Since the autumn of 1996, the Deans of SAS and Wharton have sponsored a once-a-month reading group open to all University faculty. The idea has been to develop each year a series of articles, original documents, and the occasional novel focused on a common theme and to hold once-a-month lunches during which whoever comes that month can discuss the readings. These are chosen by an organizing committee, sometimes co-opting faculty colleagues with specialist expertise when the subject matter seems to call for this. Readings are selected both to provoke thought and to fall well outside the daily professional concerns of most individual faculty members who attend. The objectives are to get people out of their groove once a month and, perhaps more subtly, to remind them that faculty members from the different parts of the University have more concerns in common than sometimes seems obvious. The enterprise seems to have had some success at both aims. (For each meeting we usually find some faculty member with specific expertise in the area of the readings to make a short introduction. That helps too, particularly with the subtler agenda.)

Over the past two years our reading group went through three phases, each dealing with issues at the intersection of politics, law, and morality. We began with reflections on destruction, moral responsibility, and collective memory in modern war: W.G. Sebald’s Zurich Lectures on mass bombing of civilians during World War II and Telford Taylor on the Nuremberg trials. Then, in the spring and fall of 2008, we had a series of discussions on what the United States was originally supposed to be about, how the American political experiment has evolved over time, and some enduring political and constitutional dilemmas. Readings included Tom Paine’s “Common Sense,” several meetings’ worth of selections from the Federalist Papers (in the discussion of which Frank Goodman of the Law School faculty was particularly helpful), portions of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, current disputes about the legality of torture and wiretapping, and Richard Hofstadter’s famous essay on the paranoid style in American politics. (I had no idea how topical this last would prove to be.) In spring 2009 we took a more scientific turn with a series of stimulating sessions organized by Howard Goldfine and Dupont Guerry of the Medical School concerning stem cell research and related bio-ethics questions.

For the 2009-2010 academic year we propose to follow up and expand on some of the previous issues with a series of readings on the general theme of “Republics, ancient and modern”. Jeff Weintraub, a longtime participant who has taught in the Political Science Department and the Program on Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, and I are assembling the readings.

The city-republics of ancient Greece and Rome, along with the images of these republics in theory and imagination, have provided some of the most crucial points of reference for thinking about politics and society throughout the whole of western history. On the other hand, for several centuries now political thought and argument have focused on the differences as well as continuities between ancient and modern republics. So it makes sense to begin with readings from and about antiquity. We will start with two classic accounts of governance and society in Sparta and Athens (from Plutarch on Lycurgus and the account in Thucydides of the funeral oration of Pericles), complemented by some more recent secondary sources. We will then move on to the Roman republic, then to the city-states of Renaissance Italy, and then to varieties of early-modern republicanism, including republican ideas from England’s 17th-century era of revolution and the 18th-century French Enlightenment (the latter certainly featuring Rousseau’s attack on the theater, speaking as a “citizen of Geneva,” from the standpoint of republican values). This will take us more or less up to the eve of the French and American revolutions. We anticipate closing with
Benjamin Constant’s famous and influential 1816 essay contrasting the "liberty of the ancients" with the "liberty of the moderns".

This program will surely occupy the academic year. We can continue in this vein the following year or do something entirely different, as the attendees prefer.

The venue this year will change away from our home of recent years in the Penn Humanities Forum. (The building has been returned to other uses.) We will meet on the other side of Locust Walk in Steinberg-Dietrich in the Dean’s Conference Room (SHDH 1040). There is a back entrance to Steinberg-Dietrich for anyone coming from the Medical School, but the main entrance is under the trellis at 3620 Locust Walk. The time remains noon to 1:20 sharp. The dates (all Thursdays) will be October 15th, November 12th, December 3rd, January 28th, February 25th, March 25th, and April 22d. A buffet lunch will be served at each meeting.

From time to time it makes sense to renew the mailing list, as people come and go from the University; and this announcement represents such an attempt. If you would like to receive announcements and readings going forward, please send me an e-mail saying so.

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