

ANCIENT POLITICAL THOUGHT
POLS 4010: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY TO MACHIAVELLI
Spring 2020
MWF 11:15AM – 12:05PM
301 Baldwin Hall

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“The ancient republics, being mostly grounded from the first upon some kind of mutual compact, or at any rate formed by an union of persons not very unequal in strength, afforded, in consequence, the first instance of a portion of human relations fenced round, and placed under the dominion of another law than that of force. And though the original law of force remained in full operation between them and their slaves, and also (except so far as limited by express compact) between a commonwealth and its subjects, or other independent commonwealths; the banishment of that primitive law even from so narrow a field, commenced the regeneration of human nature, by giving birth to sentiments of which experience soon demonstrated the immense value even for material interests, and which thenceforward only required to be enlarged, not created.” —John Stuart Mill¹

Course description and learning objectives:

In this course, we read classic texts in ancient Greek (e.g. Gorgias, Thucydides, Plato), ancient Roman (e.g. Cicero), early Christian (e.g. Augustine), and early modern political thought (e.g. Machiavelli). These texts teach us in a special way about “politics” and “political” life. Rather than viewing these texts as timeless expressions of truth and knowledge, however, we will read them as expressly historical political efforts to grasp and articulate the basic constituents of politics in the face of worldly conflicts, crises, catastrophes, wars, outright lies, lust, misinformation, false pretexts, selfish individual interest, corrupt rhetoric, and suppression of dissent. The vast historical distance separating us from ancient, medieval, and early modern thinkers, far from rendering their views obsolete, can illuminate certain important points and problems about politics today. But to understand and appreciate their thoughts, which were formulated and meant to make sense in a very different context and for very different audiences, we need to retain our sense of how odd they often are. When reading their work, we need to resist our urge to translate unfamiliar and threatening ideas into ones with which we are familiar.

Although our contemporary world is quite unlike the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome and renaissance Florence, we still analyze politics, make political arguments, and conceive of political goals, by applying concepts and ideas that are, in fact, ancient. So, the value of this course is that it offers students the opportunity to encounter ancient political ideas in ancient texts and contexts. These ideas include, but are not limited to: democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, kingship, tyranny, republic, empire, citizenship, community, constitution, justice, freedom, political equality, knowledge, virtue, corruption, authority, power, the rule of law, the distinction between nature and custom/culture, the contrast between the elite and the masses, and even the concept of “politics” itself. Though difficult, the project of entering into the thoughts of long dead authors and rethinking them for our own purposes is at once possible, useful, and enjoyable.

¹ J. S. Mill, “The Subjection of Women,” in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 125-26.

This course will end with Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*—though how we will get there is up to the class to decide. Machiavelli's *Discourses* claims to teach us about the virtuous actions done by “ancient kingdoms and republics, by kings, captains, citizens, legislators, and others who have labored for their fatherland” (I.Preface). But to learn from antiquity, Machiavelli emphasizes, we need to read histories and other texts in such a way as to “taste” the flavor that they have in themselves (I.Preface). Following Machiavelli's advice and example, our objective this semester is to become “deep readers” in Machiavelli's sense, readers who focus on meaning, on the full sense (the “taste”) that ancient texts have to offer, as opposed to surface readers who focus on facts and information. By reading the ancients as Machiavelli did—carefully, seriously, actively, thoughtfully, and deeply—we can learn lessons about politics (and life) that will nourish our souls, giving us renewed strength and renewed life.²

The readings for this course take time and are tough to understand. I am certainly not an expert on these readings, and I am going to be happy if you understand 50 percent of what you read. In order to promote and nurture deep reading, we will not be taking quizzes and other kinds of objective tests which encourage surface learning. Rather, we will struggle—individually, in pairs or small groups, and together as a whole class—to read for meaning and to make the readings comprehensible. I have planned class activities and assignments to help students to learn and to practice the disciplinary skills needed to understand and learn from political theory texts: reading (understanding complex and ambiguous texts and entering into conversation with them), interpretation (reading texts in context and developing meanings of texts using textual evidence), and criticism (determining the larger practical implications, significance, and value of texts). Although I will lecture weekly, using PowerPoint slides to help you follow and remember what I am saying, the goal of the course is not to pack you with a body of knowledge or for you to consume my interpretations. Rather, our goal is to become close, critical readers of texts and to learn how to advance persuasive and textually supported arguments about a text's meaning. Succeeding in this course is not designed to be difficult, but it is designed to be difficult if you do not do the reading.

