

PL115 Foundations of Political Theory

Seminar Leader: Riaz P Khan
Email: r.khan@berlin.bard.edu
Office: P98a; Room 0-10
Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

This course surveys the development of modern political thought from global, historical, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Our exploration of the foundations of political theory will proceed from close and critical reading of a reconstructed field of study informed by contemporary reception of the “great texts” from the recent and distant past. Taking our cue from Kant’s view of geography and anthropology as “propaedeutic knowledge of the world,” the course will seek to draw explicit connections between the global “unity of places” and the historical-conceptual understanding of the political. Our exploration of salient themes in political theory will rely on critical analyses of original (primary) texts that are presented conceptually and, for the most part, chronologically. The aim is to examine the historical and spatial foundations of the central ideas, practices, and institutions that continue to animate political behavior and societies. The course will trace the spread of political thought on a global scale from 16th century onward, shaped by experiences and ideas of conquest, colonization, slavery, empires, states, democracy, revolutions, and current political issues. Some of the dialogic themes include nature and society, global and universal, autonomy and authority, liberty and slavery, empire and race, state and violence, rule and contestation, and democracy and dictatorship.

The course has three major goals. First, students should gain understanding of the major texts, schools of thought, and lines of argument within the distinctive traditions of political and social thought. Second, students should gain proficiency in reading and analyzing political categories and concepts that are proposed and challenged by a variety of authors and texts. Third, students should take away from this course a substantive familiarity with the contested meanings and practices of democracy as the central problem of political theory.

Course Requirements

Students are expected to complete readings, attend class sessions, participate in discussions, and submit timely assignments. Performance will be assessed on the following basis:

- (1) **Active participation** in class discussions and group activities constitute an important component of the course. This course is designed as a collaborative and shared enterprise.
- (2) The course is **reading-intensive**. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the readings by means of (a) comments on weekly readings, (b) in-class presentation on selected reading, and (c) class discussions.
- (3) The course is **writing-intensive**. Throughout the semester, students will undertake regular writing assignments, including weekly comments, reflection papers, and analytical essays. You are encouraged to utilize the tutorial services at the Learning Center for assistance with your essays.

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.

Accessibility

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of

1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for longer-term accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangement directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the Bard College Berlin Accessibility page.

Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance Policy

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. A maximum of two excused absences during the semester may be granted to account for minor circumstances. Further absences are granted under exceptional circumstances, and require supporting documentation. No unexcused absences are permitted. Unexcused absences will adversely affect participation grade in the course. In case of authorized absences, students are responsible for making up any missed work. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment & Grade Breakdown

Student performance and final grades are evaluated on the basis of timely and satisfactory completion of course requirements. The main components of assessments are listed below, and further guidelines will be provided during the semester:

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| • Class Participation & Weekly Comments | – 30% (15% x 2) |
| • Class Presentations | – 10%. |
| • In-Class Preparatory Assignments * | – 5% |
| • Midterm: Proposal & Review of Key Concepts (1,500 words) | – 20% |
| • Final Essay (4,000 word) | – 35% |

* Preparatory Assignments include 2-3 short assignments designed to develop your final essay topics.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

All assignments must be submitted by the assigned deadlines. Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example)

Course Materials

All course readings are available in the *PL115 Course Reader* or Google Classroom (**GC**)

PL 115 Foundations of Political Theory
Schedule of Topics and Readings
Spring Semester 2026

I. POLITICAL THEORY – GLOBAL AND EPISODIC

1a. January 28 Introduction

Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part I, “Private Right,” 414-415.
Carl Schmitt, “The First Global Lines” in *The Nomos of the Earth*, 86-101.

1b. January 30 Space & Time in Social/Political Theory

Immanuel Kant, *Physical Geography*, § 445-451.
Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1-2, 26-27, 38-41. **(GC)**
Excerpts from Nietzsche, Kafka, Benjamin on “Time” (Handout)

II. LANDFALL & WINDFALL

2a. February 4 Unjust Enemy/Just Occupation

Francisco De Vitoria, “On American Indians” in *Political Writings*, selected pages.
Optional: Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, 9-25.

2b. February 6 “Rightful” Occupation

Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part I: “Private Right,” 401-421.

