

PPHE/PHIL/PSCI 293:
Poli1cs, Philosophy & Economics- How to Change the World

University of Rochester
Spring Semester 2026
Gavett 310 • M-W 9:00-10:15

Instructor – James Johnson
Office Hours • Harkness 312
Friday 9:30-11:00 & By Appointment
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*“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day,
if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”*

~ Arundhati Roy

*“Anything you want to, do it.
Want to change the world?
There's nothing to it!”*

~ Willy Wonka

Public Health Prologue Many folks – including the University administration – seem to think Covid is “over.” That, I believe, is naïve and dangerous. Not only is the direct experience of contracting Covid dangerous, but we know little about the long-term and downstream implications. What we do know about such things tends to be disturbing. However, College and University policies insist that we engage in risky behavior. I (Professor Johnson) am part of an age cohort (old folks!!!) for whom Covid is especially dangerous. So please, if you feel even the faintest bit ill *stay away* from class. Feel free to mask and maintain as much social distancing as our classroom allows. I encourage you to do all three things.

Course description: We humans confront a litany of problems both close to home and across the globe: environmental exploitation and degradation; dire poverty; profound and growing political-economic inequality; deep, often deadly divisions within nations along, among other dimensions, generations, religion, race, gender, and class; massive migration of populations, whether voluntary or not, within and across international borders; violent conflict between nations and states. The list goes on. It is daunting to the point of being intellectually and practically debilitating. It's nearly enough to make one dismiss Willie Wonka out of hand! For citizens, activists, government officials, and economic actors it is difficult to

Know where and how to start thinking about first responses, let alone enduring solutions to such problems. Yet, while Mr. Wonka may be overly sanguine, he is not entirely wrong.

In the face of such difficulties (and others) we urgently require responses that are both effective and justifiable. In order to identify and implement them we must not only understand how markets or political institutions work, or even how the various elements of our political and economic systems interact. We also must be able to think carefully about our obligations to our fellow human beings, and the values that we ultimately want our shared world to instantiate and be anchored by. Changing the world (let alone “saving” it!), then, requires a deeply interdisciplinary vision. A main aim of this course is to offer some resources, intellectual and practical, that may prove useful if we hope to change the world.

This course will be focused on helping students to bring ethical analysis, microeconomic and game theoretic models, and empirical inquiry to bear on fundamental problems like those mentioned above. Students should leave the course with a better understanding not just of how our political-economic practices and institutions do work – but also how they could work, how they should work, and how to take steps toward improving how they work.

Class Format: The course primarily will be lecture and discussion based. I will encourage participation and not only welcome but solicit questions and observations. That means that I expect you not only to keep up with the reading, but also to read with care and to demonstrate this in class discussions. In lectures I will not just cover assigned materials but incorporate research and writings not found on the list for the course.

Grading: I do not care what grade you get in the course. By that I mean that while I would like you to do well, and hope that happens, whether or not you do well depends on you. If you do the required work, it is extremely likely a good grade will follow; if not, it is almost certain that a good grade will not follow. The work here includes both participating in class discussion and producing a written assignment.

Final grades for the course will reflect five things:

Musical Contributions: According to political theorist Roberto Unger, the exploration of political possibilities “is not about blueprints, it is about pathways. It is not architecture, it is music.” To honor this suggestion, I ask that you share music with your classmates. I expect each of you to make two contributions to the “Music” folder on the course Blackboard page. In addition to providing a link/audio file, I expect you to offer 2-3 sentences about what strikes you about your offering and what you hope your classmates will “get” from listening. Your contribution to this enterprise is worth 10% of your final grade.

On some days I may ask a student from the class to comment on one or more of the offerings in the Music folder. In other words, you’ll need to not just deposit tunes, but actually listen to what your classmates deposit as well. *You must make these contributions no later than midnight on Friday of week nine (9) of the course* (The week following Spring Break).

Class participation: The course is relatively small and will run – as much as is possible – as a discussion. Given the nature of the undertaking it is imperative that everyone actively participate in class. That means that I expect you not only to keep up with the reading, but also to read with care and to demonstrate this in class discussions. If you are able to attend class I expect you to do so!

In order to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate and that a small subset of the class does not dominate the discussion, I will call on students more or less at random. The regularity and quality of your participation and especially your willingness to stick your neck out in seminar discussion will constitute 10% of your final grade for the course.

Please note! There is no party line in the course, meaning I do not care if you agree or disagree with me, with one another, or with any (or all?) of the readings. I care about your willingness to stick your neck out, to think critically, and to articulate and defend your views clearly both orally and in writing.

Having said all that, I urge you to read and think about the “Policy on Classroom Interactions” below. Every student in the class is due civility and respect irrespective of their substantive views. What matters are evidence, reasoning and the clarity with which those are articulated.

