

POLS 5321: Seminar in Political Theory

Contemporary Political Theory

Instructor: Allan Tellis, Assistant Professor

Class Meetings: Tuesdays, 6:00–8:50 PM

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Friday 11:30 AM–12:30 PM, and by appointment

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Course Description

This seminar examines major concepts and living traditions in contemporary political theory. It is organized thematically and contemporary in its orientation, with required readings drawn primarily from recent journal articles and post-1960's scholarship.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Analyze core political concepts through recent scholarly debates.
- Situate classic and contemporary thinkers within ongoing conversations in the field.
- Compare how different traditions and recent scholarship approach fundamental questions of justice, authority, and liberty.

Readings

All required readings will be posted to Canvas, there is no book to purchase.

Course Format & Rhythm

This is a discussion-intensive seminar. A typical evening runs:

Segment	Time
Instructor opening: the author's project, then the framing lecture drawing on foundational texts	30–40 min

Segment	Time
Break	10 min
Student Analytical Summary of the required readings + 2–3 discussion prompts	10–15 min
Extended seminar discussion of the contemporary scholarship	45–55 min
Break	10 min
Focused application, comparison, or synthesis	25–30 min

Analytical Summaries

Each meeting from Meeting 2 onward features one student-delivered Analytical Summary: a clear account of the week's readings, plus 2–3 discussion prompts that open the seminar for broader discussion. The full prompt and rubric will be on Canvas.

The rotation below will be assigned at our first meeting. Swaps are fine: arrange them with the other student and let me know at least one week in advance.

Meeting	Date	Topic	Analytical Summary
2	Sep 1	Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory	
3	Sep 8	Justice	
4	Sep 15	Liberty	
5	Sep 22	Sovereignty	
6	Sep 29	Why Define the State?	
7	Oct 6	Corporate / Neoliberal State	
8	Oct 13	The Bio-political State	
9	Oct 20	What Is a Political Ideology?	
10	Oct 27	Liberalism and Libertarianism	
11	Nov 3	Conservatism	
12	Nov 10	Socialism and Communism	
13	Nov 17	Republicanism and Communitarianism	
14	Dec 1	Anarchism and Fascism	

If illness or an emergency prevents you from presenting, contact me as soon as you know so we can trade slots rather than lose the presentation.

Writing Assignments

The three short response papers build skills progressively as you will first reconstruct an argument, then put two texts in tension, and finally stake a position. You are encouraged to develop the third into your final research paper. Full prompts and rubrics will be on Canvas.

Assignment	Length	Weight	Due
Short Response Paper 1	1–3 single-spaced pages		Meeting 3 · Sep 8
Short Response Paper 2	1–3 single-spaced pages		Meeting 6 · Sep 29
Research Paper Proposal	2–3 single-spaced pages + annotated bibliography	10%	Meeting 10 · Oct 27
Short Response Paper 3	1–3 single-spaced pages		Meeting 12 · Nov 10
Final Research Paper	8–10 single-spaced pages	30%	Tuesday, Dec 8

The three response papers together are worth 20% collectively.

Grading

Component	Weight
Seminar Participation & Attendance	20%
Analytical Summaries	20%
Short Response Papers (3)	20%
Research Paper Proposal	10%
Final Research Paper	30%
Total	100%

Grading Scale. A = 90–100 · B = 80–89 · C = 70–79 · D = 60–69 · F = below 60. Graduate students should consult the Graduate Catalog regarding minimum grades required for degree

credit and for good academic standing.

Return of Graded Work. I return response papers and the proposal within two weeks, and usually within one. Presentation feedback comes within a week. You will have both of the first two response papers back, plus a written participation estimate, before the university's withdrawal deadline (October 30), so that you can make an informed decision about the course.

Course Schedule

Block I: Introduction

Meeting 1 · August 25: What Is Political Theory? Purpose and Terrain

- Benjamin Boudou, "What is political theory for?" *Raisons Politiques* (2016).
- Loubna El Amine, "Beyond East and West: Reorienting Political Theory through the Prism of Modernity," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016): 154–167.

Recommended

- John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips, "Overview of Political Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin (Oxford University Press, 2009/2011), pp. 60–89. A map of the field; useful all semester and worth returning to when you choose a paper topic.

Lecture theme: This lecture returns to classical questions about the nature and purpose of political inquiry in light of contemporary methodological debates.

Block II: Core Political Ideals

Meeting 2 · September 1: What Are the Purposes of Ideals? (Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory)

- Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–184.
- Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654–664.

