Topics in Political Theory: Realist Political Theory
Political Science 381H1F Lecture 0201
Fall 2021
Draft syllabus: 29 August 2021

Note: this course is a semester-length version of a previous year-long course by the same name (Political Science 381Y1Y, “Topics in Political Theory: Realist Political Theory”). Students who have completed Pol381Y1Y may not take this course for credit.

See below for a section on “Covid-19 and Special Circumstances”

INSTRUCTOR
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(Emails will be answered within 24 hours. Feel free to re-send if one is not)

Office hours (a.k.a. student meeting hours whether or not you have a particular problem):
- Thursdays, 2:30-4:30 p.m. Students may sign up for either in-person or virtual meetings (via Calendly: see just below).
- Sign up for meetings via Calendly: https://calendly.com/andrew-sabl/office-hour-meeting.
- Meetings at other times are also possible: please email. But please schedule a meeting for office hours if possible.

COURSE SESSIONS: Thursdays, 12 p.m.-noon. Location to be announced.
During the first two weeks, in-person attendance is optional. During the first week of class, a doodle poll will be held asking at what time, among several options, the most students can attend a virtual (Zoom) lecture/discussion for those two weeks only. That session will also be recorded so that those who cannot attend can view it online when they want to (“asynchronously”). After the first two weeks, classes will be held in person and there will be no virtual or recorded option. Please contact the instructor with any questions.

COURSE DESCRIPTION
In everyday talk, we have a decent idea what it means to call oneself a “realist” about politics. Realists pride themselves on having learned from hard experience to distrust both fancy talk and utopian moral aspirations. A little bit cynical or “hard-boiled” (though not necessarily malicious or evil), realists think that behind—or at least alongside—professed aspirations to morality or community lie the real currency of all politics: power on the one hand, self- or group interest on the other. They have a chastened, somewhat bleak view of human nature in which most people find it hard to care deeply about those very different (or distant) from themselves and prefer a quiet, comfortable life to risky endeavours in pursuit of social change.

What would a similar disposition look like in, or as, political theory? The main mode of political theory has been called “ideal” (a term used by John Rawls, but other ideal theorists include (Plato, Rousseau, and Aquinas, and in our age—besides Rawls—Nozick, Dworkin, and most so-called “deliberative democrats). Ideal theorists seek to construct systematic, more or less universally valid theories of a just (or equal, or legitimate, or free) society, so as to be able to criticize existing institutions and practices for falling short of the ideal.

Ideal theorists’ methods and assumptions include:
• utopianism: imagining perfect orders so as to attack existing ones;
• moralism: a belief that justice and other moral principles should always trump nonmoral considerations, e.g. self- or group interest, self-preservation, and custom;
• rationalism: a belief that people's reason can and should govern their passions or mere preferences.
• universalism: a search for principles independent of time, place, and circumstance;
• harmonism: a neologism: the conviction that much, perhaps all, political conflict is regrettable, a sign of bias or partiality, and that we should aspire to have much less of it.

The recent school of thought known as realist—or "political realist"—adopts the opposite assumptions. It begins from political and social experience, current and historical. While respecting the force of moral appeals, it does not treat them as sovereign as a matter of either fact or right: in politics, morality is typically one consideration among many. It doubts that most people most of the time are ruled by reason, much less the philosophically soundest reasons. It accepts the possibility that many political standards may differ according to time, place, circumstances (the level of wealth, the distribution of power, etc.), and regime type. It assumes that conflict is permanent and must be managed through non-rational means, including institutional design, rhetorical persuasion, the channeling of passions and interests towards more rather than less benign ends, and the deployment of one set of power to avoid another. It focuses not on idealized systems but on the perspective of agents and the requirements of real-world political action. And it insists that good political theory must always be based on a knowledge of, and respect for, real politics.

This course will explore the insights and virtues of the realist tradition. It will do this by exploring an alternative canon of political thinkers and, more briefly, contemporary contributions to the "realist revival" of political theory.

