science and a science that is not social (e.g. democratic theory and a science of human behavior)? Discuss with reference to Skinner’s views on these questions.

Essays: (due 3/1 by 12 pm): “Skinner’s work is more like theology than like science.” Discuss Novak’s comment.

**Recommended Readings:**


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


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 11th

**Normative Inquiry & Empiricism**

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

Essays (due 3/8 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 3/8 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 "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:
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

March 18th

Fromm’s Humanist ‘Science of Man’
Essays (due 3/15 by 12pm): Is there such a thing as a “just price” or a “fair wage?” For Fromm what constitutes a “moral” economic system and how does it provide for a just society? What differences and similarities do you find between Fromm and Rawls’ conceptions of justice?

Essays (due 3/15 by 12pm): Does it make any sense to you to distinguish (as Fromm does) between interests and real interests? How does the inquiry into interests verses real interest change the kinds of questions a thinker can explore?
March 25th

**Contemporary Justice-Seeking**
Read: Brian Berry, Why Justice Matters

Essays (due 3/22 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 3/22 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?

Recommended Readings:


Andrew Smookler, *The Illusion of Choice*

******** April 1st-7th Spring Break ********

April 8th

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

Essays (due 4/5 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 4/5 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
- Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*
- Arendt, *On Revolution*  
  *Between Past and Future*  
  *The Life of the Mind*
- Young-Bruehl, "Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s Life of the Mind," Political Theory, May 1982
- Whitfield, *Into The Dark: Arendt and Totalitarianism*
- Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*
- Raaflaub, "Democracy, Oligarchy and the Concept of the Free Citizen in Late Fifth Century Athens," *Political Theory*, November 1983
- Canovan, "A Case of Distorted Communications," *Political Theory*, February 1983

**April 15th**

*Arendt’s Analytical Inquiry into Politics cont.*

Read: *The Human Condition*

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

**Essays (due 4/12 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 22nd  
*Slack Day*

April 29th  
**Analytic Approach to Theory: John Gunnell**  
Read: John Gunnell, *Political Theory & Interpretation*

Essays (**due 4/26 by 5pm**): While are the key characteristics do you find in Gunnell analytical approach to political theory? What to do you find are the strengths & weaknesses of his approach?

Essays (**due 4/26 by 5pm**): What it’s clear Gunnell prefers to engage in critical analysis, what, if any, kind of ‘justice’ or moral values can be derived from his theory?

**Recommended Readings:**

May 6th  
**Analytical Inquiry & Conclusion**  
Read: M. Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*

Essays (**due 5/3 by 12pm**): Ignatieff appears to move between all three approaches to political inquiry. Does his work stress one approach more than another?
Essays (due 5/3 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?

Final & Field Exam (MA grads) due Wednesday, May 15th at 5pm