PHIL 6600 Social & Political Philosophy I:
**Grounded & Engaged Approaches to Political Theory/Philosophy**

**Term:** Fall 2022  
**Instructor:** Professor Monique Deveaux (MCKN 356) mdeveaux@uoguelph.ca  
**Format:** Weekly in-person seminar meetings, or online (if required).  
**When/Where:** Thursdays 11:30-2:20 – in MCKN 521

**Course Synopsis:**
This course examines the shift away from ‘ideal theory’ and towards more grounded and engaged normative approaches to political theory/philosophy. Proponents of these approaches argue that there’s much value in centering people’s lived experiences when we undertake normative theorizing. According to them, determining whether a social practice or state of affairs is unjust, and how to make it more just, is a matter best worked out contextually and in ways that include the voices of those suffering from oppression.

Engaged/grounded normative theory approaches reject both ‘ideal theorizing’ — i.e., the method of devising theories of justice from abstract principles or idealized hypothetical worlds — as well as ‘applied philosophy’ approaches that seek merely to apply ideal ethical principles, norms, or judgements to real-world cases. There’s a wide variety of research methods that we can consider to be grounded or engaged: historically contextual approaches to political problems, interpretive methods in the social sciences, qualitative interviews, ethnographic research, discourse analysis, etc.

We’ll begin the course by reading critiques of ideal theory and theorizing, then move on to philosophical defenses and examples of grounded and engaged approaches to ‘doing’ theory differently. The readings below include ‘realist’ approaches to political philosophy; theorizing that makes central use of empirical research, such as qualitative interviews and ethnographic studies; engaged, participatory, and solidaristic approaches to normative theorizing; Indigenous, grounded/place-based theorizing; and dialogic, democratic, and reciprocity-based approaches to theorizing.

**Assignments & Means of Evaluation**

**Course Assessment**
- Oral expression (in-class/video class discussion)*: 15%  
- 10 short (200 words) written reflections pieces (due before class)**: 15%  
- Oral presentation + written version of presentation (2000 words/5-6 pages, or else presentation slides)***: 25%  
- Final research paper (7000-8000 words): 45% (due mid-December)

*This component is not just attendance; it is about how well you convey your ideas verbally and engage in discussion with others as a constructive interlocutor. Includes the roundtable at the beginning of class.

**10 one-page (300 words max) response pieces posted to our Courselink Discussion space. These should engage with one (or more) of the readings for that day, and can be informal; they may also be substantially replies to another student’s piece for that day. These will be marked together as a dossier at the end of the course, however, I will give you written feedback on your first one. If you would benefit
from comments on subsequent ones, please ask me. You can submit these for any of our classes, even the day of your oral presentation.

***this is an extended critical analysis (*not* summary) of the course readings for that day. Please give this to me no later than two days after your oral presentation.

Course Requirements
You are expected to read the assigned readings (usually about 70 - 100 pages per week) attend class meetings regularly, and participate in class discussion. Prior to most (10) classes, you should submit a short, written reflection (200-300 words), in which you reflect critically on some aspect of that day’s reading.

There are two longer written assignments for the course: a 2000-word critical essay focused on the course readings you’re focusing on in your oral class presentation; and a final paper of 7000-8000 words (essentially the length of a journal-article) due in mid-December. If you miss any readings due to absence, please make sure to catch up, as we will often refer back to material covered in prior classes.

Course objectives
This course will introduce you to a family of approaches to political philosophy/theory known as “grounded and engaged approaches to normative theorizing.” More generally, the course aims to develop your analytical and critical reasoning skills; your ability to insights and arguments; and your ability to write cogently and concisely.

Learning outcomes
By the end of the course, you should have a sound overview of grounded and engaged approaches to political theory/philosophy, and understand the strengths and challenges of several of these different approaches and methods. You should also be able to employ one or more of these methods in your own research and writing.

Readings:
This course uses books, book chapters, and journal articles available through our online library catalogue. In a few cases I will supply a PDF of the reading in advance. Approximately 100-150 pages per week of reading. If you are sourcing readings for the day you’re presenting, just make sure we have access to the reading in digital form.

**Schedule of Readings and Topics (subject to change)**

The readings for the first 7 classes are set, but the readings for the subsequent classes will depend on what students choose for their presentations and want to read/discuss. I have provided a list of suggested readings (starting after the set readings), grouped by theme, but you are also welcome to source and assign readings of your own choosing.

For additional sources, see also resources like https://engagedtheory.net/resources/, and for Indigenous political theory, https://cpsa-acsp.ca/syllabus/ and https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/

**Sept. 8 – Conceptual work: ideal vs. non-ideal theory; applied vs. grounded philosophy**


Sept. 15 – no class (Deveaux at conference)

Sept. 22 Critiques (and defenses) of ‘ideal theory’ - part I
• Charles W. Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” Hypatia 20, 3: 165-84.

Sept. 29 - Critiques (and defenses) of ‘ideal theory’ - part II – political realism
• Michael Goodhart, Injustice: Political Theory for the Real World (2018), Introduction & Ch. 1 (pp. 1-45)
• (tentative) Hwa Young Kim and David Axelsen, “Ideal Theorizing as a Political Weapon” (2022 draft paper, to be distributed)

Oct. 6 – Calls for grounded & engaged philosophy
• James Tully, “Deparochializing Political Theory and Beyond,” ch. 3 in James Tully: To Think and Act Differently, ed. Alex Livingston (Routledge, 2022): pp. 41-52

Oct. 13 – Community-engaged, participatory, & solidaristic approaches to theory
Oct. 20 – Ethnography & political theory: I [this class will be held over Teams/Zoom]


Oct. 27 - Ethnography & political theory: II


Student-led discussions (you choose the readings)

Nov. 3

Nov. 10

Nov. 17

Nov. 24

Dec. 1 - please reserve, in case we need it)

Suggested other readings by theme (or source your own readings)

**Feminist grounded normative theory**


**Indigenous reflections on theorizing**

- Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2021), Ch. 1 (pp. 21-47).
• Dale Turner, “Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy,” ch. 5 in *This is Not a Peace Pipe* (2006)

**Grounded theory and racial justice** (historical approaches)

• Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)
• Frederick Douglass, *Angela Davis Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, written by himself* (2010). [incl. Davis’s lectures on liberation]
• Alex Livingston, “Power for the Powerless: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Late Theory of Civil Disobedience,” Journal of Politics 82, 2 (2020): 700-713.
• Angela Davis, Lectures on liberation (1970) – lectures 1 and 2

**Grounded theory and racial justice:** (contemporary, social movement-based approaches — the Movement for Black Lives #BLM/M4BL)

• B. Hogan et al., *The Movement for Black Lives: Philosophical Perspectives* (2021)
• (see esp. chapter by Olúfemi O. Táíwò, “Reconsidering Reparations: The Movement for Black Lives and Self-Determination”)
• Deva Woodly, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (2021), esp. ch’s 2, 3, & 4

**Grounded responses to colonialism and imperialism**

• Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)
• Catherine Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (2017)

**Non-violence and political resistance**