

POL 2028: Approaches to Political Theory

Time: Thursday 12:10-2:00

Place: Trinity College 24

Instructor: Joseph H. Carens

Office: Sidney Smith Hall 3044

**Office Hours: Tuesday 4:10-5:00
Wednesday 4:10-5:00**

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Course goals

This course will introduce graduate students to some alternative approaches to political theory in the early 21st century and help them reflect upon what these approaches can or cannot contribute to their own work in political theory. The course satisfies the department's qualitative methods requirement for Ph.D. students whose primary field is political theory. The course is open to MA students but not to undergraduates. Auditors are welcome and encouraged (but not required) to submit the reaction pieces.

The premise of the course is that the most helpful way to engage with methodological questions in political theory is to see how such questions emerge from, or are presupposed in, the work that political theorists actually do. So, we will use the work of ten of the political theorists in our department to reflect upon some of the ways in which one can approach political theory. Each week a different theorist will come to the class. Prior to the class, students will be asked to read two sorts of background materials: (1) a methodological piece – either one written by the theorist himself or herself or one written by another author about an approach that affects the way the week's theorist does his or her work; (2) a substantive example of the theorist's own work (i.e., a piece in which he or she actually does some political theory rather than talking about how to do it). At the beginning of class the theorist will talk for 15 or 20 minutes. The rest of the class will be devoted to discussion. I have asked my colleagues to present a brief intellectual autobiography, sketching how they came to be political theorists and what sorts of work they have done over their careers. I have also asked them to reflect upon issues like the following in their presentations:

- What sorts of questions do you address in your work?
- How do you go about answering these questions?
- Are there other theorists who think about similar questions or topics in very different ways, and, if so, why do you adopt your approach instead?
- Are there any who do things quite differently whom you particularly admire?
- What does your approach permit you to see that you think other approaches might miss?
- What is your approach in danger of missing that other approaches might see?
- How do you decide what to read (and what to ignore), what to consider (and what to set aside)?
- What counts as evidence in the sort of inquiry you conduct?

- What distinguishes a good analysis or argument from a bad one (or are those the wrong categories from your perspective)?
- What sort of audience do you have in mind for your work and how does that affect the way you think and write?

You are encouraged to press each theorist to provide explicit answers to these questions in the class discussion to the extent that you cannot see the answers emerging from the week's readings or from the presentation.

In the discussion we will explore the connections and dissonances between the methodological piece and the theorist's own substantive work and between both of those and the oral presentation. My hope is that these discussions will work somewhat differently from the standard model of academic interaction, however. The usual form of intellectual exchange in our profession is for someone to present a paper which is followed by a discussion in which the audience poses objections or asks questions, usually with the goal of revealing some flaw in the presentation. This approach to learning has virtues and defects, but it is not likely to be fruitful in the context of this course. The goal of our class discussions should be for you to see how each theoretical approach opens up certain avenues of intellectual inquiry.

The presentation each theorist makes in this course is not supposed to be an argument, an *apologia pro vita sua*, but a reflective meditation on paths taken (and not taken). The underlying presupposition of the course is a kind of epistemological pluralism, i.e., that there are many good ways of doing political theory. Each of the theorists in the department (including those not appearing in the course this year) pursues political theory in a somewhat different way and yet there is a high level of mutual respect and appreciation among the theorists in our department. We all think that what every other theorist in our department does is worth doing, though we don't always say why to one another. This course offers a way of bringing that mutual respect and appreciation to consciousness in order to reflect upon it. The fundamental objective of the course is to enable you to understand more fully what different theorists in the department do and why. To be sure, understanding involves questioning and you should come to each session with questions in mind. And questions may involve challenges, but the main goal of the questions and challenges should be to understand more fully why a given theorist works in the way that he or she does rather than to provide a critique.

Understanding what each of the theorists does is not enough, however. I do not want the course simply to provide a survey of alternative approaches that you can digest passively. One important purpose of the course is to help you in your own work in political theory. To that end, you are encouraged to think about the connections between each week's materials and the questions you are trying to ask as a political theorist. Over the course of the semester, I hope to build a conversation about how to do political theory that will draw connections between the different approaches of the faculty members and will help each of you to think more deeply about your own approach to political theory.

Course requirements

1) Class participation and short reaction pieces: 20%

- (a) You are expected to do the assigned readings, to read the reaction pieces of your colleagues posted on Blackboard, and to participate actively in the discussion.
- (b) You are expected to submit 5 short reaction pieces. In the 5 short pieces, you should use your reactions to the assigned readings to raise questions about the approach a theorist is taking. You may pose objections, if you wish, but the main goal should be to see what you can learn from each week's readings and so to ask questions that help you to think further about what kind of work you want to do as a theorist. You are especially encouraged to think about the various questions posed in bullet points on the first page of the syllabus and to use these questions to probe more deeply into the readings.

The papers should be between half a page and one page, single spaced, (12" font; 1" margins). **They must be distributed to the entire class through posting on Blackboard by 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday evening, the night before class.** I will forward the papers to the week's presenter. The papers will be graded on a pass-fail basis.

The class will be randomly divided into 2 groups (A and B), with one of the groups expected to respond to the week's readings. You may exchange weeks with a colleague in the other group, but only if you do so in advance and send me an e-mail informing me about this.

2) Research paper: 16-20 pages

The paper can be on any topic related to the question of what approaches to use in political theory. You are encouraged to use this opportunity to explore the methodological issues that you will face in your own research, but you are not required to do so. You may use the paper to discuss readings from the class or from the supplementary list of readings on methodological issues in political theory or you can focus on sources of your own. You must discuss your paper topic with me in advance – preferably in person -- and get formal confirmation of its acceptability via e-mail. It is your responsibility to send a followup e-mail after our conversation confirming what we have agreed upon.

Readings

The readings for the course will be posted on Blackboard under the heading "Course Materials" or will be available online at the U of T library.

SCHEDULE

September 11: Introduction

September 18: Joe Carens (Group A)

Joseph H. Carens, "Appendix: Presuppositions and Political Theory" from *The Ethics of Immigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Joseph H. Carens, "Chapter 11: The Case for Open Borders" from *The Ethics of Immigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Recommended: Joseph H. Carens, "A Contextual Approach to Political Theory," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 2004): 117-132.

September 25: Rebecca Kingston (Group B)

Iain Hampsher-Monk, "Politics, political theory and its history," in *Political Philosophy vs. History?*, eds., J. Floyd and M. Stears (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011): 105-127.

Rebecca Kingston, "Montesquieu and Plutarch: Reflections on Historical Analysis in Broader Social Scientific Comparison" in *A Companion to Enlightenment Historiography*, eds., S. Bourgault and R. Sparling (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 133-152.

Rebecca Kingston, "The Political Relevance of the Emotions from Descartes to Smith" in *The Passions in the History of Political Thought*, eds., Leonard Ferry and Rebecca Kingston (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008): 108-25.

October 2: Ryan Balot (Group A)

October 9: Dan Lee (Group B)

October 16: Simone Chambers (Group A)

October 23: Melissa Williams (Group B)

October 30: Jennifer Nedelsky (Group A)

November 6: Peggy Kohn (Group B)

November 13: Courtney Jung (Group A)

November 20: Ruth Marshall (Group B)

November 27: Review and Synthesis