A central goal of the course is to show that when political theory avoids a one-sided emphasis on the justice and/or legitimacy of imagined institutions, it can consider—and has considered—a great many concerns of crucial and continuing importance to political life. These include: the way political decisions and institutions are driven by power and interest (and how to define those things); the real but partial role of moral claims as motivating some but not all political actions and judgments; the way in which human nature and moral psychology may limit political possibilities; the urgency of political order and the requirements of durable order; the role of initiative and invention in political life; the varieties of political character and leadership; the role of both institutions and countervailing political power (e.g. social movements) in preventing abuses of power; and the ways in which custom, habit, and history structure and limit, for better or worse, the political choices considered by human agents.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. 2 short papers (4-5 pages, 1100-1500 words)  
   Total Weight: 50%  
   Due 18 October and [***tk]  
   (25% and 25%)

2. Term test  
   Weight: 40%

   The exam will last two hours and will be offered either in person or virtually depending on covid-19 conditions. It is possible that two different exams will be offered to accommodate both in-person and virtual options (or two different virtual options).  
   o each exam will consist of two essays, with choice (e.g. "write on one of the following two prompts" in each of two sections).
3. **Participation**  
**Total Weight: 10%**

Includes:
- (a) attendance at Thursday class meetings (attendance will be recorded).
- (b) quality of class participation during those meetings, with the caveat that participation opportunities may be limited if enrollment is high.

The papers should be turned in via Quercus: no hard copies will be accepted. The Assignments will all be under “Assignments” except for the exam which, if a virtual option is offered, will be taken under “Quizzes”.

**QUERCUS AND EMAIL**
Course assignments and guidelines will be posted on Quercus. You MUST have a valid UTOR email and are expected to consult Quercus regularly as well as enabling prompt (same-day) Quercus announcements to allow communication of urgent matters.

The professor will respond to emails within 24 hours whenever possible. In the rare case that a substantive question is not answered within that time, you should feel free to send it again, and will never be marked down for (politely!) repeating your inquiry. Please consult the syllabus or Quercus before asking questions that are answered there.

**WRITING ESSAYS**
This course assumes that you are prepared to work on improving your prose style and argumentative skill. Moreover, it regards clear, well-structured, and forceful writing as the hallmark of strong analytic and synthetic thought. Passive, indirect constructions let a writer get away with not stating and defending—in other words, possibly not having—a definite position. The Writing at U of T website (http://writing.utoronto.ca/) contains a variety of online resources, links to writing centers, and other forms of support. Writing assistance is also available through every college. **You are strongly encouraged to take extensive advantage of all these resources.** Not only the worst but also the best writers are constantly trying to improve.

Other resources for improving your writing will be posted on Quercus.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**
Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will be dealt with accordingly. Students must read “Tips for Avoiding Academic Misconduct” [http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students/avoid-misconduct/tips-for-avoiding-academic-misconduct](http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/students/avoid-misconduct/tips-for-avoiding-academic-misconduct) and the University’s “How not to Plagiarize” document, [http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize/](http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize/) and are encouraged to discuss with the instructors if they are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty. Plagiarism applies not only to essays, but also to more informal forms of writing.

**SUBMITTING PAPERS AND OTHER ASSIGNMENTS: OURIGITAL.**
Normally, students will be required to submit their course assignments and essays to Ouriginal for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. (Ouriginal is U of T’s new plagiarism detection tool, which operates similarly to turnitin.com and other tools you may have heard
of.) In doing so, students will allow their work to be included as source documents in the Ouriginal reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Ouriginal service are described on [**the relevant website: details to be announced.**]

You should ensure that you have an electronic copy and a backup copy (hard copy, or an electronic copy stored somewhere other than the device on which the original is) of all work submitted, and you are strongly advised to retain the rough work, notes, and draft material that went into the essay or assignment.

Students have the right to refuse to use Ouriginal. In this case, students will be expected to submit an electronic copy of their essay to the professor by email, accompanied by their outline, thesis statement and annotated bibliography, as well all their notes and rough drafts, by the time each paper would normally be due on TurnItIn.

