

**POL381S**  
**Modernity and Political Agency**  
**Winter 2026**

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**Class:** Mondays, 1-3 PM

**Office hours:** Wednesday 2-4 PM (please see Quercus Module for sign-up sheet)

**Course description**

In this course, we will study the works of key figures in 20<sup>th</sup>-century political thought, for whom the possibilities of politics were thrown into radical question by their diagnoses of the distinctive conditions of the modern era: the territorial state as the basic unit of political organization, the rise of capitalism as a distinctive mode of economic production, the rise of scientific knowledge and the rapid expansion of technological capabilities, and the loss of shared religious traditions that can serve as a force of social integration. For all the thinkers we will study together, the circumstances of modernity pose a distinctive set of challenges for the possibilities of politics and of human freedom and agency. For many, the modern age is a period of unprecedented forms of *unfreedom*, including the violence of colonial domination, world wars, and genocide. What may we hope for, and what must we fear, under such conditions? Does modernity hold emancipatory potential for humanity? If so, what is the character of the freedom we can strive for? Is the realm of the political distinct from other domains of human activity and relationship: the moral, the social, the economic, the spiritual, the aesthetic? Does it have its own guiding principles of human conduct, or are those principles derivative from other domains of human living-together?

**Course objectives**

By the end of this course, you should have a deeper grasp of central themes and concepts in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought: modernity, freedom, “the political,” power. You will also understand how 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers draw on and depart from earlier traditions.

This course will centre on the close reading of influential texts in political theory, and to the extent possible will build your skill in reading whole texts. This skill entails grasping the overall thrust of a text’s argument and the identification of especially important passages. You will also learn to analyze the rhetorical techniques authors employ to achieve an effect on their audiences or readers. What does the author hope to achieve politically through this text? What devices do they use to move their readers or orient their political judgment? Written assignments are aimed at honing your skills of textual interpretation. You will become more adept at identifying key passages in a given text

and “unpacking” their meaning by relating them to other parts of the text, other texts by the same author, and cognate themes or concepts in other thinkers and texts.

You will also practice linking the ideas and arguments in these texts to our 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Which insights of a given thinker remain valid today? Which have been rendered less relevant by subsequent transformations of political, economic, and social life.

### **Course readings**

The following course texts have been ordered at UofT Bookstore. Most are available online through UofT Libraries, or as e-book purchases. Where possible, I have posted .pdf versions of these texts on Quercus. It is essential that you use the assigned editions of these texts for all your written assignments in this course.

Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (David Owen, ed.) (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004) (Available online through U of T Libraries).

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2004).

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990)

Mohandas Gandhi, *"Hind Swaraj" and Other Writings*. Ed. Anthony Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

All additional readings are available through UofT Libraries and/or will be posted on the Quercus portal for the course. Readings for the last two weeks of the spring term will be announced in the middle of November, based on the deliberative syllabus design process described below.

### **Course requirements**

1. **Reading.** Reading the texts closely and coming to class prepared to discuss them is the most important strategy for getting the most out of this course and doing well in it. Close reading entails entering into an authentic conversation with the author, a conversation in which you are both trying to get to the heart of the political problems we confront as human beings who live in modern times. You are trying to listen well to what they are trying to tell you, and to arrive at a judgment about why you find them persuasive, or where you disagree with them. In order to arrive at that judgment, you have to be confident that you have understood what they are trying to say. As you approach each text, consider posing the following questions to its author:\*

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\* These questions are adapted from Stephen Salkever, a brilliant teacher of political theory, who taught at Bryn Mawr College for many years. See Stephen G. Salkever, “Teaching Comparative Political Thought: Joys, Pitfalls, Strategies, Significance,” in

- What are your hopes and ideals? What are your greatest fears?
- What are the causes of the threats you fear most? How do you understand the forces that generate the greatest dangers for humanity?
- How can those dangers be met?
- What stands in the way of the actions that could meet these threats?
- How can these obstacles be overcome?
- What are the main arguments against your position? Why might an intelligent person disagree with you? How would you respond to their critique of your argument?

Each week, I will post a set of Reading Questions for the assigned reading. You may find it helpful to review these questions before your first reading of the text, and then to review them again after your reading to see whether you could confidently answer them.

I encourage you to keep a Reading Journal in which you sketch out your answers to the above questions and/or to the Reading Questions. You may (optionally) submit your Reading Journal at the end of the course as a component of your Class Participation requirement.

