

PL115 Foundations of Political Theory

Seminar Leader: Riaz P Khan
Email: r.khan@berlin.bard.edu
Office: P98a; Room O-10
Office Hours: Friday 14:00-16:00 and 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 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 is an important component of this course. The 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 visit the Learning Center for tutorial 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:

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|---|------------------------|
| • Class Participation & Weekly Comments | – 30% (15% x 2) |
| • Class Presentations | – 10%. |
| • Midterm: Proposal & Review of Concepts (1,500 words) | – 25% |
| • Final Essay (4,000 word) | – 35% |

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

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

Course Materials

All **required** course readings are available in the *PL115 Course Reader*.

All **optional** course readings are available in the *Google Classroom*.

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

1a. September 2 What is Global Political Theory?

- Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part I, "Private Right," 414-415.
- Immanuel Kant, *Physical Geography*, § 445-451.
- Carl Schmitt, "The First Global Lines" in *The Nomos of the Earth*, 86-101

I. LANDFALL & WINDFALL

1b. September 4 The Conquest of America

- Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, selections from Ch 1, 3.
- Silvia Federici, "Colonization and Christianization," in *Caliban and the Witch*, 219-239.

2a. September 9 Unjust Enemy/Just Occupation

- Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, Book II, Chapter 2-4 (selections).
- Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*, 175-179, 41-46.

2b. September 11 "Rightful Occupation"

- Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part I: "Private Right," 401-421.
- Jakob Huber, "Theorizing from the Global Standpoint: Kant and Grotius on Original Common Possession of the Earth," 1-27. **(Optional)**

II. LIBERALISM AND REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

3a. September 16 Nature and Sovereignty

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

3b. September 18 Nature and Government

- John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, Ch 2-5, 9.

4a. September 23 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," 66-89.

4b. September 25 Nature and Universal History

- Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," 41-53.
- Immanuel Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace," 317-331.
- Immanuel Kant "The Metaphysics of Morals," 386-89, 482-490. (N.B. Add state of nature)

5a. September 30 Liberalism and Representative Government

- John Stuart Mill, *Considerations of Representative Government*, selections.
- Hamilton, Jay, Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, **No. 1; 9-10; 47; 51; 54.**
- Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, 94-108. **(Optional)**

III. LIBERALISM AND ITS OTHERS

5b. October 2 Liberalism and Public 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.

6a. October 7 Liberalism and Slavery

- Fredrick Douglass, "What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" 109-119.
- W. E. B. DuBois, *The Black Reconstruction*, Ch. 1, 17.
- David Davis, "The Response to Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Thought," 3-17, 114-121. **(O)**

6b. October 9 Liberalism and Colonialism

- Dadabhai Naoroji, *Essays, Speeches, Addresses, and Writings*, 26-45; 131-136.
- Aimé Césaire, *Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism*, selections.

7a. October 14 Liberalism and Class Struggle

- Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 149-151, 155-163.
- Karl Marx, "Estranged Labor," 70-81.

7b. October 16 Liberalism and Revolution

- Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 16-25.
- Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 473-483.

October 18: Midterm Assignment Due

8a/8b. October 21 & 23 FALL BREAK

IV. THE TOTAL STATE

9a. October 28 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.

9b. October 30 Sovereignty and Dictatorship

- 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.

10a. November 4 State of Exception

- Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 17-23, 47-48, 52-54, 63-66.
- Giorgio Agamben, "The State of Exception as a Paradigm of Life," 1-31.

10b. November 6 Biopolitics and Governmentality

Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power Over Life," 135-158.
Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," 87-104.

11a. November 11 The Colonial State

- Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," 1-26.
- David Scott, "Colonial Governmentality," 23-52.

V. DEMOCRACY AND CONTESTATION

11b. November 13 Democracy & Oligarchy in Ancient Greece

- Aristotle, *The Politics*, Bk I (Ch 1-2); Bk III.
- The Old Oligarch/Pseudo-Xenophon, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, 15-20; 24-25; 28-29.

12a. November 18 Democracy in America

- Alexis de Tocqueville, "Social State of the Anglo-Americans," 75-90.
- Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 22-25; 59-64.
- Pierre Rosanvallon, "The Political Theory of Democracy," 23-38.

12b. November 20 Parliamentarism & Illiberal Democracy

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

13a. November 25 Electoral & Deliberative Democracy

- Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 250-256, 269-283.
- Jürgen Habermas, "The Three Models of Democracy," 239-252.

13b. November 27 Race, Recognition, Rights

- James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 163-179.
- Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 257-266.
- W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 7-14.

14a. December 2 Revolution and Democracy

- Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 28-35.
- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175-181.
- Hannah Arendt, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," 290-302.

14b. December 4 Democracy and Contestation

- Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," 66-98.
- Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 100-113.

15a. December 9 Neoliberalism & Illiberal Democracy

- Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," 37-59.
- David Harvey, "The Neoliberal State," 64-86.

15b. December 11 Social Democracy & Democratic Socialism

- Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, Ch 1.
- Lane Kenworthy, *Would Democratic Socialism Be Better?* Ch 17

16a. December 16-19 Completion Week (No classes)

December 20: Final Assignment Due