

**Studies in Comparative Political Theory**  
**POL480H/2038H**  
**Winter 2026**

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Office hours: Wednesdays 1-2pm (on Zoom); Thursdays 1-2pm (in person); or  
by appointment

**Class Meetings:** AH302, Mondays, 1-3pm

**Course Description:**

Comparative Political Theory (CPT) is a growing subfield that has developed not only as a “corrective” to the cultural specificity of the Western canon in political theory, but, increasingly, as an important contribution to learning in other fields, particularly in this globalized and interconnected world. CPT scholars study the political thought of non-Western cultural and religious traditions (and sometimes, marginalized or subaltern traditions within the Western canon and Western geographical or cultural spaces). They pay particular attention to the ontological and epistemological assumptions that undergird differently situated political perspectives. In some cases, this includes explicitly “comparative” studies, either of thinkers in those traditions or with Western thinkers or concepts, but in other cases, CPT studies might be better understood as “interpretive” political theory.

CPT is an enterprise that contains the possibility of transformative encounters, but also the presence of risk, either through the potential to destabilize one’s own views or to misrepresent perspectives from another tradition. CPT scholars adopt many different approaches, and one of the purposes of this course will be for students to evaluate the range of existing methodologies and position themselves within the field. Abiding concerns in evaluating this subfield will include questioning the possibilities and the limits of mutual intelligibility, interrogating our assumptions of what constitutes “political theory” and even considering when scholarly engagement might *not* be ethically appropriate. When conducting comparative projects we must be conscious of over-stating both similarity *and* difference, and an essential element of CPT is the tension and necessary self-reflection that characterizes attempts to translate and re-present ideas in different cultural and linguistic contexts. In a relatively new and growing field like this there will always be differences of opinion regarding approaches to research, and we will try to highlight the instances where scholars engage with each other, as well as the ways in which they draw on research and insights from other fields, making CPT a truly interdisciplinary endeavor.

As it is impossible to cover many traditions of political thought in sufficient depth in a short time, this course will include attention to diverse methods and aims of CPT work, primary and secondary source readings in Buddhist political thought, and readings focused on the inclusion of non-human entities in political thinking.

*[Please note: while readings, assignments and delivery/participation methods may seem extensive, the expectation of a 4<sup>th</sup> year/graduate seminar is that you are prepared for a heavier reading load. The number and type of assignments are designed to lower the stakes for any given assignment and to give you an opportunity to practice and develop a range of important skills. The many modes of participation are also intended to respond to technological or other challenges you might face as well as different levels of comfort in participating in group settings. Please feel free to talk to me if you have questions or concerns about the course design]*

## Course Readings:

All required course readings are available online, either as copyright-compliant postings on the course Quercus site or as links to the University of Toronto Libraries electronic collection. You are responsible for completing all readings by the dates indicated on the syllabus. The additional readings are optional for undergraduates but strongly encouraged, and are required for graduate students taking the course. I also strongly encourage you to look at several of the class discussant responses each week as they are posted by your fellow students. I have tried to make the assigned readings less onerous during the weeks when you have an assignment due, so please plan accordingly.

## Course Requirements:

Class Participation (20%): Participation in group discussions is an essential aspect of a seminar course. The following is the range of ways through which your participation will be measured: participation during class; completing occasional short writing responses, usually assigned in an Announcement, with responses submitted on Quercus; participation during the Week 10 group presentations; participation in weekly open discussion threads on Quercus; or talking with me about course ideas over email or during office hours. I know that not everyone is comfortable speaking regularly in class, so I hope this range of possible methods provides an option that works for you. I still expect you to attend class regularly and check in with me in order to ensure that you are meeting my expectations regarding course participation.

