

## **POL 150C2: What is Politics?**

### **Community Classroom**

Professors: Noam Chomsky & Marv Waterstone

Course Locations and Times:

Lectures: Environmental and Natural Resources 2 Bldg (ENR2),  
Rm N120  
Tues/Thurs 5:30-7:30PM

### **Course Description**

Politics is the process of making decisions applying to members of a group. As Harold Lasswell described it, politics is about who gets what, when and how, to which we would add, where.

This course is intended to take up a series of contemporary issues with an eye to placing these matters in appropriate contexts so that their origins, current status and interconnections become understandable, and hopefully, approachable.

Beginning with an overview of the formal and informal mechanisms that shape our views of the world, the course will examine how industrial state capitalism has come to dominate our thinking as the only way to organize the political economy to satisfy human needs and wants. In fact, at the present conjuncture, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. In the subsequent weeks we will examine some of the most important consequences of organizing society along these lines. Finally, the course will take up questions of response and resistance to these phenomena. Here we intend to assess the achievements and difficulties involved as social movements agitate for change, as well as the role of critical pedagogy in attaining desirable social change.

Each week, the Tuesday lecture (by Professor Waterstone) will provide the necessary historical, theoretical, conceptual and substantive context for that week's topic. The Thursday lecture (by Professor Chomsky) will focus on concrete historical and contemporary examples to draw out and illustrate the phenomena discussed on Tuesdays. Additionally, each lecture session will provide the class, broken up into small groups, an opportunity to formulate discussion questions that will be posted online for response by Professors Chomsky and Waterstone. Finally, this year we will also reserve time during each class session for brief presentations by representatives from activist organizations working on issues pertinent to each week's topics.

## **Contact Information**

### *Professor*

Prof. Marv Waterstone

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### *Primary Contact*

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## **Required Texts and Films**

All materials will be made available through Forum website. All films will be provided through the Forum, if streaming is available.

## **Subject to Change Statement**

Information contained in the course syllabus may be subject to change with advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.

## **SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Week 1—Introduction and Overview**

**Thursday, January 10:** Our first class meeting will provide a general introduction to the course and cover course organization and logistics.

### **Week 2—How do we know what we know?**

**Tuesday, January 15:** We will take up an overview of the formal and informal mechanisms that shape our views of the world (what we take as common sense). This will include, among others, the role of families and peers, the mass media, the education system, religion, and the culture industries. The week will conclude with an examination of the role of critical pedagogy in producing a viewpoint that is always healthily skeptical of the taken-for-granted, pervasive common senses that prevail in societies at particular times and places.

### *Required Readings:*

Kate Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016. Preface & Ch. 3.

Edward Bernays, "The Engineering of Consent." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (1): 113-120, 1947.

Elena Besar, "Hundreds of Journalists Jailed Globally Becomes the New Normal."  
Committee to Protect Journalists, December 13, 2018.  
<https://cpj.org/x/7504>

### *Supplementary Reading*

*Worldwide Roundup of Journalists Killed, Detained, Held Hostage or Missing in 2018.*  
Reporters Without Borders. December 2018. (pdf)

### *Film Viewing:*

*Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media.* Dir. Mark Achbar & Peter Wintonick.  
1992.

**Thursday, January 17:** We will concentrate on concrete examples about the role of the mass media, the PR industry, the educational system, and religion. We are particularly interested this year in examining the ongoing assaults on evidence and facts, and the demonization of journalism and journalists.

### *Required Reading:*

Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*. London and New York: Verso, 1991. Chapter 12.

Chris Hedges, "Banishing Truth," Truthdig, December 24, 2018.  
<https://www.truthdig.com/articles/banishing-truth/>

### *Supplementary Reading*

John Carter, et al. *Science Under Siege at the Department of the Interior*. Union of Concerned Scientists. 2018. (pdf)

## **Week 3—Today's dominant common sense**

**Tuesday, January 22:** We will take up the ways in which the current, prevailing common sense represents a "capitalist realism:" a worldview that posits that there is no realistic alternative to industrial state capitalism. Here we examine how this orientation has come to dominate our thinking regarding how we organize the political economy to satisfy human needs and wants. Are there alternatives? How are these characterized, trivialized, and criticized? How dominant is the capitalist worldview in reality? Given a choice, might many people opt for other ways to organize society?

### *Required Readings:*

Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.  
Prefaces (2002, 1982, 1962), Introduction and Chapter 1

Robin Hahnel, “Why the Market Subverts Democracy” *American Behavioral Scientist*  
52 (7): 1006-1022, 2009.

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books,  
2009.  
Chapters 1-3.

*Film Viewing:*

*The Corporation*, 2003, directed by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbot

**Thursday, January 24:** We will discuss “really existing capitalism,” and compare it with the mythical capitalism that is a core part of contemporary ideology. Again, using concrete examples we will examine economic history (and its differing characteristics in various parts of the world over time), the creation of the so-called “Third World,” current forms of neoliberal capitalism, and the role of markets and “free” trade.

*Required Readings:*

Gar Alperovitz, “Principles of a Pluralist Economy: Introduction.” May 15, 2017. The Next System Project.

<https://thenextsystem.org/principles-introduction>

Philip Alston “Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his mission to the United States of America.” May 4, 2018. (pdf)

*Supplementary Reading*

Josh Bivens and Heidi Sheirholz. “What labor market changes have generated inequality and wage suppression?” Economic Policy Institute. December 12, 2018. (pdf)

#### **Week 4—Consequences of the “capitalist realism” orientation, Part 1.**

**Tuesday, January 29:** We will begin to make the connections between the essential features of this form of late stage capitalism and its most pressing effects. These requirements of capitalism include, most critically, organizing the globe geopolitically to facilitate the spread of this form of political economy. At different historical moments this set of activities (which almost always has had as its objectives the securing of advantageous access to resources, markets, labor, and/or

other favorable conditions of production or sale of commodities) has been termed colonialism, imperialism, and/or neo-imperialism. In all of these forms, however, the quest for geopolitical dominance has posed grave dangers for those populations in the way of such expansion. At the present moment, these dangers are manifested as such existential threats to the human species as potential nuclear war and nuclear terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, and constant and expanding militarism and warfare. In this week, we will examine the various forms these threats have taken at different moments and in different regional contexts, as well as the rationales that have been used to justify such troubling developments.

*Required Readings:*

Excerpts from NSC 68, A Report to the National Security Council, 1950.

[http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf)

Michael Klare, "Why 'Overmatch' is Overkill." *The Nation*, December 20, 2018. (pdf)

William Hartung, "The Doctrine of Armed Exceptionalism: The Urge to Splurge: Why Is It So Hard to Reduce the Pentagon Budget?" *CommonDreams.org* Oct. 25, 2016. <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/10/25/doctrine-armed-exceptionalism>

Tom Engelhardt, "Mapping a World From Hell: 76 Countries are Now Involved in Washington's War on Terror." *Counterpunch.org* Jan. 5, 2018. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/01/05/mapping-a-world-from-hell-76-countries-are-now-involved-in-washingtons-war-on-terror/>

Neta C. Crawford, "Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency." Brown University Costs of War Project. November 2018. (pdf)

Dave Lindorff, "Exclusive: the pentagon's massive accounting fraud exposed." *The Nation Magazine*. November 27, 2018. (pdf)

*Film Viewings:*

President Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address and warning about the military industrial complex, January 17, 1961. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyBNmecVtdU>

*Dirty Wars*, 2013. Director: Rick Rowley

**Thursday, January 31:** Concrete illustrations of the foregoing points. One focus would be on the threat of imminent destruction throughout the nuclear age, and the shocking record of near terminal disaster in part from accident and in part from highly adventurist choices of political leaders, including some that are very well documented but very poorly understood, like JFK's decisions at the peak of the missile crisis. And on the escalating dangers today, particularly at

the Russian border, largely a result of NATO expansion since 1991, where we will focus on what is now known from recent archival scholarship. In particular we pay attention to recent developments concerning the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) and New Start Treaties. We will also highlight the ways in which such militarism produces important local impacts and connections.

*Required Readings:*

Noam Chomsky, "The Most Dangerous Moment, 50 Years Later," *TomsDispatch.com* October 15, 2012. <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175605/>

George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Nuclear Security Project*, January 4, 2007. <http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/publications/a-world-free-of-nuclear-weapons>

"Global arms industry: US companies dominate the Top 100; Russian arms industry moves to second place. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. December 10, 2018. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2018/global-arms-industry-us-companies-dominate-top-100-russian-arms-industry-moves-second-place>

Jeffrey E. Stern. "The Warhead and the Well." *New York Times Magazine*, December 16, 2018. (pdf)

Gabriel Schivone and John Lindsay-Poland, "Opinion: Mexico's gun violence a 'moral crisis of complicity' for U.S. border states." *Arizona Daily Star*, December 17, 2018.

[https://tucson.com/opinion/local/opinion-mexico-s-gun-violence-a-moral-crisis-of-complicity/article\\_2292df4f-b0f9-54bd-924d-66b5d2470573.html](https://tucson.com/opinion/local/opinion-mexico-s-gun-violence-a-moral-crisis-of-complicity/article_2292df4f-b0f9-54bd-924d-66b5d2470573.html)

*Supplementary Readings:*

Materials from the William J. Perry Project  
<http://www.wjperryproject.org/about-the-project/>

**Week 5—Consequences of the “capitalist realism” orientation, Part 2.**

**Tuesday, February 5:** Here we examine a second essential feature of industrial state capitalism: the quest for ever expanding profits. A critical implication of this need is the contradiction between the quest for infinite growth and the material reality of a finite planet. While long problematic in more localized settings, the scale of the capitalist system now poses such existential threats as climate change, massive environmental degradation, and irretrievable resource depletion. Again, we will make clear the linkages between essential elements of this

stage of capitalist development, its environmental impacts, and the reasons that, and ways in which, recognizing such connections are downplayed and obscured.

*Required Readings:*

John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002. Preface and Chapter 2.

Marv Waterstone, “Adrift on a Sea of Platitudes: Why We Will Not Solve the Greenhouse Issue.” *Environmental Management* 17 (2): 141-152, 1993.

Jason Hickel, “Why Growth Can’t Be Green.” *Insights*. Fall 2018. (pdf)

Dean Baker, “Saving the Environment: Is Degrowth the Answer?” *Counterpunch*, November 28, 2018. (pdf).

Robert Pollin, “Degrowth vs. a Green New Deal.” *New Left Review*. July/August 2018. (pdf)

*Film Viewing:*

*Snowpiercer*. Dir. Bong Joon-Ho. 2014.

**Thursday, February 7:** The principal focus here will be on the second major threat to survival: global warming and climate change more generally. The discussion will review the basic facts and bring out one of the most astonishing features of modern history: the extraordinary marginalization of the most crucial question that has arisen in human history and even worse, the fact that a major political organization in the most powerful state in history not only denies the facts but is urging that we race to the precipice – and that all of this passes virtually without comment; hardly a word in the recent presidential campaign or coverage, even on the left. We will also extend Tuesday’s discussion, through concrete cases, of the incompatibility of capitalism with survival—given its demand for unsustainable growth and ignoring of externalities— along with its incompatibility with democracy.

*Required Readings:*

C.J. Polychroniou, “Global Warming and the Future of Humanity: An Interview with Noam Chomsky and Graciela Chichilnisky,” *Truthout.org* Sep. 17 2016.

<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/37631-global-warming-and-the-future-of-humanity-an-interview-with-noam-chomsky-and-graciela-chichilnisky>

Eric Lipton, et al. “The Real-Life Effects of Trump’s Environmental Rollbacks: 5 Takeaways From Our Investigation.” *New York Times*, December 26, 2018. (pdf)

Julie Eilperin, et al. “Trump Administration Sees a 7 Degree Rise in Global Temperatures by 2100.” *Washington Post*, September 27, 2018. (pdf)

Paul Bledsoe, “Going Nowhere Fast on Climate Change.” New York Times, December 29, 2018. (pdf)

### **Week 6—Consequences of the “capitalist realism” orientation, Part 3.**

**Tuesday, February 12:** Here we take up questions of the more mundane and pervasive, but nevertheless devastating, effects of the current globalized and neoliberal forms of late stage capitalism. We will explore the roots and impact of the neoliberal globalized stage of state capitalism, with the tendencies towards plutocracy, monopolization and secular stagnation, as well as the shifting nature national power (vis a vis the power of global capital) in the contemporary period. Again, we will demonstrate the necessary connections between these phenomena and the current stage of capitalist formation.

#### *Required Readings:*

Lewis F. Powell, Jr. “The Powell Memorandum/Manifesto” Aug 23, 1971.  
[http://reclaimdemocracy.org/powell\\_memo\\_lewis/](http://reclaimdemocracy.org/powell_memo_lewis/)

Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004. Introduction and Chapter 3.

Henry Giroux, “Culture of Cruelty: The Age of Neoliberal Authoritarianism,” *Counterpunch.org* Oct. 23, 2015. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/10/23/culture-of-cruelty-the-age-of-neoliberal-authoritarianism/>

#### *Supplemental Readings:*

Wendy Brown. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books. Chapter 1.

#### *Film Viewing:*

*Two Days, One Night*. Dirs. Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne, 2014.

**Thursday, February 14:** We will review a number of specific examples of these effects, which include increasing wealth and income inequality, reductions of state support for citizens (often under the harsh requirements of imposed austerity programs), privatization and enclosure of commons resources and services, the increasing production of surplus/disposable people (which includes a portion of the massive, current refugee and immigrant streams, as well as enormous and growing prison populations), and the policing and surveillance of domestic populations.

