

**Article: “Teaching Political Science 1: A Hermeneutic Approach”**  
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# Approaches to Introductory Political Science:

## A Note from the Editor of the Teacher

*The four course syllabi featured in this issue of PS: Political Science & Politics exemplify "comprehensive" approaches to the introductory undergraduate course in political science. Since the establishment of political science as a distinct academic discipline, a course in American Government and Politics has been the predominant introductory course for both majors and non-majors. These syllabi have been prepared or selected in order to prompt faculty to examine whether a more appropriate introduction to political science is one that places American government in a comparative and theoretical context and addresses international as well as domestic issues.*

*A grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education to the APSA has supported invitations to faculty to submit syllabi for comprehensive courses, courses that integrate approaches across the discipline's major fields. The response from faculty as well as from doctoral students confirms that American Politics is as firmly established as the core introductory course for undergraduates as are the boundaries between major fields. Consequently, while many faculty and graduate students acknowledge the merit of course innovation, their affiliation with one of the broader major subfields poses a considerable barrier to instructors under taking such innovations.*

*Discussions of this issue were held at the 1996 and 1997 APSA Annual Meetings. Commentary and other exemplary course syllabi are invited from readers of PS.*

## Teaching Political Science 1: A Hermeneutic Approach

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In 1992, the University of Pennsylvania political science department undertook a comprehensive reform of its undergraduate curriculum. With no one course required of all majors, political science students had at that time no common language and no common pedagogical experience for constructing an intellectual community or sharing, across subfields, their achievements in and frustrations with particular courses, papers, honors theses, internships, and other projects. In addition, many faculty felt hampered by the need to interrupt the flow of their introductory and intermediate level courses in comparative, international, or American politics, or political theory, by explaining casual references to the main ideas of classical political thinkers or by giving "quick and dirty" accounts of fundamental methodological techniques or conceptual tools of contemporary political analysis.

To address this problem, the department formed a committee which ultimately recommended the creation of an introductory course re-

quired of all majors, "Introduction to the Study of Politics."

A second committee (co-chaired by Professor Jack Nagel and me) was asked to design a template for this course (Political Science 1) which would communicate to future instructors what the department wanted taught at that level. This template had to be specific enough to insure the kind of common experience and baseline knowledge of the four primary subfields which we wanted majors to have, while remaining flexible enough to permit the four or five members of the department who would teach the course to draw upon their own interests and expertise. In addition, the course design had to be suitable for non-majors who wished to explore political science as a possible major, or to take the course in partial fulfillment of the undergraduate distributive requirement.

The proposal we eventually presented to the department, and which was approved and implemented along with the rest of the redesigned

undergraduate curriculum, has three basic components:

- 1) an introduction to political philosophy through readings drawn directly from classics of the western political tradition;
- 2) a survey of contemporary political science as reflected in work currently done in American politics, comparative politics, political theory, and international politics; and
- 3) exposure to political science as it interacts through policy analysis with a real and pressing problem of public policy.

The committee decided that each instructor could decide how these three tasks would be accomplished, with one restriction. The introduction to classics of the western political tradition would have to include substantial reading and discussion of original texts, including "many" of the following eleven thinkers: Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Machiavelli, Madison, Marx, J.S. Mill, Plato, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Weber. This list was compiled by asking colleagues to name thinkers with whose

work all political science majors should be familiar. Any colleague teaching the course would be free to add thinkers not on the list, provided “many” of the eleven were given due coverage.

I was the first member of our department to teach “Introduction to the Study of Politics.” (Jack Nagel is teaching the course now.) The syllabus published here is the version of the course I taught in 1996. Though each time I have taught it I have made changes, the basic strategy I adopted for accomplishing the tasks set forth by the department has remained the same.

To meet the first requirement I decided to work directly from the classical texts. Prevented by time from reading entire works, I assigned substantial excerpts accompanied by minimal editorial comment, rather than work with a secondary text or an elaborately edited compendium. I believed students would experience a thrill of direct exposure to the thinking, style, and format of these political philosophers that would help compensate for the difficulties associated with what would certainly be, at least before my first lecture on each thinker, a somewhat unsettling and even frustrating encounter.

Thus, the seven weeks before the mid-term are devoted almost entirely to coverage of “Great Books.” The next six weeks are divided into two sections. The first four weeks are devoted to illustrative/exemplar readings in the contemporary subfields of American politics, comparative politics, international politics, and political theory. In the last two weeks I present a module on public policy analysis centering on race relations in America.