Group Project/Presentation: Once the class enrollment has settled (to allow drop/add, etc.) I will divide the class into groups. Each group will be responsible for identifying, researching/diagnosing and recommending ways to address some (e.g., social, political-economic, environmental, etc.) matter of joint concern. The topic or focus for each group will be framed in negotiation with me. The group will present its work to the class and then write up and submit a report summarizing their work. The group presentation will constitute 25% of your final grade for the course.

Written Assignment: There will be a take home written assignment. It will cover materials from the lectures/class discussions and readings. You can expect to write twelve to fifteen pages (with e.g., double spacing, 12-point font, one-inch margins all around, etc.) for this assignment. Yes, the assignment will include multiple questions/prompts. That means you should anticipate having to have done pretty much all the reading and to have attended class. I will also provide detailed instructions. *Please see the comments regarding Academic Honesty below.* You will have roughly a week to complete this written assignment. Dates appear on the schedule that follow. Please plan accordingly. *Please see the comments regarding late assignments below.* This written assignment will constitute 25% of your grade for the course. There is no ‘curve.’ In cases at the margin your regular smart participation in class discussions will get you the benefit of the doubt. So too will your performance on the oral portion of the final

Oral Final: Each student will have to meet with me in person to discuss materials from the class. These meetings will last about 15 minutes. They will consist of informal one-on-one conversations. The meeting times will be scheduled after Spring Break and will take place in my office on campus during finals week. This oral final will constitute 30% of your grade for the course

So, to summarize, for purposes of final grades:

Musical Contributions	10%
Class Participation	10%
Group Presentation	25%
Written Assignment	25%
Oral Final	30%
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Total	100%

Required Readings: What follows are the assigned readings for the course. You are correct. There is a totally unreasonable amount of quite disparate material. None of it comes in pre-digested form. This is unavoidable given the nature of our undertaking. Our aim is to practice thinking like engaged citizens- to draw connections, make inferences, and think creatively not just about what now is the case but what might be. Doing that across these sorts of reading is hard. I know that. A rough (*aspirational!*) schedule for the semester follows the details of our readings. I expect you to do the assigned reading prior to coming to class. I will make all the readings (articles, chapters, policy reports, etc.) available via BlackBoard in pdf form.

Introduction

MLK Jr. Four Essays (1967-68).

Editorial. 2025. "Writing is Thinking," *Nature Reviews – Bioengineering* 3:431.

Timothy Daly. 2025. "Reading is Thinking, Too," *Annals of Biomedical Engineering* 53:2734–2735.

So, You Want to Change the World?

Stephen Holmes. 1990. "The Secret History of Self-Interest." In *Beyond Self-Interest*. Edited by Jane Mansbridge. University of Chicago Press. Pages 267-86.

Elizabeth Spelman. 1999. "Anger: The Diary." In *Wicked Pleasures: Meditations on the Seven 'Deadly' Sins*. Edited by Robert Solomon. Rowman & Littlefield. [Pages 117-132].

Phillip Pettit. 2004. "Hope and Its Place in Mind." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592: 152-165.

Amelie Rorty. 1983. "Imagination & Power." *Social Science Information* 22: 801-816.

Thinking with Models

Thomas Schelling. 1978. *Micromotives & Macrobehavior*. WW Norton. [Pages 9-43; 83-102].

Thomas Schelling. 2010. Game Theory: A Practitioners Perspective," *Economics & Philosophy* 26: 27-46.

Ariel Rubinstein. 2013. "How Game Theory Will Solve the Problems of The Euro Bloc & Stop Iranian Nukes," *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (27 March).

Roger Myerson. 2007. *Force & Restraint in Strategic Deterrence*. Army War College.

Edna Ullman-Margalit. 1978. "Invisible Hand Explanations," *Synthese* 39:263-91.

Edna Ullman-Margalit. "The Invisible Hand & the Cunning of Reason," *Social Research* 64:181-98.

The Role of Ideals?

- John Rawls. 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Harvard UP [Pages 1-66].
- Susan Okin. 1989. *Justice Gender & the Family*. Basic Books. [Pages 3-40, 89-109].
- Elizabeth Anderson. 2010. "A Note on Method in Political Philosophy." In *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton UP. [Pages 3-7].
- Charles Mills. 2013. "The Contract of Breach: Repairing the Racial Contract." In Carole Pateman & Charles Mills, *The Contract and Domination*. Polity. [Pages 106-33].
- Susan Orr and James Johnson. 2018. "What's A Political Theorist to Do? Rawls, the Fair Value of the Basic Political Liberties, and the Collapse of the Distinction Between 'Ideal' and 'Non-ideal' Theory." *Theoria* 65: 1-23.

