

Contemporary Social and Political Philosophy

Cal State Northridge | Department of Philosophy | Fall 2026 | T Th 4:00-5:15pm | JR 352

Where does society end and politics begin?

One question, fifteen weeks, five ways of asking it.

INSTRUCTOR	Dr. Jorge A. Muñoz ST 533 jorgem@csun.edu
OFFICE HOURS	T Th 11:30am–2:15pm, and by appointment
FORMAT	Flipped. Lectures posted in advance; class time is discussion.
READING	30–40 pages per week. Firm. Every week of the semester.
EVERY CLASS	Opens with a Question of the Day. Closes with an Exit Question. Both written.
CATALOG	GE Area 3B Humanities Writing Intensive (W.I.) Information Competence (I.C.)

COURSE CATALOG

Prerequisite: Completion of the lower division writing requirement. Philosophical examination of one or more issues of current public debate. Topics might include social and economic inequality, biotechnology, environmental justice, housing and homelessness, trans rights, or the abolition of prisons and police. Regular written assignments will be required. Available for General Education, Area 3B Humanities. (I.C.) (W.I.)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

A pair of jeans. A morning commute. A neighborhood. None of these feels political — and yet each is entangled in structures of labor, law, power, and exclusion that were built by collective decisions and could be remade by them. This course examines how contemporary philosophers have drawn, defended, and erased the line between the social and the political.

We begin with a methodological question: what is a social explanation, and can social facts be reduced to facts about individuals? We then follow the boundary dispute through four arenas of contemporary debate — the distribution of wealth and of climate burdens; the liberal-communitarian argument over whether the self is prior to its community; the political manufacture of citizenship and race; and the standing of nations against the authority of democratic publics. Readings pair canonical statements (Rawls, Nozick, Sandel, Taylor, Young, MacIntyre, Walzer) with contemporary responses (Fricker, Fraser, Mills, Shelby, Shue, Caney, Mounk).

Each framework is developed and then tested against a live public controversy: homelessness and housing policy, the racial wealth gap, environmental siting decisions, biotechnology and behavioral genetics, transgender rights, and the abolition of prisons and police. Theory comes first — the examples show what the theory is for, and what is at stake in getting it wrong.

By the end of the course you will be equipped to defend a considered answer to the opening question. That includes the possibility that the question is badly posed — because every human act in public space may already be both social and political at once.

HOW THIS COURSE WORKS

Flipped classroom

Lecture material is posted in advance and assigned alongside the primary texts. Class time is reserved for discussion. Preparation is therefore not optional: a session in which nobody has read is a session with nothing to discuss.

Question of the Day → discussion → Exit Question

Every session opens with a written question on that day's reading, answered individually before discussion begins. Every session closes with a written question drawing on the discussion just held. Both are written, so participating fully never requires speaking in front of the class. Together they are your participation grade.

Reading load

30–40 pages per week. This is a firm standard and it is honored every week of the semester. Posted lecture material is in addition to it.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND MATERIALS

Matravers, D., & Pike, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Debates in contemporary political philosophy: An anthology*. Routledge.

All other readings are in the course reader on Canvas. Full citations appear in the bibliography at the end of this syllabus.

ASSIGNMENTS

Participation – Question of the Day and Exit Question (20%)

Participation here is written, not verbal. Each session opens with a Question of the Day on that day's reading. These are written so they cannot be answered by someone who hasn't read — each names a specific distinction or argument in the text. They are graded credit/no-credit on evidence of preparation, not on polish.

Each session closes with an Exit Question drawing on the discussion just held. These are harder, and several are deliberately unresolved — they are the questions the class did not settle. Students who prefer not to speak in class are not disadvantaged.

Exit questions are also where paper topics are found.

Three Short Writing Assignments (20%)

Approximately 750 words each. A focused argumentative response to an assigned text: reconstruct a specific argument, then assess it. No outside sources — the work is close reading and argument evaluation.

Two Short Research Papers (15%)

Approximately 1,000 words each. Each requires locating, evaluating, and citing sources beyond the assigned reading, and accounting for why those sources were judged reliable. These build toward the scaffolded paper.

Scaffolded Paper (20%)

A five-page argumentative paper on a topic of your choosing, developed in stages across the semester and administered through Canvas: proposal, framework memo, full draft, response to criticism, revised final paper.

The constraint: take something currently treated as *merely social* rather than political — housing, medical decision-making, gender recognition, policing, environmental siting, family arrangements — and argue whether that classification holds.

You must locate and evaluate sources on the contemporary public debate and bring at least one framework from the course to bear on it. The topic carries forward into the final project.

This assignment carries the drafting-and-revision requirement for W.I. and the source location, evaluation, and citation requirements for I.C.

Final Project (25%)

Individual or group. An applied treatment of the same topic — a policy brief, a structured debate, a public-facing presentation, or an extended argumentative essay. Students choosing the group option must submit an individually authored written component, which is what is graded for individual writing outcomes.