The main challenge here is to move from the thinker-by-thinker approach to political philosophy in the first half of the course to the survey of contemporary political science subfields conducted after the mid-term examination. Aside from subject matter, the two halves of the course differ in terms of the pace and content of lectures and discussions and the relationship between lectures and reading assignments. Meeting this challenge means demonstrating real intellectual linkages, and analytic payoffs associated with

those linkages, between a chronologically organized consideration of political philosopher (400 B.C.E. to 1920 C.E.) and thematic/illustrative treatments of contemporary political analysis in the four main subfields of our discipline as practiced in the United States.

In the last four years, I have developed several interlocking strategies for addressing this problem. First is the definition of politics I offer at the beginning of the course: the competition for valued things (status, wealth, power, security, glory, etc.) and the consequences of that competition. I do *not* offer this definition as “correct” or as the prevailing definition or as the way that all or most of the “canonized” thinkers in the western political tradition use the term. But I try to explain that it meshes well with my effort to help students “see politically.” I believe it also helps students demystify the description of something as “political”—a label that seems, often, less clear than descriptions of events, actions, or motives as “economic,” “religious,” or “psychological.” Consistent use of the term then makes it possible to measure variation in the views of politics which are held by the thinkers and theorists to be considered. By adhering to this usage, referring regularly to it, and measuring different uses of the term we encounter against it, I try to convey the importance and the challenges involved in defining terms.

Emphasis on the definition as mine also provides a self-referential illustration of the main substantive theme of the course—“the noble lie”—a myth which, whether devised purposefully or not by an elite, can become for larger and later communities the naturalized grammar, the unchallenged and therefore potent presumption of intellectual, cultural, and political life. Consideration of the political role of “noble lies,” political myths, religion, false consciousness, and other related ideas is a consistent feature of the class’s consideration of work by each of the foundational thinkers we consider, starting of course, with Plato’s *Republic*. By assigning exemplary readings in the subfield-survey portion of the course which involve, either directly or indirectly, propositions

about the role of psychologically embedded or politically institutionalized beliefs, I try to show the vitality and sophistication of hypotheses advanced by the classical theorists, even as I discuss the very different ways that contemporary political scientists seek to measure, refine, dispute, or advance propositions of this sort to solve puzzles within more discrete theoretical domains. The literature I have drawn upon over the years includes rational choice vs. psychological and political cultural explanations of voter turnout, polling and elections, disputes over the efficacy of “hegemonic” theories to explain peasant behavior, revolutions and democratic breakdowns, the implications of arguments within the international relations subfield pitting unit-level or *Realpolitik* approaches against system level or norm-oriented paradigms, and debates among political theorists over communitarian vs. individualistic interpretations of American liberalism.

In the policy analysis segment of the course I ensure consideration of this motif by assigning Abraham Lincoln’s pre-election speeches on miscegenation. By noting that opposition to racial mixing was the public basis of his opposition to the extension of slavery and by observing that sending freed slaves back to Africa was Lincoln’s preferred long term solution, I can not only demonstrate the hegemonic status of racist and segregationist beliefs for most of American history, but draw the students’ attention to the “noble lies” their high school civics texts implanted in their minds about Lincoln and the political basis of anti-slavery sentiment in the United States.

I attempt to bridge the gap between studying foundational works in political philosophy and surveying approaches and issues in contemporary political science by means of four kinds of questions which I ask of each classical thinker as well as each modern political scientist:

- 1) What are the foremost concerns of this author, and what is the author’s advice for how to design or conduct political life?
- 2) What is the historical context of the author’s work, and in what way does it reflect participation in real

- political struggles or a response to real political predicaments?
- 3) How does this author figure within the 2500 year-old argument that is the western political tradition? What new points are made in this "Great Conversation?" What older points are reinforced or articulated in new ways? With whom does the author agree or disagree?
  - 4) What real contributions to our understanding of politics, including the politics of our own times, can be identified in this author's work? What explanations for various patterns of political behavior are offered, and how adequate are they? How do they contribute to our ability to make sense of political life today? In what ways have they been superseded by theories devised by contemporary political scientists? On the policy-making level, what predicaments and dilemmas do we face in our own political communities that can be illuminated by this work? In what ways has our world changed so that solutions and approaches framed by this thinker have lost some or all of their attraction?

