

CURRENT TOPICS IN POLITICAL THEORY (JPM070)
COURSE SYLLABUS

Semester: Summer 2025
Instructors: Jakub Franěk (jakub.franek@fsv.cuni.cz)
Time and place: Tuesdays 9:30–10:50 @ Room B218
Office hours: See: <https://konzultace.fsv.cuni.cz>

Course description

In 1989, a couple of months before the actual fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama predicted the upcoming end of Cold War which he famously (mis-)diagnosed as the “end of history”. In the retrospect, we can say that the end of Cold War marked not so much the end of history – and hence also the end of politics – but rather an emergence of the (neo-)liberal hegemony, which indeed brought something like an eclipse of the political.

Today, it is obvious that the liberal moment of the 1990s is definitely over. We can also say that the history, or, rather, the political, has returned – with vengeance. Liberal democracies in today’s world feel no longer triumphant and self-confident, but rather vulnerable as they face challenges both from within and from the outside. On the one hand, the liberal democratic order feels threatened by the surge of popularity of anti-liberal populism. On the other hand, liberal democracies are increasingly threatened by more and more openly hostile authoritarian regimes. Indeed, more and more scholars and politicians are arguing that the Cold War has returned.

It must be admitted that in the light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine this claim seems to ring true. At the same time, however, the new cold war rhetoric may justifiably seem as both historically misleading and threatening to the key values of the very regime it aims to protect, i.e. liberal democracy. It would be indeed hard to argue that freedom and democracy exactly flourished during Senator McCarthy’s era, or, for that matter, during the ‘first new cold war’ – i.e. the early 2000s “war on terror”.

In this political theory seminar, we will not focus primarily on the historical analogies between the Cold War and the present situation, but rather on the political function of the rhetorical figure of “cold war” in liberal politics and, more importantly, on the ambiguous relationship between liberalism and war, as well as liberalism and politics. To put it more generally, we shall explore some of the internal tensions or contradictions of liberalism to uncover the deep roots of the present crisis of liberal democracy.

Aims and purpose

The primary aim of this course is to discuss the deep internal tensions of liberal or liberal democratic ideology through close reading of selected texts by C. Schmitt, G. Agamben, C. Mouffe as well as other recent scholars against the backdrop of the present crisis of liberal democracy. The participation in the seminar should also improve the students’ analytical and argumentative skills.

Teaching methodology

This course uses a combination of lectures and seminars. The students will be expected to have read the assigned reading before the class so that they can participate in the discussion.

Assignments

All students are required to attend the classes and actively participate in the discussion. Each student will be required to write one short (1500 words long) paper related to one of the weekly topics. These papers will be due two days before the class meeting devoted to the given topic. The students must be prepared to present their argument in class and/or answer the questions of the

instructor and other students. NB: The short papers will be shared with all participants of the seminar.

Each student will also be required to write an approx. 5000 words long term paper.

Relative weight of individual assignments

Participation:	15%
Short paper:	35%
Term paper:	55%
COURSE GRADE:	100%

Grading scale

The Faculty of Social Sciences uses the following A-F grading scale:

A (excellent)	= 91–100%
B (very good)	= 81–90%
C (good)	= 71–80%
D (satisfactory)	= 61–70%
E (sufficient)	= 51–60%
F (fail)	= 0–50%

Literature

NB: All assigned texts will be available through the Moodle e-learning system. Additional texts may be assigned during the semester.

All students must register into this course in the Moodle during the first week of classes.

G. Agamben: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

G. Agamben: *State of Exception*

H. Arendt: *Crisis of the Republic*

I. Krastev, S. Holmes: *The Light that Failed*

C. Mouffe: *On the Political*

C. Schmitt: *The Concept of the Political*

C. Schmitt: *Political Theology*

L. Strauss: *Natural Right and History*

Course schedule

NB: For a more detailed description of the class topic and assigned reading, please see the course page on Moodle.

Week 1: Introduction: Course overview. The crisis of liberal democracy and the new cold war.

Weeks 2-5: C. Schmitt's concept of the political; his critique of liberalism and parliamentary democracy

Week 6: C. Mouffe's critique of the 1990s liberal moment, her agonistic theory of democracy

Weeks 7-8: Biopolitics, sovereignty and the state of exception in the work of G. Agamben.

Weeks 9-10: Truth and politics, or on the political responsibility of intellectuals. (H. Arendt and L. Struass).

Weeks 11-12: Democracy in crisis, or the end of the liberal moment.