

PSCI 4714: Liberalism & Its Critics

Spring 2023

Meetings: MWF–3:35-4:20pm Hellems 267

Professor Scott B. Ritner

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Office Hours: Monday's 11am-1pm or by appointment.

Course Description: This class is designed to examine the foundational texts of liberalism as political theory and its most stringent critics. The theme of the course is the tension in liberal political thought between individual freedom and institutional limitations. This requires taking up questions of how liberalism approaches religion, capitalism, race, law, and government, as well as conformity and nonconformity in society. Liberalism sets the individual as its fundamental category and thus both individualizes and individuates. It separates us from each other to provide freedom and simultaneously breaks down the previously existing collective and communal organization of society leaving us isolated and alienated. Liberalism's critics tend to come in two forms—those who criticize it based on what it destroys and those who criticize it for not living up to its own ideas. Thus we will see a tension, even in the writings of the liberals we read, between overreaching and underdelivering.

While most of the class will be taken up with more contemporary texts, we will begin at the origins of liberal political thought, which are rooted in the religious and political conflicts of 17th Century Europe. Thinkers like the religious dissident Baruch Spinoza and the conspiratorial John Locke will provide foundations for Utopian forms of liberalism proclaimed by Immanuel Kant, Mary Wollstonecraft, and J.S. Mill in the 18th and 19th Centuries. From a critical perspective, we will begin with Mary Shelley's critique of scientific humanism and Marx's critique of Civil Society before proceeding the anarchists of the late 19th Century including Emma Goldman. In the second half of the class we will look at 20th Century and contemporary liberals and critics including communists, socialists, conservatives, and fascists, among others.

As part of this class we will be engaging in two role-playing games. The first will be a short game before the add-drop period begins. The second will take up 3 weeks towards the end of the semester. We will discuss how these work before playing.

Classroom Conduct: During the course of this semester we will be delving into some topics that are emotionally charged, personal, or otherwise distressing for some students. Among other topics, we will be discussing forms of oppression based on race, gender, religion, and sexuality. Students are expected to engage with sensitive topics in a class on political theory. Throughout the course of the semester we will be dealing with questions of truth rather than fact. This distinction is important because while absolute truth can be posited it can also be challenged as such. There is no single person who is able to attain absolute truth, not the professor, not your fellow students, and not yourself. Dialogue will be the driver of our class sessions. At times, class discussions will be tense. I encourage you to disagree with your fellow students, and with me. That said, outward hostility, *ad hominem* attacks, intimidation, and any other form of disrespectful behavior towards fellow students will not be

tolerated. The classroom is a safe and sacred space for the discussion of difficult themes and thus must remain one of respectful discourse.

Furthermore, this course has been designed to engage with authors of a plethora of racial, gender, and national identities. Students will be expected to engage honestly with literature that may challenge their assumptions, their way of life, and their position in society. This will include texts by both left-wing thinkers who may not have respect for your mother who is an entrepreneur and right-wing thinkers who may not have respect for your father who is an immigrant. Compassion (without prejudice) for your fellow students will be tested at times because of these readings.

Course Requirements: *Class Participation (10%)* and *Group Participation (10%)*: Group discussions and full-class discussions will be the driver of the course. Your presence in these discussions is pertinent to your ability to pass the class.

The *Group Discussion Notes (10%)*: Each group will be organized into a google document where discussion questions/topics will be posted by the beginning of each class session. Groups will record their answers or questions as they discuss the topics for the day. These will be graded on a group basis and submitted into Canvas at the end of the semester (I will also have access to all of the Google Docs).

The *Mid-term paper* will be a 2,000-ish word paper based on the historical readings we do in the first 7 weeks of class. You will be asked to think about the origins of liberalism and its different early forms from Spinoza through Wollstonecraft.

For the *Meme Assignment (10%)*, you will make a meme out of either a specific quote or general impression of the two chapters of Mill's *On Liberty*.

The *Film Reflection (10%)* is a 500 word (approx 1 page) reflection on *I Am Not Your Negro*.