2. **Class participation (10%).** Come to class every week, having read the text carefully and with questions or critical reactions in mind. The class will be a combination of lecture and discussion. I understand that not everyone is comfortable speaking in class, though I will strive to make the classroom a safe environment for everyone to share their ideas. Occasionally, we will break into small-group discussions, which is another opportunity for class participation, and we will also have short on-the-spot writing exercises in class. The Class Discussant assignments also offer an opportunity to participate, both as the author of a reflection piece and in reading and offering constructive comments on the Discussion page each week. Comments should be constructive and tactful even if you disagree with a colleague's interpretation; aim at raising questions that we can discuss in class. Coming to office hours to discuss the readings is another mode of participation. As noted above, you may (optionally) submit your Reading Journal at the end of the course as evidence of your active participation. These will not be separately graded, but I will read over them.
3. **Class Discussant Essay (10%; one short essay).** Once during the term, you will write a short reflection on the assigned reading for a week of your own choosing. You should sign up for these assignments **by the end of the first week of class**, on the Sign-Up Sheet posted in Quercus. Please take care not to inadvertently overwrite other students' sign-ups, and please note that no more than four students should sign up for any given week (unless all other weeks are already full).

Follow these instructions in writing your reflection pieces:

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Melissa S. Williams (ed.), *Deparochializing Political Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

- Choose a passage from the assigned reading of between 1 and 5 sentences, and copy it at the top of your essay, with a page reference to the text.
- Write a short essay (250-500 words) explaining why you found the passage especially convincing, wrong-headed, original, or confusing. How does the passage connect to what you understand as important problems of politics in our own time? How does it make you think differently about the limits, possibilities, or purposes of political action? What is the central concept in the passage, and what is distinctive about the meaning the author assigns to it? How does it contrast with other uses of the same term in contemporary political discourse, or in other political thinkers with whom you're familiar? Don't try to answer all of these questions in your short reflection piece. Instead, focus on articulating the reasons why you found the passage interesting and why you think others should find it interesting, too. Be creative, playful, and/or provocative!
- **Post these essays (both in the Class Discussant Discussion page for the week's Module and in the Class Discussant Assignment tool) by 11:59 PM the night before the class in which we'll be discussing the assigned reading.**

**4. In-Class Close Reading Practice (5%) (see dates below).** Five times during the term, we will begin the class with a 15-minute close reading practice in which you will write a brief commentary on a key passage from the assigned text, which will be posted on a slide. This will be the first thing we do in class on these days, and we will use exam booklets, which you will hand in during the class break. The purpose of this practice is just to stimulate reflection and discussion of the text and to open up alternative interpretations of the text, which we will discuss as a class as soon as the writing exercise is complete. This commentary should be about a paragraph in length.

- In a few sentences, explain the key idea expressed by the passage in your own words.

Next, offer a commentary on the passage, which might:

- Pose and address question raised by the passage. For example, you might:
  - Identify a problem, puzzle, or paradox raised by the selected passage.
  - Identify another part of the same text that seems to contradict the meaning the selected passage.
- Question a premise of the selected passage, explaining why you think it might be wrong.
- Identify another thinker you've studied who takes an opposing view to the one expressed by the passage.
- Express what you think is compelling about the passage, perhaps by connecting it to political phenomena you have observed or experiences you have had.
- Be creative! This is a low-stakes exercise.

These in-class practice sessions will be held on the following dates:

- January 19 (Weber)
- February 9 (Arendt)

- February 23 (Fanon)
- March 16 (Foucault)
- March 23 (Gandhi)

5. **Essay: Preliminary Analysis (15%) (due March 6)** The essay assignment will require you to compare two of the first three thinkers we are studying (Weber, Arendt, Fanon). Essay topics will be distributed by February 23 via the Essay Module on Quercus. See that Module as well for guidance on writing interpretive essays in political theory and for the Academic Integrity Checklist that you will need to submit with your final essay.

The preliminary analysis component of the essay assignment is due on Quercus on Friday, March 6, by 11:59 PM (two weeks before the final essay is due). Its structure builds on our close reading practice by asking you to identify 4 passages (two from each of the thinkers you are writing on) that you think are important for the topic you have chosen. However, this assignment requires you to go beyond what you have been doing in the weekly assignments by writing a brief interpretation of each of the passages you have selected. It also asks you to prepare an outline of the argument you will be making in your final essay. In short, you will be asked to:

- Identify which topic you'll be writing on and offer a provisional thesis statement;
- Select 4 passages that you think are important for the topic you have chosen, 50-100 words, 2 from each of the authors/texts you are discussing;
- Write 250 words interpreting each passage (1000 words total)
- Write a draft outline of your essay (1 page, approximately 200-250 words)
- Grading scheme: 100 points (for 15% of final course grade)
  - Passage selection: 20 points (5 points each per passage)
  - Interpretation: 40 points (10 points per passage)
  - Outline: 20 points

6. **Essay (2000-2500 words) (25%) (due March 20)**. You will write an interpretive essay of 2000-2500 words on an assigned topic based on the readings from the first six weeks of the course. If your thesis has changed from the one you articulated in your Preliminary Analysis, add a paragraph at the end explaining why. This explanation should be clearly labeled (e.g., "Explanation for Changed Thesis"), and should be no more than 250 words. This does not count toward essay word count. You will write one interpretive essay in response to prompts I provide, comparing two or more thinkers in the course. This essay is due on Quercus no later than 11:59 PM on Friday, March 20.

7. **Final exam (35%) (in-person, Final Exam period)** This exam will comprise short answer questions covering the entire term's readings and essay questions focused on the latter part of the course. It will be a closed-book (no aids allowed) exam.

