This course compares Plato’s Republic to Machiavelli’s two great texts, The Prince and The Discourses. Our goal is two-fold. On the one hand we learn the art of close reading to reveal the complex and contradictory layers of meaning in a text. On the other hand, we introduce the enterprise of “political theory” by reading two of the greatest (and purportedly antithetical) thinkers about politics. For Plato, philosophy seems to provide standards of judgment and order in politics: if those with knowledge of justice could rule, then human life would flourish. Otherwise, in his famous image, people lacking knowledge are trapped in a cave of “mere opinion” and illusion, the result of which is conflict and partiality, exploitation and self-destruction. But he holds out the promise that human life (at the least one’s own, and perhaps the city’s) can be well-ordered by learning to think/reason philosophically. In contrast, Machiavelli denies that philosophic truth is relevant to politics and insists that we can produce forms of order and standards of justice through (from within) the political/worldly/earthly life itself. Neither philosophy nor transcendence are needed. Because he embraces the moral dilemmas, fluidity, contingency, perspectivalism, and partisanship that Plato would avoid by turning to philosophy, he has been cast as a corrupt, even “evil” figure. To stage a dialogue between Plato and Machiavelli, therefore, is to confront the fundamental questions about politics: what is the nature of power? What is justice? What motivates human action? What is the best form of regime? How are myths and symbols related to political life? Is violence or deception ever justified? Is rhetorical speech avoidable? What characterizes human excellence? In what consists human freedom? We pursue these questions by focusing on primary texts, but also by reading contemporary essays about what is at stake in their arguments. This class is limited to sophomores.

Required texts:
Sophocles, Sophocles I (Green & Lattimore translation)
Plato, Last Days of Socrates (Penguin Classics)
Plato, The Republic (CD Reeve Translation/Hackett edition)
Machiavelli, The Prince and The Discourses (Modern library edition)
xeroxed packet provided by instructor

Course Requirements in general:
attendance is mandatory
preparation is assumed
participation is expected
writing:
Response papers each week
three 5-page papers

To draw from the work of others without attribution is plagiarism. If you have any doubts about attribution, ask your professor. An incident of plagiarism will result in a grade of F for the course.
#1 Thurs 9/8 Introduction

#2 Thurs 9/15 Tragedy and politics
read:
* Sophocles, Oedipus Rex (or Tyrannos)
* Jonathan Lear, “The Shrink is In”
* David Scott, “Tragedy’s Time”

#3 Thurs 9/22 From Tragedy to Philosophy
read:
* Plato, The Last Days of Socrates—
  Read The Apology and The Crito
* Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest”
* Peter Euben, “Democratic Accountability...”

FIRST PAPER DUE: Wednesday 9/28 by 10am

Thurs 9/29 class cancelled/Jewish Holiday

#4 Thurs 10/6 Philosophy & Politics A
read:
* Plato, The Republic, Book I & II
* Hanna Pitkin, “Socrates and Thrasy machus” (xerox)

#5 Thurs 10/13 Philosophy & Politics B
read:
* Republic, Books III & IV
* Susan Bordo, “Material Girl”

I am away at a conference; the class will taught by a guest professor or we will convene a virtual conversation on blackboard.

#6 Thurs 10/20 Philosophy & Politics C
read:
* Republic Book V,
* Book VI (skip lines 507-511)
* Book VII (skip line 526d to 532a)

#7 Thurs 10/27 Philosophy & Politics D
read:
* Republic Books VIII, IX, X
* John Seery, “Politics as Ironic Community”

#8 Thurs 11/3 Philosophy Against Politics
read:
* Sheldon Wolin, Politics & Vision chapter one
* Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics”

SECOND PAPER DUE: Monday 11/7 by 10 am
#9 Thurs 11/10  Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Politics
read:
* Machiavelli, The Discourses -
  Machiavelli’s preface/introduction
  Book One: preface, chaps 1-7/9-12/16-18/25-26/34-35
  40/47/53/55/58
  Book Two: preface/ chaps 2/10/19/24/29
  Book Three: chaps 1-3/7-9/30-31/35/41-42

write:  * For M, what characterizes a “republic” or a “free” people

#10 Thurs 11/17  Political Energy & Political Form: Constitutions & Politics
read:
* Sheldon Wolin, “Norm and Form”
* John McCormick, “Machiavellian Democracy”
* Abraham Lincoln, “Lyceum Address”
* Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July 4th to the Negro”
* Barak Obama and Al Sharpton, speeches to the DNC 2004

write: * How are constitutions essential/antithetical to ‘democratic’ politics?
  * Is appeal to const’l origins necessarily conservative?
  * Is Wolin right: real democracy cannot be a form of regime but can only be episodic insurgencies?
  * Assess how the issue of race shows the limits/capacity of “constitutional” politics

#11 Thurs 12/1  Contingency, Context, and Political Action
read:
* The Prince (entire)
* Mary Dietz, “Trapping the Prince”

write:  * Why is Fortuna the goddess of politics? What kind of character is needed to flourish in a world ruled by Fortuna rather than God?
  * When political actors credit the reality of appearances, and take account of how they appear/are perceived, are they becoming corrupt or acting responsibly?
  * Interpret “the Prince” as a metaphor for politics.

#12 Thurs 12/8  Violence, States of Exception, & morality in politics
read:
* Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”
* Hannah Arendt, “On Violence”
* Jonathan Schell, “Introduction”

write: * Assess Arendt’s distinction between violence and power. Why is she emphatic that politics/power is not about RULE?
  * Is violence always wicked, but sometimes necessary? when?
  * Is it always wicked but also self-defeating? What is the difference between rejecting violence because it is wicked, or because it is impractical/self-defeating?

#13 Thurs 12/15  Conclusion
read:
* Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom”

FINAL PAPER due MONDAY December 19 by 5pm