Class Discussant (20%): Each student must sign up to be a discussant at **two** class sessions during the course of the term, with at least one session prior to Week 6. (I will have a sign-up sheet during the first week of class.) For each discussant session you are expected to read all assigned readings closely (I recommend that you also read the additional readings) and write a 800-1,000 word critical response. This is **NOT** simply a summary of the readings, but should include personal reflection on what the readings make you think about and could include questions about the readings that you wish to pose to the class, as well as your provisional responses to those questions. Each of these response papers must be posted to the course page **no later than 11:59pm the day before class**. These papers do not have to be fully developed essays, nor do they need to address all of the readings, but they should demonstrate to me that you've prepared for the discussion and considered some of the implications of the reading(s). You do not have to prepare a formal presentation for class but you should be a particularly active participant on days when you've written a Class Discussant response. Discussants are discussion *leaders*; I still expect all of you to have read the assigned readings and a selection of other students' discussant responses and to be prepared to participate in our discussions. Discussant responses and the questions and ideas they generate will form part of the framework for our seminar discussions.

Methods Response Paper (20%, Due by 11:59pm on Feb 23): You will write a 2,000-3,000 word paper in which you critically assess one or more of the different methodological approaches to or problems within CPT and situate yourself within the field. I will provide a more detailed essay prompt by Week 2. (\*\*NB: Graduate students will be expected to write a 3,000-4,000 word paper.)

Annotated Bibliography and Draft Thesis/Outline (10%, Due by 11:59pm on Mar 9): You will create an annotated bibliography (minimum 8 sources) focused on either a particular tradition, practice, perspective or other topic related to CPT, that will inform a draft thesis and provisional outline (approximately 1 page) for your exegetical essay. An annotated bibliography is a list of relevant sources (books, chapters, or articles or other materials) along with a brief (original) summary of each. Because comparative political theory is an inherently interdisciplinary enterprise, these sources can come from multiple disciplines, including (but not limited to) anthropology, history, literature, religious studies, and area studies, or non-academic sources. (\*\*NB: Graduate students must have a minimum of 12 sources.)

**Group Presentation Assignment (10%, Due by 11:59pm on Mar 16):** You will write a 800-1,000 word **summary** of the reading(s) you have chosen for this week. By contrast with the class discussant assignment, this is **not** intended to be a critical response. However, in addition to summarizing the author(s)' argument(s), you should reflect briefly on the implications of their approach(es) for doing CPT work.

**Exegetical Essay (20%, Due by 11:59pm on Mar 30):** You will choose either 1) a short primary source text of political thought either written from a non-Western tradition or a marginalized perspective within the Western tradition **or** 2) a practice, embodied position or some other non-textual expression of political thinking **or** 3) a methodological or framing challenge within the subfield that is distinct from or builds on your methods response paper, and write a critical, interpretive essay of 2,000-3,000 words. This should be more than simply a summary of the author's/practitioner's argument or stance and should reflect your own understanding of its insights and relevance. I do not expect this to be an exhaustive analysis, but you will need to develop your own reading of the text/practice/position through engaging with additional contextual and secondary interpretive sources. Ideally, your annotated bibliography feeds into the exegetical essay. (\*\*NB: Graduate students will be expected to write a 3,000-4,000 word essay.)

### **Delivery/Participation Methods:**

- **Readings** (available through Quercus; to be done in advance of the scheduled class meeting)
- **Reading Questions** (optional; posted weekly on Quercus; designed to help guide your study and provide confidence that you are recognizing and understanding some of the main arguments from each reading)
- **Class Lecture** (each week I will begin seminar with a brief an overview of the readings and some background context for the authors, to ensure everyone has a base understanding of the arguments before our group discussion)
- **Class Discussant Posts** (assigned short response papers—described above—that are posted publicly on Quercus to share students' reactions to and analysis of the readings; I will read all of these in advance of the scheduled class meeting and use them to plan our group discussion)
- **Open Discussion Thread** (optional; for posting questions, ideas, concerns about the readings that you'd like to share with classmates and to incorporate into our group discussion)
- **Class Discussions** (in person discussion of the readings, their arguments and implications; \*\*NOTE: since this is one of the key aspects of a seminar class, you need to attend these and come prepared to participate)
- **Office Hours** (held virtually and in-person, for 1 hour a week each, on Zoom and in my office; also available by appointment, virtually or in-person)
- **Announcements** (reminders of assignments due, updates on course plans or changes)

### **Course Policies:**

#### Late Work/Make-up Exams

Please plan to submit your work on time and do your best to meet the set deadlines. Cultivating strong time-management skills is an important part of your university education. At the same time, I know that life can intervene. My goal is to help you learn the materials and complete the assignments to the best of your ability, even if this takes a few extra days. If you find yourself needing an extension, please reach out as soon as possible. In requesting an extension, please include:

1. The reason for your request (but please note that you are not required to disclose medical or other personal information in detail).
2. A proposal for a new deadline.
3. Additional documentation is not required.

