

POLITICAL THEORY QUALIFYING EXAMINATION

Part I: Thematic Field Questions

First Field Political Theory graduate students receive 7 pre-set thematic field questions upon entering the graduate program at Northwestern. One of these will appear on the qualifying examination, taken in the Fall Quarter of the student's third year in the program.

THEMATIC QUESTIONS (one of which will appear on the examination)

1. "Is it enough to see things separately or must we discover the hidden links connecting them?" (Tocqueville) Discuss these competing demands of political theory by drawing upon notable authors and texts in the field, paying particular attention to whether they resolve the apparent tension, and if so, how and with what advantages and disadvantages for theorizing politics.
2. A tension between appearance and reality is a recurring theme in political theory, from Plato's "cave" through Machiavelli's "prince" to Marxism, as well as in genealogy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and gender studies. Explore the challenges that the appearance/reality tension poses for political theorizing or theorizing politics.
3. Benjamin Constant (among others) contrasted "ancient" with "modern" liberty. Choosing one key political concept—power, liberty, equality, polity, virtue, or any other—make a case for or against the distinction between ancients and moderns while tracking the changes or continuities in the concept you choose. What, if any, is the relevance of the concept's intellectual history to its contemporary meanings?
4. "Man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle). Discuss how two or political theorists since Aristotle have interpreted this dictum, focusing on any or all of the binaries between male and female, human and animal, mind and body, culture and nature. How do these binaries organize political theory as the study of how "humans" relate not only to each other but also to that which is marked "creaturely" or "nonhuman"?
5. Assess the impact of the "linguistic turn" on 20th and 21st century political theory.
6. "It is then our task as founders, I said, to compel the best natures to reach the study which we have previously said to be the most important, to see the Good and to follow that upward journey." Plato, Republic 519c-d

"The proper task of a history of thought ...: to define the conditions in which human beings 'problemize' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live."

Discuss the “task,” drawing upon any thinkers and texts of your choosing in historical and/or contemporary political theory, none of which have to be either Plato or Foucault.

7. Should political theory be directed toward the generation of normative bases of (or regulative principles for) a just society? Focusing on two or three political theorists, examine the nature of such efforts and discuss their possibilities and limitations.

Part II: Question on Selected Text

During the course of their graduate studies, students will choose one significant political theory text *in advance consultation with and approval of a member of the political theory faculty (or current advisor)* and be asked to answer one of the following questions about that text on the examination.

TEXT INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS (one of which will appear on the examination)

1. “*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.*” (Marx, “11th Thesis on Feuerbach”). What is the relationship between interpreting and changing the world exemplified by your chosen text? [You do not need to be familiar with Marx to address this question]
2. “*Lack of historical sense is the original error of all philosophers.*” (Nietzsche) Is it important to place your chosen text in an historical, including intellectual historical, context? Why (not)? What, if anything, may be gained by reading this text anew or “anachronistically”? [You do not need to be familiar with Nietzsche to address this question]
3. What makes your chosen text in “political theory” a “political” endeavor as well as an example of “theory?”

Part III: Seminar-related Questions (Majors and Minors)

These questions will be related but not entirely restricted to material covered in graduate seminars taken by students. Faculty will submit these questions to the field chair who appoints the examination committee. In this section, students will be offered anywhere from 3 to 6 questions and will choose 1 to answer.

[Students provide copy of transcripts with seminars they wish to emphasize noted with an *. Part III gives sufficient choices so that all students taking the exam can select questions pertaining to seminars they have taken].

Last fully updated September 2011; minor adjustments in language June 2016