

## LIBERALISM AND ITS CRITICS

**POL 393**  
**Spring 2018**  
**M/W 2:40-4**

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**Office Hours: T 2-4**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

In the roughly two centuries since the term was first used to describe a political disposition, “liberal” has meant many different things in “western” political thought and popular discourse. The term has referred to the view that consent is essential to legitimate government and to the view that the state must act, sometimes against the expressed views of citizens, to secure the general good. For some “liberals,” natural rights determine the ends of government; to others the very notion of such a right is “nonsense on stilts” (Jeremy Bentham). By one measure, pluralism is a core liberal value, by others, liberal values trump all others. Today, depending on location, a “liberal” party might be left of center, right of center, or center of center. By a common definition, a “conservative” in the US is fundamentally liberal in her opposition to a state regulated economy. Bernie Sanders is liberal in one way and, on certain counts, Ted Cruz is liberal in others. In short, “liberal” is a capacious term. Some scholars say too capacious to use sensibly without clearly demarcating time and place. Other scholars see a coherent tradition of sort. On this view, liberalism is a collection of ideas and values about government that bear a notable family resemblance. (Maybe not unlike the Trump or Kardashian clans.) In both cases, it is fair to say that liberal rhetoric, if not values and institutions, is the preeminent political “philosophy” or ideology our time. We live, in some sense then, in a liberal world. For this reason alone, liberalism is an essential subject for any student of modern political thought.

In this class, we narrow our focus from the broad history of liberalism to a particularly rich, influential and representative conversation among self-declared liberal political philosophers and their critics whose views reflect and effect what is arguably the dominant family of liberal ideas in the late 20<sup>th</sup>, early 21<sup>st</sup> Anglo-European world. We take note of history in our investigation, but our primary focus is on the philosophy these thinkers offer, defend and criticize. We are more concerned with the logic of their claims, the underlying commitments, often unstated assumptions and theoretical and practical implications of their theories, than with their historical location. Our aim is to understand this dominant strain of liberal political philosophy on its own terms *and* to unsettle many of our own assumptions. As we will see, this family of political theories, ideas and values is allied by varying commitments to equality, individualism, toleration, rights, limited government, rule of law, consent, and free markets. Like all political philosophies, liberalism addresses the question, how should we live together? Liberals are particularly concerned with the question of what defines a just political system among naturally free and equal human beings. Who decides, and how? They and their critics consider, as we shall with and against them, how we should resolve conflicts between freedom and equality, freedom and stability, the individual and community, public and private commitments, religion and the state. How does a just political system balance the need for independence with the fact of human interdependence? How should it negotiate disagreement between incommensurable moral and political doctrines? We consider what grounds different varieties of liberalism (religion, reason, power, pragmatics) and the

relationship between liberalism and democracy, multiculturalism, capitalism, science and the political status quo. We deepen our understanding of liberalism and its assumptions by applying the philosophical claims and insights we survey to concrete, real-world cases in contemporary political life. By necessity this class can only offer the briefest taste of these debates and the political and philosophical issues that motivate them.

In addition to the explicit content of these argument and the debates, we focus on the often-implicit positions in this literature regarding what political theory is, and why and how we ought to do it. This focus provides you a critical lever for evaluating the materials we read, and helps prepare you to write a senior thesis in political theory.

## **POLICIES and EXPECTATIONS**

The requirements for this course are designed to promote serious, collaborative *and* independent scholarly engagement with texts, ideas and each other. There are few formal lectures. I identify key issues or questions with our texts, provide an on-going account of the flow of the course, readings and assignments, and essential background that may not come through in the readings. Students will play a major role in facilitating many of the classes (more below).

**Disability accommodation:** Students with disabilities requiring accommodation should be in touch with me and the director of disability support services (Theresa Lowrie, [disability-services@reed.edu](mailto:disability-services@reed.edu)) within the first two weeks of class in order to make arrangements for suitable accommodation.

**Communication:** I will use email (often via Moodle) to post important announcements about the course. Please be sure to check your Reed email at least once a day so that you will see these messages. You can reach me via email for all sorts of questions, but I also *strongly* encourage you to come talk with me during office hours to discuss your work in progress (if you can't make my posted office hours, just email me and suggest a few alternative times for an appointment). Doing political theory well is hard. If you find yourself frustrated or struggling, please don't despair, and *please* don't keep your struggles to yourself. A quick (or long) conversation can often be the best way out of a research quagmire, so please keep me informed of what you're up to. (You are also welcome to drop by if you have made a particularly exciting discovery or lit upon an especially interesting idea that you just have to share with someone.)