Integration of the different parts of the course is sought by asking of contemporary works the same questions asked of the classics. For example, one of the crucial organizing questions for students of American politics and comparative politics is how democracy can be established, stabilized, and protected. The sub-field of American politics is largely defined by practitioners who marvel at the ability of the American polity to manage the stresses of fierce political competition for so long, so successfully and seek, in various ways, to find out how this has been accomplished. In comparative politics, students of democratic collapse in Germany and Italy in the 1930s, along with specialists on transitions from authoritarianism in the post-Soviet bloc, and scholars writing about prospects for democracy in third world countries are all embarked on a search for powerful, and vitally important theories of what permits democracy to exist, what can bring about its demise, and how it

can be created out of a non-democratic past. Theories developed to answer these questions in the contemporary world, and to guide expectations and policies at home and abroad, are rather easily compared to theories advanced by Plato and Aristotle, who recognized democracy as one form of government, but who preferred other forms, but who nonetheless advanced their own theories about where democracy comes from, what sustains it, how it comes to an end, and what it may become. As straight-forward as this kind of comparison is, it is also fairly simple to adduce the greater precision and more effective explanatory machinery available today for addressing the problematics of democratic or authoritarian transitions.

In addition to mid-term and final examinations (each including multiple choice questions as well as an essay component), a five to seven page paper is required. Each student develops his or her own approach to a book that all read. The idea is to assign a book that is a serious work of policy analysis containing recommendations as well as diagnosis. The assignment is to use concepts and theories from the course, and in particular from the classical works studied before the mid-term, to identify the implicit philosophical or theoretical commitments made by the author. (See Appendix for the handout given to students after the mid-term regarding the paper assignment.) By choosing *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* by Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton as the assigned text, I not only provide a solid informational base to use for illustrations in my discussion of various theories of public policy making, but also engage the students in a problem of the utmost importance—a problem which surrounds them in West Philadelphia, where the Penn campus is located, yet one which, before reading this book, they may never have given sustained attention. My teaching assistants and I have found student papers on this topic to be highly energized and effective vehicles for students to explore links between their political values and the analytic skills and new knowledge acquired in the course. Along with

discussions in recitation sections, it is also the opportunity I promise students at the outset to try their hand, not only at political analysis, but at political philosophy as well.

Overall, I have been pleased, and so have my teaching assistants, with the development of the course. Enrollment has increased substantially each year and is now capped at 250. Course evaluation forms show ratings that average at the high end of the "good" range, bear a variety of mostly favorable comments, and suggest the course is somewhat more demanding than the usual introductory or survey course.

The most criticized aspect of the course has been the use of multiple choice questions on examinations in addition to essays. These questions focus very directly on main points in readings—requiring students to identify particular thinkers with particular ideas, even if those ideas are not expressed in exactly the language used by the author. However, there is a strong correlation between performance on the short answer portions of the exams (which count for 40% of the exam grades) and performance on the essay portions. Where there is a large gap between these scores, opportunities are created to identify portions of the course that have not worked well and to help students with either their study habits, their substantive understanding of particular problems, or their test-taking skills. I therefore continue to favor the use of some short answer questions, always with the provision that students can choose to argue in writing over the phrasing of a question to receive full or partial credit.

Another problem area has been in the sub-field survey portion of the course. Students have had difficulty making the adjustment from chronological author-by-author treatment, to an array of topics that shifted each week from sub-field to sub-field, and within each week, from topic and approach to topic and approach. This difficulty was compounded by my practice, in the first two iterations of the course, of inviting one colleague for each subfield to deliver a lecture on an exemplary text, problem, concept, proposition, or controversy in his or her subfield of specialization. These colleagues

were free to assign whatever they wished for that class and were specifically asked not to try to make their presentation an introduction to the subfield. I then tried, in the second lecture of these weeks, to gloss the colleague's lecture in a way that situated it within the range of contemporary work being done in that subfield, and in relation to conceptual, theoretical, and philosophical patterns identified in the first half of the course. I was unable to accomplish this integration as well as I anticipated. There were, I think, just too many changes, in format as well as in substance, from before to after the mid-term and from week to week during the survey of the four subfields. I therefore decided to do all the lectures in this section and choose the topics and exemplary readings in the subfields with some attempt to highlight themes which had been well established in the first half of the course. Student evaluations still suggest, however, more comfort with the classical political philosophy readings and lectures than with the subfield-by-subfield presentations and reading assignments.

The substantive aspects of the course most exciting to students seem to be:

- 1) the idea of the "noble" or "ignoble" lie and the real political effects that culture and unappreciatedly contingent beliefs can have;
- 2) the concept of a "Great Conversation" in Western political thinking that began (approximately) with Plato and which still sustains and encourages the framing of particular kinds of problems and an array of approaches to those problems (both analytic and valuational) within the discipline and within the political arena; and
- 3) the paper assignment (see below), which, along with participation in discussion sections, gives students opportunities to explore links between their own political philosophical positions and with the hermeneutic techniques I employ.

