

**Philosophy 5960-641  
Fall 2024**

**Stephen P. Steinberg, Ph.D.  
Lecturer in Philosophy**

*MLA Seminar in Political Philosophy:*  
**Conflict, Ideology and Public Discourse**  
*Course Prospectus*

**Course Description:**

We live in a divided country and a divided world. Contemporary public discourse – in politics and international relations, in the media and online, and throughout our national and global cultures – gives expression to intense, sometimes violent, disagreements and conflicts that obstruct the solution of important public policy questions, frustrate organizational objectives, and profoundly challenge our leaders and institutions. This MLA seminar course will explore the role of political, economic, and social ideologies in these conflicts and why this makes them so difficult to resolve. We will consider a variety of contemporary conflicts and ideologies and attempt to draw out some of their common philosophical and psychological characteristics, as well as explore possible strategies for reducing or resolving such conflicts. Throughout we will seek to understand the deep attraction of ideological commitments and why ideologies tend to push discourse and behavior to extremes and even violence.

- Primarily intended for students in the **Master of Liberal Arts Program**.
- **Undergraduates must obtain the permission of the instructor, their faculty advisor, and their college office in order to obtain a permit to register from the College of Liberal and Professional Studies.**
- No prerequisites.
- No previous knowledge of philosophy required.
- May require student use of **Canvas, Zoom**, and other online applications.

**Course Format:**      **Weekly Seminar Meetings (Wednesdays, 5:15-7:55 p.m.)**

**Instructor:**            **[Stephen P. Steinberg, Ph.D.](#), *Lecturer in Philosophy*  
**Email:** **[sps@upenn.edu](mailto:sps@upenn.edu)****

**Course Goals:**

- Develop familiarity with and understanding of a variety of contemporary ideologies and ideological conflicts.
- Develop familiarity with and understanding of the common philosophical and psychological characteristics of ideological conflicts.
- Develop an understanding of the deep attraction of ideological commitments and why ideologies tend to push discourse and behavior to extremes and even violence.

***Tentative Course Outline:  
Modules and Weekly Topics***

**MODULE I: INTRODUCTION**

- **Overview of the Course:**
  - **Ideological Conflicts and Public Discourse**
  - **The Concept of Ideology**
  - **Cases in Contemporary Ideological Conflict**
  
- **The Origins of Ideological Thought**
  - **Modernity, Reason, and Enlightenment**
  - **The Search for Freedom, Certainty, and Perfection**

**MODULE II: The DIALECTICS of IDEOLOGICAL THOUGHT**

- **Classical Liberalism and the Conservative Reaction**
  
- **Nationalism and the Cosmopolitan Ideal**
  
- **Socialism and the Rise of Neoliberalism**
  
- **Authoritarianism and Democracy**
  
- **Fascism and the Anarchist Disruption**
  
- **Modernity and the Rise of Religious Nationalism**

**MODULE III: The POWER of IDEOLOGICAL THINKING**

- **Ideologies and the Construction of Reality**
  - **Pictures in our Heads**
  - **False Consciousness or Weltanschauung?**
- **The Normative Appeal of Ideologies**
  - **Ideology as a Cultural System**
  - **Ideology and Utopia**
  - **The Will to Believe**
- **Ideologies and Extremism:**  
*A “Tragedy of the Commons?”*
- **Critical Theory and the Critique of Ideology**

**MODULE IV: IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS and PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

- **Civility, Tolerance, and Compromise**
- **The Power of Common Purposes**

**About this Course:**

Critically engaging the readings and seminar discussions are the primary learning modalities in this course, so keeping up with the assigned readings, contributing to the weekly class discussion forums on Canvas, and participating regularly and actively in the weekly seminar discussions should be prioritized. There is a lot of reading, and good philosophical reading often requires repeated readings and carefully analyzing and evaluating what you are reading.

**Course Structure for Fall 2024:**

- **Assigned Readings** (from the required textbooks and from PDF readings on Canvas).
- **Weekly Canvas Discussion Forums** (for questions and comments on the readings).
- **Weekly Seminar Discussions** (Wednesdays, 5:15-7:55 p.m.).

**Weekly Student Schedule:**

- **Thursday to Tuesday:** Critically read and take notes on the weekly assigned readings and prepare for active participation in the Wednesday seminar discussions.
- **Thursday to Tuesday:** Submit questions and comments about the readings on the weekly Canvas Discussion Forums..
- **Wednesday:** Participate actively in the weekly seminar discussions focused on student questions/comments and important aspects of the readings.

**Estimated Total Student Workload:**

Approximately 10-15 hrs./wk., including class time, reading, and preparation of student papers. [The amount of reading and paper preparation time will vary from week-to-week.]

**Required Assignments & Assessments:**

- **Weekly:**
  - **Assigned Readings.**
  - **Discussion Forum questions/comments.**
  - **Seminar Discussions (Wednesdays, 5:15-7:55 p.m.)**
- **Other:**
  - **One Mid-Term Essay (approx. 5-7 pp. or 1250-1750 words).**
  - **Brief Written Proposal (1-2 pp.)** for the student's final case study.
  - **Final Case Study Paper (approx. 15 pp. or 3750 words)** on a topic of the student's choice, approved by and developed in consultation with the instructor.

**Final Grade Components:**

- 30% - Class Participation and Engagement with the Course:** Keeping up with the assigned readings, posting weekly discussion forum questions and comments, and actively participating in the Wednesday seminar discussions are required.
  
- 30% - Mid-term “Thought Experiment” Essay** (approx. 5-7 pp., 1250-1750 words): Imagining what an ideological "victory" would look like for one of the ideologies studied in the first half of the semester; identifying and explaining the most important tenets and the underlying assumptions and values of the selected ideology; and imaginatively and concretely projecting and assessing the consequences of its adoption.
  
- 40% - Final Case Study Paper (including Written Proposal and In-class Oral Presentations):** A final paper (approx. 15 pp. or 3750 words) - presenting and analyzing a contemporary ideological movement or ideologically-based conflict defined in the written proposal or subsequent revisions made in consultation with the instructor. *Topics must be approved by and developed in consultation with the instructor.*

**About Future Changes:**

Please keep in mind that it may be necessary to make changes in the course plans described in this Prospectus, either before or during the Fall semester. *All changes will be announced on Canvas to all students registered for the course.*

*As of March 20, 2024*