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

I have designed the course assignments to promote serious scholarly engagement with texts, ideas and each other. In addition to facilitating productive in class-discussion, the assignments are designed to help you develop your research and writing skills.

As a rule, I do not accept **late assignments**. Discipline can be useful. I hope to help you cultivate a certain amount of it.

More importantly, the writing assignments for this course are carefully sequenced and our classroom discussions will often center on students' written work. For this reason, late work

is *especially* problematic. Please note that at key points in the semester, I ask you to turn in work in progress. *Neither I nor your classmates expect perfection in works in progress.* It is imperative that you turn in your work on time so that your peer reviewers and I will have time to read and respond to your work.

### 1. *Reading and Class Participation*

Your first assignment is to **read** the materials with care. Many of our texts are dense, multi-layered texts. Often you may need to read them more than once. I have limited the amount of reading accordingly. (Keeps notes about what you think should be cut, kept and expanded! We spend part of one class at the end of the semester reviewing the syllabus.)

#### a) *Class Discussion*

Come to class prepared to discuss the reading imaginatively and critically. **Active, respectful participation** is essential. If speaking in class is a challenge for you, please let me know. We can work together to address the matter.

**Attendance**, of course, is mandatory. If you miss more than three classes, you run the risk of failing the course.

#### a) *Weekly Response Posts*

Before *one* class each week, **by noon the day of class**, please post to the Class Discussion section of the Moodle a brief (up to one-paragraph) response to the readings. Frequently, but not always, I will offer prompts to initiate discussion. This is a very informal piece, aimed at stimulating class thinking and discussion. Questions for discussion or clarification are welcome as are direct responses to earlier posts.

#### b) *Class Discussion Facilitation*

In groups of two or three, each of you will play a formal role in facilitating class discussion once during the semester. These classes will take place on (\*) days on the syllabus. **Each group will meet with me on the Friday or Tuesday afternoon preceding your facilitation day.** You must complete all of the assigned reading before we meet. During these sessions, we will discuss the materials and how you will help facilitate the discussion. I will spend up to an hour with you as a group. However, I expect that you will need at least another two hours together to finalize the details of your plan. In other words, I am asking each of you to commit to a total of approximately three hours over and above the regularly scheduled class meeting times.

Precisely how you approach your role in facilitating discussion is up to you. Your basic task is to help generate and guide serious, critical engagement with the materials. To this end, you should be prepared to guide discussion on the following questions:

- 1) *What's the argument?* What is the central argument advanced by each of the texts under consideration? Be prepared to offer clear *interpretations* that your peers can use and/or criticize.

- 2) *How does it relate to other topics or materials we've covered?* How does a consideration of one or more of the readings previously completed for this course inform your understanding of the material presently under consideration? How does the present material complement, supplement, contradict, and/or challenge other texts we've read? How do the essays under consideration employ one or more of approaches to doing political theory that we explored at the beginning of the semester?
- 3) *Is it a compelling argument or analysis? Why/not?* What criticisms might be directed against the readings at hand? Which, if any, do you find most compelling and why? You may not agree with your partner. Great! Use this to deepen discussion in class. In general, the most successful discussion leading draws the class into *debates* about interpretations and/or substance of the arguments.

Concrete tasks:

- 1) **Post 2 or 3 reading questions by 5p the night before class** in the Class Discussion section of the Moodle. These should direct folks to what you take to be key concepts and questions of the pieces.
- 2) Prepare a one-page outline of the key points and questions you hope to touch on in discussion. Get it to me twenty-four hours in advance, and I will give you feedback.
- 3) Prompt class discussion. The most successful discussion leading draws the class into *debates* about interpretations and/or content. I strongly recommend that you come to class prepared to defend (even if only to provoke) particular interpretations and evaluations of the material. Prompting discussion with a controversial position is a great strategy. You might begin by asking whether others have questions or wish to contest points you make in your critical assessment of the material. You may invite the class to help work through specific difficulties in the text, or questions the material raised for you with respect to other readings or, even, the real world. Facilitating a natural and sustained discussion of the assigned readings is the goal. This is a difficult task, one that requires prior development of an interrelated set of questions, along with references to specific textual passages that you think helpful in addressing those questions.

I encourage you to think as imaginatively as possible this assignment. Do not hesitate to experiment with unconventional strategies if you think them appropriate. You might, for instance, want to bring in YouTube clips or music to illustrate points you wish to make about the readings on this topic. Consider cross-dressing or taking class polls. If you have doubts about what you are planning, speak to me. Whatever you do, do it well!