3a. February 11 Commentaries on Indigenous Critique

William Connolly, “Tocqueville, Religiosity, Pluralization,” in *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 163, 167-178.
David Graeber & David Wengrow, “Wicked Liberty,” in *The Dawn of Everything*, 57-67.
Optional. Silvia Federici, “Colonization and Christianization,” in *Caliban and the Witch*, 219-239. **(GC)**

LIBERALISM AND REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

3b. February 13 Nature and Sovereignty

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch 13-17.

4a. February 18 Nature and Consent

John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, Ch 2-5, 9.
David Davis, “The Response to Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Thought,” in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Thought*, 116-121. **(GC)**

4b. February 20 Nature and Alienation

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Part II.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract*, Book I.
Joan Landes, “Rousseau’s Reply to Public Women,” in *Women and the Public Sphere*, 66-89. **(GC)**

5a. February 25 Nature and History

Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Political Writings*, 41-53.
Immanuel Kant, “Toward Perpetual Peace,” in *Practical Philosophy*, 317-331.
Immanuel Kant “The Metaphysics of Morals,” in *Practical Philosophy*, 386-89, 482-490.

5b. February 27 Liberalism and Oligarchy

Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, 94-108. (GC)

Aristotle, *Politics*, selections from Book III. (GC)

Optional: The Old Oligarch, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, 15-20, 24-25, 28-29. (GC)

IV. LIBERALISM AND ITS OTHERS

6a. March 4 Liberalism and Women

Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Introduction, Ch 1, 2.

Joan Landes, "Women and Revolution," in *Women and the Public Sphere*, 121-151. (GC)

Optional: John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, Ch 1.

6b. March 6 Liberalism and Poverty

Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 16-25. (GC)

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 594-617.

Background: Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 473-483.

7a. March 11 Liberalism and Democracy

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 22-25; 59-64.

Pierre Rosanvallon, "The Political Theory of Democracy," in O. Flügel-Martinsen et. al. (eds.) *Pierre Rosanvallon's Political Thought*, 23-38.

7b. March 13 Capitalism and Gender

Silvia Federici, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism*, 25-46, 76-91. (GC)

8a. March 18 Liberalism and Slavery

Fredrick Douglass, "What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in *Fredrick Douglass Reader*.

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Ch 1-2.

V. STATE AND VIOLENCE

8b. March 20 State and Law

Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 77-79.

Walter Benjamin, "The Right to Use Force," in *Selected Writings Vol I*, 231-233.

Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings Vol I*, 236-252.

9a. March 25 Total State

Carl Schmitt, "Definition of Sovereignty," in *Political Theology*, Ch 1.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses of Livy*, 73-75.

Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 65-71.

9b. March 27 State of Exception

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 17-23, 47-48, 52-54, 63-66.

Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception as a Paradigm of Life," in *State of Exception*, 1-31. (GC)

March 29: Midterm Essay Due

10a/10b. April 1, 3 SPRING BREAK

11a. April 8 Manichean World

Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1-26.
W. E. B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, 12-20. **(GC)**

11b. April 10 Race and Recognition

Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 257-266
James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," in *Notes of a Native Son*, 163-179.

VI. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE TOTAL STATE

12a. April 15 Limits of Parliamentarianism

Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 22-50.
Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 2-12.

112b. April 17 Electoral Democracy as Rule

Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 250-256, 269-283.

13a. April 22 Neoliberalism and Total State

David Harvey, "The Neoliberal State," in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 64-86. **(GC)**
Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework: Critical Essay in Knowledge and Politics*, 37-59.

13b. April 24 Neoliberalism and Nation-State

Hannah Arendt, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 369-384. **(GC)**
Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Camp," in *Means Without Ends*, 47-55. **(GC)**
Christian Joppke, *Neoliberal Nationalism: Immigration and the Rise of the Populist Right*, 117-136. **(GC)**

VII. DEMOCRACY AND CONTESTATION

14a. April 29 Democracy and Revolution

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 28-35.
Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, 100-113.

14b. May 1 NO CLASSES

15a. May 6 Contested Democracy: Affect and Performance

Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 66-98 (selections).
Lauren Berlant, "On the Desire for the Political," in *Cruel Optimism*, 223-232.

15b. May 8 Citizenship as Rule and Contestation

Lauren Berlant, "The Intimate Public Sphere" in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington*, 1-10, 15-25.
Danielle Allen, "Epilogue: Powerful Citizens," in *Talking to Strangers*, 161-186.

16a/b. May 13, 15 COMPLETION WEEK