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PSC 354.01: Contemporary Political Thought

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University of Montana
Political Science Department

Fall 2005
PSC 354

Tuesday 4:10-6:30pm

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Office Hrs: MT 3-4pm; W 11-12
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Contemporary Political Thought

Course Description:

In an otherwise sympathetic review of George Orwell's work, Bertrand Russell complained:

The men of our day who resemble Goethe, Shelley or Wells. . . have mostly gone through, either personally or through imaginative sympathy, experiences more or less resembling imprisonment in Buchenwald. Orwell was one of these men. He preserved an impeccable love of truth, and allowed himself to learn even the most painful lessons. But he lost hope. Perhaps it is impossible, in the world as it is, to combine hope with truth; if so, all prophets must be false prophets. For my own part, I lived too long in a happier world to be able to accept so glowering a doctrine. I find in men like Orwell the half, but only the half, of what the world needs; the other half is still to seek.

This course will examine the origin(s), scope and significance of this "modern despair" in contemporary political thought. As we will discover, many social thinkers of Orwell's day and ours seem to find it hard to keep their skepticism from leading to disillusion. At issue, this semester in POLS 354, is whether it is still possible— in spite of "the world as it is"— to combine hope with truth.

Required Readings:

Eds. Hickman & Alexxander, *The Essential Dewey Vol. 1*

Joseph W. Krutch, *The Modern Temper*

*B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*

Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*

*Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light & The Children of Darkness* (FAC PAC)

Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*

Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*

You may be asked to read a few shorter articles either by or critical of the above authors. And you will be required to read each others critical essays.

Course Objectives: upon successfully completing the course work, the student should be able to:

1. Describe the main elements of modernism and pragmatism.

2. Identify and assess the various tests or criteria (such as relevance, significance, or ethical standards) that can be used to establish the value of one theoretical position or theorist over another.

3. Present and orally defend (and if necessary revise) a series of interpretive, analytical essays which examine a thinker's ideas about human nature, justice, social obligation, and political legitimacy. The purpose of these essays is to show that ideas can be appreciated for their validity as well a genealogy. And when evaluating ideas for the problems they address, we will use one author to interrogate another so that their ideas speak to our condition as well as theirs.

4. Orally critique an essay in terms of its analytical clarity, accuracy in its interpretation of the readings, and logic of its conclusion(s).

To achieve these objectives: Course Grading:

POLS 354 will be taught as a seminar. This means that, as Dewey advises, the teacher "steers the boat, but the energy that propels it must come from those who are learning." Therefore each student will present & defend in class 3 critical essays (45% of course grade.) The essays (see note for those taking course with PSC 400) must not exceed 3 double-spaced, typed pages and will be assigned to individuals on a weekly basis. Each essay will be due no later than the class period before you are scheduled to present it. On this due date, you will have copies of the essay for the professor and classmates. If you are absent the day we are scheduled to discuss your essay, you will not get credit for it.

*Note: Those students taking this course for writing credit will revise and resubmit two (possibly all three) essays.

Each student will complete on time *a comprehensive final*, worth 40% of course grade. The final will be take-home, and must be typed, double-spaced. {There will be no midterm.} Late papers will be deducted a letter grade for every business day it's late.

Class participation and attendance will be worth 15% of your grade. *So a cautionary note:* if you are absent more than 3xs, attendance points {3 per absence} will be deducted. Or if you are unprepared for class discussion of readings or essays, points will also be deducted. Excused absences require a medical note for illness, injury, family emergency, or letter from instructor for field trips, ASUM service, music/drama performances, intercollegiate athletics, military service. Instructor will also excuse absences for reasons of mandatory public service.

It does not honor a writer to read him/her without seeking to challenge him/her.

- Plus/Minus Grades will be used based on the following:
100-93 = A; 92-90 = A-; 89-87 = B+; 86-83 = B; 82-80 = B-; 79-77 = C+; 76-73 = C; 72-70 = C-; 69-67 = D+; 66-63 = D; 62-60 = D-; 59 < = F

Schedule:

- 8/30 *Introduction to the Course*
Read: *Essential Dewey*, pp. 14-36; 71-83.
- 9/6 *Liberalism, Modernism & the Crisis of Authority*
Read: *Essential Dewey*, pp. 274-292; 323-339.
- 9/13 *American Pragmatism or Instrumentalism*
Read: *Essential Dewey*, pp. 340-54; 363-371.
Essays (**due 9/12 Monday by 5pm**): Who are Dewey's philosophical 'heroes' and 'villains?'
Or
 What links does Dewey find among science, democracy, and the "method of intelligence?" Is his view of social progress valid?
Or
 Dewey's idea of using experimentalism in politics has its benefits, but also its limitations. Discuss.
- 9/20 *Dewey's Response to Modernism, Individualism & Community*
Read for next hour: Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, (FAC Pac Chaps 1-3).
Essays (due 9/13): How does Dewey differentiate the "new" liberalism of the 20th century from the "old" liberalism of the 19th century.
Or
 Dewey's pragmatism is politically liberating, but philosophically provides no solution to modern despair. Pragmatism, say its critics, provides no signposts in the search for moral values. Discuss
Or
 "In Dewey's conflicting preferences for individuality as freedom of mind, and society as the seed of the great community, lies a paradox that can be posed as a question: Can one be both social and individual?" (Diggins) Discuss
- 9/27 *Limits of Pragmatism?*
Read Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, Chaps. 4-5; Skinner, *Beyond Freedom*, "Introduction;" Chaps. 1-2.
Essays (due 9/20): Who for Niebuhr are the "children of light" and who are the "children of darkness?" Do they represent "heroes" and "villains" in Niebuhr's world? Why, why not?
Or

What is Niebuhr's interpretation of our "modern" predicament. Is his account "conservative" or "liberal" than the other? Explain.