You should think of yourselves as leading discussion with my help. I will raise questions, clarify unresolved issues and advance criticisms. In general, I will assume a more active role when and if I sense that you, as a group, are having difficulty making sense of the assigned readings, are struggling to convey your points to the rest of the class, and/or are having a hard time getting discussion moving. Hopefully, most of these problems will have been

eliminated via your preparatory session(s). I will also use the last ten minutes of class to summarize what we've discussed and prepare us for the next class.

## 2. *Writing Assignments*

### a) *Rawls Analysis*

Because of the centrality to the course of the thought of John Rawls, and to hone your analytical skills, for class on **2/7** please prepare a first draft of a 750-1000 word critical analysis of a concept central to Rawls' argument, e.g. the overlapping consensus, reasonable, pluralism, equality, etc. We will discuss the material in class and a final draft of the paper is due on **Saturday, 2/10 at 5pm**. The key to this exercise is careful, logical unpacking of the concept. Much of the brief essay will amount to explication. But you should not simply summarize; identify and analyze premises, claims, conclusions and arguments to those conclusions, unstated assumptions, not-obvious connections and implications, logical (in)coherence and empirical (im)plausibility. On the basis of this analysis, you should be making an argument. E.g. "Rawls claims to offer a 'freestanding' defense of his theory of justice. In fact, however, the defense rests on distinctly liberal values." Indeed, in the final draft, your argument – your conclusion – should structure the essay. The reader should be able to identify your conclusion by the end of the first paragraph.

### b) *Application Analyses*

In this brief piece (750-1000 words) you will apply the theoretical concepts, questions and arguments to a particular case. Cases will be drawn from to an array of subjects (major news events, ad campaigns, canonical texts, public policy, institutions, film). What questions or concerns does the theoretical material raise? What "solutions" does it suggest? What would a liberal say about the case? Is that position compelling? Why/not? What limitations or strengths does the case reveal about liberalism – as a theory and/or a practice? About its critics? Be sure to define terms and include a clear, succinct description of the key theoretical perspectives, concepts or claims you utilize. These will serve as the basis for class discussion.

Note that these analyses are intended as exercises in writing as well as thinking. Being able to make a subtle and compelling argument in 750 words is no easy feat; it is a powerful one though. For fine examples of this exercise (from another course), see sample applications in the Syllabus, Assignments and Other Materials section of the Moodle.

I will post the assignment to the Moodle a week before it is due. **Bring a draft of the application to class on Wednesday (3/7)**. I encourage you to revise your application following class discussion. **Final drafts are due by the following Saturday (3/10) at 5pm.**

### c) *Discussion Leading paper (1500 words)*

**By noon ten days following your presentation**, please submit an in-depth critical analysis of the material you covered in your discussion leading. As your critical lever, you may rely on other readings that take liberalism as their focus. I also strongly encourage you to consider the readings from the first week of the course – on different approaches to political theory – in this analysis. The Rawls analysis should serve as a model. Here, as with that assignment,

the key to this exercise is careful unpacking of the arguments, or some crucial aspect thereof. Much of the brief essay will amount to explication. But you should not simply summarize; identify and analyze premises, claims, conclusions and arguments to those conclusions, unstated assumptions, not-obvious connections and implications, logical (in)coherence and empirical (im)plausibility. On the basis of this analysis, you should be making an argument. E.g. “At the core of Okin’s and Kukathus’ disagreement about multiculturalism and justice are different views of liberty. Kukathus’ view is better suited to deeply diverse societies.” Indeed, in the final draft, your argument – your conclusion – should structure the essay. The reader should be able to identify your conclusion by the end of the first paragraph.

Feel free to discuss your paper topics with me and/or with your partner during the week between presentation and submission. Email the final draft to me as a Word doc or PDF.

d) *Review Memo (250 words)*

At the end of this course, where do you find yourself? What do you think is the most compelling political philosophical position we’ve encountered this semester? Why? What do you think is the most compelling criticism of this position? What, if any, political action does your preferred position commit you to going forward? Answer these questions in a clear, tightly-crafted 250-word essay that engages two to three thinkers from the syllabus. **Bring draft to class on Monday (4/23); final draft due via email as Word doc or PDF on Saturday (4/28) at 5pm.**

e) *Final paper (2500- 3000 words)*

For your final paper, I want you to synthesize the materials we have considered over the course of the semester. You may use one of the prompts I provide or devise your own question. In the latter case, you should submit to me a one paragraph précis describing your question. Note: your question should not emerge directly out of the readings you considered for your discussion leading. The précis should begin with a clear articulation of your guiding question. You should also explain: a) why you think your question is important; b) what general issues you are trying to get at in posing this question; c) what texts you will use in answering your question; and d) how exactly your question enables you to draw together some of the central themes of the course, considered as a whole. **Due via email as Word doc or PDF on Saturday (5/5) at 5pm.**

## TEXTS

The following texts are required and are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter*. Durham: Duke University Press (2010).

