

**Foundations of the American Experience:
Society and Self**

An Introduction to Western Political Thought

Professor: Daniel Vandersommers, Ph.D.

Class Time and Room: I teach four sections of this course:

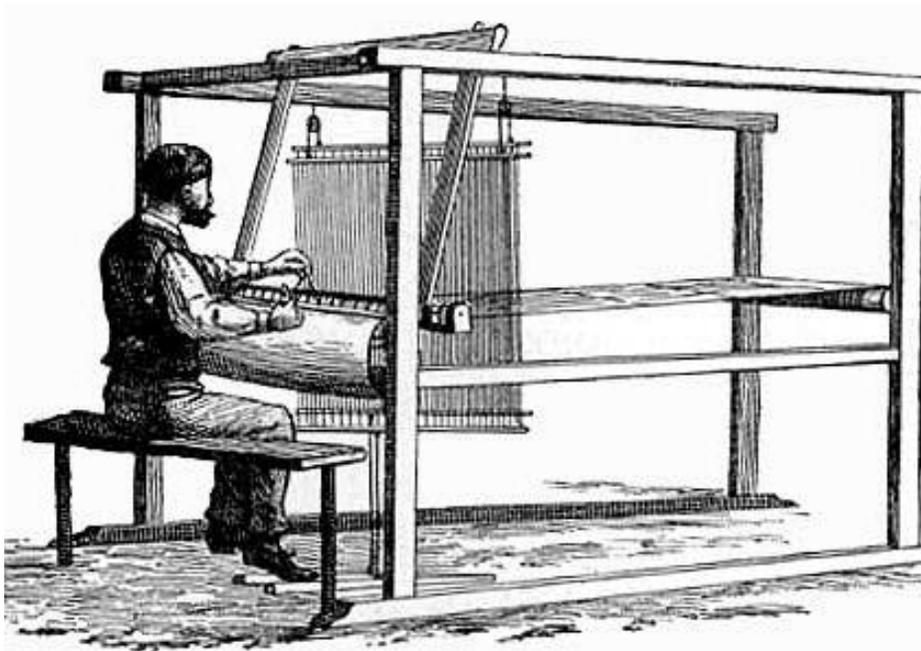
9:00 A.M. (BU121), 10:00 A.M. (BU 115), 11:00 A.M. (BU 115), and 2:00 P.M. (BU 204), **M-W-F**

Contact: davandersomm@bsu.edu

Office Hours: Tuesday: 7:30 – 12:30 **and** Wednesday: 3:00 – 5:00

Office: Elliot B027

**Office Hours, when specified, may sometimes be held at the BSU Student Center.



"That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law-- this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly."

-- Bruno Latour

Course Description

We often hear the aphorism *Everything is political* tossed about in and through our public sphere. Rarely, though, do its speakers realize the deep truth, and true depth, of this dictum. Of course, the political debates and policy decisions of contemporary American society are far-reaching—impacting nearly every visible institution in our nation. Acknowledging this truth, though, is simply seeing the tip of the iceberg. This course will interrogate the foundations of the American experience by looking through the visible and into the invisible, into the things we see everyday but do not see at all.

Politics is a sphere far larger than candidates, elections, parties, and news programs. Politics is more than ideology. Politics *is* everything, a realm where history, ideas, belief, and feeling are woven subtly together through Culture. We walk upon it and wrap ourselves with it, rarely recognizing the threads themselves. This course will search for the foundations of ourselves. This course will serve as an introduction to Western political thought—that is, an introduction into Society and Self. In this class, you will look outwards and inwards. You will learn to see philosophy and history as both windows and mirrors. You will learn to see our political present as a complicated matrix of multitudinous pasts and myriad speculative futures.

Learning Objectives

- 1) To get you to better understand processes of abstract inquiry, both philosophical and historical.
- 2) Develop your critical thinking skills generally.
- 3) Improve your ability to express yourself, verbally and in writing.
- 4) Expand your body of knowledge regarding political thought.
- 5) Learn to apply this body of knowledge to the world around you, as well as to yourself.
- 6) Encourage you to cultivate a passion for reading about diverse topics.
- 7) Practice 'experiencing' the past and present through empathy and humility rather than treating the world as an amalgam of "information" and "data" to "learn."