The *Reacting Game Participation (20%)* will be based on your specific role in the game and how you carry it out

The *Reacting Game Reflection Paper (10%)* Is a self-reflective paper about why you, as your role made certain decisions during the game and how these decisions play into the theme of the class—the tension between individual freedom and institutional constraint.

Evaluation: Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

- 10% - Class Participation
- 10% - Group Participation
- 10% - Group Discussion Notes
- 20% - Mid-term paper
- 10% - Meme Assignment

- 10% - Film Reflection
- 20% - Reacting Game Participation
- 10% - Reacting Game Reflection Paper

Grading Rubric:

- A. Excellent work, with clear, challenging, original ideas supported by sufficient, appropriate, logically interpreted evidence. The essay should engage the reader in the inquiry, convincingly answer opposing views, be well organized, and free of significant grammatical flaws. An 'A' paper should be not just good but outstanding in ideas and presentation. An 'A' paper is not completely without flaws, but they are minimal, at best.
- B. Good to very good work, with a clear thesis supported by sufficient, appropriate citation, organized and interpreted comprehensively. The 'B' paper may have some outstanding qualities but be marked by significant flaws which keep it from being an 'A'; or it may be all-around good work, free of major problems but lacking the deeper insight necessary for excellence.
- C. Satisfactory work, but not yet good. The 'C' paper meets the basic requirements of an argument supported by interpretation of specific evidence, but still needs work in thinking and/or presentation. There may be a lack of clarity, the evidence may not always be sufficient or appropriate, citation may be sloppy, or the interpretation may have significant flaws. The essay may have organizational or mechanical problems that keep it from being good. The 'C' paper may be good in some respects but poor in others, or it may simply be adequate or inconsistent overall.
- D. A barely passing work that shows effort but is too inherently flawed to be considered satisfactory. Papers without a readily identifiable argument, or significant flaws in the execution thereof, are likely to be graded 'D'.
- F. Failing work -- for example, a hasty, sloppy paper that shows little or no thought, effort, or familiarity with the text.

Requirements for COVID-19: As a matter of public health and safety, all members of the CU Boulder community and all visitors to campus must follow university, department and building requirements and all public health orders in place to reduce the risk of spreading infectious disease. CU Boulder currently requires COVID-19 vaccination and boosters for all faculty, staff and students. Students, faculty and staff must upload proof of vaccination and boosters or file for an exemption based on medical, ethical or moral grounds through the [MyCUHealth portal](#).

The CU Boulder campus is currently mask-optional. However, if public health conditions change and masks are again required in classrooms, students who fail to adhere to masking requirements will be asked to leave class, and students who do not leave class when asked or who refuse to comply with these requirements will be referred to [Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution](#). For more information, see the policy on [classroom behavior](#) and the [Student Code of Conduct](#). If you

require accommodation because a disability prevents you from fulfilling these safety measures, please follow the steps in the “Accommodation for Disabilities” statement on this syllabus.

If you feel ill and think you might have COVID-19, if you have tested positive for COVID-19, or if you are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, you should stay home and follow the further guidance of the [Public Health Office](#) (contacttracing@colorado.edu). If you are fully vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, you do not need to stay home; rather, you should self-monitor for symptoms and follow the further guidance of the [Public Health Office](#) (contacttracing@colorado.edu).

My policy on absences is that you give me advance notice, by email, if you are going to miss class. I do not need to know the reason, just that you will be absent. I ask that you please do not abuse this trust.

Accommodation for Disabilities: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](#). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

If there is anything I can do, in addition to these guidelines, to make this class more accessible for you, please let me know by the end of September.

Preferred Student Names and Pronouns: CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name. ***I will give each person the opportunity to share their preferred name and pronouns on the first day of class. I require that all students in my classes respect the preferences of each of their classmates.***

Honor Code: All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Honor Code academic integrity policy. Violations of the Honor Code may include, but are not limited to: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Code (honor@colorado.edu; 303-492-5550). Students found responsible for violating the academic integrity policy will be subject to nonacademic sanctions from the Honor Code as well as academic sanctions from the faculty member. Additional information regarding the Honor Code academic integrity policy can be found on the [Honor Code website](#).