Recommended

- Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2008), Part 1. The realist case against beginning from ideal principles.

Lecture theme: This lecture revisits the classical tension between ideal and realistic political philosophy through contemporary debates.

Meeting 3 · September 8: Justice · Response Paper 1 due

- G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2008), Chapter 6.
- Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2006), Chapter 1 and selected sections on the capabilities approach.

Lecture theme: This lecture engages classical and modern questions of justice through competing contemporary frameworks.

Meeting 4 · September 15: Liberty

- Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right* (Columbia University Press, 2014), Introduction and Chapters 1–3 (negative, reflexive, and social freedom).
- Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2009), Chapters 11–14.

Lecture theme: This lecture places contemporary accounts of liberty in dialogue with the long tradition of reflection on freedom and its conditions.

Meeting 5 · September 22: Sovereignty

- Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), Chapter 1.
- Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Zone Books, 2010), Chapter 2.

Lecture theme: This lecture connects contemporary concerns with sovereignty and exception to classical and early modern theories of the state.

Block III: Theories of the State & Political Authority

Meeting 6 · September 29: Why Define the State? · Response Paper 2 due

- Allen Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy and Democracy," *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 689–719.
- Quentin Skinner, "A Genealogy of the Modern State," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 162 (2009): 325–370.

Lecture theme: This lecture returns to foundational questions about the nature, origins, and legitimacy of the state.

Meeting 7 · October 6: Corporate Theories of the State

- David Runciman, "Is the State a Corporation?" *Government and Opposition* 35, no. 1 (2000).
- Sean Fleming, "The Two Faces of Personhood: Hobbes, Corporate Agency and the Personality of the State," *European Journal of Political Theory* 20, no. 4 (2021): 553–574.

Lecture theme: This lecture examines corporate and personified conceptions of the state in light of classical debates over sovereignty and representation.

Meeting 8 · October 13: The Bio-political State

- Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
- Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), Chapter 4.

Lecture theme: This lecture places contemporary biopolitical and data regimes in conversation with classical and modern reflections on power over life.

Block IV: Political Ideologies & Traditions

Meeting 9 · October 20: What Is a Political Ideology?

- Michael Freeden, "Ideology and political theory," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 1 (2006): 3–22.
- Alan Finlayson, "Rhetoric and the Political Theory of Ideologies," *Political Studies* 60, no. 4 (2012): 751–767.

Lecture theme: This lecture connects contemporary studies of ideology to the long-standing philosophical concern with the relationship between ideas and political life.

Meeting 10 · October 27: Liberalism and Libertarianism · Research Paper Proposal due (10%)

- Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), Chapter 1, sections 1–2.
- John Tomasi, *Free Market Fairness* (Princeton University Press, 2012), Chapter 4.

Lecture theme: This lecture places liberalism and libertarianism in dialogue with classical and early modern debates over freedom, order, and the market.

****Meeting 11 · November 3: Conservatism**

- Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), Chapters 2 and 3.
- Roger Scruton, *How to Be a Conservative* (Bloomsbury, 2014), Chapter 3.

Lecture theme: This lecture situates conservative critiques of the modern state within the longer tradition of conservative and traditionalist political thought.

Meeting 12 · November 10: Socialism and Communism · Response Paper 3 due

- Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review* 49 (January–February 2008).
- John E Roemer, "Socialism revised." *Phil. & Pub. Aff.* 45 (2017): 261.

Lecture theme: This lecture situates contemporary socialist thought within the longer history of radical egalitarian and emancipatory traditions.

Meeting 13 · November 17: Republicanism and Communitarianism

- Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 1.
- Richard Dagger, "Communitarianism and Republicanism," in *Handbook of Political Theory*, eds. Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas (Sage, 2004).

Lecture theme: This lecture returns republican and communitarian ideas to their classical and early modern roots while engaging contemporary democratic theory.

November 24: No class. Thanksgiving break.

Meeting 14 · December 1: Anarchism and Fascism

- Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), Chapter 5.
- Saul Newman, "Anarchism, poststructuralism and the future of radical politics," *SubStance* 36, no. 2 (2007): 3–19.

Lecture theme: This lecture places anarchism and fascism in conversation with classical and modern anxieties about order, authority, and radical political transformation.

December 7–11: Finals week. No class meeting.
Final Research Paper due Tuesday, December 8.

Policies

Seminar Participation (20%)

In a seminar, participation is a critical element of the course. It carries more weight here than in most seminars because discussion is where much of your contribution happens. I assess it holistically across the semester using the scale below, and I will give you an estimate of your participation grade at mid-semester.

