The recent, radical partisanship that now promotes dysfunctional logjams in American politics calls into question the meaning and character of political knowledge. Concomitantly, it jeopardizes the value of public discourse. This problem is exacerbated by intellectual trends that have undermined the stability of natural or social scientific and moral knowledge – even knowledge itself – during the past generation, despite the often illuminating value of the arguments put forth in these trends. A gap in political understanding has emerged from the waning interest in coherent intellectual frames for girding political ethics – such as conservatisms (Strauss, etc.), liberalisms (Rawls, etc.), Marxisms (the collapse of the dysfunctional Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact), and the delegitimation of political theory itself (stemming from deconstruction & poststructuralism). The manipulation of publics by corporations, authoritarian populisms, and states, the tools for which have been enhanced by the internet (despite its value), and growing socio-economic inequality, extend and deepen the challenge.

Drawing on Dewey, Popper, Arendt, Skinner, Foucault, and Wolin for conceptualizing political knowledge, the seminar addresses political interpretation as a problem of meaning and power, a practice that is dedicated to exposing common worlds even as its practice changes them. This problem and its associated practices evidence a kind of indeterminate knowledge and worldly engagement that calls for our attention. Material from classic texts in political theory, philosophy, practices of interpretation (e.g., journalism, social media, blogs), spheres of socio-economic practice (e.g., health care, education), recent scholarly articles, and contemporary political/public discourse form bases of our interrogations and explorations.

This seminar satisfies the program’s “methodology” requirement. It will be useful for graduate students at any level and particularly those who have backgrounds in Western political thought and/or theories of social science. It is intended to aid political and democratic understanding as well as research projects (e.g., master’s theses; doctoral dissertations) – particularly in political theory but potentially for those mostly writing in other “sub-fields.” Writing requirements include a mid-term assignment and a final research paper that is to be based on but not limited to course readings.
Week I (1/30) – Introduction; overview of seminar

Part I – Theory, History, Practice, and Political Knowledge

Week II (2/6) – Weber & Modern Social Science

Week III (2/13) – Public Knowledge & Democracy (Lippmann, Dewey)

Week IV (2/20) – Positivism, Political Science, and Democracy (Popper)

Week V (2/27) – The Public Realm (Habermas)

Week VI (3/6) – Paradigms and Public Truth (Kuhn)

Week VII (3/13) – Politics, Judgment, and Truth (Arendt, Wolin)

Week VIII (3/20) – Social Interpretation (Taylor, Walzer)

Week IX (3/27) – Power/Knowledge (Foucault)

Part II – Reason, Conviction, Emotion, Technology, and Political Interpretation

Week X (4/3) – Journalism

Week XI (4/10) – Social Media


SPRING RECESS

Week XIII (5/1) – Presentations I

Week XIV (5/8) – Presentations II