



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

Great Political Thinkers: Ancient Political Thought

Yeshiva College
Spring 2021
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Course Description

It has been commonly said that Western Civilization—of which America has long been considered a part—was formed through the combination of, or creative tension between, the ideas typified by two cities: Athens and Jerusalem. Scholars have recently highlighted Biblical teachings ideas on questions we might now call political. But it is in the political thought of Greece that we find active philosophic reflection on the nature of politics and an argument for the centrality of politics in human life. One can even go further: in the writers of Greek antiquity we encounter the argument that the study of politics may be the key to *understanding everything*.

This course aims to offer an introductory tour through the political thought of several of the greatest minds of Greece. But their insights are not only “Greek” insights; they remain relevant and in need of reckoning with in our times. Those insights relate to questions including: what is the relationship between individual excellence and communal excellence? Is thought superior to action or is action superior to thought? What is justice and how much justice can be realized in the world? What does war teach us about human nature? What is virtue and what is its relation to laws? To what extent are knowledge and politics tied together?

These questions, and many more, will be addressed through a careful and close reading of seminal texts of ancient political thought: Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian war*, Plato’s *Republic*, and Aristotle’s *Politics*. Read in tandem, these works present difficult and richly illuminating accounts of fundamental questions thoughtful people face in all times and places.

Course Format

The first several weeks of the course will be conducted via Zoom. After this time, the course will pursue a “hybrid” model with some lectures taking place on campus and others taking

place exclusively on Zoom. Live-streaming will be offered to enrolled students who cannot attend in person.

For Political Science majors

The course counts toward the introductory course requirement or political theory distribution.

Expectations

Students will be expected to carefully read between 100 and 150 pages a week. The class is not “random thoughts on politics” but focused in a disciplined way on addressing the issues and arguments of the texts through careful interpretation of the texts themselves. The readings in the class are “double black diamond” in difficulty. In order to gain anything from them, serious work is required. While students will be forgiven for not understanding everything, they will pledge to do their utmost to grapple with the texts. The principal role of the instructor is to help students grapple with the texts by clarifying major issues and themes. Prior to every class, students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of that week, and to participate in class discussions about them. Students will be asked to write two essays (one shorter and one longer) that asks for interpretation of one or more great political thinker. A take home final exam will ask for comparisons between thinkers covered and major themes addressed in the course.

Attendance

Active attendance and participation is essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience. All absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructors. More than two unexcused absences will result in a docked course grade (i.e. from A to A-, from A- to B+ etc.).

Grading

10%: Class Attendance and Participation

20%: Shorter Paper

40%: Longer Paper

30%: Take Home Final Exam

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, (646) 592-4280, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you



have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

Course Texts

All students are required to obtain their own copies of the following works, **in the following noted editions/translations**. Please contact the instructor if you have any difficulties, financial or otherwise, in obtaining these texts.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Robert Strassler Translation “The Landmark Thucydides”)

Plato’s *Republic* (Allan Bloom translation, Basic Books or University of Chicago Press)

Aristotle’s *Politics* (Carnes Lord translation, University of Chicago Press)

Other readings may be distributed electronically.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (Jan. 20): Course introduction, method, suppositions. Why ancient political thought?

Week 2 (Jan. 25—27): Introduction to Thucydides. Readings: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Book I, chapters 1 – 88), Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” (2015).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>,

*January 27: Private guest lecture by Professor Seth Jaffe (American Academy of Greece, John Cabot University of Rome). Subject: “Causes of War.”

Week 3 (Feb 1—3): Readings: Thucydides Book I, chapters 89 -146, Book II. Subjects: “Pericles’ Funeral Oration,” “The Plague,” “Pericles’ Second Speech.”

Week 4 (Feb 8—10): Readings: Book III-IV. Subjects: “Diodotus, Cleon, and the Mytilenean Debate,” “The Civil War in Corcyra,” “Portraits of Generals,” “Sicilian Deliberations.”

Week 5 (Feb 15—17): Readings: Book V-VI. Subjects: “The Melian Dialogue,” “The Sicilian Expedition.”

*Feb 17: Mandatory Public lecture by Prof. Seth Jaffe: “Vast Personal Forces: Thucydides, Populism, and the Liberty of the Ancients.”

Week 6 (Feb 22—24): Readings: Books VII-VIII. Subjects: “Sicilian Expedition continued,” “Athenian Defeat,” Conclusion.

Week 7 (March 1—3) Plato *Republic* Book I.

Week 8 (March 8—10) *Republic* Books II – III. **SHORT ESSAY DUE**

Week 9 (March 15—17) *Republic* Book IV – V.

Week 10 (March 22): *Republic* Book VI.

Week 11 (April 7): *Republic* Book VII.

Week 12 (April 12—14): *Republic* Books VIII – X.

Week 13 (April 19—21): Aristotle *Politics* Book I.

Week 14 (April 26—28): *Politics* Books III-IV,V (selections).

Week 15 (May 3): Conclusion & Review **LONG ESSAY DUE**

May 4 **TAKE HOME EXAM DISTRIBUTED**