

University of Pennsylvania
PSCI 5991: Politics of Interpretation
Theories and Applications
Fall 2023

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According to Karl Marx, “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” It is precisely this connection between interpretation and political transformation that anchors much of political theory, past and present. Political theorists indebted to disparate approaches take the close reading of texts as essential not only to understanding politics but remaking it in ways that enlarge the scope of human freedom and justice and identify and combat various forms of domination. In this seminar, we will examine these premises and take up a number of questions they pose. What are the different approaches or ‘schools’ of interpretation that define political theory, what practices, protocols or methods define them, and how have they been challenged or remade? What makes one interpretation better, more insightful or more correct than another? What are the political stakes of these questions and the answers we find? While this course does not aim to provide an exhaustive survey of the current scene, it is decidedly broad-gauged. It attends to matters implicated in these questions, such as how one ‘does’ political theory, its jurisdiction, what counts as a text, and why interpretation is essential to the study of politics in the first place. It engages with Straussian, hermeneutic, post-structuralist, and decolonizing approaches, the ‘Cambridge School,’ and interpretive approaches indebted to studies of gender, feminist theory and critical race theory. Throughout our investigations, we’ll aim to connect theories of interpretation to the practice of interpretation by looking at exemplary applications, with a particular emphasis on those that extend beyond the coordinates of Euro-American thought and practice.

Assignments and Evaluation:

- 1) As this is a reading intensive course, the success of which depends upon the active participation of all students, everyone is required to complete all of the reading assignments by the dates indicated on the syllabus and be prepared to discuss them during the seminar. Participation will constitute **30%** of the course grade, and will be based on evidence of having closely read and reflected upon the materials for each week.
- 2) At the end of the second week of class, every student will sign up to be responsible for the readings in two different upcoming seminar sessions. These are *not* oral presentations; they’re in-class exercises in close reading and analysis. They are graded assignments, however, and require significant preparation and thought. They should include the following: 1) one to two passages from each reading you think captures the very core of the author’s argument; 2) orally interpret and analyze (rather than summarize or paraphrase) each passage you have chosen in class; 3) consider all the readings together and prepare, in writing, at least two questions that will focus our discussion on the main issues or challenges they pose. (As the number and type of readings vary for each session, please consult with me in advance about how many passages will be required.) Each of these assignments will constitute 10% of the grade; together they constitute **20%** of the course grade.

- 3) Each student will write a 15-20 page research paper on a topic of your choice that is also central to the material and issues we're discussing, designed in consultation with me. You should arrange to meet with me no later than week 7 (October 23-27) to discuss your topic. By the end of week 9 (November 10th at 5 p.m. at the latest), you'll need to submit a one-page prospectus of your paper and a preliminary reading to me via email (euben@sas.upenn.edu). The final paper must be submitted (as a Word document) by 5 p.m. on December 21. The paper will constitute **50%** of your course grade.

Evaluation Breakdown:

Participation: 30%

Two discussion preps (10% each): 20%

Research paper (15-20 pages): 50%

Readings:

To ease financial pressures, there are no required books to purchase for this seminar. All assigned readings are uploaded to the "Files" folder in our Canvas course site, including books available for free in ebook form via Penn Libraries. Note: the readings here are not set in stone and may need to be adjusted as we go.

Seminar Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction (Sept. 11)

Week 2: What is Political Theory? (Sep. 18)

Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays*, ed. Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 3-32.

John Dunn, "The History of Political Theory," in *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-38.

Jeremy Waldron, "What Would Plato Allow," in Ian Shapiro and Judith Wagner DeCew, eds., *Theory and Practice* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), pp. 138-178.

Ruth W. Grant, "Political Theory, Political Science, and Politics," in *What is Political Theory?*, ed. Stephen K. White and J. Donald Moon (London: Sage Publications, 2004), pp. 174-192.

Week 3: The Politics of Canonization (Sept. 25)

Peter Euben, "Imploding the Canon: The Reform of Education and the War over Culture," in *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 3-31.

George Shulman, "Chasing the Whale: *Moby-Dick* as Political Theory," in Jason Frank et al., eds., *A Political Companion to Herman Melville* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), pp. 70-108.

Linda Martín Alcoff, "Philosophy's Civil Wars," online at <http://www.alcoff.com/articles/presidential-address-apa-eastern-2012>.

- Linda Zerilli, "Feminist Theory and the Canon of Political Thought," in Bonnie Honig, John Dryzek, and Anne Phillips, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106-120.
- Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena, "Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory," *Critical Times* (2021) 4 (3): 359–388.

Week 4: The Straussian Approach (Oct. 2)

- Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?" in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 9-55.
- Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 22-38.
- Leo Strauss, "On Plato's Republic," in *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 50-138.

Week 5: Hermeneutics I--From Gadamer to Geertz (Oct. 9)

- Han-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 103-160.
- Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 15-57.
- Charles Taylor, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," in Robert J. Dostal, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 126-142.
- Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3-32.
- Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 412-454.

Week 6: Hermeneutics II: The Cambridge School (Oct. 16)

- J.G.A. Pocock, "Languages and Their Implications: The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 3-41.
- Quentin Skinner, "Introduction: Seeing Things Their Way," in *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-7.
- Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8(1), 1969: 3-53.
- Quentin Skinner, "The Age of Princes," in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 113-138.

Week 7: Hermeneutics Applied (Oct. 23)

- Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)

Week 8: Poststructuralist Approaches (Oct. 30)

- Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113-138.
- Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 139-164.
- Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 78-108.
- Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 109-133.
- Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-21.

Week 9: Poststructuralist Approaches Applied (Nov. 6)

- Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), selections
- Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009), selections
- Maja Zehfuss, "Hierarchies of Grief and the Possibility of War: Remembering UK Fatalities in Iraq", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2009), pp. 419-440.
- Paul Hodge, "A Grievable Life? The Criminalisation and Securing of Asylum Seeker Bodies in the 'Violent Frames' of Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders," *Geoforum* November 2014.
- Thomas Gregory, "Potential Lives, Impossible Deaths," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 14 (3) 2012: 327-347.

Week 10: Reading through Gender (Nov. 13)

- Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (5), December, 1986: 1053-1075.
- Wendy Brown, "'Supposing Truth Were a Woman ...': Plato's Subversion of Masculine Discourse," *Political Theory* 16 (November 1988): 594-616.
- Linda Zerilli, "Political Theory as Signifying Practice" and "The 'Innocent Magdalen': Woman in Mill's Symbolic Economy," in *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 1-15, 95-137.

Week 11: Gender and Feminist Theory, Applications (Nov. 20)

- Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

Week 12: Reading Colonization (Nov. 27)

- Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), selections.
- Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique* 1 (Autumn 1985): 89-107.

- Murad Idris, "Colonial Hesitation, Appropriation and Citation: Qāsim Amīn, Empire and Saying 'No'," *Colonial Exchanges: Political Theory and the Agency of the Colonized*, ed. Burke A. Hendrix and Deborah Baumgold (Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 180-216.
- Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalism as a Problem in the History of Political Ideas," in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) pp. 1-35.

Week 13: Critical Race Theory (Dec. 4)

- Charles W. Mills, "Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience," in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), pp. 1-19.
- Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1987), pp. 123-163.
- Melvin Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks*," *American Political Science Review* 106 (February 2012): 188-203.

Week 14: Critical Race Theory Applications (Dec. 11)

- Michael Rogin, "Indian Removal," *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1975), pp. 207-248.
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014.