

# Political Freedom

**Government 3655**  
**Spring 2010**  
**Cornell University**  
**T/Th 11:40-12:55**

Instructor: Jason Frank  
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## Course description and aims

It cannot be repeated too often: nothing is more fertile in wondrous effects than the art of being free, but nothing is harder than freedom's apprenticeship.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

This course will explore issues surrounding the concept and practice of political freedom. We will begin with an examination of traditional philosophical approaches to this issue—such as debates about free will and determinism, agency and structure, and negative and positive liberty—but we will primarily focus on how these traditional rubrics obscure our understanding of the particularity of *political* freedom. In order to better grasp this particularity we will explore diverse theoretical, literary, and social scientific works.

## Course mechanics

This is an upper division lecture course, but time will be allotted for classroom discussion. Students should come to class prepared to engage in lively conversation based on the week's reading. In addition to bringing the pertinent texts to class, students will be asked to write short (1 page) reader responses. The reader responses should avoid summary, and instead critically engage a particular question or theme raised by the readings. Responses will be turned in at the beginning of each Tuesday class and counted as a part of the final participation grade (25% of the total). Students must also attend and actively participate in weekly sections. In addition to these short writing assignments and section participation, students will be asked to complete three 5-6 page papers. A list of paper topics will be distributed in class at least one week before each paper is due. All papers must include direct textual citation and notes (details provided with the topic handouts). The papers will each be worth 25% of the final grade. There is no final exam.

## Books to purchase

Available at Cornell Bookstore:

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*  
Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*  
Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*  
Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*  
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

## Weekly Readings

Readings marked \* are available on blackboard electronic reserve.

### **PART ONE: THEORIES OF POLITICAL FREEDOM**

#### **Week 1: Introduction**

January 26 – Introduction: Condemned to be Free?

Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor”\*

January 28 - The Difficulty of Freedom and the Seduction of Authority

Montesquieu, “The Myth of the Troglodytes”\*

#### **Week 2: Theories of Political Freedom I**

February 2 – The Case for Negative Liberty

Isaiah Berlin, “Two Conceptions of Liberty”\*

February 4 – The Case for Positive Liberty

Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty”\*

#### **Week 3: Theories of Political Freedom II**

February 9 – What is *Political* Freedom?

Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?”\*

February 11 – Critical Freedom and Subjectivity

Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”\*

#### **Week 4: Political Freedom and its Conditions**

February 16 – Power, Society, and Practical Freedom

Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”\*

February 18 – Class, Race, Gender, Sex...

Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”\*

## **PART TWO: ANCIENT PERSPECTIVES**

### **Week 5: Exodus and Emancipation**

February 23 – Slavery and Emancipation: The Book of Exodus

The Book of Exodus\*

February 25 – Freedom and Covenant

The Book of Exodus\*

*First paper due in class.*

### **Week 6: The Tragedy of Freedom: Oedipus**

March 2 – Greek Tragedy and Political Education

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

March 4 – Oedipus and Agency

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

### **Week 7: Dissent and Political Freedom: Antigone**

March 9 – Act and Obligation

Sophocles, *Antigone*

March 11 – What Makes an Act Political?

Sophocles, *Antigone*

### **Week 8: The Trial of Socrates**

March 16 - Socratic Citizenship and the Unexamined Life

Plato, *Apology*

March 18 - Critical Patriotism?

Plato, *Crito*

Wendy Brown, “Political Idealization and its Discontents”\*

**Week 9: SPRING BREAK**

**PART THREE: POLITICAL FREEDOM AND THE MODERN WORLD**

**Week 10: Liberalism and Liberty**

March 30 – Freedom and Economy: Constant

Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with the Moderns”\*

Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 1-58

Second paper due in class.

April 1 – No Class

**Week 11: Democracy in America I**

April 6 – Liberalism and Political Freedom

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 59-99

April 8 – Tocqueville’s America

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

**Week 12: Democracy in America II**

April 13 – Democracy’s Dangers

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

April 15 – The *Art* of Being Free

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

**Week 13: On Revolution**

April 20 – Freedom and “Beginning Anew”

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 11-48

April 21 – Public Happiness and the Revolution’s “Lost Treasure”

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 207-73

### **Week 14: Diminished Democracy?**

April 27 – Tocqueville and American Social Science

Robert Putnam, “The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America”\*

Theda Skocpol, “How Americans Became Civic”\*

April 29 – Civic Engagement

Theda Skocpol, “Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life”\*

Mathew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Downsizing Democracy*, 1-46, 198-244.

### **Week 15: Democratic Disappearance and Renewal**

May 4 – Economy and the Eclipse of the Political

Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Inc.*, 238-60, 273-92.

Sheldon Wolin, “Postmodern Democracy: Virtual or Fugitive?”\*

Sheldon Wolin, “What Revolutionary Action Means Today”\*

May 6 – We’re All Democrats Now?

Final paper due Wednesday, May 12<sup>th</sup> at 12:00 in 307 White Hall.