

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THOUGHT PSC 231, Spring 2022

Dr. John McMahon

jmcma004@plattsburgh.edu

Office: Hawkins 149G (inside Political Science suite Hawkins 149, down the hall to the left)

Class Meeting: MWF 11-11.50, Hawkins 131

Student Hours (Please make an appointment through the link on Moodle)

Mondays 3:30-4:30pm, in person

Wednesdays 1-1:45pm, in person

Thursdays 3-4:45pm, Zoom

(email me for other days/times if those listed do not work for you!)

What is this course about?

What is democracy, and what does it mean to be a democratic actor? What is the proper relationship between individual and government? What makes government, property, and law legitimate? This course examines these and other core debates about political life in a pluralistic society. Through foundational themes such as democracy, participation, and freedom, and through readings drawn from the history of political philosophy, you will study the most foundational questions of political society.

This semester, we will focus more specifically on the political relationship between the individual, society, and government, and on democracy. This includes but is not limited to questions such as: should you obey the laws, even when they are unjust? What makes government, private property, and the law legitimate? Can you be subject to a government and still be free? How important is equality? What kind? How does racial injustice shape political relations? What is democracy and what does it require?

This introduction to political thought/theory/philosophy emphasizes close readings, critical analysis, and class discussion of theoretical texts. Each of the main sections of the course pairs an important political thinker—three historical, one contemporary—with important political ideas. You will develop your own capacity for articulating and analyzing political ideas in this class and beyond, as a crucial element in your own political life. This means that your active citizenship in the course is essential, and that you should be open to reflecting on and re-evaluating your own political ideas (as I will do myself). Our course discussions and writing assignments provide opportunities for practicing your own political thinking in conversation with your peers and with the texts we read, and the final assignment asks you to use the course to reflect on yourself as a democratic actor.

What will you learn this semester?

At the end of this course, the student will be able to:

1. Analyze political philosophy and its component concepts, interpretations, claims, and supporting reasoning
2. Demonstrate knowledge of central questions, themes, concepts, and thinkers in Western political philosophy
3. Explain the history of political philosophy as an ongoing, connected conversation debating enduring questions related to democracy, freedom, and order
4. Assess questions about political philosophical themes such as democracy or freedom, in written and oral form
5. Apply philosophical concepts about politics in order to evaluate students' own political beliefs and role in society

6. Examine how racial and gender inequalities shape political thinking and political practice

General Education / Cardinal Core

This course has been approved for the Individual Expression category of the Cardinal Core Curriculum. This class engages the *Humanities* knowledge domain, *Critical Thinking* skill, and *Individual Development and Responsibility* perspective. This course has also been approved for the Western Civilization GE Category.

What are your assignments and how are you graded?

1. Class citizenship, including attendance: 30%
2. Discussion questions: 20%
3. Take-home essays: 35%
4. Final reflection essay: 15%

Grading: Grades will be assigned in accordance with the SUNY Plattsburgh College Catalog: *Superior:* A (92.5-100), A- (90-92.4); *Above Average:* B+ (87.5-89.9), B (82.5-87.4), B- (80-82.4); *Average:* C+ (77.5-79.9), C (72.5-77.4), C- (70-72.4); *Passing but unsatisfactory:* D+ (67.5-69.9), D (60-67.4); *Failing:* E (0-59.9)

1. Class citizenship and attendance (30% of overall grade): I care about whether you come to class and the role you play in it; our class will be most rewarding if you attend regularly, and if you are an active citizen. This has several elements:

Attendance: To do well in this class, you must come to class. The way I teach asks you to engage with and think about challenging readings and concepts before you come to class, so that we can use class time to clarify difficulties, explain necessary details about the reading, and do political thinking collectively. I also want to balance this with the hardships of COVID, and of some flexibility for you. Thus, the attendance policy for this semester is that you have five automatically excused absences, without needing to tell me anything, used for whatever you need; after five absences, we will talk and additional absences can lead to deductions in your grade. If you need to miss class time due to contract COVID or caring for someone who does, or another medical emergency, those will not count, but you must notify me. I would strongly recommend not using all your five absences quickly!

