POLI 2060: Introduction to Political Theory

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Office Hours: TR 12:30 - 2:30 in Stubbs 239
or by appointment

"You say you want a revolution?
Well, you know,
We'd all love to change your head."
-John Lennon (1940-1980),
"Revolution," 1968

Course Summary

POLI 2060 introduces students to the main thinkers and themes of Western political thought. This course involves history, philosophy, and literature, but is not a history, philosophy, or literature course. Political theory's essence resides in *thinking*: not only thinking like the great minds of the tradition of political philosophy, but as citizens engaged with topics of vast public importance. Therefore, this course encourages extensive discussion as a means to determine the truth regarding some of the most vital topics of political life that citizens of democracies must concern themselves with: justice, community, morality, truth, reality itself.

I emphasize the notion that political thinking does not merely reside in "intellectual arguments" or "logic," but in literary and mythic renderings of the world. As such, I will incorporate cinematic, literary, and musical elements into the course throughout. These works all contribute to a holistic understanding of the political as not something merely "rational" or "intellectual," but part of a lived reality concerning how human being ought to conduct itself in community.

Evaluation & Attendance

I generally prefer not to take regular attendance, but provide a graded equivalent**. Each week, I will post a short, five question quiz from that week's readings and lectures. These quizzes constitute 15% of your final grade, so you ought to take them seriously.** These quizzes **open after class on Friday** and **are due the following Monday at 10:30 AM.** Exceptions include weeks with tests. Many of the multiple-choice responses on tests derive from these earlier quizzes. So, it is very prudent to regularly attend class, ask questions, participate in discussion, and communicate with me regularly.

I reserve the right to suspend weekly quizzes and traditionally take attendance instead if class attendance does not meet a certain standard. Please attend class and take weekly quizzes.

- Grading Breakdown Follows:

  -15% Weekly Quizzes
  -Test 1: 17.5%
  -Midterm: 25%
  -Test 2: 17.5%
  -Final: 25%

Tests 1 & 2 will be conducted **via Zoom** and consist of past quizzes with some new questions as well. You will have 1 hour and a half and your notes to finish these tests once you begin.

The Midterm and Final will be conducted **in class via Scantron** and consist entirely of new material. The former will be tentatively given on **Friday, March 11th** and the latter **according to the LSU Finals Schedule**:

01: Sat, May 14, 7:30 - 9:30 AM
02: Tue., May 10, 12:30 - 2:30 PM

NB: Due to the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 Omicron variant, these dates are subject to change.

Readings

NB: All readings are available on Moodle, but I can recommend additional translations for each text if necessary.

Part One: The Soul – Is it possible to live a moral life in a bad regime? Do questions of class, race, and gender impact how we should view the moral life of a citizen? This introductory discussion involves depictions of life under vast injustice. The following readings suggest that despite the conditions in which humanity finds itself, often of its own design, these exigencies do not constitute the whole of political life. Rather, politics involve questions of the *whole person*, body, mind, and soul. Political theory is therefore a *social* and *architectonic* art form, as exemplified by these vital texts, each responding to their time's injustices.

Introductory Lecture, "How to Read a Book: Approaches to Political Theory, Arendtian, Straussian, and Voegelinian."

DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," "The Training of Black Men," "The Sorrow Songs." (w/ musical interpolations by Scott Joplin).

Plato, *Apology*

Part Two: The Classical Experience, Plato and Aristotle - Histories of Political Philosophy typically begin with Classical Philosophy. That is, Socratic philosophy. This section concerns itself with the thought of those directly influenced by Socrates, namely, Plato and Aristotle. The "split" between these two thinkers informs the course philosophy takes in the West regarding questions of justice, virtue, and the soul. However, we are less concerned with this history *per se*, but with how it informs the way *we* live and think about politics.

Plato, *Republic,* Books I, II, IV, VII, VIII

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* Books I-III, V, X

Part Three: The State, a Fiction? - What makes the state separate from nature? Is the state "natural?" Here, Machiavelli and Hobbes invoke a complex understanding of "technique" and "structure" respectively, that both profoundly disturb and inspire the moral sensibilities. From the ostensive cruelty of these thinkers 'musings, the justification for the one of the most successful political doctrines of human history – liberalism – arises.