Chambers, Samuel. *Lessons of Ranciere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2014).

Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. New York: Verso Books (2005).

Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Erin Kelly, ed., Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press (2001).

Unless otherwise noted, readings are from required texts or are available through the linked syllabus.

## SYLLABUS

*Week One*      Liberalism and Political Philosophy

M 1/22      <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/>

W 1/24      Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness*, 1-5.  
Tully, James, "Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity." *Political Theory*,  
(August 2002), 533-55.

*Week Two*      Comprehensive, Political or Apolitical Liberalism of John Rawls

M 1/29      Rawls, 5-79.

W 1/31      Rawls, 80-94, 130-179.

*Week Three*      Rawls (continued)

M 2/5      Rawls, 181-202.

W 2/7      Rawls review

**Bring draft Rawls analyses to class; final draft due Saturday (2/10) at 5p.**

*Week Four*      Libertarians and Egalitarians

\*M 2/12      Nozick, Robert, "Distributive Justice," *Anarchy, State and Utopia*.  
Blackwell (1974), 149-183; (skim 183-234).  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/libertarianism/>

W 2/14      Cohen, Gerald A., selections from *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (2008).  
Mood, Donald, "Cohen vs. Rawls on Justice and Equality," *Critical Review of  
Social and Political Philosophy* (2015).

*Week Five*      Communitarians and Feminists

\*M 2/19      Sandel, Michael, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self."  
*Political Theory* (1984).  
Taylor, Charles, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" *The Idea of Freedom*.  
(1979), 175-93.

W 2/21      Okin, Susan Moller, "Justice and Gender: An Unfinished Debate," *Fordham  
Law Review* (2004).  
Higgins, Tracy, "Why Feminist Can't (or Shouldn't) Be Liberals," *Fordham  
Law Review* (2004).

- Week Six*      Cultures
- \*M 2/26      Modood, Tariq, selections from *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (2007)  
Antonsich, Marco, “Interculturalism versus Multiculturalism: The Modood-Cantle Debate,” *Ethnicities* (2016).
- W 2/28      Kukathas, Chandran, “Is Feminism Bad for Multiculturalism?” *Public Affairs Quarterly* (April 2011).  
Okin, Susan Moller, “Mistresses of Their Own Destiny,” *Ethics* (January 2002).

*Week Seven*      Religion and the Real World

- \*M 3/5      Finnis, John, “Is Natural Law Theory Compatible with Limited Government?” *Natural Law, Liberalism and Morality: Contemporary Essays* (1996).  
Macedo, Stephen, “Against the Old Sexual Morality of the New Natural Law,” *Natural Law, Liberalism and Morality: Contemporary Essays* (1996).
- W 3/7      Application (Real World) Discussion

**Bring draft application to class; final draft due Saturday (3/10) at 5p.**

**3/10 – 3/18      SPRING BREAK**

*Week Eight*      Race and Ideal Theory

- \*M 3/19      Shelby, Tommie, “Race and Social Justice: Rawlsian Considerations” *Fordham Law Review*, (2004).  
Mills, Charles. “Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice? A Critique of Tommie Shelby,” *Critical Philosophy of Race*, (2013).
- W 3/21      Becca Traber, class visit and lecture, “Liberalism, Race and Ideal Theory”

*Week Nine*      Public Reason and its Limits

- \*M 3/26      Zerilli, Linda, “Value Pluralism and the Problem of Judgment: Farewell to Public Reason,” *Political Theory* (February 2012).  
Steinberger, Peter, “Rationalism in Politics,” *American Political Science Review* (November 2015).
- W 3/28      Wiggle

*Week Ten*      Radical Democratic Critics

- M 4/2      Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. 1-80



\*W 4/4 Mouffe, 80-140

*Week Eleven* Marx-ish Critics

M 4/9 Chambers, Samuel. Selections from *Lessons of Ranciere* (2013).

\*W 4/11 Chambers, Samuel. Selections from *Lessons of Ranciere* (2013).

*Week Twelve* Posthuman Critics and their Friends

M 4/16 Bennett, Jane. Selections from *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

\*W 4/18 Bennett, Jane. Selections from *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

*Week Thirteen* Review

M 4/23 Liberal? Critic? Other? Where do you stand?

**Bring draft memo to class; final draft due Saturday (4/28) at 5p.**

W 4/25 Course Review

**S 5/5 Final Paper at 5pm**