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Polsc. 335

History of Western Political Thought

Fall 2015
TTh 12:00-1:15
Saunders 541
Office Hrs:
MF 11:00-12:00
Saunders 605

I. Description:

In this survey course of 2500 years of Western political thought from ancient Greece to the present, we will have frequent opportunities to connect the classic texts with our experiences. On the one hand, one can say that not much has changed over the two and half millennia. Humans have struggled with the same fundamental problems in their social life and attempted to manage them by creating narratives of meaning and structures of order. On the other hand, everything has changed because the historical circumstances are always new and different. Humans are constantly called upon to re-vision the arrangements of their social existence and justify them. Politics is the activity of this re-visioning. Philosophers, prophets, poets, visionaries, writers and critics raise the necessary questions of justice and equity, of ethical and unethical conduct, which people in power do not want to hear.

Looking at the contemporary U.S. and the world, we will find enough illustrations for many of the spiritual, ethical, moral and political questions that are raised in the texts we will be reading. We will ask the question whether these narratives of meaning are still alive or whether they have lost their power of persuasion in a culture in which everything has become commodified and is up for sale. This question, by the way, can certainly be raised in other societies also, for example, the societies in East Asia, Africa or Europe. In a world that becomes smaller as the result of the extension of the global economy and electronic communication, national and even civilizational boundaries are getting very porous. Yet reading major narratives of meaning from different time periods facilitates, as a result of historical distancing, the understanding of problems in our own time.

We will occasionally use movies to highlight the recurring tension between power and truth. I consider the movie *Sophie Scholl* (2005) a wonderful introduction into some of the major questions of the class. It presents the true story of the courageous 21-year old University student who in early 1943 organizes with her brother and student friends in Munich (Germany) an underground resistance group against the Nazi regime. After her arrest, she becomes sentenced to death and executed by Guillotine, together with her brother.

II. Requirements:

There will be a final exam. In addition, a movie review and two short papers (3 pages each) are required. The movie review will be scheduled after showing *Sophie Scholl*. The first short paper will be scheduled in the middle of the semester; the instructor will provide a list of topics. The second paper should focus on a topic that is connected with the text assigned to the group and was discussed by the members of the group. The paper can be a group authored project or an individually authored paper by each member in the group. It will be up to the members of groups to decide which format they want to pursue.

Each student will be placed in the second week of class in a group, which will be centered on one of the required texts. These groups will be asked to debate the texts themselves and present their interpretation(s) to the class as a whole. If the group thinks that specific or general contemporary issues can be enlightened by the perspective of that specific thinker, please, feel free to do so. The instructor will provide limited guidance for these discussions.

The grades will be based on the final exam (25%), the short papers (30%), the movie review (15%) and the group performance (25%). Class participation will even out discrepancies.

In order to avoid the possibility that students get lost during the semester, each student in the class has to make one office appointment with the instructor. An appointment list will be circulated in the second week.

The required text for the class is:

Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Classics of Political & Moral Philosophy*.

III. Format of the Class:

The class will be conducted around the lecture format and group discussions.

IV. Calendar of the Class:

8/26 General Introduction into the Class

8/28 Movie: *Sophie Scholl*.

9/2 Movie: *Sophie Scholl*.

9/4 The Greek Polis:
Myth and Philosophy:

9/9 Sophocles, *King Oedipus* and *Antigone*.

- 9/11 Continuation.
- 9/16 Group discussion of *Antigone*.
- 9/18 The Polis of Athens.
- 9/23 The role of Socrates.
- 9/25 Plato, *Gorgias*.
- 9/30 Continuation.
- 10/2 Group discussion of *Gorgias*.
- 10/7 The Impact of Christianity on Western political Thought.
- 10/9 Machiavelli's Discovery of Power.
- 10/14 Machiavelli, *The Prince*.
- 10/16 Group discussion of *The Prince*.
- 10/21 Thomas More, *Utopia*.
- 10/23 Group discussion of More's Utopia.
- 10/28 The Discovery and Conquest of America.
- 10/30 Las Casas' *Short Account*.
- 11/4 Election Day
- 11/6 Group discussion of Las Casas' *Short Account*.
- 11/11 Veterans Day
- 11/13 The Liberal Revolutions in France and America.
- 11/18 J. J. Rousseau vs. *The Federalist*.
- 11/20 Rousseau, *The Reveries*.
- 11/25 Group discussion of Rousseau's *Reveries*.
- 11/27 Thanksgiving.
- 12/2 The Age of Radical Revolutions.
- 12/4 V. Lenin, *What is to be done?*
- 12/9 Group discussion of Lenin's *What is to be done?*
- 12/18 Final Exam.