

Political Science 112:
Modern Political Theory: The Political Theory of
Technology
Fall 2021
MW 6:30pm-7:50pm Olmsted 1212

Instructor: E. Stefan Kehlenbach

Email:

Office Hours: Wednesday 3:00pm Watkins 2112D

The instructor reserves the right to modify, add, or remove any course requirement as the individual needs of the semester require. Should such modification occur, the instructor will provide documentation of the change and a new version of the syllabus.

Course Description Found on Course Record: Critically explores selected works of political theory from the eighteenth century to the present. Concentrates on issues such as freedom, utility, justice, nature, citizenship, toleration, equality and inequality, autonomy, democracy, power, rights, and identity.

Specific Details: The scope of "Modern Political Theory" is so broad as to be nearly meaningless. Therefore, in this course we will take a thematic approach, looking at modern and contemporary political theory as it applies to a specific theme, technology. We will examine modern debates about the role of technology in society. To what extent can we say that technology has a politics? What might a political theory of technology look like? How might technology reflect, entrench or amplify the biases and prejudices of society? Does technology merely reflect society, or does it take an active role in shaping it?

Course Materials:

All Course Materials are available on the class Canvas or for a free download on the UCR Library website. You do not have to purchase hard copies if you do not want to.

The Whale and The Reactor

Author: Langdon Winner; **ISBN:** 9780226692548

The One Dimensional Man

Author: Herbert Marcuse; **ISBN:** 978080714172

Discipline and Punish

Author: Michele Foucault; **ISBN:** 9780679752554

Questioning Technology

Author: Andrew Feenberg; **ISBN:** 978-0415197557

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism

Author: Shoshana Zuboff; **ISBN:** 9781610395694

Weapons of Math Distruction

Author: Cathy O'Neil; **ISBN:** 9780553418811

Technologies of Speculation

Author: Sun-Ha Hong; **ISBN:** 9781479883066

We Are Data

Author: John Cheney-Lippold; **ISBN:** 9781479857593

How We Became Our Data

Author: Colin Koopman; **ISBN:** 9780226626581

Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism

Author: Safiya Umoja Noble; **ISBN:** 9781479837243

Automating Inequality

Author: Virginia Eubanks; **ISBN:** 9781250215789

Race After Technology

Author: Ruha Benjamin; **ISBN:** 9781509526406

Class Assignments:

Assignment	Importance
Final Paper/Project	*****
Writing Group Participation	****
Final Self-Evaluation	***
Reading Worksheets	**
Weekly Self-Reflections	*

Assignments Information:

"It was woven into [the school] through a constantly repeated ritual of power. The examination enabled the teacher, while transmitting his knowledge, to transform his pupils into a whole field of knowledge."

"The examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them."

"In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production"

[?, Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish]

- *Grades are not good incentive or effective feedback*
- *Grades are not good markers of learning*
- *Grades encourage competitiveness over collaboration*
- *Grades pit students and teachers against each other*
- *Grades are mechanisms of institutional control*
- *Grades aren't fair*

[?, Jesse Stommel]

This class uses a qualitative approach, not a quantitative approach, to grading. We will discuss these approaches extensively in class, both in reference to your own work and to the work that we are studying. I will be giving you qualitative feedback in the form of comments, suggestions, and questions about your work throughout the semester.

The primary goal of this class is to encourage the creation of a scholarly environment where you, as a student, are empowered to learn in a meaningful and impactful way. A secondary element of this is to ensure that you receive a grade in accordance with the administrative requirements of this school. These two elements do not need to be in opposition to each other, although they often are. In this class, I am aiming to create an open, non-hierarchical learning environment where you, the student, aim to learn based on your own intrinsic motivations-

your desire to know more, your innate curiosity, rather than imposed extrinsic motivations—the pressure of grades, the demands of the instructor, the social pressures of academic success [?, Ryan and Deci 2000,].

Strict, quantitative grades have been shown to diminish a student's interest in what they are learning, incentivize a path of least resistance (where a student takes the easiest path to an "A", rather than the most interesting) and reduce the quality of a student's thinking. [?, Kohn 2011,] It also serves to incentivize cheating ([?, Anderman and Murdock 2011]). Even when specific education is critically important, as is the case in Med School, removing strict quantified grades and replacing them with pass/fail options increased learning [?, White and Fantone, 2010,].

