

# **Field Seminar in Political Theory: Contemporary Political Theory and the Problem of Modernity**

**Government 662**

**Th 4:30-6:30**

**White Hall 104**

Instructor: Jason Frank  
307 White Hall  
607-255-6759 / jf273@cornell.edu  
Office Hours: W 10:00-12:00

## **Course description and aims**

Contemporary political theory, particularly in its Continental expression, has been animated by an ongoing interrogation of the political and moral legitimacy of the modern age. Pursuing lines of philosophical reflection inherited from Nietzsche and Heidegger, prominent political theorists like Carl Schmitt, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Michel Foucault - to name but a few – have made the critical diagnosis of modernity a central part of their positive political theorizing. In their varied but overlapping critiques of liberalism, rationalism, individualism, universalism, historicism, positivism, etc., these theorists sought to formulate conceptual alternatives to the reigning political and theoretical paradigms. They often did so through wildly divergent approaches to the lessons of “the ancients.” This seminar will explore some of the central Post-War debates over the promises and the perils of modernity. We will read texts by Hannah Arendt, Wendy Brown, Michel Foucault, Immanuel Kant, Charles Larmore, Alisdair MacIntyre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, and Charles Taylor.

## **Course mechanics**

This is a graduate seminar in political theory. Students will be evaluated on a research paper (15-20 pages) due at the semester’s end (60% of the final grade), two (7-8 page) written presentations on the week’s reading (20%), and two 10 minute critical discussions of another student’s written presentation (20%). We will begin each seminar with these discussions. Please avoid summary and feel free to be contentious in your written presentations. These should be sent to the rest of the class (and me) no later than the Monday morning before seminar (this can be done via e-mail). The discussant will have 10 minutes (and no more) to provide a commentary on the presenter’s work. The discussion should also avoid summary and instead pose a series of textually supported critical questions that can facilitate and enable a broader seminar discussion. A sign-up sheet for both presentations and discussions will be available the second week of class.

## **Books to purchase**

Available at Cornell Bookstore:

HANNAH ARENDT, BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

Paperback: 320 pages Publisher: Penguin Books (August 1, 1993)  
(December 1, 1998) Language: English ISBN: 0140186506

HANNAH ARENDT, THE HUMAN CONDITION

Paperback: 370 pages Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; 2nd edition  
(December 1, 1998) Language: English ISBN: 0226025985

WENDY BROWN, STATES OF INJURY

Paperback: 219 pages Publisher: Princeton University Press (July 3, 1995)  
Language: English ISBN: 069102989X

MICHEL FOUCAULT, DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH

Paperback: 352 pages Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (April 25, 1995)  
Language: English ISBN: 0679752552

MICHEL FOUCAULT, POWER/KNOWLEDGE

Paperback: 288 pages Publisher: Pantheon (November 12, 1980)  
Language: English ISBN: 039473954X

CHARLES LARMORE, THE MORALS OF MODERNITY

Paperback: 240 pages Publisher: Cambridge University Press (March 29,  
1996) Language: English ISBN: 0521497728

ALISDAIR MACINTYRE, AFTER VIRTUE

Paperback: 286 pages Publisher: University of Notre Dame Press; 2nd  
edition (June 1, 1984) Language: English ISBN: 0268006113

LEO STRAUSS, PERSECUTION AND THE ART OF WRITING

Paperback: 214 pages Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; Reprint  
edition (October 15, 1988) Language: English ISBN: 0226777111

CHARLES TAYLOR, MODERN SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

Paperback: 184 pages Publisher: Duke University Press (February 1, 2004)  
Language: English ISBN: 0822332930

Other material is available on e-reserve.

## Weekly Readings

### Week 1:

August 25 - Introduction

Hannah Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age"

Friedrich Nietzsche, "How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth"

Leo Strauss, "Three Waves of Modernity"

### Week 2:

September 1 – Leo Strauss and the Critique of Political Modernity

Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization"

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 1-34

Leo Strauss, "Social Science and Humanism"

Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy"

### Week 3:

September 8 – The Philosopher and the City: Reading "The Tradition"

Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 7-37

Leo Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing"

Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching"

Leo Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility"

### Week 4:

September 15 – Political Theory in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics"

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 3-16, 91-172, 227-64

### Week 5:

September 22 – Recalling the Political in Athenian Democracy

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1-174

### Week 6:

September 29 – Freedom and Action in the Modern World

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175-326

**Week 7:**

October 6 – Modernity, Moral Nudism, and the Recovery of Virtue

Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1-78, 109-164

**Week 8:**

October 13 – Nietzsche or Aristotle? What about Kant?

Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 181-282

Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity*, 1-64

Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

**Week 9:**

October 20 – Political Liberalism and the Meaning of Enlightenment

Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity*, 65-222

**Week 10:**

October 27 – Beyond Sovereignty: Foucault on Power and Subjectivity

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 55-62, 78-133

**Week 11:**

November 3 – The Genealogy of Modern Institutions

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

**Week 12:**

November 10 – Ethical Reorientation: Command Moralities and the Care for the Self

Michel Foucault, “Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom”

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume II*, 3-93

Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”

**Week 13:**

November 17 – Democratic Renewal in Late Modernity

Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, 3-76, 96-134, 166-96

**Week 14:**

November 24 - Thanksgiving Break - No Class

**Week 15:**

December 1 – One or Many Modernities?

Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*

Final paper due December 8<sup>th</sup>.