GRADES

Component	Weight
Participation (Question of the Day + Exit Question)	20%
3 Short Writing Assignments	20%
2 Short Research Papers	15%
Scaffolded Paper	20%
Final Project	25%
Total	100%

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Area 3B — Humanities

Each course meeting the Humanities requirement must fulfill at least two of the following outcomes. This course fulfills 1 and 2. Students will:

1. Explain and reflect critically upon the human search for meaning and values as expressed in the arts, literatures, religions, philosophies, and/or thought traditions.
2. Analyze, interpret, and reflect critically upon creative expression, discourse, or thought traditions from diverse perspectives.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the role of the humanities in shaping human experience and cultural traditions.
4. Recognize and evaluate the relationship between the humanities and contemporary life.

Writing Intensive (W.I.)

W.I. courses require a minimum of 2,500 words of assigned writing and must fulfill all three outcomes. Students will:

1. Develop and clearly define their ideas through writing.
2. Ethically integrate sources of various kinds into their writing.
3. Compose texts through drafting, revising, and completing a finished product.

Information Competence (I.C.)

I.C. courses develop students' ability to use information retrieval tools and practices and to evaluate and synthesize information competently and ethically. Students will:

1. Organize and synthesize information in order to communicate effectively.
2. Explain the legal and ethical dimensions of the use of information.

Course-Specific Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Explain competing accounts of social explanation — methodological individualism, holism, and mechanism-based approaches — and assess what each implies for political argument.
2. Reconstruct and evaluate the major contemporary theories of distributive justice, and apply them to concrete distributive and climate controversies.
3. Analyze the liberal-communitarian debate over the constitution of the self and the limits of political justification.
4. Assess philosophical accounts of citizenship, group difference, and racial justice, and evaluate their competing prescriptions.
5. Evaluate competing accounts of nationalism, democratic legitimacy, and public deliberation.
6. Locate, evaluate, and ethically integrate scholarly and public sources bearing on a contemporary political controversy.
7. Develop a sustained written argument through proposal, drafting, response to criticism, and revision.
8. Articulate and defend a considered position on the relationship between the social and the political.

OUTCOME MAPPING

Designation	Outcome	Satisfied by
Area 3B (1)	Critical reflection on the search for meaning and values in philosophical traditions	All assigned readings; Short Writing Assignments; Question of the Day
Area 3B (2)	Analysis and interpretation of thought traditions from diverse perspectives	Canonical/contemporary pairings throughout; Exit Questions; Final Project
W.I. (1)	Develop and clearly define ideas through writing	Short Writing Assignments; Scaffolded Paper; Exit Questions
W.I. (2)	Ethically integrate sources of various kinds	Short Research Papers; Scaffolded Paper
W.I. (3)	Compose through drafting, revising, completing	Scaffolded Paper (proposal → framework memo → draft → response → revision)
I.C. (1)	Organize and synthesize information to communicate effectively	Short Research Papers; Scaffolded Paper; Final Project
I.C. (2)	Explain the legal and ethical dimensions of the use of information	Short Research Papers (source evaluation and citation rationale); Scaffolded Paper

W.I. word count: 3 Short Writing Assignments (≈2,250) + 2 Short Research Papers (≈2,000) + Scaffolded Paper stages and final (≈2,300) ≈ 6,550 words of assigned formal writing — exclusive of the Question of the Day, Exit Questions, and the Final Project.

POLICIES

Missed Assignments

Makeup work will be given only upon demonstrated (i.e., through proof of illness or emergency) need. Makeup work needed for any other reason may be submitted in the first week after the missed assignment with a 25% penalty, except for extenuating circumstances. Any makeup assignment must be scheduled at the mutual convenience of the student and instructor. All projects must be completed to pass the course.

Students with Disabilities

Any student with a disability that prevents the fullest expression of her or his talents should see me as soon as possible to discuss any alterations that need to be made to the course requirements and format.

Academic Misconduct Will Not Be Tolerated

Any subversion or compromise of academic integrity constitutes academic misconduct. Examples include (among others) falsification, unauthorized assistance with, or plagiarism of, reports, term papers, research papers or other written documents; giving or receiving unauthorized aid on examinations; and disruption of classes. Proper action will be taken if a student is found to be involved in an act of academic misconduct, and a grade of 0 will be given for the assignment in question. Please refer to the provisions of your Student Handbook for further explanation.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

- **Permitted:** using AI tools to check grammar and mechanics on your own drafts; to explain a difficult passage in an assigned reading; or to generate practice questions for your own study.
- **Not permitted:** submitting AI-generated text as your own writing; using AI to produce arguments, summaries, or analyses that appear in your submitted work; or using AI to locate or summarize sources for the research papers or scaffolded paper, since locating and evaluating sources is itself the skill being assessed.
- **Required disclosure:** any permitted use must be disclosed in a brief note at the end of the assignment stating what tool was used and for what. Undisclosed use is treated as academic misconduct. If you are unsure whether a use is permitted, ask before you use it — asking is always safe.