All late work that is not excused in advance can be penalized at a rate of **2% per day of lateness**. I guarantee that I will give every request serious consideration. Your success in this course and your personal well-being are both important to me.

### Accessibility Policy

I do my best to welcome and support students with diverse learning styles and needs in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Accessibility Services Office as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. I know that this formal process can be slow, so I want to encourage you to come to me in advance to talk about any accommodations you might need or challenges you might be facing. I am also open to hearing about ways in which the course environment or structure might unintentionally exclude or disadvantage certain people and will work to respond to any such concerns.

I'm always willing to work with **any** student to help facilitate your participation and success in this course, whether you have a formal accommodation granted or not. I recognize that a range of other circumstances might affect your ability to engage fully with course expectations. Please feel free to come to me to discuss any difficulties you are experiencing and we can work together to address them.

### Attendance Policy

I expect you to be engaged with course matters as much as you are able, including doing the weekly readings, completing assignments, and participating in discussions during the scheduled class time and through asynchronous channels. I also recognize that your ability to access materials or participate in discussions might fluctuate, due to technological limitations, environmental stresses or other factors. If you're having trouble keeping up, please get in touch with me and we can work together to find a suitable way forward.

### Grading Policy

I will be happy to discuss any grades that I give on assignments, but please clarify initially whether you simply want more explanation and feedback or whether you intend to make a formal submission, through the steps below. I will do my best to communicate the criteria I'll be grading on in advance but please ask questions if you are confused. If you feel that I have made an error, you can take it up with me through the following procedure (Please note that I will only discuss issues with grading during the 7 days after the assignment has been handed back):

1. Wait a minimum of 24 hours after receiving your grade to contact me.
2. Put in writing the reasons why you are dissatisfied with the grade.
3. Email me your written statement and I will review it and reply.

Please also note that grading review requests can take up a lot of time. While I will seriously consider every one, it is *your* responsibility to consider whether you have a legitimate argument for a higher grade, or whether the grade you received simply isn't the grade you wanted.

### AI Policy

I strongly urge you to use resources other than Generative AI tools in your work in this class. The Class Discussant responses are personal and reflexive: I want to know *your* thoughts and reactions, not an energy-guzzling chatbot's aggregation of perspectives scraped from stolen data! Therefore, you are **not** permitted to use Generative AI tools for Short Writes, Class Discussant Responses or Group Presentation Summaries. I am, however, open to considering proposals for targeted use of these tools that acts as a complement to your own brain and your own work. If you plan to use Generative AI in any way for the Methods Response Paper or Exegetical Essay, you *must* clearly state in the outline or proposal how it will be used, get approval for that use and then follow that plan. However, Generative AI tools **cannot** be used

to generate ideas for responses to essay prompts or textual interpretations. This does not constitute original work and will not be approved. Any use of Generative AI that is not approved is **not** permitted.

### Academic Integrity Policy

Cheating and plagiarism are offenses against academic integrity and are subject to disciplinary action by the university. Plagiarism is copying someone else's work and presenting it as your own (by not attributing it to its true source). This includes using unaltered AI-generated work, which comes from programs that have themselves been built on the theft of massive amounts of original work to create training datasets. If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask me. I take this matter very seriously and will **NOT** tolerate plagiarism. Let me stress again: if you are unsure about how to properly cite an idea, please ask me. Otherwise, I expect university students to know proper citation methods, styles and norms. Your Essays will all be submitted using an online plagiarism detection tool; if you would like to request an alternate method of submission, please let me know and we can arrange this.