Overall, my strategy in this course is to introduce the discipline by introducing hermeneutics along with substance. This is opposite to the approach often taken in introductory courses, wherein, no matter what the

discipline, settled and powerful aspects of its capabilities are shown off to their best effect, leaving nagging philosophical and epistemological issues that might cast doubt on the "verities" discovered by the field's greats for consideration by more advanced students. My strategy, by contrast, is reflected in my use of the "noble lie" theme and by lectures which explicitly combine textual, contextual, and subtextual analysis. Among the specific texts I urge students to focus their "deconstructionist" skills upon are the edited collection of writings we use (Porter) and my own syllabus for the course. Why are certain passages in the originals (the complete texts of which are placed on reserve at the library) omitted and others included? Why is my own syllabus organized as it is? What larger agendas might be at work to produce such a course? What is the importance of restricting attention to the "western political tradition?"

Students have indeed been ob-

served arguing about these matters outside of class and, even more vigorously, arguing about the approach, findings, and recommendations of *American Apartheid*. These arguments help students identify, understand, and assimilate references to classics and to overarching themes. Colleagues report that class discussions are enriched by students drawing upon what they learned in this introduction to the discipline. The teaching assistants also seem genuinely to enjoy their work in the course and also seem comfortable with how questions about the canons of political science and classical political theory are confronted. In addition to the satisfaction I gain from the reactions of students and colleagues, I also personally enjoyed developing and teaching the course—a challenge giving me ample excuse to read literatures that have been of great interest but which I had avoided because they were tangential to my areas of professional specialization.

## Political Science 1: Introduction to the Study of Politics

Political science is the systematic study of politics and political life. In this introduction to the discipline we will study core concepts and traditional approaches to fundamental political questions, including the nature of political authority and political rights, the relationship between power and values and between self-interest and the common good, variation in the role and meaning of government, the origins and dynamics of political institutions, and the nature of international politics. Substantial consideration will be given to contributions by classical political thinkers as well as contemporary political scientists. Attention will also be paid to how systematic study of politics can deepen our understanding of complex public policy questions.

The course is divided into three parts of unequal length. The first part of the course is the longest and will last until the mid-term examination. Its focus will be on the political philosophies and theories of some of the greatest thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition. My lectures will assist you in your reading of

these classic texts, identifying problems, themes, theories, and arguments, examining how different authors' ideas relate to one another, and highlighting their significance for understanding contemporary politics. In weekly discussion sections you will be asked to hold these texts to high standards of precision. You will be helped to evaluate them as explanations for how politics works, and provided with opportunities to do some political philosophy of your own.

In the next four weeks of the course, we consider exemplary work drawn from each of the four subfields of political science as it is commonly taught in this country—comparative politics, international politics, American politics, and political theory. The lectures and readings in this section of the course will introduce you to the broad range of scholarship produced by contemporary political scientists, emphasizing, not comprehensiveness, but appreciation of the intellectual and scientific activity typical of each subfield. Special efforts will be made to discuss links

between the work of contemporary political scientists and the contributions of thinkers studied in the first seven weeks of the semester.

In the third section of the course, we will focus on the policy problems raised by an important book on race relations in the United States—*American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of an Underclass* by Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton. The short paper you will write for Political Science 1 will be a response to the argument and recommendations of this book informed by the philosophical and analytic materials studied in the course. Soon after the mid-term examination, a

hand-out with more information concerning the paper will be distributed. Since the paper will deal directly with the Massey and Denton book, *students are strongly advised to read most if not all of American Apartheid between the midterm examination and the beginning of December*. Each student will be expected to work with his/her teaching assistant while developing the paper. My lectures during this last portion of the course will focus on tools developed by political scientists to help them understand the relationship between politics and the policy-making and policy-implementing process.

In addition to the mid-term exam-

inations and the paper, each student will take a final examination.

Your reading is found in the following books required for purchase and in a Bulk Pack available from Campus Copy.

Jene M. Porter (ed.) *Classics in Political Philosophy*

Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of an Underclass*

Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, Modern Library College Edition

## SCHEDULE OF THE COURSE

**September 4:** Introductory lecture: “Seeing Politically, a Biblical Example”

### Classics of Political Philosophy

**September 9 and 11:** Plato, *The Republic*, Porter reader, pp. 1–87.

**September 16:** Aristotle, *The Politics*, Porter reader, pp. 89–136.

**September 18:** Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Porter reader, pp. 167–200.

**September 23:** No Class—Yom Kippur

**September 25:** Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Porter reader, pp. 201–29.

**September 30:** Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Porter reader, pp. 231–61.

**October 2:** Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Porter reader, pp. 261–82.

**October 7:** Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men*, Porter reader, pp. 333–56.

**October 9:** Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Porter reader, pp. 357–84.

**October 14:** No Class—Fall Break

**October 16:** *The Federalist*, Declaration of Independence, pp. 619–22; Washington’s Letter of Transmittal and the Constitution of the United States, 585–604: Federalist papers 1 and 2

**October 21:** *The Federalist*, Federalist papers 6, 10, 15, 51, 85

**October 23 and 28:** Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* and other writings, Porter reader, pp. 473–507.

