

**The Politics of Science Fiction**  
**POLS 334-01, Spring 2015**  
**Syllabus (1/30/15)**

Professor Brian Smith

Tuesdays 2:30-3:45 pm in University 2013 and Thursdays 2:30-3:45 pm in University 3051

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Office Hours: Mondays 2:30-4 pm and Wednesdays 1-2:30 pm in Dickson 250

Prerequisite: POLS 300

**Course Description**

This class will cover a range of important dilemmas in politics by reading five novels and a set of non-fiction works that reflect important themes the novels evoke. Our aim throughout will be to use the hypothetical possibilities the novels propose as a basis for thinking about both the enduring dilemmas of political life and the unforeseen challenges that technological progress might create.

**Course Goals**

Students will improve their reading speed and comprehension, as well as their ability to creatively synthesize arguments about complex stories and political ideas together in writing.

**Course Expectations**

***First and most importantly: Read this syllabus and examine our class Canvas site (<https://montclair.instructure.com/login>) carefully. This is not high school. I will not remind you of deadlines or explain things you should already know from this document. Clearly understanding the class requirements will save us all trouble later.***

This course is based on your encounter with serious issues in political philosophy. If you are not a fan of both science fiction and political ideas, this class is not for you: the workload is far, far too heavy and the discussions will be too dorky for you to handle.

I will conduct the class primarily as a discussion oriented around each day's reading assignment. That discussion cannot be productive if students have not completed the reading. As this is a small class and all of you should be excited about and engaged in our readings, active participation is mandatory and will count for 25% of your final course grade. I will call on people who remain silent, so this isn't about *whether* you talk, so much as the degree to which what you say reflects thoughtful engagement with the readings and ideas.

Class discussions should be respectful and considerate of others' views, opinions, and time. Expect to be challenged, but look on it as an opportunity, not a threat. In order to help you prepare for class, I have provided questions or prompts with each reading assignment below.

Some additional observations about reading for the class: these are not standard textbooks with bold lettering around every word you need to know. A casual reading or one undertaken with various distractions present will probably not get you very far. Because of all this, you should probably allot four or more hours of focused attention per week to the readings and note-taking on the material. If you fail to set aside enough time for all this, your ability to participate in class discussions will be limited, and you will find the course essays quite difficult to complete.

Please silence all cell phones and other devices while in class. I strongly urge you to not use a laptop to take notes as we talk – the temptation to wander is too great. Keep distractions from the class conversation to a minimum, especially side-conversations. You may bring food, but please note that opening plastic food wrappers usually cannot be done quietly, so just tear it open and get the noise over. I will ask anyone who is consistently disruptive to leave and fail them on course participation.

Regarding note-taking in class, I have noticed that once some time has passed, most students have a very difficult time following their notes from a discussion based class like this. Because of the circuitous nature of most discussions, you will not leave class with a neat outline. This means that if you want decent notes you can use to help you with papers and the final, within a day or so of each class, you should rewrite or type up the class notes and attempt to provide a structure for them that you will understand later in the class.

This syllabus is subject to change, but I will always provide advance notice both in class and via email. You can always find a copy of the most up-to-date syllabus on Canvas.

### **Assignments and Grading**

In addition to class participation, you must complete two essays and a take-home final. I will determine your grades using the following breakdown:

Class Participation	25%
Essay 1 (5-6 pp.)	15%
Essay 2 (8-10 pp.)	25%
Take-Home Final	35%

There are no essay rewrites allowed. All unexcused late essays will be marked down one full letter grade per day until I receive them, so an A essay that is four days late will receive an F. Be aware of the time when you submit them to Canvas: essays turned in one minute late will count as one day late, with no exceptions. Final grades will be determined using the following scale:

A	95-100%	C	75-77%
A-	91-94%	C-	71-74%
B+	88-90%	D+	68-70%
B	85-87%	D	65-67%
B-	81-84%	D-	62-64%
C+	78-80%	F	61% and below