### **Course Readings:**

#### **Week 1 (Jan 5): Introduction**

##### Required Readings

Hpo Hlaing. 1979 [1878]. *Rajadhammasangaha*. U Htin Fatt (ed.), L.E. Bagshawe (trans.). [\*\*Pages 5-8; 70-76; 87-114]

##### Additional Readings

Jenco, L., Idris, M. and Thomas, M.C., 2020. "Comparison, connectivity, and disconnection" in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, ed. L. Jenco, M. Idris and M.C. Thomas. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

#### **Week 2 (Jan 12): Encounters with the Other**

##### Required Readings

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters : Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London ; Routledge. [\*\*Chapter 3: Knowing Strangers]

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1984. *The conquest of America: the question of the other*. New York: Harper & Row. [\*\*Chapter 4]

Motoori, N., 2007. *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey*. [Transl. Michal F. Marra] Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. [\*\*"On *Mono no Aware*"]

##### Additional Readings

Rudolph, Susanne Hoeber. 2005. "The Imperialism of Categories: Situating Knowledge in a Globalizing World". *Perspectives on Politics*. 3 (1).

#### **Week 3 (Jan 19): What is CPT?**

##### Required Readings

March, Andrew. 2009. "What Is Comparative Political Theory?" *Review of Politics* 71: 531-65.

Godrej, Farah. 2009. "Response to 'What is Comparative Political Theory?'" *Review of Politics* 71: 567-582.

Hassanzadeh, N., 2018. "Race, Internationalism, and Comparative Political Theory." *Polity*, 50(4), pp.519-546.

### Additional Readings

Williams, Melissa S., and Mark E. Warren. 2014. "A Democratic Case for Comparative Political Theory." *Political Theory*. Volume 42, Issue 1, pp. 26 – 57.

### **Week 4 (Jan 26): Methods and Comparison (Part I)**

#### Required Readings

Godrej, Farah. 2009. "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other." *Polity*, 41 (2): pp. 135–65

Jenco, Leigh Kathryn. 2007. "'What Does Heaven Ever Say?' A Methods-centered Approach to Cross-cultural Engagement." *The American Political Science Review* 101 (4): 741-755.

Idris, Murad. 2016. "Political Theory and the Politics of Comparison." *Political Theory*. [\*\*pp.1-6]

#### Additional Readings

Ackerly, Brooke and Rochana Bajpai. 2017. "Comparative Political Thought." In *Research Methods in Analytic Political Theory*, ed. Adrian Blau, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 270-296.

### **Week 5 (Feb 2): Methods and Comparison (Part II)**

#### Required Readings

Alcoff, L., 1991. "The problem of speaking for others." *Cultural Critique*, (20), pp.5-32.

Simpson, A., 2007. "On ethnographic refusal: indigeneity, 'voice' and colonial citizenship." *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, (9).

Cho, V., 2014. "The Academic Life of Savages." *Journal of Burma Studies*, 18(1), pp.23-31.

#### Additional Readings

Rollo, T., 2021. "Back to the rough ground: Textual, oral and enactive meaning in comparative political theory." *European Journal of Political Theory*, 20(3), pp.379-397.

### **Week 6 (Feb 9): Language & Translation**

#### Required Readings

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1993. "Thick Translation." *Callaloo* 16 (4): 808-819.

Loos, Tamara. 1998. "Issaraphap: The Limits of Individual Liberty in Thai Jurisprudence." *Crossroads*, 12:1. 35-75.

#### Additional Readings

Schaffer, Frederic C. 1998. *Democracy in Translation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. [\*\*Chapter 2: From *democratie* to *demokaraasi*]

Michaele Browsers. 2006. *Democracy and Civil Society in Arab Political Thought*. [\*\*Chapter 3: The Politics of Translating Civil Society into Arabic]

**(\*\*No Class Feb 16 for Reading Week\*\*)**

### **Week 7 (Feb 23): Buddhist Political Thought I (Classical Theravāda Texts)**

#### Required Readings

[\*Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta\*](#), *Samyutta Nikaya*

*Milindapañha*, [\*The Chariot Simile\*](#)

Walshe, Maurice O'C. 1995. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications. [\*\**Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta & Aggañña Sutta*]