Course objectives:

- 1) Develop skills of careful and thoughtful reading.
- 2) Improve the ability to follow and assess arguments and interpretations.
- 3) Enhance writing skills.
- 4) Make some progress in being able to articulate your views of the readings in your writing and in front of others.
- 5) Gain knowledge about major ancient thinkers, and particularly about central themes and topics in their political thought.

² Machiavelli dressed in his best clothes when he sat down to read his books; his encounter with their authors, many of them ancient Greeks and Romans, was the most important part of his day. As Machiavelli wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori: “When evening comes I return home and go into my study. At the door I take off my everyday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and don garments of court and palace. Now garbed fittingly I step into the ancient courts of men of antiquity, where, received kindly, I partake of food that is for me alone and for which I was born, where I am not ashamed to converse with them and ask them the reasons for their actions. And they in their full humanity answer me. For four hours I feel no tedium and forget every anguish, not afraid of poverty, not terrified by death. I lose myself in them entirely.” Machiavelli's letter to Francesco Vettori, 10 December 1513, in *The Essential Writings of Machiavelli*, trans. Peter Constantine (Modern Library, 2007), p. 510.

Course texts:

I've ordered several books for this course, which are at the campus bookstore, but we are not going to read all of them. You are **required** to own or rent these three books:

- Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford's World Classics)
- Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford World's Classics)
- Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Mansfield and Tarcov (University of Chicago Press)

Hey professor, part of the syllabus is blank! What are we going to do?

Because this is *your* course, I need *your* input in order to complete the syllabus. Political philosophy to Machiavelli covers about 2000 years of political thought! We will decide as a class what texts we will read for the 14 blank classes between Plato and Machiavelli. We could read more Plato, or Aristotle, or other ancient Greek authors (Epicurus, Epictetus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Lucian, Plutarch, Polybius, Xenophon). Or we could read the Romans (Boethius, Cicero, Horace, Livy, Lucretius, Ovid, Plautus, Quintilian, Sallust, Seneca, Tacitus, Terence, Virgil). Or we could read Jesus of Nazareth, St. Paul, or the early (Latin) Christians (Ambrose, Augustine, Isidore, Jerome, Pope Gregory the Great, Tertullian). Or we could read some medieval texts written roughly between 350 and 1450 (Alfarabi, Aquinas, Averroes, Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, Dante, John of Salisbury, John of Paris, Maimonides, Marsilius of Padua, Nicholas of Cusa, Petrarch, Ptolemy of Lucca, William of Ockham). Or we could read even more Machiavelli, or work by his friend Guicciardini or other renaissance writers like Ariosto or Castiglione. It's up to you! (If you are overwhelmed by these options, choose from the books in the bookstore that I've ordered for this course).

Your first assignment is to find *one* text written between the c4th BCE and the early 1500s that you *want* to read and study (it does *not* have to be one of the books I've ordered, but it could be). You do not need to read the whole thing, but you'll need to browse the text, taking a look at its contents. I highly recommend doing a little research about the book so you can explain in a page or two the value of reading it. In a 2- or 3-page essay, discuss the value and suitability of your selection for class reading. As you write, think about the questions you would have about a classmate's selection, and try to answer them about your own. What is the book about? What genre is it? Who wrote it and why? What does it tell us about politics? Does it have anything to say about our own time? How does the piece connect to reading we have already done, or to themes discussed in class? You don't have to answer all of these questions, but your essay should tell us about both the substance and style of the selection and about why it will be worth our time. After you've made your persuasive case for why we should read the book you've chosen, you need to clearly indicate the precise books/chapters/sections/pages of the text you want the class to read, and come up with a few discussion questions for your classmates. I will select and present a few options to the class and we'll vote on what we want to read. This paper is due by **Monday, January 27**.

