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Polsc. 335 (1) History of Western Political Thought Spring 2013

TTh 12:00-1:15
Saunders 541
Office Hrs:
M+F 11:00-
12:30
Saunders 605

I. Description:

We will visit in this course some of the major chapters in Western political thinking. Beginning with one of the most important ancient Greek playwrights, Aeschylus, we will see how human existence was initially understood as being part of a grand mythical context. However his plays, *Prometheus Bound* and the *Suppliants*, will also illustrate how human agency began to free itself from the world of the gods. The overwhelming mythical understanding of the human place in the cosmos became radically challenged by the philosopher Socrates and his most famous student, Plato. The ancient Greeks defined politics as the realm of human freedom that was constantly threatened by people full of themselves and consumed by the desire to dominate. Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* is a remarkable confrontation between truth and power.

We will touch on the role of Christianity in the shaping of the West when dealing with the emergence of the first new nation, namely England, in its turbulent 17th century. But before we go there we will confront Christianity's rather sad participation in the imperial conquest of the 'New World'. When reading the Dominican Las Casas' *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, we will enter a world of brutal violence. The actions Las Casas vividly recounts, received some legitimation by the Christian charge to proselytize the natives. We will discuss a process that one can call Christian imperialism.

The story of politics as we know it today emerged in the English 17th century. We will pursue the evolution of the first modern political formation. At the beginning of the century we see a king who is fully convinced that he is endowed with Divine Right. His son, Charles I, becomes beheaded in 1649 because of this kind of overreach. At the end of the century, in 1688/89, we find that royal power becomes contained in a Glorious Revolution. From then on the English monarchs are restricted in their power by the co-governance of the two houses of parliament. This model of government becomes the envy of the world. We will discuss in this dramatic context also the various aspects of Christian sectarian interventions in the revolutionary events and the escape of the Puritans and other groups to the American colonies.

Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 sets the tone for all future radical critique of the evolving capitalist economy. Their critique became the basis for revolutionary movements that changed large parts of the world in Europe, Asia, and even

America. We will discuss the implications of the success and failure of the revolutions. Yet we will also reflect on the need for radical critique in the contemporary world.

II. Requirements:

There will be a midterm and a final exam. In addition, one short (3 page) paper on questions relating to the course material is required. The paper will be scheduled sometime before the midterm exam. Each student has to participate in one panel discussion. The panels will be organized in the second week of class. Each panel will receive from the instructor questions to discuss one week before the scheduled session. The grades will be based on the two exams (each 30%), the paper (15%) and the panel discussion (15%). Class participation will take care of the rest of the percentage points.

The required texts for the class are:

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound and other Plays* (Penguin);
Plato, *Gorgias* (Penguin);
Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (Penguin);
D. Wooton (ed.), *Divine Right and Democracy*;
K. Marx and Fr. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Text Book Classics);
M. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (Hackett).

III. Format of the Class:

The class will be conducted around the lecture format. In addition, we will have irregular and scheduled discussions. Occasionally film material will be shown.

IV. Calendar of the Class:

1/8 General Introduction into Political Thought.
1/10 Continuation of the Discussion.
1/15 The Greek polis and tragedy.
1/17 Aeschylus, *Prometheus*.
1/22 Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*.
1/24 The Death of Socrates.
1/29 Plato, *Gorgias*.
1/31 Cont'd
2/5 The Impact of Christianity
2/7 The Conquest of the 'New World'
Las Casas, *A Brief Account*.
2/12 Cont'd

- 2/14 The English Formation.
- 2/19 Divine Right of Kings (Wooton, 99-119).
- 2/21 Rebellion of Parliament (Wooton, 129-144; 166-210).
- 2/26 Essence of English Polity (Wooton, 214-270).
- 2/28 Cont'd
- 3/5 Radical Change (Wooton, 273-333).
- 3/7 Tyrannicide (Wooton, 336-388).
- 3/12 Utopian Tendencies (Wooton, 390-444).
- 3/14 Hobbes and Locke (Wooton, 446-493).
- 3/19 Cont'd
- 3/21 Midterm
- 4/2 Hobbes and Locke, Cont'd.
- 4/9 The American Revolution.
- 4/9 Cont'd.
- 4/11 Marx/Engels, *Communist Manifesto*.
- 4/16 Cont'd.
- 4/18 Cont'd
- 4/23 M. Weber, *Science as a Vocation*.
- 4/25 M. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*.
- 4/30 Last day of class.

- 5/7 Final Exam