## **Textbooks**

Please purchase the following books from a source of your choice. They should all be at the bookstore, but I recommend purchasing them on Amazon or another site so you have them all before our first class. Other readings and all course documents may be always found online at our course website on Canvas. As class discussions will frequently refer to the text and our discussions will be hard to follow without the correct page numbers, you *must* use these editions for the course. Some students put off buying books or don't buy them at all because of financial concerns. The Dean of Students Office runs a program where you can get a loan to purchase course materials. They are located on the 4<sup>th</sup> Floor of the Student Center. You can also find contact information for them at their website:

<http://www.montclair.edu/deanstudents/contact.html>

Iain M. Banks, *The Player of Games*, Orbit Books, ISBN: 0316005401

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*, Tor Books, ISBN: 0812550706

J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, University of Nebraska Press (Bison Books), ISBN: 0803270763

F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty, Volume I: Rules and Order*, University of Chicago Press, ISBN: 0226320863

Robert Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, Orb Books, ISBN: 0312863551

Frank Herbert, *Dune*, Ace Books, ISBN: 0441172717

Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*, Harper Classics, ISBN: 006051275X

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Harper Collins, ISBN: 0060652942

James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, ISBN: 0300078153

## Course Schedule and Readings

Please come to class with the book, your reading notes, and any and all questions you have about the texts. As I note above, this class is extremely reading-intensive. If you read novels slowly, I strongly urge you try to work as far ahead as possible with them. In any event, you must have each reading assignment read by the class day that it is officially set for discussion (and should try to have most of each week's novel assignment read by Tuesday as well). Try to have tentative answers to the discussion questions listed below – at the very least use them to guide your reading of the texts.

### 1/20: On the World of Dune and the Perilous Hope for the Overman

Read: Nietzsche, Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (on Canvas)  
Nietzsche, Sections 125-169 in *The Gay Science* (on Canvas)  
Herbert, Appendices to *Dune*, pp. 493-533 (read the main appendix articles; at least skim the glossary – you will need it to understand parts of the book)

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What hope does Nietzsche place in the coming of the Overman? What obstacles does Nietzsche suggest stand in the way of the change the Overman might bring to the world?
- 2) Consider the links between the Bene Gesserit plan to create the Kwisatz Haderach described in the Appendix and Nietzsche's ideal of the Overman.

### 1/22: Plans within Plans

Read: Herbert, *Dune*, pp. 3-126

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do the Mentats and the Bene Gesserit appear to differ in their quest for human perfection?
- 2) Why does the emergence of hierarchies based on the cultivation of extreme human talent lead back to the sort of aristocracy this novel depicts?

### 1/27: Is a Mentat a Man without a Chest?

Read: C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Ch. 1, pp. 1-26

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why does it matter to Lewis that the authors of *The Green Book* undermine the idea that moral judgments reflect reason and emotion? What political importance does he think this has?
- 2) Is Thufir Hawat an example of the sort of “chestless” person Lewis describes in the chapter?

1/29: The Harkonnen Plot and Human Frailty

Read: Herbert, *Dune*, pp. 126-255

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How might someone following the literary and moral sensibility that Lewis fears might take root read the events of the novel to this point?
- 2) The Harkonnen plot relies on the exploitation of the Atreides' characters as much or more than it does on brute force. In what ways does their understanding rely on an understanding of the virtues Lewis suggests we need?

2/3: The Fremen, Honor, and the Moral Needs of Humankind

Read: Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Ch. 2, pp. 27-52

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Consider Lewis' arguments about what leads human beings to sacrifice themselves for a cause. How does this relate to the Fremen?
- 2) To what degree have the Bene Gesserit and others in the novel embraced the quest for mastery Lewis describes near the end of the chapter?

2/5: Making a Home with a Warrior People

Read: Herbert, *Dune*, Part II

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What are the major moral features of Fremen society?
- 2) How does the Bene Gesserit plot to manipulate religion explain the Fremen response to Paul and Jessica?

