

Professor Andrew Poe
MW 10-11:20AM in 219 Webster Hall
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POLITICAL SCIENCE 110

Unraveling Assumptions: An Introduction to Political Theory

-Introduction-

What government is and how it is practiced relies on a whole host of assumptions. Some of these must be clearly agreed upon at the outset. For instance, how groups will organize themselves – Will they have representatives or not? How will those representatives be elected? How will they decide policy? How will they enforce it? etc. – requires consent to legitimate nascent polities. Yet other assumptions remain more disputatious. Answers to such questions as “What is justice? (Or freedom? Or equality?)” “Who is a good citizen and why?” “What is a good state?” and “What should my obligations be?” remain under continual debate, even as they paradoxically determine much of the world we live in and share with others.

This course is an introduction to political theory, the study that helps us develop working answers to those more contentious questions. The course is divided into four parts: The first examines the problems of foundations – what politics is at its beginning, its purpose and means; The second section explores the problem of political rule and the many difficulties involved in having or sharing political power; The third section deals with politics in the more ordinary aspects of our lives – the politics that determine how we interact at work and in our more private worlds with family and friends; The fourth section of the course examines the ends of politics – What is politics for? How do we know when it is (and isn't) working? When might we want to start over? Throughout, we will use a variety of resources – philosophic, literary, cultural, cinematic, and historical – to develop ways of engaging our political world, unraveling those very assumptions we choose to live by.

-Course Requirements-

There are **five** requirements for this course:

1. 5-6 page paper on political foundations. Topics will be distributed on October 5th; papers are due by email on October 12th – 20%
2. 5-6 page paper on political rule. Topics will be distributed on October 31st; papers are due by email on November 7th – 20%
3. 5-6 page paper on the politics of ordinary life. Topics will be distributed on November 16th; papers are due by email on November 28th – 20%
4. 8-10 page paper on the ends of politics. Topics will be distributed on December 14th; papers are due by email on December 21st – 30%
5. Attendance and participation in the course is mandatory (you must contact me if you ever cannot be available for class meetings) – 10%

Late Papers: Except in documented cases of serious emergency, late papers will receive a 1/3 grade penalty for each calendar day the paper is late.

-Texts-

The following books are available for purchase at Amherst Books:

J.S. Mill – *On Liberty* (Hackett)
Hannah Arendt – *On Revolution* (Penguin)
Sophocles – *Sophocles I: Oedipus The King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone* (Chicago)
Weber – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Penguin)
Plato – *Republic* (Hackett)
Kant – *Political Writings* (Cambridge)
Rousseau – *On the Social Contract* (Hackett)
Shakespeare – *King Lear* (Arden)
Aristotle – *Politics* (Cambridge)
Orwell – *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harcourt)
Machiavelli – *The Prince* (Chicago)

The remainder of the readings will be available on course e-reserve.

-Schedule and Readings-

Introduction: Facing Our Assumptions

September 7th – What is Political Theory? (Normative/ Historical/ Ontological)

September 12th – The Power of the Majority
Reading: J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (selections)

September 14th – The Power of the Minority
Reading: J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (selections)

Part 1: We Political Animals

September 19th – Politics and Authority
Readings: Machiavelli, *The Prince* (complete)
Selections from *The Book of Exodus*

September 21st – Politics and Fortune
Readings: Machiavelli, *The Prince* (complete)
Livy, “On Romulus’ Rule” (from *The Early History of Rome*)

September 26th – In the Wilderness, Part I
Reading: Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*

September 28th – In the Wilderness, Part II
Reading: Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*

October 3rd – Our Fears of Ourselves
Reading: Selections from Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*

October 5th – Foundations
FILM for Viewing: John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956)

NB: This film will stream via the Amherst College Library’s website and should be viewed prior to the class for which it is assigned.

October 12th – Class Canceled

Part 2: Who Should Rule?

- October 17th – Constitution
 Reading: Aristotle, *Politics* (selections)
- October 19th – Ruling and Being Ruled
 Reading: Aristotle, *Politics* (selections)
- October 24th – In Chains
 Reading: Rousseau, *On The Social Contract* (parts 1 and 2)
- October 26th – Obligations of Rule
 Reading: Rousseau, *On The Social Contract* (parts 3 and 4)
- October 31st – Two Bodies
 Reading: Sophocles, *Antigone*

Part 3: In Ordinary Lives

- November 2nd – Hard Work
 Readings: Benjamin Franklin, Part 2 of *The Autobiography* (pp. 58-77, in *Franklin: The Autobiography and other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue*)
 Benjamin Franklin, “Advice to a Young Tradesman written by an Old One” (1748)
 D. H. Lawrence, “Benjamin Franklin,” in *Studies in Classic American Literature*
- November 7th – Vocations
 Reading: Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
- November 9th – Dirty Work, Part I
 Reading: Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Part 1)
- November 14th – Dirty Work, Part II
 Reading: Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Part 2)
- November 16th – Unnecessary Work
 Readings: Plato, *Republic* (excerpts)
 Jacques Ranciere, “Plato’s Lie” from *The Philosopher and His Poor*

Part 4: The Ends of Politics

- November 28th – The Idea of Revolution

Reading: Aristotle, *Politics* (selections)

November 30th – What is Revolution For? Part I

Reading: Arendt, *On Revolution* (selections)

December 5th – What is Revolution For? Part II

Reading: Arendt, *On Revolution* (selections)

December 7th – Spectators of the Revolution

Reading: Kant, “A Renewed Attempt to Answer the Question: Is the Human Race Continually Improving?”

December 12th – In Theory and in Practice

Reading: Kant, “On The Common Saying: This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice”

Conclusion

December 14th – The Life We Choose

Reading: Plato, *Republic*, Book X

Some Additional Readings on the Study and Practice of Political Theory

John G. Gunnell, "The Founding of the American Political Science Association: Discipline, Profession, Political Theory, and Politics," *APSR* 100 (4) (Nov. 2006): 479-486

Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation", *APSR* 63 (1969), 1062-82

Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3-53

Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?" in *What is Political Philosophy?*

John Rawls, "Four Roles of Political Philosophy," in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*

Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" reprinted in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*

David Mayhew, "Political Science and Political Philosophy: Ontological Not Normative," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, No. 2 (Jun., 2000): 192-193

Jeffrey Isaac, "The Strange Silence of Political Theory" *Political Theory* 1995; 23; 636