Class citizenship: Class citizenship, however, entails more than just showing up, it also means participating in class. *Doing the reading is part of your classroom citizenship!* (and remember that Moodle shows me who is and is not doing the reading). Participation can take many different forms: asking questions about unclear concepts or materials, raising ideas we as a class or the author may have overlooked, respectfully sharing opinions, volunteering to read passages aloud, visiting student hours, contributing to class discussions in large and small groups without monopolizing conversations, paying attention to me and to your classmates, and taking risks when there are questions asked that have no clear answers. Participation does not only mean talking—it also means working to be aware of the space you inhabit and how you can best contribute to an atmosphere of supportive learning. Engaging with your peers when you are working/talking in small groups is part of class citizenship. I understand that speaking in class can be challenging. We will have a number of different kinds of discussions to encourage participation, and you should use the discussion questions as a way of preparing ideas to bring to our class sessions. Last but not least, class citizenship means being receptive of and interested in others' political and philosophical perspectives, respectful of experiences different than your own, and open to having others disagree with you. And, in COVID times, class citizenship means keeping your mask on and over your nose and mouth.

GRADING: We will jointly evaluate your class citizenship grade, based on the rubric posted to Moodle. About halfway through the semester, you will fill out a self-evaluation to see where you think you are at, and to help you determine what you want to change (and what to continue!) going forward. During the last week of the semester, you will fill out the final self-evaluation, and write a paragraph about your class citizenship to turn into me. I will also fill out an evaluation for you. If your self-evaluation grade is more than 4 points

higher than mine, you receive my lower grade; if your self-evaluation grade is more than 4 points lower than mine, you receive my higher grade. Otherwise, the average between the two will be your citizenship grade, pending any adjustment for absences. My goal with this is for you to have a stake in your evaluation, and to have the opportunity to reflect on your role in the classroom.

2. Reading discussion questions (20% of final grade):

Before every class session, you need to write and submit 1-2 discussion question about that day's reading, to be submitted on Moodle by 6am the morning of class. The purpose of this is for me to check that you are doing the reading, to learn what ideas and points in the reading students are interested in or struggling with, and to help you shape what we talk about during class time.

The questions should be something about which you are interested in hearing others' thoughts. Some guidelines for reading questions are that they:

- require reading most or all of the reading to answer (that is, they should engage more than just the first couple pages of the reading);
- engage a substantive issue, concept, or idea that you see as connected to the course;
- would require much more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer or a quick Google search to respond to; and
- involve *your own thinking, response, uncertainties, and more* about the reading, and thus do *not* come from SparkNotes or other similar online sources; *the questions must be your ideas plus your words.*

The questions may take the form of connecting the reading to a contemporary political issue/debate, making connections to previous ideas and readings, asking a critical question of the thinker's ideas, identify and ask a question about an especially significant or interesting passage, identify and ask a question about an idea that is amusing, confusing, intriguing, or otherwise speaks to you, and so on.

You are to write questions for every class session, with five free skips for the semester (that is, you can miss five days' worth of questions before your grade starts to go down). Questions are due submitted to Moodle by 6am, about the reading(s) for that day's class session. While these are primarily a way for me to check that you are doing the reading, I will also somewhat regularly bring in your questions to our class time together. The questions will be graded as a completion grade: follow the guidelines above, and you get 100%. Late submissions do not receive credit – they will count toward one of your free skips.

Extra-credit 1: If you complete *every single day's worth of reading questions*, not only do you get 100% in this part of the course grade, but you also will earn an additional extra credit bonus (one-third of a full letter grade at the end of the semester).

Extra-credit 2: For a little extra credit for this part of your grade, you may write *substantive* comments/replies on your classmates' posts. Comments can be written from the end of class Friday through the end of the weekend, in response to posts from the preceding week; maximum of three comments per week, and substantively responding to someone else's reply to your initial question can also count as a comment.