**October 29:** Optional Review Session—Time and Place To Be Announced

**October 30:** Mid-Term Examination

## FOUR SUBFIELDS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCIENCE

### Comparative Politics

**November 4:** “Can Revolutions Be Predicted?”

Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics*, Vol. 44 no. 1 (October 1991) pp. 7–48.

**November 6:** “Explaining Democratic Durability”

Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub & Fernando Limongi, “What Makes Democracies Endure?” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (January 1996) pp. 39–55.

### International Politics

**November 11:** “When Does Nationalism Cause War?”

Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994) pp. 5–39.

**November 13:** “Is the World Becoming a Political Community?”

Ronnie D. Lipschutz, “Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society,” *Millennium*, Vol. 21, no. 3 (1992) pp. 389–420.

### AMERICAN POLITICS

**November 18:** “Reading the Will of the People: Elections vs. Polling”

## Approaches to Introductory Political Science

Sidney Verba, "The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, no. 1 (March 1996) pp. 1-7.

**November 20:** "The Politics of Health Care Reform in America"

Lawrence R. Jacobs, "Politics of America's Supply State: Health Reform and Technology," *Health Affairs* (Summer 1995) pp. 143-57.

Jeffrey K. Tulis, "Revising the Rhetorical Presidency," in *The Future of the Rhetorical Presidency*, Martin Medhurst, ed. (1996).

## POLITICAL THEORY

**November 25:** "Can Liberalism Be Substantive?"

William A. Galston, "Liberal Virtues," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, no. 4 (December 1988) pp. 1277-89.

## DILEMMAS AND TECHNIQUES OF PUBLIC POLICY

**November 27:** American Politics and Public Policy

Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly*, 2,1 (June 1887).

**December 2:** Race Relations in America as a Political Problem

Thomas R. Hietala, "Texas, the Black Peril, and Alternatives to Abolitionism," in *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America*, pp. 10-54.

**December 4:** Race Relations in America as a Policy Problem

David E. Lilienthal, "Planning and Planners," chapter 18 in *TVA: Democracy on the March* (1944).

Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 19 (Spring 1959) pp. 79-88.

**December 9:** Is a Science of Politics Possible?

## REQUIRED PAPER FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE 1

The paper required for Political Science 1 is a critical response to the book *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* by Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton. As noted in the syllabus, the paper should "draw on the philosophical and analytic materials studied in the course" in order to evaluate the findings or policy recommendations of the book and/or discuss the assumptions or basic claims about politics, political life in America, the purposes of our political community, the meaning of our constitution, or the obligations of citizenship, which the authors embrace.

If Massey and Denton explicitly and directly posed their argument in terms of political science theories and concepts we have studied, or addressed broad questions of political philosophy, the paper would be a rather simple exercise in finding the appropriate passages and quoting them. Since, for the most part, these or other similar questions are *not* posed directly or explicitly, you will have to analyze the argument of the book in order to discover the implicit beliefs or claims about these matters contained in the book. You will be best advised, of course, not to try to answer all conceptually or philosophically important questions which could be raised by a careful reading of the book, but to choose a particular question or questions, justify your choice, and then offer your answer.

It may help you to imagine that you are attempting to do something like what my comments on our readings and on the lectures of my colleagues have been designed to accomplish. I seek to "situate" arguments presented by identifying them with larger traditions, themes, and questions present in the "Great Conversation," or with particular theoretical approaches in contemporary political science, and then to use these avenues of analysis to further illuminate, criticize, raise questions about, or expand upon what has been written or said.

We would like you to try to do the same thing with *American Apartheid*. Your paper will be evaluated on the basis of how well you bring to bear categories, concepts, theories, and principles of political theory and political science that have been presented in readings, lectures, and recitation groups, to illuminate, qualify, and/or criticize the argument presented by Massey and Denton.

Your paper should be 5-7 pages long, double-spaced and be submitted no later than 4:30 p.m. on December 11. All quoted material must of course be footnoted. Extensions will be granted with a good excuse but will result in a reduction of 1/2 grade for every day late. Late papers that have not received extensions will be reduced by one full grade for each day late. These rules do not apply for valid medical or other emergencies.