Or

Is Intelligence only an individual possession? How would Dewey and Neibuhr respond, and do respective their responses make either less liberal? Why, why not?

10/4

Reinhold Niebuhr "The Acids of Modernity & Skinner's Science
Read for next hr: Skinner, *Beyond Freedom*, Chaps. 3-5
Essays (due 9/27): Niebuhr sees modern skepticism as the enemy of legitimate political authority; Dewey sees it as the friend of the democratic society. After explaining their respective positions, what side do you favor and why?

Or

Is Skinner a political theorist, and if he is, what makes him so?

Or

"In designing a culture," says Skinner, "the critical issue is whether it will work." What, if anything, would Dewey find agreeable and/or objectionable about Skinner's brand of pragmatism and the latter's application of science to human society?

10/11

Science & Political Science

Read: Skinner, *Beyond Freedom* "Introduction," Chaps. 6-9.
Essay (Due 10/4): What makes a science "scientific"? What claims (findings/hypothesis/laws) does Skinner make that may be called scientific, but are anything but?

Or

Can science be either anti-social or asocial? How does Skinner answer? Do you see problems with his answer?

10/18

Science & Democracy

Read for next time: Krutch, *The Modern Temper*

Essays (Due 10/11): If Skinner had his way, we would have no alternative but to choose between science and democracy. Is this a valid choice? Why, why not?

Or

In the end, how well does Skinner's utopia dispense with traditional notions of morality? How 'radical' is his utopia?

Or

Politically speaking, how would you label Skinner: a conservative, a liberal, a radical? Why?

10/25

Joseph Wood Krutch & "The Modern Temper"

Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society*, "Foreword," Chaps. 1-5

Essays (Due 10/18): What must Krutch ignore or distort, if anything, to make his indictment of modern science appear absolute?

Or

What would Dewey find objectionable about Krutch's brand of "liberalism?"

Or

What does Krutch find wrong or missing in Skinner's "science" of man? (please see Krutch, *The Measure of Man*, Chap. 3 "Ignoble Utopias")

11/1

Democratic Socialism: Toward A Marxist Humanism

Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society*, Chaps. 6-9.

Essay (Due 10/25) "Can a society be sick?" Discuss

Or

'Without a revolutionary class, there can be no revolutionary movement.' If this is correct, then what problem does this pose for the neo-Marxist.

Or

Unlike many socialists, Fromm's work has appealed to his American audience. Why do you suppose his works were 'popular'?

11/15

The Indictment of Modern Capitalism & Society cont.

Read for next hr.: Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, "Introduction," Chaps. 1-3.

Essays (Due 11/1): There is always a villain in every political philosophy. Who (or what), for Fromm, is the villain(s)?

Or

Does Fromm's concept of alienation make sense to you? Why, why not? How is he 'revising' Marx's idea of alienation?

Or

What criticisms would Fromm level against Skinner and what criticisms would Skinner level against Fromm? Despite what they say, how really different are their respective theories and which do you prefer and why?

11/22

Contemporary American Thought:

Read: Bell, Chap. 6 (pp. 251-282); "Afterward 1996"; Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*, Chaps. 1-2

Essays (Due 11/15): According to Bell, what are the “cultural contradictions of capitalism?”

Or

What similarities and differences do you find between Bell and Fromm’s analysis of capitalism and their remedies?

Or

What is, according to Bell, Po-Mo? And how has Po Mo spoiled art? Do you agree with his assessment?

11/29

The End of Utopia & the Public Intellectual?

Read: Jacoby, Chaps. 3-4

Essays (Due 11/22): “Bell’s account of contemporary capitalism clearly shows his “conservative” bias.” Discuss

Or

Bell appreciates in a way that classical liberals do not that capitalism is more than an economic system. Consequently, if capitalism is in trouble, it is not so much socialism that it must fear, but itself. Discuss

Or

For Jacoby the demise of the radical left (not the triumph of the political right) has undermined liberalism. How can this be?

12/6

The End of Political Theory?

Read: Jacoby, Chaps. 5-6

Essays (Due 11/29): For Jacoby who or what has destroyed utopianism?

Or

Does utopia belong exclusively to the political left? Is there no such thing as “conservative” utopianism? What is Jacoby’s answer? What do you think?

Or

Jacoby seems to agree with those who say that today it’s not longer possible to construct a genuine political theory. What make theory “genuine” for a thinker like Jacoby? And do you agree with his sober conclusion?

Final Due Wednesday by 5:20 pm December 14*****