

POLI 2060: Introduction to Political Theory

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MWF 12:30 - 1:20, via Zoom



“For the argument is not about just any question,  
but about the way one should live”

-Socrates, *The Republic of Plato*, Book I (352d)

## Course Summary

POLI 2060 is a General Ed course designed to introduce students to the main thinkers and themes of Western political thought. This course involves history, philosophy, and literature, but is not a history, philosophy, or literature course. Political theory's essence resides in *thinking*: not only thinking like the great minds of the tradition of political philosophy, but as citizens engaged with topics of vast public importance. Aristotle tells us that humanity is a *Zoon Politikon*, a political animal. Therefore, this course encourages extensive discussion as a means to determine the truth regarding some of the most vital topics of political life that all citizens of democracies must concern themselves with: justice, community, morality, truth, reality itself.

However, I would like to emphasize the notion that political thinking does not merely reside in “intellectual arguments” or “logic,” but in literary and mythic renderings of the world. As such, I will introduce cinematic, literary, and musical elements into the course throughout. These works all contribute to a syncretic understanding of the politics as not something merely “rational” or “intellectual,” but part of a lived reality primarily regarding how human beings ought to conduct themselves in community with one another.

## Evaluation & Attendance

Because of the online synchronous nature of this course, “attendance” cannot be regularly taken, but a graded equivalent can be given. **Each week, I will post a short, five question quiz from that week's readings and lectures. These quizzes will constitute 15% of your final grade, so one ought to take them seriously.** Exceptions include weeks with tests and when assignments are due. Further, many of the multiple-choice responses on tests will be derived from these earlier quizzes. So, it is very prudent to regularly attend course, ask questions, participate in discussion, and communicate with me via email or other means. Test dates TBD but will follow the structure of the syllabus.

Grading breakdown follows:

- Weekly quizzes: 15%
- First Test (Multiple Choice): 10%
- Second Test (Multiple Choice) :20%
- Third Test (Multiple Choice): 25%
- Final (See below): 30%

## Readings

All readings are available on Moodle.

Part One: The Soul – Is it possible to live a moral life in a bad regime? Do questions of class and race impact how we should view the moral life of a citizen? This introductory discussion details depictions of life under vast inequality, both racial and economic. The following readings suggest that despite the conditions in which humanity finds itself, often of its own design, these exigencies do not constitute the whole of political life. That is, politics involve questions of the *whole person*, body, soul, and mind.

Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (w/Broadway Revival Soundtrack on Spotify)

DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” “On Mr. Washington and the Others,” “The Sorrow Songs”

Plato, *Apology*

Part Two: The Classical Experience, Plato and Aristotle - Histories of Political Philosophy typically begin with Classical Philosophy. That is, Socratic philosophy. This section concerns itself with the thought of those directly influenced by Socrates, namely, Plato and Aristotle. The “split” between these two thinkers informs the course philosophy will take in the West regarding questions of justice, virtue, and the soul. However, we are less concerned with this history *per se*, but with how it informs the way we live and think about politics.

Plato, *Republic*, Books I, II, IV, VI, VII, VIII

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I-III, V, X

### TEST ONE FOLLOWS THIS SECTION

Part Three: The State, a Fiction? - What makes the state separate from the realm of nature? Is the state “natural?” Here, Machiavelli and Hobbes invoke an extremely complex understanding of “technique” and “artifice” respectively that both profoundly disturb and inspire our moral sensibilities. Indeed, as we shall see, from the ostensive cruelty of these thinkers’ musings, the justification for the one of the most successful political doctrines of human history – liberalism – arises.

Scenes from Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chs. 1-9; 14-19

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part One: i, ii, iv, v, vi & xiv; Part Two: xviii, xxi, xxii, xxvi

**Part Four: The Social Contract, America, and the Black Experience** - Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes in *The Social Contract* that “Man was born free yet is everywhere in chains.” In his age, political despotism reigned: Europe was dominated by monarchies, these monarchies established colonies, and these colonies were worked by slaves. The American experiment with its declaration that “all men are created equal” attempted to do away with this condition. Still, the Founding generation did not disestablish chattel slavery – prolonging its horrors for generations. This section discusses liberalism and its relationship to human freedom, especially the freedom of slaves and their descendants.

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Books I, II, IV

Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*

Scenes from Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*

## **TEST TWO FOLLOWS THIS SECTION**

**Part Five: Action and Politics** - Liberalism’s dominance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw to a wealthy and incredibly powerful society. However, this wealth was not equally distributed throughout society. Arguably, this period of rapid economic expansion led to the breakdown of traditional morality and the consolidation of power by wealthy elites and capitalists. Voices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond oppose liberalism on various grounds, but here we consider voices that seek *active resistance to liberalism on the grounds of action*.

Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, “Preface,” “Alienated Labor,” “Private Property and Communism.”

Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* Chs. 1, 2, & 4

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Books 3, 5

## **TEST THREE FOLLOWS THIS SECTION**

**Part Six: Liberalism after Marx and Nietzsche?** - Marx’s revolution never came to America or Europe and Nietzsche’s critique of morality did not necessarily create a greater “race” of free spirits. Still, the institutions of liberalism are, arguably, under duress and the idea of morality as purely rationally justifiable appears in doubt. Two more contemporaneous thinkers, Alasdair MacIntyre and G.A. Cohen both concur that the project of the Enlightenment and its faith in detached reason’s ability to radically alter human nature failed, and in the words of MacIntyre, “had to fail.” Both thinkers attempt to forge an alternate path beyond liberalism that deserve the attention of educators, students, and legislators alike.

MacIntyre, “Nietzsche or Aristotle”

Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*

## Final Assignment

Using one of the texts we have analyzed this semester, provide an interpretive essay of **no longer than three pages** on one of the following films:

Films:

-*Parasite* (2019) by Bong Joon-Hoo

-*First Reformed* (2017) by Paul Schrader

-*Sorry to Bother You* (2018) by Boots Riley

All three films are available to stream on Hulu and for purchase/rental on Amazon video. If you are unable to locate a copy of these films, please contact me.

I **do not** expect a “review” or a “report.” I expect an analytical discussion of the film’s themes and storytelling in relation to a text analyzed in this course. The goal is to create something new through writing, not to regurgitate existing knowledge of these films or the texts as an “assignment.”

Citations should follow the Chicago Style Guide.

Do note, some of these films are very explicit. All three are rated “R” by the MPAA. Do exercise caution when selecting a film. That is to say, do some research and pick a film you feel comfortable watching, perhaps multiple times, and that you find interesting or evocative.

**NB:** I will **NOT** accept papers uploaded in .pages or .PDF format. I **only** accept Microsoft Word files. If you do not have Microsoft Word installed on your device, please access Tigerware to obtain a copy, compliments of your university technology fee.

**Due: Sat. April 24<sup>th</sup>, 9 PM**

## Screenings

In addition to the readings, I will host three screenings of the three aforementioned film throughout the semester. Attendance is optional but encouraged – and those who attend will be awarded bonus points on tests. They will be held on certain Saturdays at Noon over Zoom. As usual, check your email for more up-to-date information.

## Rules and Stipulations

This is a college course. Therefore, I expect collegiate quality work. My general role is to facilitate your learning by instructing you inside of the classroom and making myself available outside of via Zoom and am more than willing to answer any question about the material. I also recognize that we live in highly unusual times and that many of you will experience great hardship throughout the semester.

While I am very amenable about deadlines and sympathetic to situations that emerge beyond the grasp of any individual, **I do not** need your “life story,” nor do I desire a great deal of information about your personal life. Instead, I suggest in the event that you need to turn in the paper late or cannot attend a test date, that you **briefly** inform me of your difficulties **ahead of its due date** and we can arrange an alternative due date. **However, failure to meet this alternative time will result in a drastic reduction of credit, especially near the end of the course.**

Furthermore, this course is **highly discussion oriented**. It is simply impossible to learn these texts and their ideas without participating in discourse about them. As a result, when you come to class, I expect you to have read and be ready to discuss that day’s text. If you are unable to access a text either on Moodle or in the library, or if that text appears arcane and difficult to approach, please contact me and I can suggest an alternative translation for you.

I expect this to be an interesting and engaging semester. However, only your participation can make it such - I exist merely to instruct your learning and provide context to your reading. It is ultimately you who must practice reading the texts in order to gain a greater understanding of the material and, therefore, insight into the notion of political theory. I look forward to working with all of you this semester and wish you the very best of luck from this point. Moreover, I hope that through this course, you can gain something more valuable than mere “information” or “job training.” That is - I hope you can attain wisdom and freedom through education.

-ADC

## ADA Compliance

The University is committed to making reasonable efforts to assist individuals with disabilities in their efforts to avail themselves of services and programs offered by the University. To this end, Louisiana State University will provide reasonable accommodations for persons with documented qualifying disabilities. If you have a disability and feel you need accommodations in this course, you must present a letter to me from Disability Services in 115 Johnston Hall, indicating the existence of a disability and the suggested accommodations.

## LSU Integrative Curriculum Statement

Integrated learning allows students to make simple connections among ideas and experiences and across disciplines and perspectives. The LSU Integrative Learning Core (ILC) curriculum is designed to develop student abilities to transfer their learning to new situations, and demonstrate a sense of self as a learner. A fundamental goal of the ILC is to foster students’ practical and intellectual capacities associated with integrative learning in preparation for high competence and functionality in their post-baccalaureate careers. This course fulfills the BOR Area of Social/Behavioral Sciences and provides students experience with the ILC proficiency of Inquiry and Analysis.