

SYLLABUS: POWER, INJUSTICE, AND RESISTANCE

Tuesdays 16:45 - 18:15

Room: H.004

Instructor: Philipp Stehr

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1 COURSE DESCRIPTION

Much of political theory is dedicated to spelling out what a just state would look like. But real politics is more often characterized by persistent injustices, perpetrated by state and private actors alike. In this course, students learn about philosophical analyses of injustice and the possible responses to it. We will discuss questions like: What makes something an injustice as opposed to a mere harm? What can and should citizens do when they are subject to injustices? We will also look at some real-life examples that might include things like civil disobedience against segregation, ecotage against climate change, or rioting against persistent discrimination. What, if anything, can justify these practices? The aim of the course is to familiarize students with these discussions and to enable them to independently evaluate claims of injustice and the justifiability of practices of resistance.

2 REQUIREMENTS

2.1 PREREQUISITES

This is an advanced course in political theory. It requires basic familiarity with political theory and in particular theories of justice, democracy, and the rule of law.

2.2 READINGS AND SESSION PREPARATION

The seminar is largely based on interactive discussions during the seminar sessions based on the assigned readings. This makes two things absolutely crucial for the success of the seminar. First, students have to attend the sessions in order to participate in these activities. Second, students have to thoroughly prepare the assigned readings in order to analyse and critically evaluate them in class.

You should be able to get a hold of most of the readings through the links included in the list in section 4 or through the university library. Where that is not the case, I've uploaded PDFs to Moodle.

2.3 EXAMINATION

The module examination consists of a term paper of 6,000 words, excluding references. The term paper should present an argument in political theory. That argument can be on any topic related to the theme of the seminar. I highly encourage you to discuss your topic with me in advance. There is a dedicated paper feedback session at the end of the course. The deadline for the paper is March 20th 2026.

If you feel unsure about how exactly to structure your paper, I would encourage you to take a look at Earl's Four-sentence paper structure and to write your paper along those lines: <https://philpapers.org/archive/EARTFP.pdf>

3 SESSION OVERVIEW

No.	Date	Topic	Reading
01	Oct 14th	Introduction	—
02	Oct 21st	MLK and the Civil Rights Movement	King 2000
03	Oct 28th	Rawls on Civil Disobedience	Rawls 1999 (Selections)
04	Nov 4th	Civil Disobedience and Political Obligation	Lyons 1998
05	Nov 11th	Crime and Resistance	Shelby 2016 (Selections)
06	Nov 18th	Civility in Politics	Harcourt 2012
07	Nov 25th	Expanding Civil Disobedience	Celikates 2016
08	Dec 2nd	The Case for Uncivil Disobedience	Delmas 2018 (Selections)
09	Dec 9th	Rioting	Pasternak 2018
10	Dec 16th	Ecotage	Lai & Lim 2023
11	Dec 23rd	<i>No class: preparation term paper topics</i>	—
12	Jan 13th	Resisting State Injustice	Brennan 2019 (Selections)
13	Jan 20th	Terrorism	Jaggar 2005
14	Jan 27th	Revolution and Intervention	Buchanan 2013
15	Feb 3rd	Paper Feedback Session	—

4 COURSE CONTENT

The course can be roughly divided into two parts. The first is an extensive discussion of the concept of civil disobedience in order to illuminate the basic concepts at issue. The second half is then dedicated to a discussion of forms of uncivil resistance.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We use the introductory session to clarify the course content and structure and to discuss some of the basics for the course.

4.2 MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

One of the main inspirations for the philosophical literature on civil disobedience has been the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s USA. It is considered one of the clearest examples of a justified movement of resistance that achieved its aims with permissible means. We begin the seminar by looking at the self-understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and considerations on the morality and practicality of different forms of resistance.

Reading: Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 77–100

https://web.archive.org/web/2021102034634/https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/sites/mlk/files/letterfrombirmingham_wwcw_o.pdf

4.3 RAWLS ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

John Rawls's account of Civil Disobedience is probably the most influential one. It justifies civil disobedience under relatively stringent conditions as a practice right at the border of legality and moral permissibility. In this session, we look at this account in more detail.

