

SYLLABUS: THE POLITICAL THEORY OF BIG TECH

SOT86II7

Mondays 13:15 - 14:45

HfP, H.103

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1 COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, students learn to apply concepts and arguments from political theory to analyze and critically evaluate Big Tech companies. The course consists of three parts. The first part is dedicated to some fundamental arguments on business corporations. What is a business corporation? What are business corporations for? What kinds of power do they hold and what grounds these powers? The second part then considers some concrete arguments and proposals that theorists have made about Big Tech in particular. For example, what (if anything) is wrong with “surveillance capitalism”? Should social media be democratized and, if so, how? What are the prospects of alternatives like platform cooperatives or digital socialism? In the third and final part of the course, students then apply the insights of the course to a business corporation of their choice. They give a presentation on the specifics of that corporation and connect this case to the content of the course: What are particular problems of this corporation? In how far are the alternative proposals we discussed applicable to it? Or are there other reforms that are more feasible and/or justifiable?

2 REQUIREMENTS

This is an MA-level course in Political Theory. We expect you to be familiar with basic concepts from political theory and political economy.

The examination for this course has two parts: First, you will prepare a **presentation** applying the insights of the course to a specific firm. We will assign dates (and if necessary groups) for this during the course. Second, you will additionally write a **term paper** of 4,000 words plus references. The deadline for the paper is March 15th 2026. The paper should present an argument on the political theory of Big Tech. We recommend discussing the topic of the paper in advance with the instructors.

3 SESSION OVERVIEW

No.	Date	Topic	Reading
01	Oct 13th	Introduction	Robé 2011 (optional)
02	Oct 20th	A Political Theory of the Firm	Ciepley 2013
03	Oct 27th	Stakeholder Theory	Freeman 1998
04	Nov 3rd	Against Stakeholder Theory	Friedman 1970, Heath 2006
05	Nov 10th	Corporate Political Activity	Scherer et al. 2013
06	Nov 17th	Corporate Power	Hussain & Moriarty 2018
07	Nov 24th	Authority in Corporations	Anderson 2017 (Selections)
08	Dec 1st	Big Tech's Power and Regulation	Lindman et al. 2023
09	Dec 8th	Big Tech Monopolies and Antitrust	Khan 2016 (Selections)
10	Dec 15th	Surveillance Capitalism	Zuboff 2015
11	Dec 22nd	<i>No class, work for presentations</i>	<i>No reading</i>
12	Jan 12th	The Purpose of Social Media	Aytac 2025
13	Jan 19th	Big Tech and the Workplace	Christiaens 2025
14	Jan 26th	Presentations 1	No reading
15	Feb 2nd	Presentations 2	No reading

4 COURSE CONTENT

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first session, we introduce the logic of the course and talk about content, requirements, etc. There will also be a mini-lecture introducing some of the fundamentals of business corporations.

Note: If you miss the mini-lecture or want to revisit its main points, it is roughly based on this article: Jean-Philippe Robé, “The Legal Structure of the Firm,” *Accounting, Economics, and Law* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1–86, <https://doi.org/10.2202/2152-2820.1001>

4.2 A POLITICAL THEORY OF THE FIRM

Why should business corporations be the topic of political theory at all? Are they not simply private institutions where people pursue their economic goals? In this session, we read a paper by David Ciepley that played a large part in reinvigorating the political theory of the corporation.

Reading: David Ciepley, “Beyond Public and Private: Toward a Political Theory of the Corporation,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 139–158, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000536>

4.3 STAKEHOLDER THEORY

Who are business corporations for? What constituencies should they serve? One popular answer to this question are stakeholders. That is, business corporations should be run in favour of all those who have a stake in them.

Reading: R. Edward Freeman, “A Stakeholder Theory of the Modern Corporation,” in *A Stakeholder Theory of the Modern Corporation* (University of Toronto Press, 1998), 125–138, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442673496-009>

4.4 AGAINST STAKEHOLDER THEORY

The rise of stakeholder theory in the second half of the 20th century lead to a re-articulation of its main rival, shareholder theory. In this session, we consider Milton Friedman’s famous response to stakeholder theory in the New York Magazine as well as its best recent defence in academic business ethics by Joe Heath.

