

**Politics 9503A: Political Theory I:  
Renewing Political Theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century -  
"Democracy", "Power", "Sovereignty", "Justice":  
modern and postmodern approaches**

September - December 2014

Mondays 10:30 - 12:30

SSC 4112

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Office hours:

Mon. 1:30 to 3:00; Tues. 11:30 to 12:30 and 1:30 to 3:00; Thurs. 11:30 to 12:30

*The seminar is not about the interests or erudition (or lack thereof) of the instructor. Like all advanced seminars, it is about the empowerment and freedom of all the participants.*

This seminar will explore the way in which some of the familiar elements and authors of modern political theory are re-invented (deconstructed? re-constructed?) in the context of postmodern discourses of various kinds. It offers participants the opportunity to take a careful look at core traditional components of the 'Western' political vocabulary, and to ask: "Is our theoretical understanding of power (or sovereignty, or justice, or freedom ...) sustainable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is it in need of reconsideration and renewal? What does reconsideration entail? What does renewal require?"

The particular ideas and/or authors studied will be determined by the interests and backgrounds of the seminar members. Some possible focal points might be:

1. **Justice, the indispensable and impossible ideal** as understood in Plato and Derrida; or in Stuart Hampshire's *Justice as Conflict*, or the Natural Jurisprudence tradition from Aquinas to Adam Smith; as compared to the deeply paradoxical discussion of it in Francois Lyotard's works.
2. **Liberalism** as embodied in the works of John Rawls, A. K. Sen and Martha Nussbaum, as reformulated in Richard Rorty, and as rejected in Michel Foucault's *College de France* lectures of 1978.
3. **Power**: Hobbes's juridical model frontally attacked by Foucault, who formulates the alternative conceptions of disciplinary/normative power and biopower; Or Foucault's famous critical examination of Bentham's Panopticon as a symbol of the construction of disciplinary power in the modern capitalist state; Sheldon Wolin's conception of "superpower" and terrorism as "formless forms" of power from the perspective of a radical American democratic theorist.
4. **Sovereignty**: Hobbes again, of course, but this time contrasted with A Giorgio Agamben's notion of "sovereign exception". Hobbes's "Commonwealth" becomes Agamben's "camp". Hobbes's subjects become instantiations of Agamben's 'homo sacer': persons stripped of all formal political and social status and left with nothing but 'bare life'. The power of sovereign political states is dwarfed by trans-national economic, organizational and psychological power.
5. **Democracy**: we could revisit a classic modern articulation of it such as Dahl's 'polyarchy', a modern critical account of it such as Sheldon Wolin's "postmodern democracy: fugitive or virtual?", paired for contrast with the new collection of postmodern essays on democracy edited by Agamben, *Democracy in What State?* In which 'democracy' is viewed as an 'empty signifier' approaching meaninglessness.

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### A Rationale for this approach: Theory at the “modern / postmodern interface”:

**Note: this is intended as a statement of interest, and as a disclosure of perspective. It is not a list of requirements. Please read it critically and with your individual interests in mind. Can you find a place for yourself somewhere ‘inside’ this field of ideas and issues?**

My working assumption is that political theory – which is really a language game about political language games – finds itself today situated at an interface, ‘between’ modern and postmodern ways of talking and writing about individuality, community, power, conflict, freedom and justice. It does not follow that one or the other approach to political talk must ‘win’ over the other – to put the matter in those terms is to work within - and thus to assume the superiority and priority of - the modern paradigm. We do not simply have to choose one view or the other. But unless we are aware of the characteristics, problems and claims of both, how can we hope to assess political talk in the new century/ millennium critically and fruitfully? All speech is spoken ‘inside the box’ of some language game. “Thinking outside the box” has become its own opposite these days. Is it possible for us to avoid imprisoning all of our speech inside an ‘ism’, be it modern or postmodern? If not, what is left of the idea of freedom of thought or speech so heroically celebrated in the rhetoric of J. S. Mill? What has become of liberalism? What has liberalism become? The same question can be asked about the State, Sovereignty, Power, Community, Identity and Justice. All are ‘fair game(s)’ for this seminar.

