

**Political Science 386**  
**The Politics of Neurodiversity**  
**(Contemporary Political Theory)**

Spring 2022

Prof. Ivan Ascher

Bolton B86  
Tuesday & Thursday, 2:00pm-3:15pm

Office Hours: 640 Bolton Hall  
Thursday 3:30-5:00 and by appointment

Over the last twenty years, the concept of neurodiversity has gained in popularity across various communities and disciplines. Originally used by autistic activists and self-advocates in an effort to depathologize autism, the term has the appeal of a promise: just as we come in different shapes and colors, the reasoning goes, so our brains are also wired differently. On this view, autism and other conditions should be understood in terms of *difference*, not disability, and the diversity of our neurotypes should be both recognized and embraced.

But are things ever so simple? What exactly is entailed by the concept of neurodiversity or the related concepts of neurotypes and neurodivergence? And what are the ramifications of these concepts for political theory? After all, if Aristotle is right that “man is a political animal” because he has the faculty of speech, what does citizenship look like for those who may communicate in other ways? Similarly, it might be said that modern political philosophy is predicated on the existence of a universal subject: individuals are known to think different thoughts, but they are assumed to think similarly. Today’s neuroscience suggests it isn’t necessarily so; what are the consequences of this paradigm shift for the social contract?

We may not be able to address all these questions in this course, but we will start thinking about these and related issues by reading from across the disciplines, from cognitive science to queer theory, from disability studies to political theory. Likely readings include Banu Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin* (2014); Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* (2008); Elizabeth Fein, *Living on the Spectrum* (2020); Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2018); Elizabeth Wilson, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (2004); Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts* (2015); Hamja Ahsan, *Shy Radicals: The Anti-Systemic Politics of the Introvert Militant* (2017); Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (1993).

This is a seminar-style course, of the kind that both requires and rewards careful reading and active participation. To facilitate our discussions, we will rely on the guidance of few students each time. These students will **have prepared written remarks to be distributed at the start of each class** and will be responsible for guiding the discussion that day.

This being a reading- and writing-intensive course, the first requirement is that you come to class having done the reading carefully and willing to discuss it. Please make sure to bring the readings to class.

In addition to these class presentations, there will be three other assignments for this course: **two essays** and **one podcast or video essay**. Each review essay will combine three books and will be no longer than 2,000 words. Details about the podcast assignment will be given later in the term, but will likely pertain to representations of neurodiversity in the culture at large. Each assignment accounts for 20% of your grade, with class participation accounting for the remaining 20%.

### **Time commitment**

This course should require a total time commitment of approximately ten hours per week. Of this, students will spend two hours and thirty minutes in class; they will spend the remaining time engaged in reading, thinking, and writing.

### **UWM Policies and Procedures**

In this course, we will abide by the UWM policies and procedures as described in the following document: <http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf>

### **Students with disabilities**

Students with disabilities should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document: <http://www4.uwm.edu/sac/SACltr.pdf>

### **Religious observances**

Students who plan to observe religious holidays should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document: <http://www4.uwm.edu/secu/docs/other/S1.5.htm>

### **Students called to active military duty**

Students who are called to active military duty should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document: [www4.uwm.edu/current\\_students/military\\_call\\_up.cfm](http://www4.uwm.edu/current_students/military_call_up.cfm)

## Schedule of Readings

### **Week 1. Introduction to the course**

### **Week 2. The Biology and Politics of Diversity (1)**

Banu Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin* (first half)

### **Week 3. The Biology and Politics of Diversity (2)**

Banu Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin* (second half)

### **Week 4. Plasticity**

Catherine Malabou, *What Shall We Do With Our Brain?*

### **Week 5. Gut Feelings**

Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Duke University Press, 2004)

### **Week 6. Neurotribes**

Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (Avery Press, 2016)

### **Week 7. Assignment 1**

**Draft due on Tuesday**

### **Week 8. Ethnography**

Elizabeth Fein, *Living on the Spectrum*

### **Week 9. Spring Break**

### **Week 10. Rhetoricity**

Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Duke University Press, 2018)

### **Week 11. An Anthropologist on Mars**

Ian Ford, *A Field Guide to Earthlings: An Autistic/Asperger View of Neurotypical Behavior*

**Week 12. Spiderman: The Arachnean**

Fernand Deligny, *The Arachnean and Other Texts*. Translated by Drew Burk and Catherine Porter (Univocal Publishing, 2015)

**Week 13. Shy Radicals**

Hamja Ahsan, *Shy Radicals: The Anti-Systemic Politics of the Introvert Militant* (Book Works, 2017)

**Week 14. Assignment 2 on Autism Voices**

**Draft due on Tuesday**

**Week 15. Neurodiverse Netflix**

**Week 16. Final Assignment**

