Contemporary Political Thought

Course Description:

This course provides a critical introduction to political thought from the early twentieth century to the present. We will examine the major thinkers and ideas that have theorized and shaped political life over the past century, both for their historical value and to understand how they have influenced ideology. We will explore how our ability to be creative, generative, expanding selves in the world can be influenced—for good and for bad—by the political ideologies, philosophies and assumptions of leaders, activists, governments, laws and institutions. We will therefore trace the themes of violence, politics, power and difference throughout contemporary political thought as it is rooted in traditional political theory. Many of the thinkers we will explore provide reasons and motivations for changing the world, some more successful than others, some seeking more radical transformation than others.

The four major themes that will shape our examination of political life are:

1. Power: We will consider how different theoretical traditions conceptualize power and its effects, paying particular attention to the way that varied notions of power give critical insight into social processes such as gender, race, sexuality, imperialism and patriarchy. We will also examine how traditional concerns about the state, law, and governance are shaped by contending conceptualizations of power. Finally, we will analyze the multiple locations, visible and invisible, where power is deployed.

   Essential Questions: How and at what level does power operate? What are its forms, visible and invisible? How do we best conceptualize power? What is the relationship between power and resistance?

2. Violence: The growth of global inequality in the 20th and 21st century, whether economic, social or political, demands that we consider the proliferation of violence across different scales and social locations. We will consider the forms violence takes at four levels: institutional/governmental, community, discursive (the language we use to
discuss power, politics and violence, e.g., and the terms of this debate), and epistemological (the way knowledge we take for granted is produced as “fact”). We will explore what violence looks like when harnessed by groups versus individuals, and its effects when it is not necessarily visible.

**Essential Questions:** What ‘causes’ political violence, and is it an inevitable part of politics? What is its (inevitable?) relationship with the nation-state? How does one respond, politically and ethically, to violence? How is violence differentially distributed across social groups?

### 3. Difference

Politics has always had to address differences between (and within!) individuals and groups. However, political theory only starts to explicitly take difference into account in its theorizing in the 1900s. Numerous political and theoretical movements – anti-racism, feminism, anti-colonialism, queer liberation, etc. – challenged the implicit centering of political theory upon affluent, white, heterosexual, masculine subjects. We are thus interested in how various thinkers take difference into account throughout contemporary political thought, working to transform, transcend and make anew the traditional cannon.

**Essential Question:** Should politics strive to reconcile difference and produce sameness, or should it affirm difference? What is the relationship between power and difference, and violence and difference? How do we change our understandings about ethics and politics when we begin to account for difference? What does difference look like at the institutional, individual, community, discursive and epistemological levels?

### 4. Politics

Similar to the way that political theory in the 20th century has expanded our notion of power, it has done the same with what ‘counts’ as political. This expansion opens the possibility to affirm that a number of issues previously seen as apolitical are, in fact, at the center of our political considerations.

**Essential Questions:** What ‘counts’ as political? How does the concept of ‘the political’ change throughout the 20th century? What new issues and problems arise with the expansion of the concept of politics? How does the expansion of politics affect the relationship between the state, society, and the individual?

This is a writing-intensive course. It will primarily take the form of group discussion, with the occasional short lecture or directed group work. Regular attendance, careful preparation, student presentations and active participation are essential. You must prepare for every class by completing all readings, reflecting upon the texts, and bringing to class issues, questions, and passages for discussion. Please bring the **printed out weekly reading to class! Also bring your critiques, curiosities, frustrations, excitement, bewilderment and ever-changing opinions.**

**Learning Objectives:**
- Understanding contemporary political debates at the theoretical and practical level
- Improving skills in reading and comprehending primary and secondary theoretical texts
• Writing clear, well-argued expository analyses that creatively explore political questions and concepts
• Drawing thematic, historical and methodological connections between theoretical debates
• Articulating how course themes apply to contemporary political systems of inequality and oppression, as well as theories of political change
• Improving your ability to engage in dialogue and debate through class discussions
• Thinking critically and analytically about your own political beliefs, assumptions and visions

**Grading:**
Your grade in this course will be based upon the following components:

1. **Attendance and Participation (20%)**: Regular attendance is crucial. After one unexcused absences, your participation grade drops by two half-letters for each absence (i.e. an A becomes a B+). Conscientious reading of all assignments, informed participation in class discussion and one student presentation also comprise this component.

