

## Political Philosophy 309, Spring 2015, Jonny Thakkar

Wednesday 1:30-4:20pm, Bobst Hall 105

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Office hours: Friday 1:30-3:00pm, JHH 20

### Course Description

What would the ideal society look like? How would we go about rationally justifying a given conception of the ideal society? And what role might such conceptions play in our day-to-day political lives? This seminar will address these questions via a close reading of three authors for whom they were central: Plato, Marx and Rawls. We will end by considering recent attempts to inherit each of those thinkers for the present, in both "ideal" and "critical" theory.

Plato's *Republic* is arguably the greatest work of philosophy in the Western tradition. A literary masterpiece from a formal perspective, its discussions of ethics, politics, psychology, aesthetics, metaphysics and epistemology somehow manage to be both foundational for Western philosophy and deeply alien to our own intuitions. It therefore richly repays close reading and spirited debate in general, and certainly with respect to the question of ideal theory. Marx, meanwhile, has a good claim to being the most influential philosopher of all time, which is why we must struggle past our own preconceptions in reading him. When we do that what we find is a corpus—culminating in *Capital*, Volume One—which professes to overturn the kind of ideal theory we find in Plato but seems to preserve crucial elements of it regardless. Marx, in other words, presents us with a puzzle: the philosopher whose ideal hung over much of the twentieth century foreswore ideal theory in favour of so-called critical theory. Our final thinker, John Rawls, dominated post-war Anglo-American political philosophy within the academy. His *Theory of Justice* presents a highly original and worked-out ideal of a liberal society, and his famous "two principles of justice" have been the subjects of much debate. But in *Political Liberalism* Rawls presents a challenge to the whole project of ideal theory, asking (to phrase things differently from the way he would) whether and to what degree it can ever be ideal to use the coercive power of the state to further an ideal.

Although our focus will be on getting to grips with Plato, Marx and Rawls, our ultimate goal is to enrich our own thoughts regarding contemporary political life. We will therefore be placing those thinkers in dialogue both with each other and with our own world, and reading them in conjunction with various attempts to inherit and deploy them in that way. We will also be honing our skills as readers, writers and speakers. As readers, we will practice close reading of specific passages in order to develop our analytical skills, getting better at finding argumentative structures and becoming more sensitive to literary and rhetorical art. As writers, we will develop our ability to produce challenging, coherent and persuasive arguments, learning when and how to deploy evidence in support of our claims, how best to deal with counter-arguments, and so on. As speakers, we will work on becoming more articulate and considerate conversation partners. The ideal of a discussion class is that everyone makes their points clearly and concisely and with genuine attention to what others have said. This requires taking notes as the discussion proceeds, and being willing to

intervene if it seems that one class member is misunderstanding another. It also requires active participation by all. Some will have to make a special effort to get over their shyness; others will have to restrain themselves to make room for others to speak. With these goals in mind let us turn to the course requirements.

## **Course Requirements**

This is a seminar. Attendance is therefore mandatory, and so is active participation. Active participation goes beyond the classroom: it requires thorough preparation. The readings are broken into two categories: “primary” and “secondary”. The primary readings are non-negotiable; there is no point in coming to class if you haven’t done them. The secondary readings are optional: some have been chosen to help you understand the primary readings, others to help you connect those readings to the theme of the course. But preparation for this class will involve more than simply reading. The class will be divided into four groups (A, B, C, D). Each week members of one group (e.g. A) will write around 750-1000 words on a passage that they find particularly interesting or challenging. For example, the passage might:

- seem like a bad argument
- seem to contradict an earlier passage
- seem to undermine our usual assumptions
- seem to deploy a surprising rhetorical strategy

You might argue that what at first looks like a problem dissolves on closer inspection; or you might argue that there is no way to sweep the problem under the carpet. The main constraint is that your post be both backed up by evidence and good for stimulating discussion—it shouldn’t be obvious to someone who has read the text casually. These posts should be up on Blackboard by 11pm on Monday evening. At that point members of the second group (B) will read the posts and write a paragraph in response to any one of them, regardless of whether it has already received a response. (In fact, you can also respond to a response.) Responses should critically evaluate the claims made by the earlier post, either building upon or disagreeing with it. These responses should be up on Blackboard by 2pm on Tuesday afternoon; every member of class should log in and read the discussions before Wednesday’s session. Needless to say, this will require discipline and diligence on the part of each student. But it will make for much better discussions.

Good writing requires rewriting. There will be only one major paper for the course, 8-10 pages in length, but it will be the subject of drafting and redrafting. This is best done collaboratively. Once the first drafts have been submitted, each student will therefore be assigned the task of coming up with a paragraph of comments and suggestions for a peer. This process should benefit the commenter as well as the author, since learning to evaluate and improve others’ work can help one learn to do the same for oneself. Suggested paper topics will be circulated on April 22nd; first drafts will be due on May 5th; comments will be due on May 8<sup>th</sup> (emailed to the author but cc-ed to me); and then final drafts will be due to me on May 12<sup>th</sup> (all deadlines at 5pm).

## **Evaluation**

Students will be evaluated based on one final paper (worth 50%), three Blackboard papers (worth 10% each) and their participation throughout the quarter (worth 20%). Your comments on others' work (both on Blackboard and on the final paper) will not be graded, though they will form part of the participation assessment. Late work will not be accepted unless there is documentary evidence of an emergency. Students found to have plagiarized work will fail the course.