Modern political theory was/is heir to a centuries-old tradition of self-conscious dedication to the pursuit of simple, perhaps even self-evident, ‘truths’. The propositions to which modern theorists dedicated themselves have, however, often turned out to be neither simple nor unconditionally true. Drawing at will on the cultural and intellectual authority of theology, philosophy and science, modern theory since the Enlightenment (since Kant?) has claimed to reduce the infinite complexity of human life experience to a manageable simplicity. It has in the process marginalized problematic discourses and phenomena in the name of systematization, the better to demonstrate its power and utility by ‘solving problems’ (all too often accomplishing this by ‘winning wars’). **Political theory looks very different when ‘complexification’ replaces simplification, ‘problematization’ replaces system-building, and the proliferation and imaginative enrichment of discursive constructs replaces the discovery of ‘truth’ as its goal.**

In other words, modern and postmodern theories look very different and aim to do very different things. Modernity was fixated on truth-telling iconic figures (e.g. Freud, Marx) whose discourses ‘shaped reality’ for millions, perhaps billions of people. Postmodern discourse looks for, highlights, and delights in exploring the very aporias (‘dead-ends’, intractable contradictions) which modernity strove to exterminate or conceal. Modernists accuse postmodernists of a paralyzing and nihilistic relativism. Postmodernists accuse modernists of wilfully and oppressively papering over the cracks of a fractured and inhumane life experience. Thus Michel Foucault labels the modern model of liberal-democracy a ‘carceral’ system, challenging the whole ‘story’ developed to defend it as a system of individual liberty. Francois Lyotard abandons both the centring of the human individual as subject and the centrality of capitalist exchange and valuation in human interaction, in pursuit of a new postmodern story (NOT a ‘meta-narrative’) of the human condition (*The Postmodern Condition*) famously dramatized before him by Andre Malraux (*La Condition Humaine*). Georges Bataille deliberately takes us to the outer limits of what language can say and leaves us there, repelled and confused, to sort out our reactions and reconstruct our defenses. Giles Deleuze offers a new ontology as a basis for a new kind of political theory – one that will thrive on difference, contestation and uncertainty. Giorgio Agamben plays with the paradoxes that ‘plague’ sovereignty and community. Jacques Derrida ‘deconstructs’ democracy, identity, community and justice (‘if such things exist’) and often portrays the human condition as one of Sisyphus yearning for a future that, like Beckett’s Godot, never comes.

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The postmodern presupposes the modern, but it does not come after it. It is a post-ideological form of radical criticism, perhaps the only available form of criticism of the modern paradigm that permits, invites, requires the theorists to stand outside that paradigm. Such a stance, such a criticism, is essential to the preservation of individual freedom and power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the face of the totalisation of modern political, bureaucratic, economic and scientific power which confronts the individual, 'civilizing' and 'socializing' her into a state of seemingly inescapable conformity to systemically dictated norms.

The continuing influence of modern ways of theorizing on the practice of politics in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is undeniable. In fact, the dominant modern "possessive individualist" view of political life seems to be centred on an intellectual construct made famous by the Canadian political theorist C. B. Macpherson back in the 1960s in The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism. As Macpherson himself asserted, this intellectual construct has been elevated to the status of an 'ontology': a statement of the essential nature of the human being. "We" are said to be, as economists often say, rational utility-maximizing creatures by 'nature'. And we are capable of articulating pure and universal 'concepts' of power, justice, equality etc., whose nature is somehow prior to the particular voices and circumstances which provoke and enable us to articulate them. Modern political theory is concerned with the discovery of the ontological and scientific 'truth' about humanity, society, power and conflict. Only on the basis of assumptions such as these could Francis Fukuyama write that with the triumph [sic] of global capitalism we have (or rather 'had') reached "the end of history". In the past fifty years or so a series of political thinkers such as Robert Nozick, Friedrich Hayek and libertarian cheerleader Milton Friedman have achieved enormous fame and influence in the world of partisan political action by enthusiastically espousing the very possessive individualism Macpherson so disdained in the 1960s.

On the other hand, during that same half century (one of the first usages of the term 'postmodern;' was by the Sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1957), the distinctively modern claim that carefully chosen theoretical words can express the 'essential nature' of individuals or systems or 'reality' has been attacked, and some would say irreparably discredited, by a series of philosophical critics, some of whose works we shall have the opportunity to examine in this course. If in modern terms you and I are gathered here to discover 'the truth' about politics, in postmodern terms we are here to say new, interesting and fluid things about old, familiar and ossified topics (Rorty), to unmask our fondest and most fundamental 'realities' as discursive constructs (Derrida), and to identify the 'grid' of discursive constructs which holds us firmly in place, even as we dream of freedom, like flies on flypaper (Foucault). Deleuze would say that we are here in search of 'lines of flight' that are inaccessible to us until we discard, or at least recognize, the "territorializing machine" that is modern political thought.

### **Dramatis Personae: some of the critical, 'postmodern' theorists /theories that may be of interest to you:**

**Richard Rorty's 'ironism'**, a descendant of David Hume's philosophical scepticism, suggests that established political labels like 'liberal' can be retained in a postmodern era, so long as it is understood that there is really no such thing as liberal justice or freedom. Liberals must be ironists. They must talk – and care – about political things even while they know that such things exist only in language, not in a realm of 'metaphysics' somehow beyond, above, beneath or otherwise prior to language. In his critical analysis of language, "selfhood" and community, Rorty takes Hume beyond Hume.