Assignments and Grading

****All written assignments, including papers and blog posts, can be completed with a partner.****
You and your collaborator will receive the same grade. How you work together is up to you.

Papers: You will write three papers. The first is the “blank syllabus” essay of 2-3 pages due January 27. The second paper will be 5 pages and it is due February 24. The topic for your second paper will be on Thucydides and I will post the topic well in advance on eLC. Your third and final paper is a longer research paper (at least 7 pages, preferably closer to 10) and it will be due May 1. There is no assigned topic because I want you to write on a topic that interests you and to find relevant scholarly sources and to use them in your writing (this will help you learn and practice the skills of quotation, summarization, and citation). I will provide more guidance for this research paper before spring break. The paper deadlines are firm, but if you need an extension, I will be happy to give you one because I’m more concerned with your learning than meeting an arbitrary deadline. All papers should be double spaced in Times New Roman, size 12 font, one inch margins.

Blog posts: I need time to read them before class, so all blog posts are due by **10 p.m.** the night **before** class. Sometimes I will give you a specific prompt or question to respond to, but otherwise you are free to choose what to say. You could summarize the reading, connect it to personal experience, describe your emotional or intellectual responses to it, ask questions, argue with it, analyze it, evaluate it, and so on.

Low-stakes reading assignments: Half of your grade is determined by weekly low-stakes assignments such as blog posts, reading questions, reading summaries or précis, reading quizzes, and other class preparation and active learning exercises that I come up with. These assignments are meant to help you to do the reading and to practice reading skills, to come to class prepared, to process and retain content, and to integrate new information into your prior knowledge. The key to success on these assignments is to do the reading. You can expect to make blog posts once or twice a week, and to be asked to turn in reading questions or reading summaries about once a week. Sometimes you will take a test at the beginning of class either to reinforce what you’ve learned from the reading or to reveal gaps in your knowledge, gaps that will be filled-in by a lecture or video. These assignments will be graded using a rubric.

Your final grade will be determined by the following weighting:

- 10% - Blank Syllabus Essay (due January 27)
- 10% - Midterm Essay on Thucydides (due February 24)
- 15% - Final Research Paper on a topic of your choice (due May 1)
- 50% - Low-stakes reading assignments and class preparation activities
- 15% - Participation (which includes attendance)

Grading scale: A >93 A- 90-93 B+ 87-90 B 83-87 B- 80-83 C+ 77-80 C 73-77 C- 70-73

Extra credit: You will have opportunities to boost your final grade by earning extra credit. I am always open to hear your suggestions and creative ideas for extra credit assignments. In our last class session on **April 27**, I will give a ‘factoid’ quiz of 40 questions that require short answers to some basic matters of ‘fact’ that pertain to the study of the various theorists and texts read in this course. We will grade this quiz together in class. A good score on this quiz will be worth *three* extra points; but a not so good score will not hurt you.

Student responsibilities and expectations:

• **Regular attendance and class participation.** Attending class and taking part in class activities is 15% of your grade. You do not need to speak to participate; listening, taking notes, and generally being attentive is a form of participation. This course is not a seminar, but my goal is to conduct it as much as possible as if it were a seminar, which means I will keep my lecturing to a minimum so as to give you the space to be involved, to do the thinking, and to make discoveries without feeling pressured to have to seek or to say the “correct” thing.

• **Have the reading done before each class, and be ready to discuss it with each other.** Readings that are posted on eLC should be printed and brought to class too. The texts for this class are not quick reads; nor can you glance over their paragraphs to catch their main ideas. You must carve out enough time to read the assigned texts closely and carefully.

• **Please bring your copy of the relevant text to each class session.** Our class *is* like a book club, and you are expected to have the same edition/translation of the book as everyone else so that we are all literally on the same page looking at the same words.