Prof. Ritner's note: The best way to get the most out of this class is to do the work yourself. I'm not big on bureaucratic processes, but if you plagiarize, you will fail the class.

Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment and/or Related Retaliation: CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. The university will not tolerate acts of sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner violence (dating or domestic violence), stalking, or protected-class discrimination or harassment by or against members of our community. Individuals who believe they have been subject to misconduct or retaliatory actions for reporting a concern should contact the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) at 303-492-2127 or email cureport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and the support resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents of sexual misconduct, dating and domestic violence, stalking, discrimination, harassment and/or related retaliation, to ensure that individuals impacted receive information about their rights, support resources, and reporting options. To learn more about reporting and support options for a variety of concerns, visit [Don't Ignore It](#).

Religious Holidays: Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance.

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.

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

Statement on Academic Freedom: Your academic freedom and mine does not require that you agree with me, nor that I agree with you. It does not require that I, as the course instructor, make pretense of “impartiality” or objectivity (these are mythical things when it comes to politics!). It does, however, require a good faith effort on both my part and yours to make a coherent and thoughtful argument, and to consider that there is more to learn. <https://www.cu.edu/regents/law/7>

Required Readings: The Following Texts are required and available at the CU Bookstore or other online spaces. Anything not from these required texts will be available on the course [Canvas page](#), and the class [Google Drive](#).

- Spinoza, Baruch. *Theological-Political Treatise: 2nd Edition*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Inc., 2001.
- Locke, John. *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Inc., 1983.
- Treacy, Mary Jane. *Greenwich Village 1913: Suffrage, Labor, and the New Woman*. Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2022.

- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1992.
(Recommended)

Useful Websites and Podcasts: This is a list of websites that may offer some more extensive background or short-form analysis of our readings and thinkers who are not on the syllabus but may have relevance to our topics, presented in no particular order.

- The Partially Examined Life: <http://partiallyexaminedlife.com/>
- The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps: <https://www.historyofphilosophy.net/>
- Critical Theory: <http://www.critical-theory.com/>
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/>

Course Schedule:

The readings are listed for the day that we will discuss them. Please be prepared in class with the readings and a notebook, computer, or tablet for taking notes. I highly recommend not using your phone for the readings. I know it is unavoidable for some, but it really is not the best.

As course instructor I reserve the right to alter the readings based on unforeseen scheduling events, contemporary political events, illness, weather, etc. I do offer this guarantee: I will not eliminate any books I have required you to buy.

Please be sure to read the texts in the order they are listed on the syllabus.

I have done what I can to keep the reading within reasonable limits. Some readings are long, by necessity of needing to read a full chapter or essay to get the argument the author(s) is making. On average you will read between 20 and 40 pages of text per class session. There are also sessions in which I am asking you to watch a movie of 1:30-2:30 hours in length. I will do my best to give some guidance for the longer readings, and if I forget, please do not hesitate to remind me of this paragraph.

January 18-20–Introductions:

- Wednesday: What are we doing here?
 - Who am I?
 - Who are you?
 - How to read political theory handout
 - Brief discussion of what we will do and how I made these decisions.
- Friday: A discussion of our preconceived notions.
 - What even is liberalism?
 - What ideologies and traditions are antagonistic to liberalism?

- Conservatism
- Fascism
- Socialism
- Communism
- Anarchism
- Others?
- How has liberalism changed?
 - What is neoliberalism?
 - What is ordoliberalism?

January 23-27–The foundations of liberalism:

- Monday: Before we start, a game
 - Readings: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press, 2005), Selections.
- Wednesday: The Game, Part II
- Friday: Domination and Prophecy
 - Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)*, Preface & Chapters 1 & 2.