Reading: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 319–343

4.4 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND POLITICAL OBLIGATION

One of Rawls's core assumptions is that civil disobedience is a tactic for reasonably just societies. In this session, we consider how that fits historical facts about the people and movements that are considered the main examples of civil disobedience. We also discuss whether the assumption of a reasonably just society is sensible more generally.

Reading: David Lyons, "Moral Judgment, Historical Reality, and Civil Disobedience," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27, no. 1 (1998): 31–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.1998.tb00058.x>

4.5 CRIME AND RESISTANCE

In this session, we continue the debate on duties of justice under conditions of injustice. We look at Tommie Shelby's account that defends the idea that the American "ghetto poor" have only limited duties to obey the law and may break it in resisting their oppression.

Reading: Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Harvard University Press, 2016), chapter 7

4.6 CIVILITY IN POLITICS

In this session, we take a step back from the discussion of civil disobedience and consider more generally the question of civility. What does it mean to be civil? When should we demand others be civil and when may we violate the standards of civility?

Reading: Bernard E. Harcourt, "The Politics of Incivility Symposium: Political Discourse, Civility, and Harm," *Arizona Law Review* 54, no. 2 (2012): 345–374

<https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/arizrev/article/id/7169/>

4.7 EXPANDING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Moving away from Rawlsian understandings of disobedience and resistance, this session considers Robin Celikates's proposal to extend the definition of civil disobedience to also include certain forms of violence and coercion, for example.

Reading: Robin Celikates, "Democratizing Civil Disobedience," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42, no. 10 (2016): 982–994, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453716638562>

4.8 THE CASE FOR UNCIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

As a counterproposal to Celikates, this session is dedicated to Candice Delmas's theory of uncivil disobedience, arguing that we should not expand the category of civil disobedience. Rather, the legitimacy and permissibility of uncivil forms of political activism and resistance should be evaluated independent of whether they adhere to the criteria of civil disobedience.

Reading: Candice Delmas, *A Duty to Resist: When Disobedience Should Be Uncivil* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), chapter 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190872199.001.0001>

4.9 RIOTING

Moving on to the second part of the seminar, we consider some specific forms of activism and resistance in detail. First among these are riots. The border between demonstration and riot is sometimes blurry and many activists try hard not to cross it. That is because public opinion favours demonstrations and often sees riots as unjustified. But is that true, morally speaking? Can rioting ever be justified as a political practice?

Readings: Avia Pasternak, "Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 46, no. 4 (2018): 384–418, <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12132>

4.10 ECOTAGE

Climate change is an enormous problem for humanity. Scientists consider the political response to this problem so far utterly lacking. In the face of this political situation, is it justifiable to use unlawful and violent actions to disrupt fossil fuel infrastructure?

Reading: Ten-Hereng Lai and Chong-Ming Lim, "Environmental Activism and the Fairness of Costs Argument for Uncivil Disobedience," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 9, no. 3 (2023): 490–509, <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2022.15>

4.11 NO CLASS: PREPARATION TERM PAPER TOPICS

There will be no seminar session this week. Instead, you have the time to look at possible topics for the term paper.

4.12 RESISTING STATE INJUSTICE

What are we allowed to do if state agents perpetrate injustices? For example, what is the scope of legitimate resistance in cases of arbitrary police violence or under a severely repressive authoritarian regime?

Reading: Jason Brennan, *When All Else Fails: The Ethics of Resistance to State Injustice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), Preface and chapter 1

4.13 TERRORISM

As a popular saying goes: “One man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.” In this session, we ask whether we can nevertheless make sense of this distinction. What exactly is terrorism and can it ever be morally permissible? Are there any criteria to categorically distinguish, say, the military arm of Mandela’s ANC, the Israeli Haganah, the German RAF, and Al Qaeda?

Reading: Alison M. Jaggar, “What Is Terrorism, Why Is It Wrong, and Could It Ever Be Morally Permissible?,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2005): 202–217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.2005.00267.x>

4.14 REVOLUTION AND INTERVENTION

When are citizens justified to engage in revolution? And if they are justified to revolt, what tactics may they use? This session is dedicated to clarifying these questions.

Reading: Allen Buchanan, “The Ethics of Revolution and Its Implications for the Ethics of Intervention,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41, no. 4 (2013): 291–323, <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12021>

4.15 PAPER FEEDBACK SESSION

We dedicate the final session to feedback on paper topics.