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PSC 354: Contemporary Issues in Political Theory

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**University of Montana
Political Science Department**

**Fall 2001
PSC 354
MWF 2-3**

**Dr. Grey
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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:

John Dewey, *Liberalism & Social Action*

Joseph W. Krutch, *The Modern Temper*

***B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom & Dignity* (FAC PAC)**

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 as 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 with a few lectures. 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 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.

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.)

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.

Schedule:

9/5 *Introduction to the Course*

9/7- *Liberalism, Modernism & the Crisis of Authority*
9/10 Read: Dewey, *Liberalism & Social Action*, Chaps. 1-2

9/12- *American Pragmatism or Instrumentalism*
9/14 Read: Dewey, *Liberalism & Social Action*, Chap. 3

9/17- *Dewey's Response to Modernism*
9/21 Read: Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, Chaps. 1-2
Essays (due 9/14): Who are Dewey's philosophical 'heroes' and 'villains?'

Or

Is Intelligence only an individual possession? How would Dewey respond, and does his response make him less liberal? Why, why not?

Or

How does Dewey differentiate the "new" liberalism of the 20th century from the "old" liberalism of the 19th century?

9/24- *Individualism vs. Community?*
9/26 Read: Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, Chaps. 3-4
Essays (due 9/21) "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

Or

What links does Dewey find among science, democracy, and the "method of intelligence?" Is his view of social progress valid?

9/28 *Limits of Pragmatism?*
Read: Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, Chap. 5
Essays (due 9/26) 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

10/1-
10/3

Reinhold Niebuhr "The Acids of Modernity"

Read: Skinner, *Walden II* "Introduction," Chaps. 1-2

Essay (Due 9/28: What is Niebuhr's interpretation of our "modern" predicament. Is his account "conservative" or "liberal" than the other? Explain.

Or

Essays (Due 9/28): 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?

10/5-
10/8

Niebuhr verses Dewey

Read: Skinner, *Beyond Freedom* . . .Chaps. 3-4

Essays (Due 10/3): 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?

10/10

Behaviorism: Skinner & Social Engineering

Read: Skinner, Chaps. 5-6

Essay (Due 10/8): Is Skinner a political theorist, and if he is, what makes him so?

10/12

Science & Political Science

Read: Skinner, Chaps. 7

Essays (Due 10/10): "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?

10/15

Skinner: Science & Society

Read: Skinner, Chaps. 8-9

Essay (Due 10/12): What makes a science "scientific"? What claims (findings/hypothesis/laws) does Skinner make that may be called scientific, but are anything but?

- 10/17** ***Science & Social Science***
Read: Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, Preface, Chaps 1-2
 Essays (due 10/15): Can science be either anti-social or asocial? How does Skinner answer? Do you see problems with his answer?
- 10/19** ***Science & Democracy***
Read: Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, Chaps. 3-4
 Essays (Due 10/17): 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?
- 10/19-
10/22** ***Social Science & Science***
Read: Krutch, *Modern Temper*, Chaps. 5-6
 Essays (Due 10/19): In the end, how well does Skinner's utopia dispense with traditional notions of morality? How 'radical' is his utopia?
- Or**
- Essays: Politically speaking, how would you label Skinner: a conservative, a liberal, a radical? Why?
- 10/24** ***Joseph Wood Krutch & "The Modern Temper"***
Read: Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, Chaps. 7-8
- 10/26 -
10/29** ***Krutch, Modern Science, & Dewey***
Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society*, "Foreword," Chaps. 1-2.
 Essays (due 10/24): What must Krutch ignore or distort, if anything, to make his indictment of modern science appear absolute?
- Or**
- Essays: What would Dewey find objectionable about Krutch's brand of "liberalism?"
- 10/31** ***Krutch v. Skinner***
Read Krutch, *The Measure of Man*, Chap. 3 "Ignoble Utopias," on Reserve; Fromm, *The Sane Society*, "Foreword," Chaps. 3-4
 Essays (Due 10/29): What does Krutch find wrong or missing in Skinner's "science" of man?

- 11/2 ***Democratic Socialism: Toward A Marxist Humanism***
Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society*, Chap. 5, pp. 78-151
- 11/5 ***Revisionist Marxism & Modern Capitalism***
Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society*, Chap. 5, pp. 152-208
Essay (Due 11/2) "Can a society be sick?" Discuss
- 11/7-11/9 ***The Indictment of Modern Capitalism & Society cont.***
Read: : Fromm, *The Sane Society*, Chaps. 6-7.
Essays (Due 11/5): '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
- Essays:** Unlike many socialists, Fromm's work has appealed to his American audience. Why do you suppose his works were 'popular'?
- 11/ 12 **Veterans' Day Holiday**
- 11/14 ***Fromm cont.***
Read: Fromm, Chap. 8-9
Essays (Due 11/9): There is always a villain in every political philosophy. Who (or what), for Fromm, is the villain(s)?
- 11/16 ***Fromm cont.***
Read: Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Chap. 1
Essays (Due 11/14): Does Fromm's concept of alienation make sense to you? Why, why not? How is he 'revising' Marx's idea of alienation?
- Or
- Essays:** Is there a scale of values on which reasonable people can be expected to agree, and, if there is not, what are the political consequences of them being unable to agree.

11/19 ***Fromm v. Skinner***
Read: Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions*, Chaps. 2-3
Essays (Due 11/16): 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?

Or

Essays (Due 11/16): What is missing from the theories of Skinner and Fromm is a theory of politics. Discuss

11/21-25 ***Thanksgiving Break***, **Read:** Bell, Chaps. 3, Chap. 6 (pp. 251-282)

11/26-11/28 ***Contemporary American Thought:***
Read: Bell, "Afterward 1996"
Essays (Due 11/26 by 11a.m.): According to Bell, what are the "cultural contradictions of capitalism?"

Or

Essays (Due 11/26): What similarities and differences do you find between Bell and Fromm's analysis of capitalism and their remedies?

11/30-12/3 ***Bell, Liberalism, and Contemporary Art***
Read: Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*, Chaps. 1-2
Essays (Due 11/28): In Bell's analysis, modernism appears to both support and refute liberal principles. How?

Or

Essays (Due 11/28): What is, according to Bell, Po-Mo? And how has Po Mo spoiled art? Do you agree with his assessment?

12/5 ***Bell Conclusion***
Read: Jacoby, Chaps. 3-4
Essays (Due 12/3): "Bell's account of contemporary capitalism clearly shows his "conservative" bias." Discuss

Or

Essays (Due 12/3): 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

12/7 ***The End of Utopia & the Public Intellectual?***
Read: Jacoby, Chaps. 5-6
Essays (Due 12/5): For Jacoby who or what has destroyed utopianism?

Or

Essay (Due 12/5): 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?

12/10-12/12 ***The End of Political Theory?***
Essays (Due 12/7): For Jacoby the demise of the radical left (not the triumph of the political right) has undermined liberalism. How can this be?

Or

Essays (Due 12/7): 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?

12/14 ***Slack Day (if we are on schedule, no class):*** you may consult with me on your final.

*** * * * *Final Due Monday by 5pm December 17th* * * * ***