Walton, M.J., 2016. *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press.  
[\*\*Chapter 2; read this after the other assigned readings]

**\*\*Methods Response Paper Due\*\***

**Week 8 (March 2): Buddhist Political Thought II (Modern Theravāda Interpretations)**

Required Readings

Aung San. 2015 [1998]. *The Writings of General Aung San*. Ed. Mya Han. Yangon: Yan Aung Books.  
[\*\*Annexure 8: Many Kinds of Politics]

Phra Thēpwisutthimēthī and Donald K. Swearer. 1989. *Me and mine: selected essays of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa*. Albany: State University of New York Press. [\*\*“Democratic socialism” and “A dictatorial dhammic socialism”]

Satha-Anand, S., 2013. “Buddhist ‘Genesis’ as a Narrative of Conflict Transformation: A Re-reading of the Aggañña-sutta.” *Diogenes*, 60(1), pp.54-61.

Additional Readings

Collins, S., 1993. The discourse on what is primary (Aggañña-Sutta): an annotated translation. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 21(4), [\*\*pp.301-337; also read Collins’ translation to compare, if you have time]

Walton, M.J., 2016. *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press.  
[\*\*Chapter 4]

**Week 9 (Mar 9): Buddhist Political Thought III (Contemporary Engagements with Race)**

Required Readings

Vesely-Flad, Rima. 2019. “Racism and Anatta: Black Buddhists, Embodiment and Interpretations of Non-Self.” *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*. (ed. George Yancy and Emily McRae) Rowman & Littlefield.

McNicholl, A., 2018. Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formation in Black Buddhist Writing. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 86(4), pp.883-911.

**\*Annotated Bibliography and Draft Thesis Due\*\***

**Week 10 (Mar 16): Approaches to Decolonizing Political Theory**

*This week will consist of group presentations, considering different frameworks for the project of decolonizing PT. Students will sign up at the beginning of term for one of the following readings/sets of readings. There is no group “project” but the group will be expected to meet at least once (virtual meetings are fine) and should organize some sort of presentation for the class of about 20 minutes, in which each group member participates in some way. Beyond this presentation, each group member must submit their own written summary of the readings, as described in Course Requirements, above.*

Group 1

Getachew, Adom and Karuna Mantena. 2021. “Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory.” *Critical Times* 1 December; 4 (3): 359–388.

Kim, D.H., 2015. “José Mariátegui’s east-south decolonial experiment.” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 7(2), pp.157-179.

Group 2

Gordon, J.A., 2014. *Creolizing political theory: reading Rousseau through Fanon*, New York: Fordham University Press. (\*\*Introduction\*\*)

Ba, M.E.H. and Doukas, G.E., 2024. How Not to Decolonize Political Theory. *Philosophy and Global Affairs*.

### Group 3

Seth, Sanjay. 2020. "A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Political Theory." In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, edited by Leigh K. Jenco, Murad Idris, and Megan C. Thomas, 620–637. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

des Portes, C., 2024. Towards a decolonial political theory: Thinking from the zone of nonbeing. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 51(9) 1548–1567.

### **\*Group Presentation Summary Due\*\***

### **Week 11 (Mar 23): Political Thinking with Non-Humans (Part I)**

#### Required Readings

Watts, Vanessa. 2013. "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European Tour!)." *DIES: Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2(1): 20–34.

De la Cadena, M., 2010. "Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond 'politics.'" *Cultural anthropology*, 25(2), pp.334-370.

#### Additional Readings

Horn-Miller, Kahente. 2016. "Distortion and Healing: Finding Balance and a 'Good Mind' Through the Rearticulation of Sky Woman's Journey" in *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place*. Edited by Nathalie J. Kermoal and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez. Edmonton, AB: AU Press, Athabasca University.

### **Week 12 (Mar 30): Political Thinking with Non-Humans**

#### Required Readings

Tsing, Anna, 2010. Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom. *Manoa*, 22(2), pp.191–203.

Tsing, Anna, 2012. Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species. *Environmental Humanities*, 1, pp.141–154.

### **\*\*Exegetical Essay Due\*\***