3. Essay assignments (35% of final grade): There are four take-home essay assignments (1000-1200 words in length) throughout the semester. You are required to write the first essay, and I will count the three highest grades overall toward your final grade. This means you can write all four essays and I will drop the lowest score, or you can write three essays that will all count. The essay due dates are listed in the syllabus. You will have the assignment and grading rubric at least one week before the due date, and you will have a free workday (no reading or required class session) on the due date of each essay.

4. Final reflection essay (15% of final grade): During finals week, you will write an essay (1000-1200 words in length) reflecting on the documentary we watch during the final week in relation to the semester as a whole, and to your own self-understanding as a political thinker and democratic actor.

Readings

All reading for this semester is uploaded to Moodle as a PDF, or is freely available on the internet and linked to on Moodle.

Technology

Numerous studies (for example [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#); for an overview see [here](#)) demonstrate that, on aggregate, students taking notes by hand learn information more effectively and receive higher grades than those taking notes electronically, even when those on devices are exclusively focused on class tasks (which is hard to do!). Moreover, many of us (myself certainly included) find it difficult to pull ourselves away from social media, news, etc. when we have screens in front of us. Finally, in a class that will involve lots of discussion with one another, screens, alerts, and notifications can distract you and your classmates, and can impede the conversations that will be essential to our experience in the course this semester.

Nevertheless, all of our readings for the course are in PDF/electronic form, and I recognize that laptops/tablets are essential to the learning of many students. So, while I encourage you to print out course materials and take written notes, you may use devices for referencing readings and taking notes in class. Any in-class use of devices for other activity that is disruptive to your fellow students or to me will result, without warning, in your citizenship grade going down. If you have concerns or want advice on technology use, please come talk to me.

Things to know about the class (and the campus)

COVID

We will follow all college-wide policies and procedures, and we should expect these to potentially change throughout the semester. We are all required to be masked (over nose and mouth), and failing to wear your mask correctly will result in points off of your grade. We will be changeable and adaptable as we need to, and if classes move online for any period of time, we will adjust accordingly, and I will consult you all about how to best make that adjustment. If you have to miss class for being sick, isolation/quarantine, family care, etc., let me know and we will adjust as necessary.

Inclusivity and Classroom Environment

The diversity of this classroom and campus is a strength, and I intend to cultivate a classroom environment that is attentive to and respectful of diversity in its many forms, including but not limited to the intersections of race, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class/socioeconomic background, ability, age, culture, national origin, religion, and political and philosophical opinion. I strive for inclusivity in education, understood as a demonstration of equity through awareness, understanding, and respect for the ways that the differences, identity, culture, background, and experience, and socialization impact how we live and learn. Please let me know if something said or done in the classroom, by myself or a fellow student, is particularly troubling.

I believe that the best way to learn and engage with the course material is adopting a critical perspective. This class is an open floor for ideas as long as we acknowledge that there might be fundamental differences in our opinions and political positions, cultivate respect for each other, and avoid discriminatory language. Further, disagreement (including, and perhaps especially, with me) is inevitable in a political science class, and can be generative for everyone in the room, so long as it proceeds equitably. A variety of opinions and experiences can be a source of learning for us all.

Gender Pronouns

All people deserve to be addressed in accordance with their identity, including their gender pronouns. Students are encouraged to notify me of their gender pronouns (she/her/hers, he/him/his,

they/them/theirs,, etc.) if they wish to do so, so that I can address you correctly. My pronouns are he/him/his. You can also now set your pronouns in Banner/MyPlattsburgh.

Accessibility and Student Support Services

It is the policy of the College that any student requiring accommodations of any kind to fully access this course must be registered for accommodations with the Student Support Services office located in the Angell College Center. If you need any accommodations for this course, please contact Student Support Services at 518–564–2810. Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If there are ways I can assist you in reaching your full potential in class, please talk to me or email me.

