

K20. 1248 Thinking Politically

fall 08/Professor George Shulman

office: rm 508

office hours: monday 4-6/tuesday 2-5/thursday 10-4 by appt

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The purpose of this course is to analyze what politics -as a concept and a practice- has meant in history, means to us now, and could mean. What distinguishes “politics” from other kinds of human activities? What makes an action or practice “political?” Is it credible to define a conceptual “idea” of “the political” that is not historical, a kind of platonic form defining what politics “really” is, as compared to, say, ethics, or aesthetics, to morality and art? Or is politics (and our sense of what is “political”) a changing human practice? We begin by closely reading one canonical theorist -Machiavelli. We proceed by using more modern texts to explore different “dimensions” of political life: the conceiving of interests pursued by rational actors; the forging of group identifications in relation to domination; the role of unconscious drives, anxieties, and fantasies in the making of political identities; the fostering of antagonism and of solidarity in politics; the role of “culture” in the forms of narratives, symbols and language more broadly; the place of rhetoric, persuasion and performance, since politics happens through speech to audiences; and the role of appearance and theatricality since politics is enacted on a public stage. Along the way we will consider different ways of understanding and practicing “democracy.” Our basic goal is to learn how to “think politically” about the world, by learning to understand politics in conventional and unconventional senses.

Required Texts

Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince and the Discourses (Modern Library ed. only)

Robert Tucker, ed, The Marx-Engels Reader (Second edition only, Norton)

xeroxed packet of readings provided free

Course Requirements

-attendance is mandatory

-class preparation

-read the New York Times DAILY

-a weekly 1-page (typed) response paper

-two 5-page essays about course texts

-final (optional) project relating course texts to current issue

Sep. 8: Introduction: defining what is “politics” and “political”

#1

- read:**
- *Aristotle, excerpts from The Politics
 - *Robert Darnton, “What was Revolutionary about the French Rev?”
 - *Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”
 - *Peter Euben, “The polis and globalization”

write: what is “politics?” What does it mean to say a person or act or practice or institution is “political” -or “democratic”?

Sep 15 Spatial and Temporal dimensions of Politics

#2

- read:**
- *Niccolo Machiavelli, The Discourses
Machiavelli’s preface/introduction
Book One: preface, chaps 1-7/9-12/16-18/25-26/34-35
40/47/53/55/58
Book Two: preface/ chaps 2/10/19/24/29
Book Three: chaps 1-3/7-9/30-31/35/41-42

write: For M, what characterizes a “republic” or makes a “free people”?

Sep 22: Political energy and Political Form: Constitutionalizing Politics

#3

- read:**
- *Sheldon Wolin, “Norm and Form: Constitutionalizing Democracy”
 - *Abraham Lincoln, “Lyceum Address”
 - *Henry Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”
 - *Abraham Lincoln, “Cooper Union Address”
 - *Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July 4th to the Negro”
 - *Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics”
 - *Staughton Lynd, “Coalition Politics or Non-Violent Revolution?”

write: Analyze how Lincoln/Rustin, compared to Thoreau/Douglass/Lynd, relate democracy to constitutions and origins.

Sep 29: Contingency, context, and political action

#4

- read:**
- *Machiavelli, The Prince
 - *Mary Dietz, “Trapping the Prince”

write: Why is “fortuna” the goddess of politics? What kind of character is needed and forged if the world is ruled by Fortuna, not God?

Oct 6 Violence & Power: the problem of morality in politics

#5

- read:**
- *Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”
 - *Hannah Arendt, “On Violence”
 - *Martin Luther King, “A Time to Break the Silence”
 - *Jonathan Schell, Introduction to Adam Michnik, Prison Letters

write: Assess Arendt’s distinction between violence and power
OR: Compare Machiavelli and MLK on violence -is it always wicked but sometimes necessary - when??- neither moral nor practical?

Oct. 13 holiday/no class

first paper due Wednesday October 15 by noon

Oct. 20 Liberal society I: liberal universalism and its Limits

#6

- read:**
- *Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" in Tucker Reader, p25-55
 - *James Madison, Federalist Papers "#10"
 - *George Lipsitz, "Possessive Investment in Whiteness"
 - *Barack Obama and Al Sharpton, speeches to DNC 2004

write: Compare how Marx and Madison characterize liberal society? In what consists the difference? OR: How does Crenshaw relate to Marx?

OR: use Marx and/or Crenshaw to compare Obama & Sharpton.

Oct 27 Liberal Society II:

#7

From formal democracy to domination in society

- read:**
- *Karl Marx, Tucker Reader, excerpts t.b.a.
 - *Catherine McKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State"
 - *Kimberlee Crenshaw, "Reel Time/Real Justice"

write: How does Marx (McKinnon/Crenshaw) analyze domination?

Nov 3 Domination and Identity I: antagonism

#8

- read:**
- *Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political p19-79
 - *Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" in Tucker Reader
 - *Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality"

write: Schmitt says defining friend & enemy is the "political" act: why?

OR: How do Marx &/or Rich imagine/foster group identification?

Nov 10 Domination and Identity II: anxiety, projection & disavowal

#9

- read:**
- *James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone" and "Letter to my Nephew"
 - *Susan Griffin, "The Way of Ideology"
 - *Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim-Bad Muslim"

write: Are distinctions between friend/enemy never justified? When? How?

Nov 17 Politics as Hegemony: Moving beyond Marx

#10

- read:** *Laclau/Mouffe, from Hegemony & Socialist Strategy

write: How do L & M move "beyond" Marx? Which of his assumptions do they reject?

Nov 24 Politics as re-signification: moving beyond identity politics

#11

- read:**
- *Michel de Certeau, from The Practice of Everyday Life
 - *Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"

write: What is "political" about re-defining signs and stories?

Dec 1 Politics as Mediating/Reconstituting Parts and Wholes

#12

- read:** *Jacques Ranciere, Dis-Agreement

Dec 8 Politics as Action in Concert

#13

- read:**
- *Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom"
 - *Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy"