

Manfred Henningsen

Polsc. 610

Political Theory & Analysis

Spring 2015. Th 6:00 to 8:30.

Saunders 242

I. Description:

We will discuss in this class a range of conceptual, historical and philosophical issues that have tremendous importance for contemporary epistemological debates in the social sciences. We will begin with the question whether we should replace the conventional notion of Western modernity with an understanding of the world being shaped by a plural field of modernities. Peter Wagner's book, *Modernity* (2012), provides a complex map of the variety of modernity.

Connected with the Western notion of modernity has always been the understanding that the modern world was enabled by the disenchantment of the cosmos. The removal of the gods and all spiritual entities from the world and envisioning a transcendent ground of being made it possible for humans to take charge of and remake the world without being stopped by any divine prohibitions. This central thesis of Max Weber's understanding of occidental modernity was reinforced by Juergen Habermas in his mid-life writings. Though he hasn't become religious yet, Habermas has shown a growing openness towards an acceptance of spiritual truth quests. His discussions with Judith Butler, Charles Taylor and Cornel West in *The Power of Religion and the Public Sphere* (2011) will provide a frame for the further investigation of the attempts at re-enchanting the universe. John Grimm and Evelyn Tucker engage in this kind of questioning in their book *Ecology and Religion* (2014). The Grimm/Tucker perspective sheds light also on the ongoing Mauna Kea debate in Hawai'i.

We will encounter a radical spiritual revisioning of the thinking about violence in Rene Girard's *The One by Whom Scandal Comes* (2014). The secular approach towards our understanding of mass violence is presented by Christian Gerlach in his book *Extreme Violent Societies* (2010) that covers rather unfamiliar ground like Armenia, Indonesia and Bangladesh. Gerlach's case studies lead themselves to making connections with the larger and more familiar cases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But these studies will also facilitate our understanding of movements like ISIS/ISIL in the present. The particularly American curse of racism is picked up by Kwame Appiah in his *Lines of Descent* (2014) where he traces the depressing journey of the most influential African-American intellectual in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W. E. B. Du Bois, from the U.S. to Germany at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and finally to Ghana at the end of his life.

We will finish the semester program with the question concerning Martin Heidegger whose peculiar attraction for post-modern, post-colonial and feminist intellectuals in the U.S. and other parts of the

world had always to cope with the embarrassing biographical detail that this unquestionably brilliant philosopher fell at one point in his life for the Nazis considering them to herald a cosmological paradigm shift. This embarrassment has recently become sharpened by the publication of the so-called 'Black Notebooks.' We will discuss the Heidegger question in connection with the essays in *The Question Concerning Technology*.

## II. Requirements:

Since this class will be conducted as a seminar, reading the assigned texts will be essential for productive class discussions. Students should select one or two texts from the booklist and present a summary of the major arguments to the group. This class presentation can become the basis for a critical paper of the text or be integrated into an independent research project on a separate topic.

## III. Required Texts:

The books for the class are mentioned in the description and are all available in the bookstore.

## IV. Calendar of the Class:

1/15 General introduction.

1/22 The varieties of modernity: P. Wagner, *Modernity*.

1/29 "Charlie Hebdo", ISIS and modernity.

2/5 Religion in the Public Sphere: J. Habermas and Charles Taylor (*The Power of Religion...*, 15-69).

2/12 Contd.: Judith Butler and Cornel West and Concluding Discussion and Calhoun's Afterword (*The Power of Religion...*, 70-134).

2/19 The Re-enchantment of the Cosmos: Grimm/Tucker (*Ecology and Religion*).

2/26 Continuation.

3/5 The re-visioning of violence: Rene Girard, *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*.

3/12 Continuation.

3/19 Scenarios of violence: Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies*, 1-120.

4/2 Contd.: Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies*, 123-289.

4/9 The Economy of American Violence: K. A. Appiah, *Lines of Descent*.

4/16 Continuation.

4/23 The Post-Modern Master Thinker: M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*.

4/30 The Problem of Heidegger's "*Black Books*".

5/7 Last Day of Class.