In this class we aim to avoid these issues by engaging in a long-term dialogue about your learning in this class. You will complete a number of self-reflections and self-evaluations so that we can turn the one-sided conversation about grades into a discussion about learning. At the conclusion of the class, you will be asked to complete a final self-evaluation where you will give yourself an overall grade and justify why you deserve this grade. If all goes well, this will be the grade you receive in this class. However, I reserve the right to continue this conversation, and ultimately assign you the grade that I think is appropriate. But I hope that we will be able to come to an agreeable conclusion.

Such an arrangement requires a form of mutual trust and respect. Much of education is predicated on a one-way network of trust, you the student must trust that I, the instructor has your best interest at heart. That I am not going to play favorites or bog you down with unnecessary or irrelevant information. You also must trust that I will be fair in distributing my grades and not use arbitrary measures to assess your work. However, I, as the instructor do not need to have the same trust in you. In fact, much of education is predicated on this trust not existing. Multi-million dollar corporations bank on the distrust sown between instructor and student, offering me innumerable ways of turning this distrust in to surveillance, exploited data, or other money-making technologic enterprises. All of this is interwoven in a hierarchical web of discipline, punishment, categorization and power famously described by Michel Foucault. Moving towards a new way of teaching that eschews these traditional elements, a new critical pedagogy, requires the rebuilding of this mutual trust.

By empowering you to take control of your own learning, by attempting to remove the hierarchical power structures that dominate the traditional classroom, and by including you in the process of your own assessment, I hope to work towards a classroom environment that is built on trust rather than suspicion. But this also requires you to trust that I am doing the best that I can, and to come to me if you are feeling anxious about this development, or if you have any questions about anything in this course.

Final Paper/Project

The main assignment in this class is a final project. In its most basic form it is a long (10-15 page) argumentative paper about a specific element of the course material. This project requires you to choose one of the weeks of the course (which are organized by broad themes), do additional research, either by completing the book that we read excerpts of, or by investigating the supplemental readings provided in the syllabus, or by doing your own investigations, and synthesize this work into an original project. The goal of this is not to intimidate you, or force you to undertake an unpleasant scholarly activity, but to provide you with the opportunity to do self-guided learning according to your own preferences and develop an original piece of work that I hope will be valuable to your intellectual growth. This project could take two fundamental forms, a close analysis of the theoretic texts we are discussing, or an application or extension of these texts, used to analyze or understand a problem or question within society.

Writing Group

Scholarship is fundamentally a collective activity. No scholar, no matter how brilliant, works in a vacuum. Being able to discuss your own work and receive regular feedback is crucial for success. To help achieve this end, I will be putting you in writing groups. In these groups you will discuss your final projects, outlines, and drafts. This is NOT a group project but a way to discuss and receive individual feedback on your work before you formally submit it.

Bi-Weekly Self-Reflections

Every other week you will complete a self-reflection, reflecting on the work you did during the past 2 weeks, the things that you learned and your plan for moving forward. I will provide a template for these reflections on Canvas. You will submit them on Canvas for my records, but also keep a copy for yourself.

End of Course Reflections

At the conclusion of the course you will complete a final self-evaluation, summarizing the entire class, including the work on the final project. On the Final Self-Evaluation, you will be asked to give yourself a final grade and provide the justification for this grade. Ideally, this will be used to determine your grade in the course, but I reserve the right to modify your self-assigned grade as appropriate.

Tips for Close Reading: This course is one centered around reading texts and discussing them. There are no objective answers in this class, no facts to memorize. Therefore, doing the assigned readings in advance and being prepared is one of the most important requirements for the course.