LATE WORK POLICY

Late papers and other assignments will be penalized three points on the 100-point U of T grading scale per day late or part thereof. Exceptions may be granted to students who have faced serious medical or other emergencies, and who have substantial and convincing documentation fully accounting for the length of delay. If you are facing such a situation, inform the instructor as soon as possible—and, whenever possible, before the assignment is due. It is the instructor’s intention to be understanding and lenient when students face difficult circumstances: see below under “COVID-19 AND SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES”.

CLASS ATTENDANCE/PARTICIPATION:

Students are expected to complete the readings listed for each lecture/discussion session before that session takes place. You are also expected to download and print out the handout that will be provided as a reference point for each lecture: it will contain an outline of the lecture as well as relevant quotations. The lectures will not summarize the reading. On the contrary, they will assume that you have covered the reading material and will therefore analyze or explain the reading, or place it in a larger context. The papers as well as the fall and end-of-year exams will be based on material covered in both the readings and the class lectures and discussion.

COVID-19 AND SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

As of this writing, covid-19 is not quite as disruptive as it was in the previous academic year, and it is expected that learning will take place in person. However, this may change without notice, and course delivery may end up becoming virtual. Even if that is not the case, any student (or the instructor!) may have to miss specific classes, or provide them virtually, if those individuals come down with covid-19 infections.

I am determined to be sensitive to all such circumstances and to accommodate them whenever possible (e.g. by adapting assignments). All readings are available in electronic form, and alternatives are available such that all of them can be accessed without cost. Please contact me, however, with any special circumstances that have not been covered here. I will try to do what I can to accommodate those circumstances—with the proviso that we will have to settle on some way that I can monitor whether you have learned the course material.

TEXTS

Five books (though by no means the whole of each book) will be assigned in this course. Two are available online through the U of T library. The other two unfortunately are not, and the library cannot obtain electronic versions of them from the publishers. Because placing books on reserve is
not possible due to covid-19 as of this writing, students will also be permitted to read, and cite, editions of those two books that are available online: see the details below.

Though some of these books are long, reading will typically consist of less than 80 pages a week—often much less if the material is dense and/or difficult. Only portions of the big books will be assigned. Although you are encouraged to refer to used copies, please use the editions assigned, so that we are all literally on the same page and using the same translation. That said, the instructor will refer to universal indicators (e.g. section and paragraph number) whenever possible and available, to allow for cross-referencing.

All other required course readings will be available online, either as copyright-compliant postings on the course Quercus site or as links to the University of Toronto Libraries electronic collection (see below).

You are responsible for completing all readings by the dates indicated on the syllabus (i.e. before the lecture in which they will be discussed).

All the readings marked on the syllabus are required, unless otherwise stated. Readings may be modified at the Instructor’s discretion – you must consult Quercus regularly for new, revised or updated assignments.

**Assigned books** (in alphabetical order; the numbers at the end are ISBN-13 numbers for easier used book shopping.


Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist* (originally published in serial form, 1787-88). The instructor will be using the Gideon edition, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001 [1818]). This edition is available online here through the Online Library of Liberty. You may also use other online or print editions, as are widely available, or ebooks (free).


The listed translations of Machiavelli and Weber are highly recommended (since many translations, especially older ones that are free, are very misleading). Both are available as e-books but, regrettably, not through U of T library. I recommend buying both books since they are quite cheap as paperbacks. But if you genuinely cannot afford them you may use — the Oxford University Press translation (2005) of *The Prince*, by Peter Bondarella, which is quite good and available through the library: https://search.library.utoronto.ca/details?8960384

CLASS SCHEDULE

I. Introduction (Week 1): 9 September
Course introduction, mechanics, and format; the realist attitude towards politics.

Reading:
Recommended Viewing: “Game Of Thrones Season 8 Finale, Tyrion And Jon Scene”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=En4QJ2GOdL0, posted 19 May 2019. The relevant part begins around 2:30.
(Discussion will probably be a little light, and the session will probably not last two hours.)

