Course Description

From where do our ideas of politics come? Do we have the obligation to do what distant others tell us to do? When did ideas of rights, equality, and obligation emerge? Who gets to tell us what we have to do, and why? Where, in other words, do authority, law, and politics come from?

This class looks far back into Western history to unearth the origination of the ideals of government. We will read a wide range of authors who, over the ages, have asked these questions and -- more often than not -- given answers (though often mutually contradictory ones). In doing so, we will examine the founding of not just Greek democracy and the Roman Empire, but the very conditions upon which our current understandings of politics depend.

Though these questions will be asked, they will not be definitively answered. Instead, we as a class will wrestle with the possibilities and implications of various answers, exploring, discussing and arguing their merits. You will be asked to analyze competing theories of politics and how these different accounts affect our concepts of and possibilities for the state, law, obligation, morality, and power. Because discussion and involvement is central to this course (counting for 20% of your grade), your attendance and participation is essential. If you cannot attend, it is vital that you get someone to take notes for you, and that you participate even more on the discussion board. Notes and tapes of the course will not replace the experience of participating and their sale is consequently forbidden. You are encouraged to explore the interrelated nature of these inquiries, both in your discussions and your papers.

There will be three writing assignments through the course. Each of these is dependent on the course reading, the themes brought up in class, and in your other courses. The first two of these will be 4-5 pages, each worth 20% of your grade, and the final 7-8 page paper (in lieu of a final exam) will be worth the remaining 40%. This is a writing intensive course: your writing itself will be graded, so please avoid misspellings and grammatical errors. A brief word about citation and originality: you are encouraged to discuss the class readings with one another, and you are free to use outside sources, including articles, books or websites, regarding them. In your papers,
it is considered polite to refer to help you have received from other people in discussions, but it is mandatory that you refer to any ideas which are not your own. You may use in-text citations, footnotes, or endnotes. Any word-for-word use must, of course, be in quotation marks and properly cited. Failure to meet these requirements constitutes academic dishonesty and will be dealt with at the University level.

Required Readings

Required texts can be found through the UWM digital bookstore. All other readings will be available online, through Canvas. If you order your own copies (through Amazon.com, for example), please use the same ISBN number so you get the same translation and pagination. You must bring your reading to class, whether it is a book or a printed-out D2L.

Aeschylus, The Oresteian Trilogy (Penguin: 9780140440676)
Aristotle, The Politics (Dover: 978-0486414249)
Plato, Great Dialogues of Plato (Signet: 978-0451530851)
Augustine, City of God (Penguin: 978-0140448948)
Aquinas, On Politics and Ethics (Norton: 978-0393952438)
Christine de Pizan, Book of the City of Ladies (Penguin: 978-0140446890)
Machiavelli, The Prince (Bantam: 978-0553212785)

The class meets for 3 hours per week during the semester. Expect to spend 7 to 12 hours per week on your readings and writing assignments, depending on your comprehension and composition speed.

Course Schedule

January 21: Introductory

January 23: Aeschylus, Agamemnon

January 28: Aeschylus, The Eumenides

January 30: Plato, Apology

February 4: Plato, Crito

February 6: Plato, The Republic (Books 1-3)

February 11: Plato, The Republic (Books 5-7)

February 13: Plato, The Republic (Books 8-10)

February 18: Aristotle, The Politics (Books I, II)

February 20: Aristotle, The Politics (Books III, IV)
February 25: Aristotle, The Politics (Book VII)

February 27: Film: Fall of the Roman Empire

March 3: First Paper Due!

March 3: Fall of the Roman Empire, continued

March 5: Fall of the Roman Empire, continued and discussion

March 10: Augustine, City of God, pp. 471-481, 510-574,

March 12: Augustine, City of God, pp. 583-613, 656-660, 813-820

March 16-20: Spring Break

March 24: Augustine, City of God, 843-931

March 26: Bernard of Clairvaux, “Consideration: Advice to a Pope” *


April 2: Aquinas, Summa Theologica, pp 42-81

April 7: Second Paper Due

April 7: Film: Becket

April 9: Becket, continued.

April 14: Becket, discussion

April 16: Al-Fârâbî, “The Political Regime”*

April 21: Christine de Pizan, Book of the City of Ladies (Pages to be assigned)

April 28: Christine de Pizan, Book of the City of Ladies (Synthesis)

April 30: Machiavelli, The Prince (Chapters 1-11)

May 5: Machiavelli, The Prince (Chapters 12-26))

May 7: Conclusion

Tuesday May 12: Final Paper Due, 4:00 P.M.