Tips for reading thoroughly and successfully in advance of each class:

- Preparing for each class session by reading thoroughly in advance is possibly the most important thing you can do to ensure your own success in this course. Each of the assigned readings will be addressed in depth during class, and seminar participants will be asked for their detailed reactions to and reflections upon each reading. I may call on people during the seminar to answer questions or share reflections, so be prepared for this.
- Cutting corners or skipping readings will most likely reflect in your participation during that week's session, so budget enough time accordingly to get through the readings for each week's session.
- Read in the precise order that items are listed on the syllabus. Every week, you will receive several questions to guide your reading for the following week. These will indicate which passages, ideas or concepts you should be focusing on as you read, so pay attention to these questions before you begin, and allow them to guide you.
- As you read, highlight and/or make marginal notes. Ask yourself (and be prepared to answer) the following questions: How should we interpret exactly what this author saying? What is the central point or idea of this reading? What are the important concepts within this reading? What are the implications of these ideas and concepts, if we take them seriously?
- If something strikes you as interesting/important/worth talking about, make a note of it. Chances are that this will be an important thing for you to bring up during discussion in class. We will often spend time focusing on interpreting specific passages or excerpts from the texts, so highlighting during reading will help you with this skill.
- If you encounter something you do not understand, flag it. Whether it is a proper name, a concept, a theory, or an idea, use the considerable resources available to you online to look it up. If you are still puzzled or unclear, bring your question to class. Chances are you are not the only one with that question, and at least some of your classmates will appreciate the chance to clarify it too.

The Structure of the Course: This course is structured to allow you to pursue your own intellectual fulfillment, within the broad structures of the course requirements. I will be providing weekly lectures, but these will be my own attempts to work through the questions and challenges posed by both the texts and their relationship to our current society. These lectures are intended to provide some clarity on both the readings and the broad themes of the class.

Tentative Course Outline:

The weekly coverage might change as it depends on the progress of the class. However, you must keep up with the reading assignments.

Week	Content
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretic Foundations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Whale and the Reactor - Winner – Chapter 1: Technologies as a Form of Life, Chapter 2: Do Artifacts have Politics? Pages 3-39 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Technopoly - Neil Postman – Times of the Technoculture - Robins and Webster
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretic Foundations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The One Dimensional Man - Marcuse – Introduction to the First Edition, Chapter 1: New Forms of Control, Chapter 2: The Closing of the Political Universe. Pages xli-55, 247-257 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dialectic of Enlightenment - Horkheimer and Adorno – An Essay on Liberation - Marcuse – Necropolitics - Mbembe
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretic Foundations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Discipline and Punish - Foucault – Part Three, Chapter 1, Docile Bodies, Chapter 2: The Means of Correct Training 135-194 – Note: No Class on 10/11 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A Brief History of Neoliberalism - Harvey – The Neoliberal Yogi - Godrej – In the Ruins of Neoliberalism - Brown – The Birth of Biopolitics - Foucault
Week 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretic Foundations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Questioning Technology- Feenberg – Chapter 1: Technology, Philosophy, Politics, Chapter 7: Critical Theories of Technology. Pages 1-17, 151-180 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A Critical Theory of Technology - Feenberg
Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Rise of Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Age of Surveillance Capitalism- Zuboff, Weapons of Math Destruction- O’Neil – Zuboff Chapter 3: The Discovery of Behavioral Surplus, Chapter 4: The Moat Around the Castle, pages 63-127, – O’Neil Chapter 1: Bomb Parts, Chapter 3: Arms Race. Pages 15-31, 50-67 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Black Box Society - Pasquale – The Googilization of Everything - Vaidhyanathan

Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Rise of Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Technologies of Speculation - Hong – Introduction, Chapter 1 Honeymoon Objectivity, Chapter 2: The Indefinite Archive. Pages 1-51 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A Brief History of the Cloud - Hu – Beautiful Data - Halpern
Week 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data and the Self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We Are Data - Cheney-Lippold – Chapter 3: Control. Pages 95-149 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What Tech Calls Thinking - Daub – Data Feminism - D’Ignazio and Klein
Week 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data and the Self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How We Became Our Data - Koopman – Introduction, Chapter 4: Diagnostics, Toward a Political Theory for Informational Persons 1-32, 153-172 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Exposed - Harcourt
Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology and Inequality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Algorithms of Oppression - Noble – Introduction, Chapters 1, 6, Conclusion, Epilogue. Pages 1-65, 153-186 – Note: No Class 11/24 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Behind the Screen - Roberts
Week 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology and Inequality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Race after Technology- Benjamin – Introduction, Chapter 1: Engineered Inequity, Pages 1-76 – Note: No Class 12/1 • Supplemental Reading Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Automating Inequality - Eubanks

College Policies and Resources: I will post a list of college policies and resources on our class page. I highly encourage you to read the policies and take advantage of all of the resources provided by the school.