Readings: Milton Friedman, “The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 1970, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-70818-6_14

Joseph Heath, “Business Ethics without Stakeholders,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2006): 533–557, JSTOR: 3857795

4.5 CORPORATE POLITICAL ACTIVITY

The rise of large business corporations and the purported shrinking and weakening of the state since the 1970s lead to business corporations engaging in an array of political activities. But how should they conduct these activities? We consider an answer by Scherer et al. that proposes business corporations engage in deliberation with outside groups to legitimate their political activity.

Reading: Andreas Georg Scherer, Dorothée Baumann-Pauly, and Anselm Schneider, “Democratizing Corporate Governance: Compensating for the Democratic Deficit of Corporate Political Activity and Corporate Citizenship,” *Business & Society* 52, no. 3 (2013): 473–514, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650312446931>

4.6 CORPORATE POWER

Continuing with the theme of the previous session, we consider an answer to Scherer et al. by Hussain and Moriarty. They argue that the deliberative proposal overlooks the fact that corporate power is problematic in itself and should therefore be limited or even abolished instead of legitimated via deliberation.

Reading: Waheed Hussain and Jeffrey Moriarty, “Accountable to Whom? Rethinking the Role of Corporations in Political CSR,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 149, no. 3 (2018): 519–534, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3027-8>

4.7 AUTHORITY IN CORPORATIONS

Although most of the important business corporations worldwide are headquartered in democratic states, they are not democratic themselves. Rather, they are hierarchical, dictatorial institutions. In this session, we look at an argument that criticises this setup.

Reading: Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), chapter 2

4.8 BIG TECH AND REGULATION

For the second part of the seminar, we turn to applications of political theory to Big Tech in particular. First, we discuss an overview of different kinds of power Big Tech firms hold and how we should think about them.

Reading: Juho Lindman, Jukka Makinen, and Eero Kasanen, “Big Tech’s Power, Political Corporate Social Responsibility and Regulation,” *Journal of Information Technology* 38, no. 2 (2023): 144–159, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962221113596>

4.9 MONOPOLY AND ANTITRUST

Is there anything wrong with the quasi-monopoly status of many Big Tech firms? Jurisprudence around the world has largely been relatively uncritical and refused to engage in the kind of antitrust activities that took place, for example, in the early 20th century. But some legal theorists disagree and argue that jurisprudence and regulation should return to the ideas of the 1910s and more closely regulate and perhaps even break up Big Tech firms.

Note: This reading draws quite heavily on some concepts from economics and political economy. If you find the text difficult, you might want to revisit the first theorem of welfare economics and its implications for competitive vs. monopoly pricing and consumer and producer surplus.

Reading: Lina M. Khan, “Amazon’s Antitrust Paradox,” *Yale Law Journal* 126, no. 3 (2016/2017): 710–805 **You can skip sections V and VI.**

4.10 SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

Big Tech has unprecedented access to data on the decisions, actions, and behaviours of individual citizens. Should that worry us and, if it should, why?

Reading: Shoshana Zuboff, “Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization,” *Journal of Information Technology* 30, no. 1 (2015): 75–89, <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5>

4.11 NO CLASS

This week, we will have no class to allow you to do some preparatory work for your presentations.

4.12 CORPORATE PURPOSE AND THE CASE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This week, we look at a reform proposal for social media. This proposal is to modify the legal corporate purpose of social media corporations to tie platforms more closely to their democratic function.

Reading: Ugur Aytac, “What Is the Point of Social Media? Corporate Purpose and Digital Democratization,” *Philosophy & Technology* 38, no. 1 (2025): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-025-00855-y>

4.13 BIG TECH AND THE WORKPLACE

Big Tech also changes the way in which work is organised. One distinctive example is work via platforms like Uber and Deliveroo. This week, we consider a proposal for an alternative to the existing platforms with the goal to avoid some of their disadvantages.

Reading: Tim Christiaens, “Platform Cooperativism and Freedom as Non-Domination in the Gig Economy,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 24, no. 2 (2025): 176–199, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14748851241227121>

4.14 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS I

In this session, we will hear the first batch of student presentations.

4.15 STUDENT PRESENTATIONS 2

In this session, we will hear the second batch of student presentations.