2/10: The Bene Gesserit Way and the Control of Man's Estate

Read: Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Ch. 3, pp. 52-82

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does it suggest to you that the Bene Gesserit never really articulated a *reason* they wanted to create the Kwisatz Haderach?
- 2) Lewis argues that efforts to "see through" first principles actually result in less understanding of our world than analyses that presuppose the existence of a natural law. Does this help us understand the Harkonnen's myriad failures throughout the book in any way?

2/12: Seeing Reality and Seeing Beyond

Read: Herbert, *Dune*, Part III

Discussion Questions:

- 1) To what degree does Paul Muad'dib transcend the efforts of others to control him?
- 2) In what significant ways do Lewis' warnings about danger of scientific control over human life resonate in the novel? How does this seemingly differ from Herbert's intent in writing?

*First Essay Due on Canvas by 11:59 pm on Saturday, February 14<sup>th</sup>*

2/17: Reading People and Engineering a New World

Read: Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, Introduction and Ch. 1, pp. 1-52

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why does the "high modernist" project rest on a kind of radical simplification of people's lived experience? How does Scott suggest this use of state power harms human life?
- 2) How does mapping and rendering a people "legible" to a state require the use of coercion?

2/19: Community, Anarchy, and the Utopian Dream

Read: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Chs. 1-4, pp. 1-125

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Shevek's childhood memories demonstrate some of the necessary differences in thought Le Guin imagines that communitarian anarchism would require. What are the most important ones?
- 2) Does the Odonian "social conscience" work on society the same way Scott describes state efforts at mapping places? Is it more benign? Less?

2/24: Documentation, Standardization, and Transformation ... in Anarchy?

Read: Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, Chs. 2-3, pp. 53-102

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Scott speaks of the ways that state improvement projects "disallow other competing sources of judgment." What does he mean by this? Why is it important for understanding modern states?
- 2) To what degree does the Odonian ideal as we have seen thus far in the book resemble the projects of high modernism Scott describes? Does his critique apply equally to both Anares and Urras?

2/26: Becoming a Rebel

Read: Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Chs. 5-7, pp. 126-232

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How does Shevek's exploration of society in A-Io reveal his discomfort with their lifestyle as well as his own ambivalence about the path Odonian society has taken?
- 2) Did Takver and Shevek become proprietarians through their relationship?

3/3: Rule by Simplification and the Emerging Odonian State

Read: Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, Chs. 9-10, pp. 309-357

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Scott argues that the simplifications states must create for "organized" social order always undermine the functions of communities, cities, and economics. Why?
- 2) Do the "metis-friendly" institutions Scott desires support Odonian anarchism? Why or why not?

3/5: Living with Ambiguity

Read: Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, Chs. 8-12, pp. 233-387

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Le Guin calls her novel an "ambiguous utopia." What lessons do you believe she wished her readers to draw from this description?
- 2) Can egalitarian community survive familial love?

3/10, 3/12: Spring Break, no class

3/17: Boredom and Mystery in a Free Society

Read: Banks, *The Player of Games*, Part 1, pp. 1-119

Banks, "A Few Notes on the Culture" (on Canvas)

Roger Kimball, "The Legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche," *The New Criterion* (September 1991) (on Canvas)

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Kimball observes that one of Nietzsche's fears (which appears in the excerpts we read at the start of the semester) is that excellence, drama, and danger might disappear from our lives. To what degree does this seem the case in the Culture?
- 2) Why is Gurgeh so bored?

3/19: A Culture Clash

Read: Banks, *The Player of Games*, Part 2, pp. 121-289

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What are the most significant differences in language between Azad and the Culture? Why are they politically and morally important?
- 2) Why do the ruling elite in Azad take pleasure in having laws only in order to break them?