Grading

Grades will be a composite of short-reading/lecture quizzes, participation, and a final paper. Quizzes will take place immediately at the beginning of each class. They will be short "reading checks" of 5 to 10 questions. If you do not read carefully, actively, and consistently, these reading quizzes will prove difficult. Up to 40% of the questions on these quizzes may also derive from previous lectures, discussions, and classes. The **quizzes account for 65%** of your grade. They are "the glue" of the course. They are designed to 1) provide incentive to read 2) reward those who do read 3) provide incentive to be engaged in class 4) reward those who are engaged in class, and 5) provide me with a method of evaluating students that is consistent with a discussion- and reading-based introductory course while, at the same time, sidestepping the need to administer the stressful and gargantuan exams, midterms, and finals commonplace in high school and undergraduate education. Your lowest four quiz grades of the semester will be dropped. Keep in mind, though, that make-up quizzes will not be given for any reason (whether due to tardiness, sickness, or vacation). If you miss a quiz, then you miss a quiz. However, the four lowest grades (including 0%'s) will be dropped.

Tip: Come to class. Go to your tutorials. Read in an organized, timely fashion. Do your best. And you will do well.

The class participation component of the grade is based on assessment of the consistency and quality of your engagement in your tutorials. **Participation is worth 20%** of your grade. This category evaluates your participation in small-group and large-group discussion, as well as your general participation in the course. Participation may also evaluate your class journal or notebook in which you will keep daily, organized, and thoughtful notes from class and your readings. Last, you will write a **final argumentative essay that will be worth 15%** of your grade. This essay will ask you to apply political theory to the world around you. Potential writing prompts, questions, and themes will be discussed later in the semester.

Final grade scale: 94-100 = A ; 87-93 = A- ; 79-87 = B ; 70-78 = C ; 60-69 = D; <60 = F

Readings

I view this course, in many ways, as merely a "book group" of sorts, a structured group that will give you the opportunity to read some of the most challenging and important writings in the history of Western philosophy. You will be assigned a good deal of reading each week, and you will need to develop critical reading skills. A *verbatim* scrutiny is not always necessary, but you should closely consult all of the materials, comprehend them, and be able to articulate the substantive content of the pieces (what topics/events they cover), the theoretical content (what the authors are arguing), and any points of interest that may have struck you as significant, bizarre, profound, etc. The readings for this class may not always be long; however, they should feel challenging, for most have found themselves at the center of political-historical-philosophical-ethical debates that have lasted for centuries. Allowing yourself to form questions and articulate confusions is just as important as developing a "sense of understanding." No expert has ever "mastered" these texts, and I believe sincerely that a text can never be mastered. It is engagement, not mastery, that these texts will ask of you. Step into the ring...

The required text for this course is:

Cohen, Mitchell, editor. *Princeton Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts from Plato to Populism*, second edition. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Some suggestions to guide your reading:

Read Actively: Preview each reading to figure out what it is about and formulate questions to guide your reading. Read the introductory and concluding paragraphs and note major headings to get a sense of where the author is taking you. Keep in mind the author is being selective here. She or he cannot possibly tell you everything you need to know. What the author chooses to include will tell you a lot about what she or he considers important.

“Write” In Your Book and/or Keep a Journal: Write in the margins. Flag critically important points and summarize the author’s arguments. Note stream of consciousness connections or anything else that will help you go back through all the readings and make sense of them. Always think about the who/what/when/where/why’s of the piece. Everyone reads differently. Find what works for you.

Get Away: We are an increasingly connected society in which many people feel uncomfortable being “away” or unavailable for any length of time. I advise you to leave those places where friends or family can distract you, turn your cell phones off and be “away.” Coffeehouses, public libraries, or shady trees rarely if ever ask engaged patrons to move along. Spend time with yourself and your readings. I promise you will soon realize the worth of your education and begin to truly benefit from it.

General Notes Regarding Conduct

This class is expected to be a positive learning experience based on open communication and respect. You are expected to be collegial and to respect the *rights* of the other seminar participants.

You should not use laptops, tablets, I-Pads, or other types of electronic technology in the classroom unless I specifically say that we will utilize them for an activity.

Under no circumstance should cell phones be visible in the classrooms. They must be stowed away or kept in pockets, with ringers and sounds turned off. **Texting** in class can result in a loss of quiz or participation points.

I encourage you to visit my office hours to ask questions, raise concerns, continue discussion, talk about the readings, etc. Please don’t hesitate to stop by. Also, due to high volume, please be aware that it could take me 48 hours to respond to emails.

Diversity and Inclusion Policy

Ball State University aspires to be a university that attracts and retains a diverse faculty, staff, and student body.

We are committed to ensuring that all members of the community are welcome, through valuing the various experiences and worldviews represented at Ball State and among those we serve. We promote a culture of respect and civil discourse as expressed in our Beneficence Pledge and through university resources found at

<http://cms.bsu.edu/campuslife/multiculturalcenter>.

Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and will be subject to the Academy’s policies on academic dishonesty. For a full discussion of this process and possible sanctions, please refer to the student handbook.

Attendance and Tardies

Attendance is required, per Academy policy. Unexcused absences will result in a grade deduction in participation. Late arrivals may be counted tardy, with late arrivals of more than ten minutes subject to be counted absent for the day.

Disclaimer

I reserve the *right* to make changes to this syllabus at my discretion. I will give notice to the class as soon as possible after making any change.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

Please note that reading assignments are subject to change. As Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” The same is true for my courses, which are often exercises in lateral thinking, improvisation, headlong advances and scurrilous retreats. I don’t follow a divine script; I don’t have a strict agenda regarding what I expect you to get out of this course. The end result will ultimately be what *you* make of it.

P.S. In accordance with my belief that we, knowingly or not, engage philosophy and history every single day, I may occasionally send links to stories, articles, and audio or video related to the readings for the week. You will be responsible for reading and/or watching/listening to them, so our class discussions will be pertinent and dynamic. That said, I will not bombard you with last minute manifestos of biblical proportions. Most news stories are relatively short, and the audio links can be listened to while you’re reading your email. They’ll simply be things to consider while you read for class.

** Notes on the reading schedule below: 1.) The reading titles refer to the corresponding excerpts in the Cohen text, 2.) In a few cases, where the Cohen text does not have the accompanying reading, an excerpt will be provided, 3.) You should, in addition, always read the short (and very helpful) section introductions in the Cohen text as we work through the volume, and 4.) Occasionally, I will give mini-lectures, as needed, throughout the semester to complement the readings, provide important context, and help direct the readings into discussion.

8.13 – Introduction to the Course!

8.15 – What is “Politics”? / What is Political Theory?
Reading: “Thinking Politically: An Introduction”

8.17 – Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

8.20 – Plato, *The Apology*

8.22 – Plato, *The Republic*

8.24 – Plato, *The Republic*

8.27 – Aristotle, *Politics*

8.29 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

8.31 – Cicero, *On the Republic and Laws*

9.3 – **Labor Day! No Class!**

9.5 – St. Augustine, *City of God* and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Politics and Law* and Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*

9.7 – Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* and *Discourses*

9.10 – Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society* and John Calvin, *God, Politics, Duty*

9.12 – Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

9.14 – Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*

** Substitute Teacher Will Lead Discussion (I will be in Cambridge, Ontario, leading a ReNewZoo-sponsored colloquium for zoologists)

9.17 – John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*

9.19 – Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*

9.21 – Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*

9.24 – David Hume, *Empirical Politics*

9.26 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The People's Will, Sovereignty, and Inequality*

9.28 – Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

10.1 – Thomas Jefferson et al., *The Declaration of Independence*

10.3 – Publius and Brutus, *Federalists and Anti-Federalists*

10.5 – Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

10.8 – **Fall Break! No Class!**

10.10 – Marie-Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens* and Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

10.12 – Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* and G.W.F. Hegel, *Lordship and Bondage*

10.15 – John Stuart Mill, *Liberty and the Individual*

10.17 – Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

10.19 – Frederick Douglass, *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?* and Abraham Lincoln, *The Gettysburg Address*

10.22 – Karl Marx, *Revolution against Capitalism*

10.24 – Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

10.26 – V.I. Lenin, *Bolshevism*

10.29 – Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* and Robert Michels, *Political Parties*

10.31 – Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation* and Emma Goldman, *Victims of Morality*

11.2 – Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, *Why War?*

11.5 – Benito Mussolini, *Fascism* and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

11.7 – F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*

11.9 – John Dewey, *Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us* and Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Liberal America* and T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*

11.12 – George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* and Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*

11.14 – Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

11.16 – Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet* and

Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*

** Substitute Teacher Will Lead Discussion (I will be in Toronto at the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts annual meeting)

11.19 – **Thanksgiving Break**

11.21 – **Thanksgiving Break**

11.23 – **Thanksgiving Break**

11.26 – Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* and Mitchell Cohen, *1989: What Is to Be Learned?*

11.28 – Jürgen Habermas, *The Public Sphere* and Michel Foucault, *Power: An Interview*

11.30 – Peter Singer, *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* and Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*

12.3 – John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*

12.5 – Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* and Michael Walzer, *In Defense of Equality*

12.7 – Edward Said, *Orientalism* and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* and Zadie Smith, *Speaking in Tongues*

12.10 – Martha Nussbaum, *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism*

12.12 – Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* and Val Plumwood, “Inequality, Ecojustice, and Ecological Rationality”

12.14 – Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?*

12.17 – 12.21 – **Final Exams**