Machiavelli, *The Prince,* Chs. 1-9; 14-19 (w/ scenes from Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*).

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part One: i, ii, iv, v, vi, xiii, xiv

Interlude: Politics, Film, and Literature - Everything has a story. And, when these stories are written and shared with one another, they belong to a world of people, objects, events, and ideas; to a world of politics. This section breaks with previous ones to consider a number of ancient and modern narrative works that convey important truths about that political world.

Sophocles, *Antigone*

Lanzmann, Interviews with Raul Hilberg and Jan Karski, from *Shoah*

Brecht & Weil, *The Threepenny Opera*, Recording on Spotify/Apple Music

Part Four: America and the Black Experience - In the 18th century, political despotism reigned: monarchies dominated Europe, these monarchies established colonies, and slaves worked these colonies. The American experiment, with its declaration that "all men are created equal," attempted to do away with this condition. Still, the Founding generation did not disestablish chattel slavery, prolonging its horrors for generations. This section discusses American liberalism and its relationship to human freedom, especially the freedom of slaves and their descendants.

Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume I, Part One, Chs. 4, 5; Part Two: Ch. 10; Volume II, Part Four: Ch. 6.

Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" Speech.

Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet" Speech.

Part Five: Action and Politics - Liberalism precipitated a vast expansion of wealth and technological progress in the 19th century. However, ostensibly democratic political structures did not distribute this wealth equitably throughout society. Arguably, this period of rapid economic and technological expansion led to the breakdown of traditional morality and the consolidation of power by capitalists. Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche both criticize modern liberalism for vastly different reasons. Yet both advocate forms of *action* as a way of overcoming liberal capitalism's shortcomings. This section focuses on these thinkers, considered together.

> Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, "Preface," "Alienated Labor," "Private Property and Communism."
>
> Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* Chs. 1, 2, & 4
>
> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates," "Morality as Anti-Nature," "The Four Great Errors," "Expeditions of an Untimely Man."

NB: The date these texts should be read by will be given via weekly email, typically on Friday afternoon. Please check it early and often. More texts will be added if time permits; I dearly appreciate student involvement in choice of text in case this extra time arises.

Extra Credit Screenings

In addition to the readings, I will host three screenings of films in the second half of the semester **via Zoom on Saturdays.** By attending and writing a short essay (1-2 pages) relating the film's themes to course materials, I will provide you with **five bonus points** on an assignment. The final screening will grant you **bonus points on the final and amnesty on a missed quiz**. The three films follow:

> -*Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), dir. Guillermo del Toro
> -*Robocop* (1987), dir. Paul Verhoeven
> -*Four Lions* (2010), dir. Christopher Morris

NB: Merely turning in an essay will **not** grant you full credit. I provide full feedback for extra credit papers as if I were grading a full paper. As a result, I expect you to have: 1. Watched the film you cover and 2. Read the material to which you relate the film. Dates for screenings will be delivered via email closer to their dates.

Rules and Stipulations

Above all else, I value the learning experience of students and hope to provide you all one you cannot get elsewhere. Universities are special places where you are granted four years

to **think** and to **think together with others for its own sake**. Therefore, take advantage of this opportunity. While much of what I teach here relates to the "skills" one can develop on the "job market" or in law school, I hope to provide you with a liberal arts education that informs your dealings with others in an open society regardless of where the market takes you.

Furthermore, this course is **highly discussion oriented**. It is simply impossible to learn these texts and their ideas without participating in discourse about them. As a result, when you come to class, I expect you to have read and be ready to discuss that day's text. If you are unable to access a text either on Moodle or in the library, or if that text appears arcane and difficult to approach, **please contact me and I can suggest an alternative translation for you**.

While I am very amenable about deadlines and sympathetic to situations that emerge beyond the grasp of any individual, **I do not** need your "life's story," nor do I desire a great deal of information about your personal life. Instead, I suggest in the event that you cannot attend a test date or complete a quiz on time, that you **briefly** inform me of your difficulties ideally **ahead of its due date** and we can arrange an alternative due date. **However, failure to meet this alternative time will result in a drastic reduction of credit, especially near the end of the course.**

As you are all aware, we are currently entering the third year of a deadly worldwide pandemic. Seeing as political theory is about thinking together, **please exercise restraint and caution for your fellow Tigers**. The first two weeks of this course will be provided synchronously, but at a distance. As Omicron hopefully abates and "normality" returns, **please use common sense and do not come to class if you present symptoms of COVID-19.** I can **always** help you catch up with what is lost in class, but I cannot make your health improve. Please, seek a more appropriate doctor if you are sick!