Range	What it looks like
A (18–20)	Present and prepared every week. Contributions are grounded in the assigned text; you cite pages, quote lines, and press on arguments. You respond to classmates' claims, not only to my questions. You advance the discussion rather than restating it.

Range	What it looks like
B (16–17.9)	Consistently present and prepared. Contributes regularly and substantively, though more often in response to prompts than in initiating lines of argument.
C (14–15.9)	Present, but preparation is uneven. Contributions are general or impressionistic rather than textual.
D/F (below 14)	Frequently absent or unprepared; contributes rarely, or contributes without evidence of having read.

What counts as strong participation: citing the text, naming a distinction precisely, identifying a tension between two authors, steelmanning a position you reject, asking a question that opens rather than closes discussion, and changing your mind when the argument warrants it.

What does not: talking frequently without reference to the reading, restating what has already been said, or treating the seminar as a venue for positions formed without any regard for the reading.

If speaking in seminar is genuinely difficult for you, come see me in the first two weeks. There are ways to build this that do not require being the fastest or loudest voice in the room.

Attendance

This seminar meets fourteen times. Because the course is built on collective discussion, attendance is not separable from participation: each unexcused absence beyond the second reduces your participation grade by one-third of a letter. Missing more than four meetings for any reason puts successful completion at risk; if that happens, come talk to me about your options.

Absences that do not count against you, with notice and documentation:

- **Religious holy days.**
- **Active military service**
- **Jury duty or a required court appearance**
- **Documented illness, injury, or family emergency** You need not disclose medical details.
- **Professional academic travel**

Late Work

Contact me at least 48 hours before a deadline if you need an extension; for a reasonable request made in advance, the answer is usually yes and there is no penalty. Work submitted late **without** prior approval is reduced by one-third of a letter grade per day, up to three days, after which it is not accepted.

The Final Research Paper is the exception. Because final grades are due to the university on December 15, papers cannot be accepted after the announced deadline without a documented emergency and a formal grade of Incomplete.

Incompletes

A grade of Incomplete is available only for documented emergencies arising after the majority of coursework is complete, and requires a written agreement specifying what remains and when it is due. An Incomplete is not a remedy for falling behind.

Academic Integrity & Artificial Intelligence

UT Tyler is committed to exploring and using artificial intelligence (AI) tools as appropriate for the discipline and task undertaken. We encourage discussing AI tools' ethical, societal, philosophical, and disciplinary implications. All uses of AI should be acknowledged as this aligns with our commitment to honor and integrity, as noted in UT Tyler's Honor Code. Faculty and students must not use protected information, data, or copyrighted materials when using any AI tool. Additionally, users should be aware that AI tools rely on predictive models to generate content that may appear correct but is sometimes shown to be incomplete, inaccurate, taken without attribution from other sources, and/or biased. Consequently, an AI tool should not be considered a substitute for traditional approaches to research. You are ultimately responsible for the quality and content of the information you submit. Misusing AI tools that violate the guidelines specified for this course (see below) is considered a breach of academic integrity. The student will be subject to disciplinary actions as outlined in UT Tyler's Academic Integrity Policy.

For this course, all submitted work must be your own. Generative AI tools may be used for brainstorming, outlining, and copy-editing only, and any such use must be disclosed in a footnote or appendix stating which tool you used, what you asked it, and how it affected the work. Disclosed use within these limits is not penalized; undisclosed use is a violation of academic integrity.

You may not use AI to draft prose you submit, to summarize a reading in place of reading it, or to generate citations, quotations, or page references. This last point is not a formality. These systems routinely fabricate sources that do not exist and quotations that were never written, and in a seminar where the argument depends on what a thinker actually said, a fabricated quotation is fabricated evidence. Verify every quotation and page number against the text itself.

AI-detection software is unreliable, and I will not base an accusation on a detector score. If something in your work raises a question, I will ask you to walk me through your notes, sources, and drafts. Keep them until the semester ends.

Discussion Norms

We will engage rigorous, evidence-based disagreement in a respectful manner. Critique ideas and arguments, not people. Come prepared, listen actively, and help build a productive scholarly community.

Canvas & University Policies

All readings, assignment prompts, rubrics, and submissions are managed through Canvas. Students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with UT Tyler policies on academic integrity, disability accommodations, Title IX, and other matters as outlined in the Graduate Catalog and Student Handbook.

This syllabus is subject to minor revision. Any changes will be announced in class and posted on Canvas with reasonable notice.