**Lateness policy:** Please organize your schedule so that you can submit your work on time. Cultivating good time management skills is an essential part of your university education. If you are having trouble meeting a deadline, it is essential that you reach out to me **before the assignment is due**. Late essays will be penalized at the rate of 2 percent per day of lateness, including weekends.

**Writing essays:** Clear, thoughtful, well-organized writing is one of the most important skills you develop in the course of your undergraduate training. This course assumes that you have laid the foundations for strong academic writing and are prepared to continue working on your writing skills. The UofT Writing Centre ([www.writing.utoronto.ca](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca)) offers some excellent resources, as do College writing centres. Writing well is a lifelong endeavour; it is important to develop the habit of drafting, getting critical feedback from advisors and fellow students, and rewriting before submitting your paper. Revise, revise, revise! Be sure to acknowledge, by name, all who supported you in writing your essay.

### **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is fundamental to learning and scholarship. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the University of Toronto degree that you earn will be valued as a true indication of your individual academic achievement, and will continue to receive the respect and recognition it deserves.

Familiarize yourself with the University's [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). It is the rulebook for academic behaviour at the U of T, and you are expected to know the rules.

For further guidance, see ["How Not to Plagiarize"](#).

To remind you of these expectations, and help you avoid accidental offences, *we will ask you to include a signed Academic Integrity Checklist with every assignment (downloadable from Quercus). If you do not include the statement, your work will not be graded.*

Normally, students will be required to submit their course assignments to the University's plagiarism detection tool website for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their material to be included as source documents in the University's plagiarism detection tool reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the University's plagiarism detection tool service are described on the company web site.

We treat cases of academic misconduct very seriously. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following the procedures outlined in the *Code*. The consequences for academic misconduct can be severe, including a failure in the course and a notation on your transcript. If you have any questions about what is or is not

permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact your TA. If you have questions about appropriate research and citation methods, seek out additional information from your TA, or from other available campus resources like the University of Toronto's [Writing website](#). If you are experiencing personal challenges that are having an impact on your academic work, please speak to me or seek the advice of your college registrar.

### **Generative AI**

Representing as one's own an idea, or expression of an idea, that was AI-generated may be considered an academic offense in this course. I recognize that in some circumstances there may be valid reasons to use generative AI as part of your learning process. If you believe you have a valid reason to use it, you must request and receive my approval in writing prior to submitting work that has relied on generative AI, and include a statement describing your use of AI in a note on the assignment you submit. This rule applies to all written work in the course, including Reading Journals. Beware of relying on AI-generated summaries of the assigned readings in lieu of your own careful reading of the texts. Also note that relying on programs such as Grammarly or online translation programs constitutes a use of AI for the purposes of the course. Such uses may be permissible, but you must precisely disclose your use of these tools and seek my advance guidance about how to ensure that it does not lead to concerns about the originality of your work.

Do keep careful notes on your readings and in the preparation of your written assignments. These can be very helpful in documenting the development of your work through your engagement with the readings. In cases where we have questions about your use of sources, we may ask you to provide your notes.

### **Class schedule**

1. **January 5:** Course introduction: What distinguishes the modern age from earlier periods of human history? Why might we think that the conditions of the modern age constitute a problem for human freedom and political agency?

No assigned reading.

### **Political Ethics Without Foundations: Diagnoses of the Modern Condition**

2. **January 12 – Weber I**

Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation."

3. **January 19 – Weber II**

Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation."

\*In-class reading practice this week.

## Thinking What We Are Doing: Modernity and the Possibility of Politics

### 4. January 26 – Arendt I

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Prologue, Chapters 1 & 2

### 5. February 2 – Arendt II

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chapters 3 & 4

### 6. February 9 – Arendt III

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chapters 5 & 6

\*In-class reading practice this week.

**\*\* February 16: Family Day/Reading Week – No Class\*\***

## Freedom, Power, Violence, Non-Violence

### 7. February 23 – Fanon I

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Chapter 1, “On Violence”

\*In-class reading practice this week.

Recommended: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface” to *The Wretched of the Earth*

### 8. March 2: Arendt IV

Arendt, *On Violence* (selections posted on Quercus)

**\*\*Friday, March 6: Preliminary Essay Analysis Due\*\***

### 9. March 9: Fanon II - Power after Colonialism

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Chapter 3, “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness”

### 10. March 16: Foucault - Power-through

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Parts IV and V  
\*In-class reading practice this week.

**\*\* Friday, March 20: Final Essay Due\*\***

**11. March 23: Gandhi - Nonviolence and Power-within**

Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, chs. 4-10, 13-14, and 16-17.

\*In-class reading practice this week.

**12. March 30: Gandhi Conclusion, and Review**

Mohandas Gandhi, "Economic Development and Moral Development," pp. 153-64; "The Constructive Programme" (pp. 169-180); and "The Pyramid and the Oceanic Circle" (pp. 181-83).