2. **Weekly Reflections (25%)**: You must submit a weekly reflection on the readings (100 – 250 words) AND one to two discussion questions each class session. You do NOT need to submit a reflection the week the midterm is due, nor the week of your presentation on the readings, but you may do so for extra credit. Weekly reflections are due by 8:00 am the day of class. (See full instructions under Course Policies below).

3. **Midterm Take-Home Essay (25%)**: There will be a 6 page take-home essay in response to questions handed out in advance. You may choose one of three questions to answer and will have a week to complete the assignment.

4. **Final Project (30%)**: The primary form of the final project is an 8-10 page paper on a topic you will choose in consultation with me. This can take the form of a more thorough exploration of an issue from class, an independent question, etc. Alternatively, I am open to different forms of final projects (e.g. performance, short film, documentary, creative writing, artwork) related to themes and questions from the class, however you must receive my approval. If you choose an alternative project, you will still be required to write a short paper (2-3 pages) connecting your work to course themes and objectives. I will work with all students on developing a topic/project, and we will use the semester to build up to the final assignment. You can earn 4 extra points on your final by going to the Writing Center.

**Course Policies**

- Classroom philosophy and discussion: All of us come to this class as learners, teachers and thinkers. None of us, myself included, have the singular correct answer for any of the complex, important problems we will be discussing. Instead, we all
have valuable questions and experiences to bring each week. We therefore seek to work collaboratively through these questions and issues in a critical, dialogical manner. Students should come to class ready to interact with each other in a community of learning. Most importantly, our classroom will be an open, creative, supportive and respectful space for all. I expect, enjoy and encourage a lively classroom discussion, but it must always be conducted in a respectful manner.

- **Weekly Reflections:** You are required to submit a short response to the readings for the day (between 100 and 250 words) AND 1-2 discussion questions for the class each week. You may also choose which reading or readings to investigate and do not have to address them all. The response can involve a critique of the readings and their arguments, assumptions and rhetoric; put readings in conversation with each other; apply the readings to contemporary situations; or stem from personal reflection. Ultimately, it should reflect what you wish to talk about in class that day. The discussion question(s) should be critical thematic questions relating the day’s readings and if relevant, previous readings. On certain occasions I may ask you to consider a specific question instead of writing a general reflection. **Both the response and the question(s) are due by 8:00 a.m. on the morning of the class session** for which you are writing, and must deal with that day’s readings. You do NOT need to submit a reflection the week the midterm is due, nor the week of your presentation on the readings. Please email them to me as a word.docx attachment at rbrown4@gc.cuny.edu.

- **Office Hours:** I encourage everyone to come to my office hours to discuss the readings, seek writing help, talk about your courses or academic interests at Brooklyn College, or discuss internships, extracurricular activities, career or post-graduation possibilities. Office hours count as participation! My office hours are Wednesdays, 4:30 – 5:30 pm, or by appointment, in James Hall 3416.

- **Email and Blackboard:** I will be sending out updates and information via email and occasionally through Blackboard. It is crucial that you (a) check your email regularly and (b) make sure that the email address that Blackboard has registered for you is an email address you check frequently. If it isn’t, please change your email address on Blackboard by clicking “Update Email” on the tools menu. **Check the email associated with your BB account at least once or twice per day.**

- You may provide documentation to excuse an absence. In all other cases, absences will be unexcused and will negatively affect your grade (after one unexcused absence, your grade drops two half-grades, e.g. an A becomes a B+).

- **Extra Credit:** There may occasionally be opportunities for extra credit that take the form of visiting an exhibition, attending a lecture, or writing a reflection paper. You can also receive 4 extra credit points on your final paper by visiting the writing center and attaching your rough draft, stamped and marked by the Writing Center (1300 Boylan Hall). Writing Center appointments tend to fill up so make yours well enough in advance of the final paper!
Student Presentations: Each week one student will give a brief presentation (roughly 7 – 10 minutes) on the weekly readings. This presentation will include a short word on who each of the authors are, a summary of ONE of the readings (you do not need to do a summary for each reading if there is more than one), your thoughts on how the readings connect thematically, your personal reactions and opinions, and finally, one or two questions that arose for you as you read.