Be Punctual

It is important that we start class on time. This is a discussion course, and your participation is both important and required. Do not be shy: philosophy needs to be discussed. Because the Question of the Day is administered at the start of class, late arrival means a missed assignment.

You MUST Come Prepared

Class is discussion of the readings, so you must keep up with them. Readings and posted lecture material should be completed prior to the date indicated. Discussion will presuppose that everyone has done the assigned work. If anything is unclear and you would like an explanation or further discussion, raise it at the beginning of the period.

Drop Deadline

The deadline this semester for dropping a course with only the instructor's signature is [DATE]. After that date, withdrawals require additional approvals and can be obtained only for “serious and compelling reasons.”

My office hours are open to everyone; feel free to contact me anytime. If you cannot attend office hours, speak to me after class so we can arrange a suitable time to meet.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Schedule and procedures are subject to change at the discretion of the professor. All weeks fall within the 30–40 page standard.

Wk	Topic	The question	Readings
META TOPIC 1 – THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL EXPLANATION			
Week 1	What Is Social Explanation?	<i>Can you explain a society without talking about individuals — or an individual without talking about society?</i>	Lukes, “Methodological Individualism,” pp. 12–21 Little, Varieties of Social Explanation, Ch. 1 (pp. 1–12)
Week 2	Causal Mechanisms and Social Ontology	<i>When is a cause really a cause? What turns “rent went up” from a fact into an explanation?</i>	Little, Ch. 2: Causal Analysis (pp. 13–38) Guala & Hindriks (2023), opening sections through the bridge-builder framework
Week 3	Social Construction, Knowledge, and Power	<i>What if you aren't believed — and the reason is who you are?</i>	Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, Introduction (pp. 1–8) and Ch. 1, testimonial-injustice core (pp. 9–29)
Week 4	Methodological Pluralism and the Recognition Debate	<i>Is injustice about money or about respect — and what happens when fixing one breaks the other?</i>	Fraser, opening statement in Fraser & Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition? (pp. 7–40)
META TOPIC 2 – DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE			
Week 5	Foundational Theories of Justice	<i>You didn't choose where you started. So what do you owe, and what are you owed?</i>	Rawls, A Theory of Justice, §§1, 3, 11, 13, 17 Nozick, “Distributive Justice,” pp. 73–81
Week 6	Equality and the Site of Justice	<i>Is the problem that some have too little, or that others have too much? And does justice reach inside your private choices?</i>	Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” pp. 82–99 Cohen, “Where the Action Is,” pp. 100–114
Week 7	Climate Justice	<i>Whose emissions count as survival and whose as luxury? And if the polluters are dead, who pays?</i>	Shue (1993), “Subsistence Emissions and Luxury Emissions” Caney (2005), pp. 747–763
META TOPIC 3 – LIBERALISM AND COMMUNITARIANISM			
Week 8	The Liberal Self and Political Legitimacy	<i>Are you the author of your values or their inheritor? And can a state justify itself to people who agree on nothing else?</i>	Sandel, “Liberalism and the Limits of Justice,” pp. 140–159 Rawls, “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” pp. 160–172
Week 9	Critiques and Defenses of Liberalism	<i>Is community a correction to liberalism, or a rival to it?</i>	Gutmann, “Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,” pp. 182–194 Taylor, “Cross-Purposes,” pp. 195–212
META TOPIC 4 – CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY, AND JUSTICE			
Week 10	Citizenship and Multiculturalism	<i>Does treating everyone the same actually treat everyone equally?</i>	Young, “Polity and Group Difference,” pp. 219–238 Parekh, “Contemporary Liberal Responses to Diversity,” pp. 239–247
Week 11	Racial Justice and Political Philosophy	<i>Was the social contract ever meant for everyone? And what holds a group together — shared identity, or shared injury?</i>	Mills, The Racial Contract, Introduction Shelby, We Who Are Dark, Introduction and opening of Ch. 1

META TOPIC 5 – NATIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY			
Week 12	Nationalism and Patriotism	<i>Do you owe your country anything it hasn't earned?</i>	MacIntyre, “Is Patriotism a Virtue?” pp. 286–300 Miller, “In Defence of Nationality,” pp. 301–318
Week 13	Democratic Theory	<i>Should democracy count what people already want, or change what they want?</i>	Elster, “The Market and the Forum,” pp. 325–341 Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” pp. 342–360
Week 14	Democracy Under Pressure	<i>When philosophy and the people disagree, who wins?</i>	Walzer, “Philosophy and Democracy,” pp. 361–379 Mounk, The People vs. Democracy, Introduction
SYNTHESIS AND CLOSE			
Week 15	Synthesis and Close	<i>In Week 1 you named one thing that wasn't political. Were you right?</i>	No new assigned reading. Return of Week 1 exit tickets; synthesis across the five meta-topics; Final Project due.

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- Selections by Cohen (G. A.), Cohen (J.), Elster, Frankfurt, Gutmann, MacIntyre, Miller, Nozick, Parekh, Rawls, Sandel, Taylor, Walzer, and Young are drawn from Matravers & Pike (2003).*