I also caution you all that discussions of real political import challenge preconceived notions of the truth; this search moves each of us beyond our "comfort zones." I reserve the right as an instructor to facilitate this search - and this means bringing the classroom **into controversial topics like race, class, gender, and religion.** At times, we will all feel uncomfortable. I want to remind each of you that **I do not intend to *make* you feel uncomfortable or uneasy**, but these feelings sometimes come with the territory, as it were.

I am confident that through this intellectual pursuit, we will grow more respectful of our differences and, therefore, grow as people. **If you have any difficulties regarding the course materials or discussions, please contact me via email, office hours, or before and after class**. Teaching is my vocation and it does not end or begin in the classroom; neither does your learning.

The Beatles

No other band outdoes The Beatles. John, Paul, George, and Ringo came out of the rough, working class streets of Liverpool to perform Rock and Roll in a completely innovative way. Since their debut in 1962, The Beatles influenced artists as diverse as The Beach Boys, David Bowie, Nirvana, Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Lil' Wayne, Danny Brown, Fugees, Frank Ocean, Ozzy Osbourne, Pixies, King Crimson, Kate Bush, Radiohead, and The Beastie Boys. Likewise, The Beatles's own influences were incredibly diverse, ranging from European baroque and Classical music, French pop, Indian Raga, American country, folk, "Motown," and "skiffle," as well then-contemporary "girl groups." Members knew and occasionally performed and collaborated with Black American artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Ronnie Spector, Stevie Wonder, Micheal Jackson, and Billy Preston. They created a veritable revolution in popular culture, seeing men donning long hair and wearing high-heeled boots for the first time in many Western countries. They were also genuine innovators in music production and songwriting, pioneering techniques like riffing, multitrack layering, overdubbing, tape looping, the intentional inclusion of feedback as an artistic choice, and sampling.

Rare for a rock band, each member of The Beatles made significant artistic contributions while producing music better than the sum of any individual members' part. Yes, including Ringo (songs like "In My Life"; "The End"; "Come Together"; "Rain"; "Tomorrow Never Knows"; and "Ticket to Ride" demonstrate Mr. Starkey's immense drumming talent). Still, this is a band with John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison in it too - and each produced incredible songs with unforgettable melodies, beautiful harmonies, and soul-stirring lyrics (see "Strawberry Fields Forever"; "Here, There, and Everywhere"; and "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," respectively among *many* others).

To this day, fans pore over and debate which album is the best (*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*), who the best member is (John Lennon), and what the best solo album is (George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*), among other, more existential questions (is Paul really dead, and if he is, is the replacement better than Paul)? Beatles fans are also remarkably diverse, spanning the globe and crossing national, racial, ethnic, generational, and political boundaries.

Truly, just as Baseball is America's pastime, Keanu Reeves is the greatest American action star, Arnold Schwarzenegger is the best European one, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is the best anime, and *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* is the best manga, The Beatles are the greatest rock band in human history. This information is part of the curriculum and by taking this course, you are responsible for and agree to be tested over it.

-ADC

ADA Compliance

The University is committed to making reasonable efforts to assist individuals with disabilities in their efforts to avail themselves of services and programs offered by the University. To this end, Louisiana State University will provide reasonable accommodations for persons with documented qualifying disabilities. If you have a disability and feel you need accommodations in this course, you must present a letter to me from Disability Services in 115 Johnston Hall, indicating the existence of a disability and the suggested accommodations.

LSU Integrative Curriculum Statement

Integrated learning allows students to make simple connections among ideas and experiences and across disciplines and perspectives. The LSU Integrative Learning Core (ILC) curriculum is designed to develop student abilities to transfer their learning to new situations, and demonstrate a sense of self as a learner. A fundamental goal of the ILC is to foster students 'practical and intellectual capacities associated with integrative learning in preparation for high competence and functionality in their post-baccalaureate careers. This course fulfills the BOR Area of Social/Behavioral Sciences and provides students experience with the ILC proficiency of Inquiry and Analysis.