Freedom-Agency-Interdependence

- Amartya Sen. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Knopf. [Pages 54-111].
- Sabina Alkire. 2008. 'Concepts and Measures of Agency ', In K Basu, R Kanbur (eds) *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honour of Amartya Sen; Volume 1: Ethics, Welfare and Measurement* Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Pages 455-74].
- Amartya Sen. 1990. "More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing" *New York Review of Books* Volume 37, Number 20 (December 20).
- Amartya Sen. 1990. "Gender & Cooperative Conflict." In *Persistent Inequalities*. Edited by Irene Tinker. Oxford UP. [Pages 123-49.]
- Abinay Muthoo. 2000. "A Non-Technical Introduction to Bargaining Theory," *World Economics* 1: 145-166.
- Bina Agarwal. 1997. "'Bargaining' & Gender Relations: Within & Beyond the Household," *Feminist Economics* 3: 1-51.

Segregation & Poverty in the US (with Special Reference to Rochester, NY)

- Thomas Schelling. 1978. *Micromotives & Macrobehavior*. WW Norton. [Pages 169-190].
- Vi Hart & Nicky Case <https://ncase.me/polygons/>
- Conor Reynolds, et. al. 2020. *Confronting Racial Covenants*. Rochester: City Roots CLT & Yale Environmental Law Clinic.
- Stephanie Hollenbach, et. al. 2021. "Associations Between Historically Redlined Districts and Racial Disparities in Current Obstetrics Outcomes," *JAMA Network Open* (30 September). <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2784593>
- Cathy Cohen & Michael Dawson. 1993. "Neighborhood Poverty & African American Politics," *American Political Science Review* 87: 286-302.
- Elizabeth Anderson. 2011. "Why Racial Integration Remains an Imperative," *Poverty & Race* 20:1-2,17-19
- Tommie Shelby, 2014. "Integration, Inequality, and Imperatives of Justice" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42: 253-285.

Possibilities - Institutions, Pluralism, Self-Governance ... and Power

- Elinor Ostrom. 1990. *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge UP. [Pages 1-58; 88-102].

- Barbara Allen. 2020. *Actual World, Possible Future* [film] (87 mins).
 [<https://www.pbs.org/video/actual-world-possible-future-09rkab/>]
- Michael Taylor, *The Possibility of Cooperation*. Cambridge UP, [Pages 1-49].
- Cristina Bicchieri. 2014. "Norms, Conventions & the Power of Expectations." In *Philosophy of Social Science*. Edited by N. Cartwright & E. Montuschi. Oxford UP. [Pages 208-29].
- Randall Calvert. 1995a. "The Rational Choice Theory of Social Institutions." In *Modern Political Economy* Ed. J. Banks and E. Hanushek. Cambridge UP.
- Randall Calvert. 1995b. "Rational Actors, Equilibrium and Social Institutions." In *Explaining Social Institutions*. Ed. J. Knight and I. Sened. University of Michigan Press.
- Jack Knight. 1995. "Models, Interpretations and Theories: Constructing Explanations of Institutional Emergence & Change." In *Explaining Social Institutions* Ed. J. Knight and I. Sened. University of Michigan Press.

Expertise, Authority, Democratic Politics

- Phillip Kitcher. 2006. "Public Knowledge and the Difficulties of Democracy," *Social Research* 73: 1205-1224.
- Elizabeth Anderson. 2011. "Democracy, Public Policy & Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony," *Episteme* 8: 144-164.
- Steven Epstein. 2000. "Democracy, Expertise & AIDS Treatment Activism." In *Science, Technology, & Democracy*. Edited by D.L. Kleinman. SUNY Press. [Pages 15-32].
- Elizabeth Anderson. 2006. "The Epistemology of Democracy," *Episteme* 3:8-22
- James Johnson. 2011. "Between Democratic Faith & Political Inquiry: A Pragmatist Approach to Visualizing Publics," *European Journal of Pragmatics & American Philosophy* 3:167-85 [+Images]

Schedule

January

21- Introduction

23- MLK Essays; Editorial + Daly

NOTE THIS IS A FRIDAY!!!!

26 – Holmes; Spelman

28 – Pettit; Rorty

February

2 – Myerson; Schelling; Rubinstein

4 – Ullman-Margalit (x2)

9 – Rawls; Anderson

11 – Okin; Mills

16 – Orr & Johnson

18 – Sen

23 – Akire

25 – Sen (x2)

March

2 – Muthoo; Agarwal

4 – Schelling; Hart/Case

9-11 – *Spring Break*

(No Class)

16 – Reynolds *et. al.*;

Hollenbach *et.al.*

18 – Cohen & Dawson;

Anderson; Shelby

23 – Allen; Ostrom

25 – Ostrom

30 – Taylor; Bicchieri

April

1 – Calvert (x2)

6 – Knight

8 – Anderson (x2)

13 – Kitcher

15 – Epstein; Johnson

(Written Assignment Distributed)

20 – Presentations

22 – Presentations

27 – Presentations

29 – Presentations

(Written Assignment Due)

May

4-8 – Oral Finals

Course & Instructor Policies or, “The Fine Print” (Spelled out at ludicrous length mostly because the University Legal Counsel insists on this sort of legalistic stuff) ...

