

# PS129 Understanding Politics

Seminar Leaders: Kai Koddenbrock, Aysuda Kölemen, Boris Vormann

Course Times: Wednesdays 14:00-17:15

Location: Lecture Hall and City Visits as announced below

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Office Hours: by appointment

## Course Description

Laying the foundation for the politics track in the Economics, Politics and Social Thought (EPST) program, this class covers three aspects of what an academic engagement with politics presupposes. First, it provides an introduction to key concepts (nation, democracy, power, federalism, institutions, etc.), debates (e.g. state-market relations, subsidiarity, globalization, etc.), and traditions of thought (e.g. (neo-)liberalism, realism, Marxism, etc.) in political science. As such, the class facilitates a deeper understanding of the role of political science as an academic discipline within the broader range of social science traditions. Second, the course explores historical developments of the past, providing students with an overview of actors and institutions at various scales within and beyond nation-states as well as the evolution of the global political economy. Finally, the course introduces students to foundational methodological tools and academic skills. In sum, students will gain familiarity with central concepts, debates and theory traditions in political science and its subfields, deepen their understanding of major developments, players and power relationships in recent global political history, and develop foundational methodological skills.

## Requirements

### Required Textbooks

→ Course Reader

→ White-Spunner, Barney. 2020. *Berlin: The Story of a City*. London: Simon & Schuster.

### Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

### Attendance and Participation requirements

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence from this once-per-week course will not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Beyond that, each further absence will lead to a subtraction of 5 percentage points from the overall participation grade. There is no option of remote participation and electronic devices are not permitted in class. Absences cannot be substituted through extra work. Accommodation letters need to be submitted in the first week of the term and cannot be used retroactively.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes (more than four absences), regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours. Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

### Assignments and Grade Breakdown

#### *Oral*

- Participation 30% (2\*15%)  
This seminar involves thoughtful and active participation, based on the readings and the topics covered in the course, in class discussions and working groups. The classroom is a protected space and you should feel free to voice your arguments and comments. Please do not hesitate to address the seminar leaders if you feel that this is not the case.

#### *Written*

- Mid-term 30%

The mid-term exam for "Understanding Politics" will encompass a range of questions designed to evaluate students' grasp of the course material and their ability to engage in critical reflection. This assessment will include short answer prompts and essay questions that require detailed analysis and synthesis of key political concepts and theories discussed throughout the semester. Students will be expected to demonstrate their understanding of political systems, ideologies, and institutions, as well as their ability to critically evaluate contemporary political issues and debates. The exam aims to assess not only factual knowledge but also the capacity to apply theoretical insights to real-world political scenarios.

- Final exam 40%

The final exam will be an in-class essay to evaluate your critical thinking, analytical skills, and mastery of the course material. You will write a 3,000-word essay based on your choice of several provided prompts. This format aims to demonstrate your ability to construct a well-organized, coherent, and compelling argument based on the course content. Ensure you come prepared with a thorough understanding of class topics, as this is your chance to showcase your knowledge and analytical abilities in a focused, time-constrained setting. Good luck!

Schedule

1 Sept 4	<p><b>What is Politics?</b> → Lecture Hall</p> <p>1. What is Politics? Actors, Processes, Institutions//Political science and its subfields 2. Lecture (BV): “Nationalism, Democracy, and the State”</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hague (2016), <i>Introduction</i></li> <li>• Hall (2014), <i>Varieties of State Experience</i></li> <li>• Gellner (1983), <i>Nations and Nationalism</i></li> </ul>
2 Sept 11	<p><b>1740-1840: Nationbuilding</b> (organized by Boris) → Meet at M1 station “Hackescher Markt”</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White-Spunner, <i>Berlin</i>, Chapters 4 &amp; 5</li> <li>• For more context, we recommend the first half of <a href="#">White-Spunner’s talk</a></li> </ul>
3 Sept 18	<p><b>States and Markets</b> → Lecture Hall</p> <p>1. Lecture (KK): “States and Markets” 2. Break-out into sections</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wallerstein (2004), <i>The Rise of the Modern State System</i></li> <li>• Bhambra (2022), <i>Reparatory Social Science</i></li> </ul>
4 Sept 25	<p><b>1840-1871: Unification and Industrialization</b> (organized by Boris) → Meet in the foyer of Technikmuseum (Trebbiner Str. 9, 10963 Berlin)</p> <p>Readings: White-Spunner, <i>Berlin</i>, Chapter 6 Please watch Tooze, <a href="#">Bismarck, Realpolitik and the Birth of a Nation</a></p>
5 Oct 2	<p><b>Imperialism and Hegemony</b> → Lecture Hall</p> <p>1. Lecture (AK): “Imperialism” 2. Break-out into sections</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrighi (1994), <i>The Long 20<sup>th</sup> Century</i></li> <li>• Dubois (1915), <i>African Roots of the War</i></li> <li>• Getachew, please watch <a href="#">The End of Colonialism</a></li> </ul>
6 Oct 9	<p><b>1871-1918: German Colonial History</b> (organized by Kai) → Postcolonial tour</p> <p>Readings: Conrad, <i>The German Colonial Empire</i> (in our reader) (Optional: White-Spunner, <i>Berlin</i>, Chapter 7)</p>
7 Oct 16	<p><b>Mid-term exam</b></p>

\*\*\*Fall break Oct 21-27\*\*\*

8 **Fascism and Totalitarianism** → Lecture Hall

Oct 30

1. Lecture (KK): “Fascism”
2. Break-out into sections

- Kershaw (1989), *The Nazi State: An Exceptional State?*
- Rufo (2024), *The New Right Activism*
- Brooks (2024), *My Unsettling Interview with Steve Bannon*

9 **1918-1945: Democratic Failure and Fascism** (organized by Kai)

Nov 6

→ Topographien des Terrors, Niederkirchnerstraße 8, 10963 Berlin

Reading:

- White-Spunner, *Berlin*, Chapters 8 & 9

10 **Fordism in the Global Context** → Lecture Hall

Nov 13

1. Lecture (AK): “Fordism and Worlds of Welfare”
2. Break-out into sections

Readings:

- Nye (2013), *America's assembly line*
- Morel et al. (2011), *Beyond the welfare state as we knew it?*

11 **1945-1989: Cold War and Bretton Woods Order** (organized by Aysuda)

Nov 20

→ Stasimuseum, Normannenstraße 20/Haus 1, 10365 Berlin

Reading:

- White-Spunner, *Berlin*, Chapters 10 & 11

12 **Neoliberal Globalization and Uneven Development** → Lecture Hall

Nov 27

1. Lecture (BV): “Neoliberalization and the Global City”
2. Break-out into sections

Readings:

- Coe et al. (2007), *Introduction to Economic Geography*
- Sassen (2005), *The Global City*

(Optional: White-Spunner, *Berlin*, Chapter 12)

13 **Multi-polarity, Global Governance, and State Persistence** → Lecture Hall

Dec 4

1. Online Lecture, Dr. Egemen Kölemen: Geo-engineering and Global Governance
2. Break-out into sections & Wrap-up

Readings:

- Wirth (2013), *Engineering the climate: geoengineering as a challenge to international governance*
- Funnel (2020), *Saviour or scientific hubris? Geoengineering the planet to counter climate change*
- Stephens et al. (2023), *The dangers of mainstreaming solar geoengineering: a critique of the National Academies Report*

14 **Final Exam**

Dec 11