II. The nature of realist theory (Week 2): 16 September
Realist vs. idealist political theory; Moralism vs. the values of politics.

Reading:

III. Political immoralism and the autonomy of politics: Machiavelli (Weeks 3-4)
Week 3: 23 September
Agency and institutions; realism vs. moral constraints

Reading:
—Machiavelli’s letter to Francesco Vettori (10 Dec. 1513), pp. 107-111 of the Mansfield translation of *The Prince* (will be posted on Quercus for students using other editions).
—*The Prince*, Dedicatory Letter and Chapters 1-14 (pp. 3-60). Pay special attention to Chapter 8-9.

September 30: No class (instructor attending American Political Science Association conference). An optional class will be held, and if possible recorded, on the U of T makeup day, 9 December

Week 4: 7 October
“Effectual truth” vs. imagination; technology (political and scientific)

Reading:

IV. Realist nature and utopian commonwealths: Hobbes (Weeks 5-6)
Week 5 (14 October): Power and interest; political honour and dishonour
*Reading:*
Hobbes, *Leviathan*
Skim chapters 1, 2, 3, 8; Read Introduction and chapters 4-7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, the last paragraph of 18, and 26.¹

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 18: FIRST PAPER DUE (via Quercus), 10 p.m.**

Week 6 (21 October):
"Thomas Hobbes, Idealist?": The artificial commonwealth and its authority; will as a realist category (or not); the (attempted?) displacement of religion.
*Reading:*
Hobbes, *Leviathan*: Chapters 12, 14-20, 22, 43, 46, 47, Review and Conclusion.

V. Political reflections on human nature: *The Federalist* (Weeks 7-8)
Week 7 (28 October):
A. Institutional design: political science and technologies of representation; security and commerce; justifying vs. checking power.
B. Political Problems and their (partial) solutions: Causes and remedies of faction; fame, interest, and political office; divisions of political labour.

*Reading: The Federalist*, Nos. 1-4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 48-9, 51, 63, 70-72.

Week 8 (4 November): "Instruction week"—focus on techniques of close reading and interpretation, and possibly current events (very little reading!).

*Reading: close reading of two Federalist papers chosen by the instructor, and one determined by student interest.*

**NOVEMBER 11: U of T READING WEEK—NO CLASS.** (Office hours may be virtual-only that week.)

VI. Political ethics and political action: Weber (Weeks 9-10)
Week 9 (November 18): Institutions and Actors
Political crisis as context; administration as temptation to anti-politics; violence as the limit case of power; mass politics and the alienation of elites.

*Reading: Politics as a Vocation*: pages to be announced.

¹ Curley includes in his edition his own translation of some chapters of the Latin edition of Leviathan whose sense differs from the English version published in Hobbes's time. *Feel free to ignore these translations from the Latin* (marked “OL” by Curley). The English version, and only that, is assigned.
Week 10 (November 25): Ethics and Action.
Agency, leadership, and “spiritual proletarianization”; political ethics (conviction and responsibility); ethical pluralism and the limits of reason.

Reading: *Politics as a Vocation*: pages to be announced.

A. Avoiding the worst—metaphysical eclecticism, suffering, and pessimism.
B. The priority of injustice and realist moral psychology.

Reading:

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6: SECOND PAPER DUE (via Quercus), 10 p.m.
(Requests for turning in papers late will typically be granted; the due date is Monday to avoid conflicting with term tests.)

VIII: Review and Conclusion (Week 12): Make-up day, December 9. (Will be recorded for those who cannot attend.)

A. Concluding lecture. Some reference will be made to the following readings, which should be considered helpful but optional:
(Both of these are posted on Quercus under Files/Week 12).
B. Review session: students to come prepared with questions.

TERM TEST: DAY AND TIME TO BE ANNOUNCED. TWO HOURS, IN-PERSON (OR VIRTUAL IF CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGE), OPEN-BOOK, OPEN-NOTES.