Office of AccessABILITY
In compliance with the ADA and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Brooklyn College is committed to ensuring educational access and accommodations for all its registered students. Brooklyn College’s students with disabilities and medical conditions are encouraged to register with the Office of AccessABILITY for assistance and accommodation. For information and appointment contact the Office of AccessABILITY located in Room E1214 or call (212) 772-4857 or TTY (212) 650-3230

If needed, please be sure to make any necessary academic arrangements in advance of due dates so that I can best assist you.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism
Brooklyn College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Brooklyn College Academic Integrity Procedures.

If online submissions, exams, or the paper is found to have been plagiarized, disciplinary action will result. A grade of F for the assignment and/or course will be given, and, if necessary, the case will be submitted for further action at the level of the Department Chair and/or the Dean of Students.

For the take-home essay exam, in-text citations (Author, Page number) can be used to reference class texts. For the final project, you are required to use Chicago-style citations; I will circulate information and guidelines with the paper assignment. For a guide to what constitutes plagiarism, please consult http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php; of course, discuss with me any questions you may have.

Course Materials
All materials for this course will be uploaded to Blackboard. Please print out the readings for each class in advance and bring them with you for the purposes of in-depth classroom discussion. We will be directly engaging with the day’s readings in class, so also be sure to bring the syllabus to each class.

Reading Schedule

Wed 1/28: Introduction: Where Is Politics?
Wed 2/4: Power
• Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression” (2004)

I. Violence and Revolution

Wed 2/11: Psyche, Society and Liberation
• Civilization and Its Discontents, Part II, VI, VIII (1930)
• Lenin, “Class, Society and the State,” The State and Revolution (1917)
• Stokely Carmichael, “Toward Black Liberation” (excerpt) (1966)

Wed 2/18: NO CLASS (Classes follow Monday schedule)

Wed 2/25: Fascism
• Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile, “The Doctrine of Fascism” (1932)
• Jose Antonio Prima de Rivera, “What the Falange Wants” (1934)
• Samir Amin, “The Return of Fascism in Contemporary Capitalism” (2014)

II. The Frankfurt School and Hannah Arendt

Wed 3/4: Walter Benjamin
• Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” (1923)

Wed 3/11: Herbert Marcuse
• Marcuse, “The New Forms of Control” and “The Closing of the Political Universe,” One-Dimensional Man, excerpts (1964)

Wed 3/18: Hannah Arendt
• Arendt, “Preface to Part One,” “Antisemitism as an Outrage to Common Sense,” and “Total Domination,” The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951)
In-class Writing Workshop

III. Liberalism, Libertarianism, Conservatism and Democracy

Wed 3/25: Liberalism and Neoliberalism
• John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness” (1985) (excerpts)

Wed 4/1: Libertarianism and Conservatism

**TAKE-HOME ESSAY DUE**

**W 4/8: NO CLASS (Spring Recess)**

**Wed 4/15: Democracy**

**IV. (Post-)Colonialism and Anti-Racism**

**Wed 4/22: Frantz Fanon**
- Fanon, “Introduction” and “By Way of Conclusion”, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)
- Fanon, “Concerning Violence,” *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

**Wed 4/29: American Racism, Black Responses**
- Malcom X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, “Negroes and the Crisis of Capitalism in the U.S.” (1953)

**Wed 5/6: Orientalisms**
- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes” (1988)

**V. Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Body**

**Wed 5/13: Feminisms**
- Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction: Woman As Other,” *The Second Sex* 1949
- bell hooks, “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*

**Wed 5/20: Queer Theory and The Body**
- Siobhan Somerville, “Queer,” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2007)
Wed 5/27: FINAL PAPERS DUE by 12:00 pm NOON. Please email them as a word document attachment (ending in .docx) to rbrown4@gc.cuny.edu. Papers submitted in unreadable format will not count as on time so please plan accordingly.