**Jacques Derrida, father of 'deconstruction'**, is (deliberately) the philosophical antithesis of Plato. Plato thought that the intellectual realm of "The Forms" alone could give deep meaning to a life trapped in "the cave" of appearances, that only philosophy could give thinkers access to a 'reality' beyond

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appearances. Derrida, a careful student of Plato, sees philosophy as the activity of fracturing meanings and ‘deconstructing’ unities just like the ones postulated by Plato as constituting and unifying “reality”. Derrida’s philosophy exposes the limits of language, and the contradictions which infest our most precious abstract and general ideas. For Derrida, we may find our freedom in the space (and the creative tension) between the world of experience (e.g. the law) which we must continually deconstruct in order not to be imprisoned by it, and something “undeconstructible” (e.g. justice) for which we yearn but which remains always “toute autre” to us, always “a-venir”.

Thus the study of Derrida’s writings may open the door to a consideration of the pivotal term ‘otherness’ or ‘alterity’: modernity hates and denies profound otherness –it seeks uniformity in the spirit of Newton’s laws of motion. Postmodernity celebrates the inexpressible and irreducible otherness of eccentricity, impulsiveness, creativity - freedom. Its challenge, from a political point of view, is to maintain some coherence, some consistency and some defensibly notion of authority and power in the midst of these anarchic celebrations – and to do so while rejecting the ontological basis that grounds the fraudulently universalized ‘simple truths’ of modern thought.

**Michel Foucault’s attack on modernity** included a rejection of modern historiography, an ontological critique of modern theoretical language much like Derrida’s, and a demonstration that the very society modern liberals cherish as the apotheosis of freedom can plausibly be viewed, when instrumentalities like propaganda and advertising, systems of educational training like this university, systems of law and punishment and systems for the definition and treatment of mental health are critically scrutinized, as what Foucault called a ‘disciplinary’ society – a space and a system of control more complete and pervasive (video surveillance anyone?) than anything ever dreamed of before, say, 1984.

Because Foucault and Derrida reject ontology as such, modernists have rejected Foucault and Derrida as nihilistic. Derrida in turn mocks this charge, which completely fails to see the difference (or the “differance”) between deconstruction and destruction. **With Gilles Deleuze ontology** returns as the basis of philosophical thinking, but it is a new kind of ontology, one based on a Heraclitian ‘flowing philosophy’ of creativity and becoming, not a Platonic metaphysics of stasis and being, and (explicitly) on an empiricism of ‘particularities’ instead of uniformities. Deleuze offers something really radically new: an actual ontology of difference, not just a tactical discourse of grudging acknowledgment of it. If the texts of Derrida and Foucault can become difficult reading because they cannot come to rest on foundational concepts with clear, fixed meanings, the writings of Deleuze and Guattari are difficult because of the extensive ‘rhizomatic’ tangle of concepts they create in order to free us from the grip of ossified and congealed traditional vocabularies. In the collaborative works of Deleuze and Guattari it is not one or a few specific concepts in modern political theory that come under fire, but the entire process of conceptualization as moderns understand it. A new language of political and social thought is the result.

There are many, many possible selections and pairings of modern and postmodern thinkers discussing the same terms or tropes (if not necessarily the same ‘concepts’). I will be very happy to entertain your ideas if you have a modern/postmodern pairing of authors or a particular concept that can be interestingly viewed from modern and postmodern perspectives. Giorgio Agamben (whom I think I am just beginning to understand) is fascinating on issues like sovereignty and citizenship, and on the nature of the state. Georges Bataille (whom I am not sure I really do want to understand!) is an acquired taste, but his “accursed share” is a biting critical comment on the basic idea of “political economy”. Alterity can be studied via the writings of Levinas or Luce Irigaray, both strongly influenced by the French psycho-analytic thinker Lacan. Francois Lyotard’s “Postmodern Fables” is a study in decentering the subject. If the seminar members wish to go in this direction, we can always examine the particular theory through which Jurgen Habermas tries to relocate “modernity” inside a discursive construct called ‘communicative rationality’, and thus to defend it from postmodern critiques. Since we are here to observe an interface,

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not to witness a burial or do a collective *post mortem*, we may wish to conclude with a look at Habermas's unique and heroic efforts, which to me are reminiscent of the (ultimately futile) liberal heroics of J. S. Mill. With the help of my students in recent years, I have begun to cultivate an appreciation of the imaginativeness and power of Giles Deleuze's new ontological approach to political theory, though my grasp of his ideas is still very imperfect.