Policy on Attendance: Given the nature of the class *attendance is not optional*. If you need to miss class for some reason, please let me know.

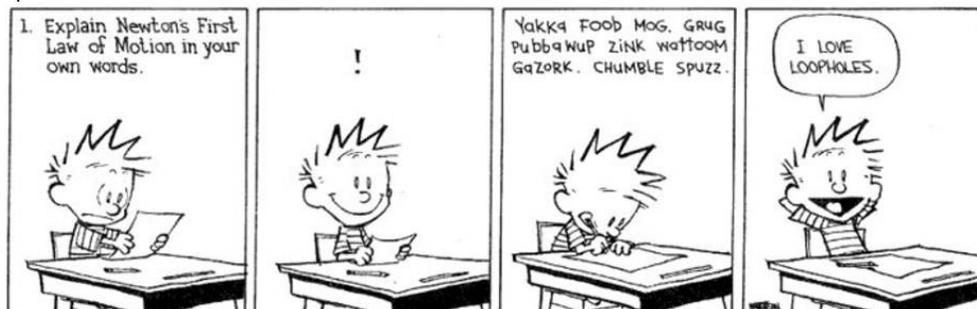
Policy on Electronic Devices: My policy on electronic devices in class (meaning any screen connected to silicon chips) is restrictive. No cell phones at all! Turn them off and put them away when you get to class. Laptops or tablets are allowed solely for access assigned readings or notes. In general, you should disconnect from the social media and phone/text communication media. In fact, *if you have readings or notes you will need in class, you are better off getting them off of your devices and onto paper*. If I detect you engaged in social media during class, I will ask you to shut off your device and put it away. If this happens a second (or subsequent) time I will ask you to leave class. This will obviously impact your ability to participate in discussions and thereby your final grade.

Policy on classroom interactions: In order to create a classroom environment that supports respectful, critical inquiry through the open exchange of ideas, we will observe the following guidelines: (i) Treat every member of the class with respect, even if you disagree with their views; (ii) Recognize that reasonable persons can differ on any number of perspectives, opinions, inferences, and conclusions; (iii) Because constructive disagreement sharpens thinking, deepens understanding, and reveals novel insights, I do not just expect disagreement but encourage it; (iv) Welcome and listen to all viewpoints with the caveat that none – including the instructor’s – is immune from scrutiny and debate; (v) Your grade – to repeat – will be based on the quality of reasoning and evidence you bring to bear in presenting and defending your views whatever they happen to be. *There is no party line in the class*. So, whether or not you agree with the instructor has no bearing on your grade.

Statement on Academic Honesty: I operate on the assumption that every student in the course is familiar with and abides by the College policies on Academic Honesty. If you are not familiar with those policies, please go to the Board on Academic Honesty web page and make yourself familiar with it. You can find that page here: <http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/>.

I will provide specific instructions for each course assignment. In any event, I take a very dim view of cheating and plagiarism of any sort. It makes me very cranky. Very! I will refer any and all suspected instances of cheating or plagiarism to the Board on Academic Honesty. The easiest way to avoid such unpleasantness is to not succumb to temptations to cheat, plagiarize, bend the rules, exploit loopholes, and so forth.

CALVIN & HOBBS



As a default, if you are unsure in any way about whether something is “allowed” just ask me.

NOTE on “Technological Progress”- I consider using any sort of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool to produce your written work dishonest and will treat suspect instances accordingly. Why? Remember the first week of class. It’s about learning how to think and imagine.

Students with Disabilities: If you have a documented disability of any sort that you believe will impact your ability to meet the expectations laid out in this syllabus, I encourage you to speak with me in person as early in the term as is possible. If you are not comfortable speaking to me directly, you should contact the Office of Disability Services who can assist you in making your needs clear to myself and your other teachers. In any case, we can make reasonable accommodation regarding the assignments. You can find them here: (<https://www.rochester.edu/college/disability/index.html>).

Religious Observances: If you need to miss class for or if assignments conflict with religious observances, please just let me know. We will make alternate arrangements.

Policy on late assignments: Except in the direst circumstances, I very much frown upon late assignments. I will deduct one third of a letter grade for every day an assignment is late. (This means if your grade would have been a B+, one day late gets you a deduction to B, two days a deduction to B-, etc.). If you anticipate a problem getting an assignment in on time (due to, say, religious holidays, travel for athletic teams, etc.) please speak to me *in advance*. I will make reasonable accommodation to address such difficulties. In particular, I will gladly accommodate faith-based exceptions to any expectations or assignments laid out above.