For this year, this seminar course will examine some canonical texts in the supposed “tradition” of Western political theory. It will especially focus on how some of these canonical texts identify and pose the problem to which they are responding; that is, we will look especially at either the opening parts of key texts and/or the early texts of key thinkers.

Resisting recent injunctions to simply get away from thinkers who are clearly implicated in contemporary structures of domination and injustice, I take part of my cue from Gilles Deleuze:

The mania of people today is not knowing how to admire anything: either they are ‘against,’ or they situate everything at their own level while they chit-chat and scrutinize. That’s no way to go about it. You have to work your way back to those problems which an author of genius has posed, all the way back to that which he does not say in what he says, in order to extract something that still belongs to him, though you also turn it against him. You have to be inspired, visited by the geniuses you denounce. (Deleuze, Desert Islands...2004, p. 139).

Put differently, it is better to appreciate what one seeks to resist than to pretend that one can escape their grasp; and better to engage with figures who have withstood many challenges and reappraisals in many different contexts than to guess which contemporary theorists will still seem interesting fifty years hence. However, my more specific reason for staying with the canonical beasts is to encourage students to think about how political theorists have set up their arguments, to try to start from scratch in eras of significant dangers and structural/historical transformations; eras that are perhaps like our own. In this way, the course will hopefully resonate with analyses of myths of origin that still shape political traditions in many other contexts, as well as with the more general claim that conceptualizations of a problem tend to predispose the solutions that are available. In more practical terms, engaging with a core question about origins and set-ups that might be addressed to most or even all the canonical texts should enable us to focus on a limited and manageable range of texts while also permitting students to pursue their own interests both in particular theorists and in contemporary debates about what it means to pursue political theory.

The beginning of this particular course will explore how participants in it have come to think about political theory. What problems bother you? Which literatures attract or repel you? Which thinkers and schools of thought have become part of your own thinking, whether implicitly or explicitly. What understanding of politics, and what politics of understanding, do you bring to this material? Reading the classic texts is always a matter of imposing oneself on someone else, so it is always helpful to acknowledge the inheritances we bring to the conversation. Here we might also briefly consider some very basic methodological questions, not least about the necessities and dangers of historical and cultural anachronism, the relation between historical and
analytical interpretation and the determinations of specific concepts and categories.

We will then move to a few influential texts by Max Weber, who can be thought of as both the initiator of many of the core traditions of twentieth-century political theory as well as a culmination, even dead-end, of contradictory traditions that had been in play in Europe for the previous four or five centuries. From there we will move back to texts from that previous half-millennium, working from Machiavelli to Hobbes to Locke to Rousseau to Kant. Then we will consider two texts that respond to Kant in exemplary twentieth-century modalities, one an attempt to subvert him though a kind of sociological history, and one a survey of the wreckage that came with a loss of emancipatory vision he represented. Finally, back to the supposed beginning: Plato and Aristotle. Plato especially will provide the basic subtext of the entire course and should be read with special attention.

The specific texts that constitute the required reading for the course are identified below, though I hope students will read more of the texts by these figures than is specifically required. I will expect everyone to come to class prepared to speak about these texts. I especially expect everyone to have something to say about (a) how politics is being posed as a problem; (b) how politics is being defined; (c) what is being excluded both by the framing of a problem and the specification of what counts as politics; and (d) what consequences follow from (a), (b), and (c). References to secondary texts are welcomed but my main concern is that you engage with the primary texts with some seriousness.

These texts provide a reasonably limited repertoire in some respects, but the potential field of reference is obviously very broad and each author offers enough material for a course of their own. I have been partly guided by the demands of a field course, one that can serve as preparation for the political theory comprehensive examinations in the doctoral program. These examinations generally have a double ambition: to ensure that students know enough about the broad field of political theory to be able to teach at least undergraduate classes with some authority; and to encourage students to develop their own authoritative voice in relation to that broad field. The course shares this ambition. It also tends to be the case that one can learn a lot by trying to make sense of how the canonical thinkers became so iconic, and how the most provocative contemporary political theorists tend to work both with and against them.

Requirements:

**Class participation: 20%.** I expect all students to be able to respond to the texts under discussion in any class. Everyone should be prepared to speak to the four questions identified in (a) to (d) above. A one page commentary identifying themes that provoke you, especially in relation to those four questions, should be sent to all participants by noon on the day of the class.

**Short essay: 30%.** This will require a comparative analysis of the politics of origins, that is, the framing of the problem, in any two of the texts considered in class. Due early November.

**Long essay: 50%.** Each student will be expected to define the topic, argument and scope of the essay with me. I would prefer that it focus in some way on one of the figures explicitly discussed in class, but am also open to essays on engagements with other such figures. Due December 11.
Preliminary Seminar sequence:

September 11. Introduction.

September 18. Discussion: Which forms of political theory most interest you? Who specifically? What understanding of politics do they express? What do they assume political theory does?

September 25. No class; move to October 1?


October 2. Machiavelli, The Prince, all. It is useful to compare several editions, especially for the way they translate the core concept of virtu.


October 23. Rousseau, Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts and Discourse on the Origins of Inequality. I tend to use the translations by Donald Cress in Rousseau: The Basic Political Writings, Hackett Publishing.

October 23. Kant, especially the late essays “History with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” “What is Enlightenment?” “Theory and Practice” and “Perpetual Peace.” These can all be found in the edition of Kant’s Political Writings edited by Hans Reiss for Cambridge University Press, but also elsewhere.

October 29?. Michel Foucault, History of Madness, the 2006 version translated by Jean Khalfa for Routledge.


November 6. No class, move to October 29?

November 13. Reading Break.