## **Courtesy**

Please refrain from using mobile phones, computers and other gadgets during class.

## **Books**

The following should be available at Labyrinth Books:

Plato, *Republic* (tr. Reeve)  
*The Marx-Engels Reader*  
John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice (Original Edition)*  
John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*  
Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic*  
G. A. Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*  
David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*  
Samuel Freeman, *Rawls*

All other readings will be made available via Blackboard except the Runciman and the Power, which you will have to order on Amazon.

## Schedule

### February 4: Plato I (Goals of the Course; Social Ontology and the Political Virtues)

Primary: *Republic*, Books II-IV

Secondary: G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*  
Margaret Gilbert, "Societies as Plural Subjects"  
Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic*, chs. 1-3, 5  
Aryeh Kosman: "Justice and Virtue"  
John Cooper, "The Psychology of Justice in Plato"

### February 11: Plato II (Culture Critique) (A & B)

Primary: *Republic*, Books II-III, V  
Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, 1260b27-1264b26

Secondary: Sally Haslanger, "But Mom, Crop-tops *Are* Cute!"  
Sara Brill, "Plato's Critical Theory"  
W. G. Runciman, *Great Books, Bad Arguments*, ch. 2  
Gregory Vlastos, "Was Plato a Feminist?"

### February 18: Plato III (Ideal Theory and the Ideas) (C & D)

Primary: *Republic*, Books V-VII

Secondary: Gerasimos Santas, "The Form of the Good in Plato's *Republic*"  
Jonny Thakkar, "What Do Philosophers Know?"  
Danielle Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*  
Myles Burnyeat, "Utopia and Fantasy: The Practicability of Plato's Ideally Just City"

### February 25: Plato IV (Philosopher Kings, Degenerate Regimes, Lower Parts) (B & A)

Primary: *Republic*, Books VI-IX

Secondary: Jonny Thakkar, "Plato on Political Idealism"  
Jonathan Lear, "Inside and Outside the Republic"  
G. R. F. Ferrari, *City and Soul in Plato's Republic*, chs. 2 and 3

### March 4: Plato V ((Craftsmen and Moneymakers) (D & C)

Primary: *Republic*, Books X and I

Secondary: Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic*, ch. 7  
Jonny Thakkar, "Craftsmen and Moneymakers: Plato on Privatization"  
Myles Burnyeat: "Culture and Society in Plato's *Republic*", Lectures 1-3  
Mark Gifford, "Dramatic Dialectic in *Republic* Book I"

**March 11: Marx I (Hegelian Critique and the Critique of Hegel) (A & B)**

Primary: Hegel: Preface to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, pp. 90-117; Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing”  
Marx: “On The Jewish Question”; “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”; “Notes on James Mill”

Secondary: G. A. Cohen, *If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, chs. 1-2  
Daniel Brudney, *Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, chapters 4-6  
Hegel, Introduction to *The Philosophy of History*

**March 25: Marx II (Historical Materialism) (C & D)**

Primary: Marx: “Marx on the History of His Opinions”; “Theses on Feuerbach”; “The German Ideology”; “Society and Economy in History”; “The Communist Manifesto”  
Aristotle: *Physics* I.1, II.1-3; *History of Animals*, I.1, VIII.1, *Politics* I.8-11, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1-4, IX.7  
Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity*, “Introduction”, §1 and §2

Secondary: G. A. Cohen, *If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, chs. 3-5  
Daniel Brudney, *Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, chapters 7-10  
W. G. Runciman, *Great Books, Bad Arguments*, ch. 4

**April 1: Marx III (Understanding Capital) (B & A)**

Primary: “Capital, Volume One” (MER, 294-361)

Secondary: Jonny Thakkar, “Plato and Marx on Moneymaking”  
David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*

**April 8: Marx IV (Overcoming Capital) (D & C)**

Primary: “Capital, Volume One” (MER, 361-438); “Capital, Volume Three”; “Critique of the Gotha Program”

Secondary: G. A. Cohen, *If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, ch. 6  
David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*

- April 15: Rawls I (Liberty & Equality) (A & B)**
- Primary: *A Theory of Justice*, Part One
- Secondary: Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State & Utopia*, ch. 7  
 G. A. Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, chs. 7-9  
 Samuel Freeman, *Rawls*, chs. 2-4
- April 22: Rawls II (Political Liberalism) (C & D)**
- Primary: *Political Liberalism*, Introduction and Part One
- Secondary: Joseph Raz, "Liberalism, Autonomy and the Politics of Neutral Concern"  
 Charles Larmore, "The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism"  
 Rainer Forst, "The Ground of Critique: on the Concept of Human Dignity in Social Orders of Justification"
- April 29: Rawls III (Public Reason) (B & A)**
- Primary: *Political Liberalism*, Part Two and Part Four
- Secondary: T. M. Scanlon, "The Difficulty of Tolerance"  
 Thomas Nagel, "Toleration"
- TBA: Marcuse (Critical Theory) (D & C)**
- Primary: Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*
- Secondary: G. A. Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, ch. 10  
 Charles Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology"  
 Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman*  
 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory"
- May 5: FIRST DRAFTS**
- May 8: COMMENTS**
- May 12: FINAL PAPER**