January 30-February 3–Theology as it's basis:

- Monday: How to read the Torah
 - Spinoza, *TTP*, Chapters 3-5.
- Wednesday: God as Sovereign, Nature as God
 - Spinoza, *TTP*, Chapters 6-8.
- Friday: No Class, Professor Away

February 6-10–Spinoza's Scripture and Spinoza's State:

- Monday: The Bible as a Way of Life?
 - Spinoza, *TTP*, Chapters 9-15
- Wednesday: Political Purposes?
 - Spinoza, *TTP*, Chapters 16 & 17
- Friday: Spinoza's Conclusion: Founding Liberal Philosophy
 - Spinoza, *TTP*, Chapters 18 & 19.

February 13-17–Foundations of liberalism: Locke and Kant:

- Monday: Tolerance
 - John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Entire.

- Wednesday: Kant's Utopian Liberalism
 - Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" in *Political Writings*. Ed. H.S. Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 93-130.
- Friday: Wollstonecraft's Universalist Internal Critique
 - Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Chapters 1 & 9.

February 20-24--The Monsters We Make!:

- Monday: No Class, Professor Away
 - Mid Term Paper Due at 11:59pm
- Wednesday: Shelley Against Colonialism
 - Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Chapters 11-16
- Friday: Liberalism & Capitalism
 - Karl Marx, *A Contribution to The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Selections.

February 27-March 3--Liberalism Critiques Itself?

- Monday: Abolitionism & Feminism
 - *The Declaration of Sentiments*
- Wednesday: Liberalism & Individualism I
 - J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter 3
- Friday: Liberalism & Individualism II
 - Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter 4.
 - Meme Assignment Due @ Noon!

March 6-10--Liberalism & The Problem of Race:

- Monday: Appropriating Government Structures
 - *The Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace*
- Wednesday: The Color Line & Progress
 - W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapters 2, 6, and 10.
- Friday: No Class, Professor Away

March 13-17--20th Century Critics

- Monday: Against the Legal Person
 - Simone Weil, "What is Sacred in Every Human Being?"
- Wednesday: Toleration Under Threat?
 - Watch: Raoul Peck, *James Baldwin, I am Not Your Negro*
 - Film Paper Due at 11:59pm.

- Friday: Against Tolerance
 - Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance”

March 20-24–21st Century Critics:

- Monday: The Individual, as Such?
 - Jenny Ikuta, *Contesting Conformity: Democracy and the Paradox of Political Belonging*, Introduction
- Wednesday: Freedom to Move? Freedom to Be?
 - Hagar Kotef, *Movement And The Ordering of Freedom*, Chapters 2 & 4.
- Friday: Forced Life–From Sovereignty to Something Else?:
 - Banu Bargu, *Starve & Immolate The Politics of Human Weapons*, Chapter 2.

March 27-March 31–No Class, Spring Break

April 3-7–Our Game: Reacting to the Past Greenwich Village 1913:

- Monday: Set Up Session 1
 - Announcing Roles and Discussing Game Play
 - All Readings From Now Until the End of the Game are From
 - Treacy, Mary Jane. *Greenwich Village 1913: Suffrage, Labor, and the New Woman*. Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2022.
- Wednesday: Set Up Session 2
- Friday: No Class, Professor Away

April 10-14–Model Minorities:

- Monday: Set Up Session 1
- Wednesday: Game Session 1
- Friday: No Class, Professor at a Conference on Campus

April 17-21–Sexuality and Dissent:

- Monday: Game Session 2
- Wednesday: Game Session 3
- Friday: Game Session 4

April 24-28–Cultural Politics and Power:

- Monday: Game Session 5

- Wednesday: Game Session 6
- Friday: Post-Game Debrief Session

May 1-5–Wrapping Up, Moving Forward:

- Monday: What have we done?
 - A lot, but also not a lot. We will recap.
- Wednesday: What have we missed?
 - A lot, of course, but let's talk about it.
 - Reacting Game Reflection paper Due 11:59pm.
- Friday: No Class, Reading Day.