Learning Center

The Learning Center (101-103 Feinberg) offers many resources that may be useful for this course, including free tutoring, academic peer mentoring, “academic personal trainers,” and more. Visit the [Learning center website](#), contact them, or ask me for a referral. I am also available to answer any questions, to help with readings, to brainstorm, to assist on assignments, to offer advice, and more – email me or drop-in during office hours.

Academic Honesty

It is expected that all students enrolled in this class support the letter and the spirit of the Academic Honesty Policy as stated in the College Catalog. Academic misconduct and dishonesty—such as cheating, plagiarism, submitting someone else’s work as your own, submitting work from other classes without permission, etc.—are serious offenses. Such acts violate the trust that forms the foundation of the student-teacher relationship, they take away opportunities to learn, and they discount the work of others, including peers, faculty, and scholars. Acts of suspected academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, will be addressed through the [Suspected Academic Dishonesty Procedure](#).

Other course policies

- Check your email regularly – I will do the same for you. During the week, you will usually receive an email response from me within 24 hours; on the weekends, it might be longer.
- If a student has a desired name that is not listed on my course roster, please let me know.
- I strongly encourage you to come visit my student hours, even if only to chat; if the times listed don’t work, email me so we can figure out another time to meet.
- If you are struggling with any aspect of the course, talk to me sooner rather than later so we can work on the ways to best help you. Please also consider visiting the Learning Center.
- For some extra credit to demonstrate you read through the syllabus, email me a cute animal picture by 11am on Wednesday February 2.
- If a religious holiday that you observe conflicts with assigned work, please let me know in advance so that we may discuss alternate options.

COURSE SCHEDULE

The schedule is subject to change; when there are multiple readings, please read them in the listed order.

Some notes on reading for this class

I expect you to do the reading (yes, all the reading) before you come to class every day, and indeed you will need to read for the discussion questions.. I try to excerpt readings whenever possible. The reading in the class will be a challenge; you will not “understand” every single thing, *and that is entirely okay!* There are texts we engage in this class that I am puzzling over the tenth time through for myself. We are trying to think with these writers, and there is no such thing as 100% perfect understanding of a theoretical or philosophical text. My expectation is that you engage in thought, analysis, and interpretation, and this is how you are evaluated

rather than having a supposed perfect understanding. All that said, I am happy to help if/when you struggle with the readings! Please also refer to the reading and note-taking strategies info sheet on Moodle.

One of the difficult (but rewarding!) parts of political thought is that it teaches you how to read *both generously and critically*. Generously, because you want to try to track the thinker's argument, ideas, framework to take on the author's mode of thinking; critically because you also want to be skeptical of the thinker, evaluating their claims and the assumptions upon which they depend. I learn new things every time I read and teach these thinkers, and there are parts of each of them that resonate with me and parts that I entirely disagree with – my hope is that you develop a similar relation to them! Political thought is a provocation to think and reflect, above all else.

I. Introducing Political Thought

1/31: Introductions

- Read: syllabus

2/2: What is political thought (and why study it?)

- Read: Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973); Scott Samuelson, "Why I Teach Plato to Plumbers," *The Atlantic* (2014)

2/4: Political Thought and Resistance

- Read: N.K. Jemisin, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" (2018)

II. Dissent and the Politics of Citizenship: Socrates

2/7: The Apology

- Read: *Apology* (c. 399 BCE), beginning through line 29d

2/9: The Apology

- Read: *Apology* (c. 399 BCE), line 29d-end

2/11: Socrates on Trial

- Read: re-read the *Apology*
- In-class: Socrates trial simulation

2/14: The *Crito*

- Read: *Crito* (c. 399-390 BCE), all

2/16: Citizenship, Dissent, and Democracy

- Wendy Brown, "Political Idealization and its Discontents," *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (2005), pp. 17-27