• **No online, digital, or electronic books of any kind (on your phone, kindle, tablet, or computer) will be allowed in class.** It is very important to read from a physical book because reading requires you to pile one level of abstraction on top of another (letters, words, sentences, concepts) and what makes this possible is that it is grounded in a physical framework—the book. The physical location of a piece of information on the page is a key part of our reading ability, especially for long, difficult material. When we read electronically all text is ephemeral. It flows like water down the screen, and appears and disappears with the click of a button. This encourages surface-level reading and searching for keywords. We want the meaning of the words we are reading to settle into and impact our mind, and my experience is that reading text on a screen is simply not conducive to paying deep attention to what is on the page. Without a physical location on a particular page, it’s as if the words cannot find a location in our mind.

• **All computers, phones, and similar devices should be put away during class.** I realize that you are probably in the habit of taking notes on your computer and checking your phone frequently. But you know as well as I do that when students are on their phones and computers in class they are not paying attention to lecture and discussion and it is distracting to everyone around them. I also know that this forces you to take notes by hand, which you may find difficult. But taking notes by hand is a desirable difficulty that aids learning. Studies show that students who take notes by hand perform better on quizzes and other assessments of learning than students who take notes on a computer.³

• **Academic honesty:** The University’s Academic Honesty Policy (“A Culture of Honesty,” available at <http://honesty.uga.edu/index.html>) defines scholastic honesty as “the performance of all academic work without cheating, lying, stealing, or receiving assistance from any other person or using any source of information not appropriately authorized or attributed.” Academic honesty is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else’s work as your own, will result in disciplinary action.

³ See, e.g., Pam A. Mueller and Daniel M. Oppenheimer, “The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand over Laptop Note Taking,” *Psychological Science* 25:6 (2014), pp. 1159-1168.

Schedule of Classes

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviation announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary. Indeed, there will be frequent deviations, and you should think of these deviations, which you will have a part in determining, as further elaborations of the original course.

8 Jan: first day of class

10 Jan: get to know your neighbor and each other

13 Jan: **read** Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* (on eLC) and **blog** about one idea in the text that you find interesting.

15 Jan: Gorgias (lecture)

17 Jan: Introduction to Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*

20 Jan: NO CLASS – MLK DAY

22 Jan: **read** *Peloponnesian War*, Book I (all)

24 Jan: Thucydides

27 Jan: **read** Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book II (especially 10-17, 34-65, 71-74, 87-89).
Due: Blank Syllabus Paper

29 Jan: Thucydides

31 Jan: **read** Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book III (especially 9-14, 30-85)

3 Feb: **read** Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book IV (especially 10-11, 17-28, 58-87)

5 Feb: **read** Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book V (especially 84-116)

7 Feb: **read** Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book VI (especially 1-93)

10 Feb: **read** Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Book VII (especially 47-87)

12 Feb: **read** Plato, *Gorgias*, 3-34

14 Feb: **read** Plato, *Gorgias*, 34-62

17 Feb: **read** Plato, *Gorgias*, 62-102

19 Feb: **read** Plato, *Gorgias*, 102-135

21 Feb: finish Plato's *Gorgias*

24 Feb:

Due: Thucydides Paper

26 Feb:

28 Feb:

2 March:

4 March:

6 March: NO CLASS (Spring Break March 9-13).

16 March:

18 March:

20 March:

23 March:

25 March:

27 March:

30 March:

1 April:

3 April:

6 April: **read** Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I (all, but esp. preface and chapters 1-18, 24-58)

8 April: Machiavelli

10 April: Machiavelli

13 April: **read** Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book II (esp. the preface and chapters 1-3, 13-15, 19, 29-30)

15 April: Machiavelli

17 April: Machiavelli

20 April: **read** Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book III (esp. chapters. 1-3, 6-9, 22, 29, 31, 34, 41)

22 April: Machiavelli

24 April: Machiavelli

27 April: Last Class – In-Class Extra-Credit Factoid Quiz

28 April: NO CLASS (Unless we really need a make-up day)

29 April: Reading Day

11 May: Grades Due (Noon)