#### *Required Readings:*

David Kotz, “End of the Neoliberal Era.” *New Left Review*, September/October 2018. (pdf)

Alfred W. McCoy, “It’s Not Just Trump: A Toxic Right-Wing Nationalism Is Rising Across the Planet.” *Alternet*, April 2, 2017.

<https://www.alternet.org/2017/04/its-not-just-trump-toxic-right-wing-nationalism-rising-across-planet/>

Fintan O’Toole, “Trial Runs for Fascism are in Full Flow.” *Irish Times*, June 24, 2018.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-trial-runs-for-fascism-are-in-full-flow-1.3543375>

### **Week 7—Response and resistance**

**Tuesday, February 19:** The phenomena we have been discussing thus far in the course do not take place without impact and consequences. In this week, we take up questions of the multi-faceted ways that those affected by the machinations of late stage, neoliberal, globalized capitalism respond. Each of the sets of impacts that we have examined have given rise to social movements of many kinds, from peace and environmental activism, to calls for social, political, cultural, and economic justice. In this week, we will examine the ways in which these diverse movements might find common ground, and thus political alliance and solidarity.

#### *Required Readings:*

Kate Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016. Chapter 7.

James. O’Connor. *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1998. Pp 255-265 and Chapters 15 & 19.

Sunrise Movement (youth organizing to fight climate change):

Statement of Principles:

<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/principles>

Draft for a Select Committee on Green New Deal:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jxUzp9SZ6-VB-4wSm8sselVMsqWZrSrYpYC9slHKLzo/edit>

#### *Film Viewing:*

*Zapatista*. Dirs. Benjamin Eichert, Richard Rowley, & Ståle Sandberg. 1999.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBqIowBEL60>

**Thursday, February 21:** We will begin with an examination of historical predecessors to today’s social movements that include anti-slavery and anti-colonial resistances, early contests over industrialization and waged labor, and the civil rights and feminist movements. With this background, we then intend to assess the achievements and difficulties

involved in such contemporary phenomena as the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, the indignados, the Bernie Sanders' and Donald Trump mobilizations, the Brexit vote, and other social movements agitating for social change, as well as similar things that will undoubtedly be in the news at the time of the course. We will pay special attention to rising resistance to neoliberalism, and examine the different forms this resistance has taken in particular regions around the globe. Finally, we will also examine the response of elites and states to these proliferating movements.

*Required Readings:*

Janine Jackson, "They're Going to Pen You In and Charge You for It." Counterspin interview, October 24, 2018.

<https://fair.org/home/theyre-going-to-pen-you-in-and-charge-you-for-it/>

John Queally, "For Next Weapon in Anti-Protest Arsenal, US Military Building Plasma Gun Capable of Vaporizing Human Flesh." Common Dreams, October 18, 2018.

<https://www.commondreams.org/news/2018/10/18/next-weapon-anti-protest-arsenal-us-military-building-plasma-gun-capable-vaporizing>

Primary Documents from Other Social Movements TBD (i.e. Black Lives Matter, Fight for Fifteen, Los Indignados, Podemos, No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, etc.)

## **Week 8—Prospects for progressive change**

**Tuesday, February 26:** Given all of the foregoing, we return to the title of the course "What is Politics?" in order to provoke contemplation on what would constitute progressive change, and how such change might be brought about. In approaching these matters we also return to the potential contribution of critical pedagogy and the role of informed and activist intellectuals, scholars and citizens.

*Required Readings:*

Marv Waterstone, "Smoke and Mirrors: Inverting the Discourse on Tobacco." *Antipode* 42(4): 875-896, 2010.

Henry Giroux, "Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy and the Responsibility of Intellectuals." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1 (1): 59-79, 2004.  
<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~drrussel/www548/giroux-respofintells.pdf>

**Thursday, February 28:** We will tie together themes already discussed, and explore conceptions of the common good from the Enlightenment to the present. In terms of the educational system, we will contrast the traditional concept of education as a vessel into which one pours water with the Humboldtian view of education as laying out a string along which the student pursues his/her own course, with the goal of encouraging innate curiosity and the desire to inquire and create, to challenge and to discover. We will connect these concepts to the current state of education, bringing in the current imposition of business models particularly in reaction to the liberating and democratizing tendencies of the 1960s.

*Required Readings:*

Noam Chomsky, *What Kind of Creatures Are We?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.  
Chapter 3.

Primary Documents from Social Movements TBD (i.e. Black Lives Matter, Fight for Fifteen, Los Indignados, Podemos, No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, etc.)

*Film Viewing:*

TBD