3/24: The Allure of Danger

Read: Gray, *The Warriors*, Introduction and Chs. 1-2, pp. vii-xxiv and 3-58

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Gray emphasizes the ways in which war offers advantages to a citizen of a modern society. To what degree does Gurgeh's struggle in the game (and excitement in it) resemble this account?
- 2) Consider Gray alongside the excerpts from Nietzsche that we have read. Is violence a logical outcome of the problems Nietzsche identifies?

3/26: A Game that is Not a Game

Read: Banks, *The Player of Games*, Parts 3-4, pp. 291-391

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why do Azad's citizens have such a fascination with domination and violence? Is this society different from that of A-Io in *The Dispossessed*?
- 2) We see a short glimpse of Gurgeh's return to the Culture. Will he get bored again?

3/31: Love, Death, and Coming Home

Read: Gray, *The Warriors*, Chs. 3-4, pp. 59-129

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How does Gray's description of the soldier's relations to love and sex relate to Gurgeh's conduct over the course of *The Player of Games*?
- 2) Gurgeh was not driven by any sense of duty. He seems to have developed a hate of the Azad's society. But what let him complete the final game without expressing much in the way of fear (until the end)?



4/2: Making Little Warriors and Statesmen

Read: Card, *Ender's Game*, Chs. 1-9, pp. 1-153

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do Ender's attitudes make him a potentially good commander?
- 2) Valentine and Peter set about shaping public opinion on Earth. What is their strategy?

4/7: Guilt and Moving On

Read: Gray, *The Warriors*, Ch. 6 and Conclusion, pp. 171-242

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do Gurgeh and Ender differ in their reactions to the violence they do to others?
- 2) Why do people desire war, knowing what it costs?

4/9: The Instinct to Win

Read: Card, *Ender's Game*, Chs. 10-15, pp. 154-324

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Explain the politics of the Battle School. Why are they a good preparation for Ender to lead?
- 2) What is the danger of placing children in command?

*Second Essay due on Canvas by 11:59 pm on Saturday, April 11<sup>th</sup>*

4/14: The Evolution of Political Norms

Read: Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. I, Introduction and Chs. 1-2, pp. 1-54

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why does Hayek criticize what he calls "constructivist rationalism"? Does it bear any relationship to the project of "high modernism" Scott outlines?
- 2) What is a spontaneous order? Do the various fictional anarchisms we have covered earlier in the semester resemble it?

4/16: A Computer and the Cause

Read: Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, Book 1, pp. 9-184

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Hayek's account of liberty presupposes that its defenders must protect their traditions and customs rather than embrace planning or progress. How does this apply to Luna?
- 2) How does the Loonie culture exemplify evolutionary adaptation?

4/21: Generality and the Law

Read: Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. I, Chs. 3-4, pp. 55-93

Discussion Questions:

- 1) For Hayek, why must law, properly understood, be framed in general principles?
- 2) Hayek suggests that power may be divided and have many centers in a society, and that this is a stronger guarantee of liberty than any theory of sovereignty. How does this resonate with the world of *Moon*?

4/23: The Revolution Defined

Read: Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, Book 2, pp. 185-304

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does the novel suggest about what makes a revolution that merely aims at the restoration of liberty so difficult to achieve?
- 2) How does Professor Le Paz's serve as a moderating influence on the revolution?

4/28: Nomos and Thesis

Read: Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Vol. I, Chs. 5-6, pp. 94-144

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What are the fundamental differences between nomos and thesis?
- 2) Do Wyoh, Mannie, the Professor, and the Luna Colony's others leaders implicitly challenge Hayek's account of law? Why or why not?

4/30: Luna is Free

Read: Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, Book 3, pp. 305-382

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Did Mike have to be destroyed in order for the Luna Colony to prosper on human terms?
- 2) What was the logic behind targeting the Earth for bombardment the way the rebels did, combining a "maximum of instructive schrecklichkeit with minimum loss of life"?

*Take-home final exam due on Canvas by 11:59 pm on Wednesday, May 13<sup>th</sup>*