**However, at the graduate level of study self-generated projects are best and most appropriate, and your background may have exposed you to ideas and authors whom I, as a reconstructed (deconstructed?) traditional political theorist, have not yet encountered.**

... **all of which will leave you** exactly where you were before, but hopefully with an enriched sense of your surroundings and your possibilities. The seminar is not about the interests or abilities of the instructor. Like all advanced seminars, it is about the empowerment and freedom of all the participants. My most passionate hope is that you will find in it something that will help you face your political future - as consumer, citizen, activist or marketer - with a renewed or enhanced sense of power and freedom.

### Assignments:

1. **One major research paper** will be due **Monday December 8th, 2014. Length: 20-25 pages.**

**Value: 60% of your grade.**

**Note: A condition for successful completion of your major research paper** will be submission of a **300 to 500-word abstract** including a **one-page (or less) preliminary bibliography** for this paper **FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE FINAL SEMINAR MEETING ON December 1st 2014. I.E. the abstract must be handed in by Wednesday November 27<sup>th</sup> at noon.** At our Dec. 1st meeting we will have a roundtable discussion of the major papers of all members of the group as an exercise in mutual support and criticism.

**No grade: but must be done as part of the essay assignment.**

2. Each seminar member will be required to make at least one **presentation to the class**, depending on the number of participants we actually have. **The presenter will be responsible for structuring the presentation (i.e. determining its scope and sequencing), and of course identifying a central theme or issue or problem.** *Every presenter will distribute to the class one week in advance of the presentation, via the course web site, a 'package' of information including one or more readings with a total length of 30 pages or less.* **Value: 20% of your grade.**

**Note: For every presentation there will be a "designated discussant" who will be expected to communicate with the presenter, read the material assigned, and start discussion off with two or three points of well informed inquiry or constructive criticism.** I will work to generate optimum pairings of presenters with discussants. Discussants' comments need not be submitted to me - this is a matter of **you supporting each other as colleagues.**

**No grade for this either, but you have to take your turn. And there is, of course, your participation grade to think of ...**

3. **Your humble instructor's constructively critical, supportive but serious assessment of your overall contribution to the excellence of the seminar from start to finish:**

**Value: 20% of your grade.**

4. **Total seminar experience, if we learn enjoy each other's company and work to support each other intellectually throughout the term: priceless**

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### Re: Readings -

I favour quality over quantity in readings for classes. Short, manageable excerpts from the works of all the theorists discussed above are available. I will meet one-to-one with each seminar member to identify specific readings they can use in support of their presentations. Greater 'depth' of reading (if quantity in fact correlates with 'depth') will, as a matter of course, be associated with your major essays.

Note: I would like to avoid requiring you to purchase any particular "textbooks" for the course. At this level and with this subject matter, the idea of a "textbook" seems out of place. We will use photocopied excerpts and shared PDF files as much as possible, and I will encourage each of you to identify excerpts, to be shared with the rest of us, from works you want to explore.

**A firm rule:** at this level of work, I will do my absolute utmost not to allow anyone to be 'stuck' with a topic that does not relate in some useful way to their interests

Below are the ACTUAL dates of our meetings, with some HYPOTHETICAL presentation topics INSERTED JUST TO GIVE YOU A SENSE OF WHAT SORTS OF THINGS COULD BE DONE.

1. Sep. 8th: Discuss Course Outline/ Plan sessions / set dates for one-on-one interviews.
2. Sep. 15th: Intellectual orientation: Long leads preliminary review of modern / postmodern thinkers of interest to the group.
3. Sep. 22nd: Rorty's Humean liberalism
4. Sep. 29th: Foucault and Agamben on Hobbesian sovereignty and society
5. Oct. 6th: Foucault and Bentham: 'Panopticism'?  
Oct. 13th: Thanksgiving Monday - we'll make it up if members so desire.
6. Oct. 20th: Whither feminism? Modern and postmodern variants.
7. Oct. 27th: Agonistic Democracy and The Return of the Political: Chantal Mouffe
8. Nov. 3rd: Deconstruction: Derrida on identity, community and 'democracy to come'.
9. Nov. 10th: Derrida and "Justice, if there is such a thing".
10. Nov. 17th: "Postmodern Fables" and the "'postmodern condition": Lyotard on the impossibility of justice, distrust of 'meta-narratives' and post-capitalist 'libidinous exchange'
11. Nov. 24th: Taking 'alterity' seriously: Levinas, Irigaray and Deleuze?
12. Dec. 1st: 'ROUND TABLE' DISCUSSION of essay projects.

Again: this is just a hypothetical sequence of topics. We will of course design a series of topics that is totally and uniquely our own. I will meet with each student one-to-one to do that.

### (Graduate) Statement of Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)