

CULT 860, SOCI 833: WHAT IS POLITICS?

Prof: Roger Lancaster – Fall 2016

Tues, 7:20—10 PM, Innovation Hall 139

*What:* We routinely speak of “politics” or “the political.” But what do we mean when we say these words? Coercion and force? Policy? Consent and cooperation? Ideology? Something else? This course will explore the question by interrogating various objects that have been deemed political: e.g., friendship, taboo, law, morality, justice, violence, terror.

*Why:* The humanities and the interpretive social sciences have long struggled to give coherent account of what might be meant by power, politics, and the like. Successive waves of scholarship purport to offer new definitions, each founded on a critique of antecedent definitions. We ride the prevailing wave—but perhaps we, too, delude ourselves in thinking that we already know the answer to the question. Thus the interrogative approach of this course, which puts classics and postmoderns and their critics in conversation with each other: its goal is to provide working materials for engaged scholarship in the field of cultural studies, broadly understood to include textual, historical, and sociological research.

*About:* Each week a different student or pair of students will be responsible for facilitating class discussion. The presenters will initiate a conversation, in workshop form, around the material, helping us to understand the arguments being developed and to draw connections between the readings (including prior readings).

*Writing Assignments:* Students will write a term paper on an approved topic of interest. Alternatively, students may propose other projects: collaborative work, or demonstrated traction on their field statements, or some other meritorious means of working with the course materials.

*Grades:* Evaluations will be based on 1) class participation, including formal presentations, and 2) a term paper (or alternative project), which utilizes course materials to explore a subject of interest to you.

*Procedures:* We will seminar over the material. The presenters’ role will be to get the discussion started, to keep the discussion going, to focus the conversation, and to prod classmates with relevant questions. Should the presenters experience difficulties, it will be the collective responsibility of the class to help out. *If you invoke specific passages from texts, prepare them properly; e.g., “The author has been arguing such and such; she spells out her case on page 34 (mid-page) when she says [quote].”* This form is *not* intended to cause anxiety; it is intended to develop your public speaking and thinking skills, and to encourage collective responsibility and active collaboration. Toward those ends, we will all help each other out.

*Spirit:* We will seek a lively, thoughtful, critical engagement with the texts. This means that we will not simply celebrate the field. We will not put across interpretations with verbal histrionics, nor will we relish the “cultic” function associated with the mastery of code words, the use of arcane language, the recognition of secret handshakes, and the like. We will explain our terms. We will focus on the *uses*, the *applications*, and the *relevance* of various ideas, and,

perhaps most importantly, on the application of plausible interpretive “tests.” We will try to maintain a sense of humor. Your initials here: \_\_\_\_\_.

*Required Books:*

Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky/Foucault Debate on Human Nature* (New Press, 2006).

Frederic Jameson, *An American Utopia*.

Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*.

Carl Schmidt, *The Concept of the Political*.

Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*.

*Recommended Books:*

Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

## **I. Introductions (30 August)**

### ON SOCIETY, SENTIMENT, AND IDEA

#### **2. What is friendship? (6 September)**

- Plato, *Lysis*, or Friendship, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/lysis.html>.
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 8 and 9, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.
- Jacques Derrida, “The Politics of Friendship,” *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (11) (1988): 632-44.
  - *Recommended Reading*: Robert Brain, excerpt from *Friends and Lovers*. An Exchange Between Durkheim and Tönnies on the Nature of Social Relations, with an Introduction by Joan Aldous, *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (6) (May 1972): 1191-1200.

#### **3. What is taboo? (13 Sept)**

- R. Radcliffe-Brown, “Taboo,” in Lessa and Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 46-56.
- Mary Douglas, “The Two Bodies,” from *Natural Symbols*, 93-112. “Ritual Uncleaness,” from *Purity and Danger*, 8-35.
- Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” from *Powers of Horror*, 1-31.
  - *Recommended Reading*: Georges Batailles, “The Link between Taboos and Death,” from *Erotism*, 40-48.

#### **4. Reification or bad faith? (20 Sept)**

- Georg Lukacs, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” from *History and Class Consciousness*.
- Jean-Paul Sartre, “Bad Faith,” chapter 2 from *Being and Nothingness*.

## ON COERCION AND CONSENT

**5. What is power? (27 Sept)**

- Max Weber, "What is Politics?" *Social Theory*, ed. Charles C Lemert.
- Max Weber, "Class, Status, and Party," *From Max Weber*, ed. Gerth and Mills, 180-195.
- Michel Foucault, "Body/Power," from *Power/Knowledge*, 55-62.
- Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Summer, 1982.
  - *Recommended Reading*: Jean Baudrillard, from *Forget Foucault*.

**6. What is violence? Part I (4 Oct)**

- Primo Levi, "from The Grey Zone," Hannah Arendt, "from Eichmann in Jerusalem," Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," Hannah Arendt, "from On Violence," Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "Symbolic Violence," Elaine Scarry, "from The Body in Pain," Mahmood Mamdani, from "When Victims Become Killers," and Giorgio Agamben, "The Witness," in Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, eds., *Violence in War and Peace*.
- Pierre Clastres, "Of Torture in Primitive Societies," from *Society Against the State*
  - *Recommended Reading*: Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*.

[11 October NO CLASS]

## ON LAW AND ORDER

**7. What is justice? (Part I) (18 Oct)**

- Plato, *The Republic*, Book I, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.
- Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky/Foucault Debate on Human Nature* (New Press, 2006).

**8. What is morality? (25 Oct)**

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part I ("On the Prejudices of Philosophers"), Part 3 ("What is Religious").
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, first essay ("Good and Evil," "Good and Bad") and second essay ("Guilt," "Bad Conscience," and the Like).
- René Girard, "Nietzsche versus the Crucified," from *The Girard Reader*.
  - *Recommended Reading*: Malcolm Bull, "Where is the Anti-Nietzsche?"

**9. What is (epistemic) violence? (Part 2) (1 Nov)**

- Norbert Elias, "On Transformations of Aggressiveness"
- Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

**10. What are rights? What is law? (8 Nov)**

- Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, 1995), Introduction and chapters 1, 2, 3.

- *Recommended Reading:* Roger Lancaster, “The New Pariahs: Sex, Crime, and Punishment in America” (Forthcoming, *The War on Sex*)

**I 1. Who is my enemy? (15 Nov)**

- Carl Schmidt, *The Concept of the Political*

**I 2. What is justice? (Part 2) (22 Nov)**

- Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, selections.

**I 3. What is violence? (Finale) (29 Nov)**

- Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (selections)

**I 4. (6 Dec) Whither Utopia?**

- Frederic Jameson, *An American Utopia* (selections)