2/18: Essay I due

- Workday; no required class

III. Liberty (for some), Property, and the State: John Locke

2/21: The State of Nature, the State of War

- Read: John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (c. 1689), chaps. 1-3

2/23: Property, Slavery

- Read: Locke, *Second Treatise*, chaps. 4-5

2/25: Locke simulation/activity

- Read: Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 6

2/28: Popular Sovereignty and the Formation of Government

- Read: Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 7 §87-90; chap. 8, §95-99 and §119-121; chap. 9 all

3/2: September 29: Government According to Locke

- Read: Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 11 all; chap. 12 §143-144; chap. 13 §149-150; chap. 14 §159-160 and 164-168

3/4: A Right to Revolt?

- Read: Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 18, §199, 201-204, chap. 19 §211-217, 221-230, 240-243

3/7: Gender and Patriarchy in Locke

- Read: Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (1988), excerpts from chaps. 1 and 4

3/9: Colonialism and Slavery in Locke

- Read: Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, excerpt from chap. 4; John Quiggin, “Locke Against Freedom,” *Jacobin* (2015)

3/11: **Essay II due**

- Workday; no required class

SPRING BREAK

- Extra credit opportunity TBA

IV. Thinking Democracy

3/21: The long history of democracy?

- Read: David Stasavage, “Early Democracy was Widespread” excerpt, *The Fall and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (2020)

3/23: Plato: Celebrating and Critiquing Democracy

- Read: Plato, *Republic* (c. 375 BCE), excerpts from Book VIII

3/25: Rousseau: Radical democracy in the 18th century?

- Read: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract* (1762), excerpts

3/28: Du Bois, Race, and Democracy in the US

- Read: W.E.B. Du Bois, “On the Ruling of Men” (1920), all

3/30: A Feminist Theory of Democracy

- Read: Anne Phillips, “Feminism and Democracy,” excerpt, in *Engendering Democracy* (1991)

4/1: Democracy and Climate Change

- Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* (2004), excerpts from chapter 5

V. Karl Marx, Revolution, and Economic Democracy

4/4: The Communist Manifesto

- Read: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), excerpts

4/6: Revolution

- Read: Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), excerpts

4/8: Marx, the Manifesto, and the League of the Just

- Read: Re-read *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*
- Read: Mitchell Aboulafia, “Eight Marxist Claims that May Surprise You” (2019)
- In-class: Prepare for simulation

4/11: “The League of the Just” Simulation

- Read: Prepare for simulation, no new reading
- In-class: Simulation

4/13: Marxist freedom

- Read: Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845-6), short excerpt on communism; Marx, *Capital Vol. III* (1894), short excerpt on freedom and necessity; Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program” (1875), excerpts

4/15: Workplace democracy

- Read: Roberto Frega, Lisa Herzog, and Christian Neuhauser, “Workplace democracy: the recent debate” (2019), *Philosophy Compass* 14 (4)

VI. Solidarity and Justice in a Multiracial Democracy

4/18: Essay III Due

- Workday; no required class

4/20: Introduction to race and political solidarity

- Read: Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (2009), Introduction

4/22: What is solidarity?

- Read: Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, chap. 1 pp. 21-40

4/25: What is racialized solidarity?

- Read: Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, chap. 1 pp. 40-end

4/27: Contesting Multicultural Political Thought

- Read Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, chap. 3 pp. 88-91, 97-105

4/29: Public Memory

- Read Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, chap. 3 pp. 105-end

5/2: Racialized Solidarity in Nicaragua

- Read: Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, chap. 4 all

5/4: Reflecting on Race and Political Solidarity

- Read: Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, conclusion all

5/6: Essay IV Due

- Workday; no required class

VII. Conclusion: What is Democracy?

5/9: What is Democracy?

- In-class: set-up and begin watching *What is Democracy?* (2018, dir. Astra Taylor)

5/11: What is Democracy?

- In-class: continue *What is Democracy?*

5/13: What is Democracy?

- In-class: finish and discuss *What is Democracy?*