

Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism
University of Western Ontario
September - December 2009

THC 9543a - The Art of Being Political in Theory

Dr. Mark F. N. Franke, Director
Centre for Global Studies
Huron University College
1349 Western Road
London, Ontario
N6G 1H3

office# A206, Huron University College
office hours: Mondays, 12:00 - 2:00pm., and by appointment

email: <mfranke@huron.uwo.ca>
ph.# 1-519-438-7224 x242
fax.# 1-519-438-3938

General Course Information

Course Description:

There are four fundamental and interrelated lines of inquiry that we will take up in "The Art of Being Political in Theory": what is politics?; what is it to be political?; how does the political stand with respect to theory?; and what is it to be political as persons working within the context of theory? The first of these questions is probably the most difficult to answer, and it haunts one's ability to respond to the other three. This is at least partly due to the fact that much of the history of political theory and analysis, going back to the writings of Plato, has involved deliberate efforts to establish theories of politics that gain distance from theory as something distinct from politics. In this respect, traditions of political theory have been mobilised typically through acts of differentiation from what becomes deemed mere philosophy or merely critical theory. At the same time, traditions of philosophy, even in the case of political philosophy, have formed in the service of similar interests, by claiming the right and ability to theorise without politics, or to at least theorise politics outside of the political. Arguably, the 'great moments' of European political theory have involved conceiving political order in which one can theorise free of political obligation. The results for thinking on politics have been disastrous; political philosophy has often lost sight of its own force; and the life of politics impacted by both has become utterly confused and

confusing, particularly with respect to attempts to the supposed differences and relations between theory and practice.

This course wades into this messy nexus through a highly localised version. We will enter and engage the problem of being political in theory with respect to the pursuit and development of our own arts within the context of Theory and Criticism. The course requires a central reflexivity, where we will not only ponder the meanings and interrelations of politics, the political, being political, the art of politics, and theory but where we will also investigate the politics of doing so. We will endeavour to transgress the conventional divisions set between theory and politics, and we will do so in the effort of coming to understand and appreciate the politics and political conditions of Theory and Criticism. Especially in the focus this course places on pushing open the problem of politics itself as a matter of being, this course requires us to consider how politics are provoked in our respective acts of critical theoretical debate, research, and writing. How are politics at play in our respective efforts to be theoretical and critical? What are the political conditions under which Theory and Criticism are possible as subjects of study? What is politically at stake for us as theorists and critics? Also, what must be achieved politically in order for Theory and Criticism to appear apolitical, so that the doing of Theory and Criticism may appear "merely theoretical"?

The question of "art" in the title of this course is a reference to the degree to which aesthetic judgment is at the heart of political acts, being political, and thinking politics. This is a complicated and somewhat elusive element of the course's concerns to open, and to do justice to this aspect of the course, we would really need to add about five or six seminars...which, unfortunately, we cannot and will not do. Consequently, the aesthetic dimension of the course will remain a subtle element of our studies, so to speak. The question of aesthetics will be raised at several important junctures in our reading, and we will do our best to identify and put into practice understandings of how questions of politics, particularly in our work as theorists and critics, are subject to aesthetics and demand artful manners of being. It is my hope that appreciation for this dimension of the course will ultimately grow beyond the duration of this term.

Course Objectives:

The primary objective of "The Art of Being Political in Theory" is for participants in this course to begin to develop a very strong sense of the politics of doing Theory and Criticism. This course seeks to help participants recognise how being political is fundamental to their own work as scholars. In particular, it aims to assist participants in finding ways to reflexively identify and critically engage the specific political arts at work in their own respective areas of research and study. In these respects, ultimately, this course offers an opportunity for participants to gain a greater understanding of the specific responsibilities they have within their scholarly work, practices, and ambitions.

Methods of Instruction and Course Conduct

The course will be run in a manner conventional to graduate seminars in the Arts and Social Sciences, where our weekly meetings will focus most importantly on free-flowing debate with respect to questions and problems raised in assigned readings. These discussions will be provoked each week by a seminar presentation made by one of the

students in the class in direct engagement with the assigned readings. As professor, my duty is largely to facilitate productive debate and discussion, while also drawing us to important issues and questions that are not raised by students themselves and ensuring that the views raised by students are constructively challenged. In these regards, while it will be important to spend some time submitting the texts we read to critical evaluation and analysis, the larger goal of these seminar discussions should be to identify and creatively / thoughtfully consider the questions and problems that the assigned readings raise for us in terms of the larger interests of the course. Therefore, to fulfill the objectives of our seminars, it is not enough to offer either interpretations or judgments on the texts we read. The texts themselves, ultimately, are not the objects of study in the course. Rather, we ought to employ these texts as important points of departure into the hard work of thinking through the challenges they set before us and relate this work to the broader problem of being political in theory.

The vitality and rewards of this course are conditioned largely on the rigorous and positive engagement that we have with one another in the seminar dynamic. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial that every member of the class study her or his assigned readings and come prepared to pose questions regarding readings and actively pursue the lines of inquiry posed by others. Thus, it is also the case that students must attend seminar meetings for the course to succeed. It is expected that all class members will attend and actively participate in each seminar meeting, except where illness or other personal misfortune makes it impossible to do so.

Reading Materials

As a "B" course, we will engage a broad range of writings of relevance to the course's central concerns. Most of the readings will be drawn from the following books:

- Arendt, Hannah. The Promise of Politics, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken Books, 2005).
 Badiou, Alain. Conditions, trans. Steven Corcoran (Continuum, 2008).
 Chow, Rey. The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work (Duke University Press, 2006).
 Derrida, Jacques. Who's Afraid of Philosophy?: Right to Philosophy I, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford University Press, 2002).
 Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan, Parts I and II, ed. A. P. Martinich (Broadview Press, 2005).
 Kant, Immanuel. The Conflict of the Faculties, trans. Mary J. Gregor (University of Nebraska Press, 1979).
 Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Nancy, Jean-Luc. Retreating the Political, ed. Simon Sparks (Routledge, 1997)
 Moreiras, Alberto. The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies (Duke University Press, 2001).
 Nancy, Jean-Luc. The Sense of the World, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
 Rancière, Jacques. Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, trans. Julie Rose (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
 Rancière, Jacques. The Philosopher and His Poor, trans. John Drury et al. (Duke University Press, 2003).
 Rancière, Jacques. The Politics of Aesthetics, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004).

Weber, Max. From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford University Press, 1946).

All of the books listed above are available, in varying numbers, in the UWO bookstore. If you want to purchase a copy of any of them for your own, please check with the bookstore early, as some titles may sell out early. You can always special order a copy for yourself independently, but that takes a little lead time. I have also placed a copy of each of these books, along with a few others, on two-hour reserve loan at the Weldon Library at UWO. There will be a few other shorter readings, from Derrida, Kant, Foucault, Rancière, and Badiou, that I will make available as photocopies in the CSTC lounge.

To see what exactly it is that I am expecting you to read from these books and articles, please refer to the Reading Schedule, below.

Course Requirements and Methods of Evaluation

Participation in and Contributions to Seminar Discussions:

Students are expected to contribute regularly and constructively to weekly seminar discussion and debate. Additionally, students are required to bring to each seminar meeting a two-paged critical response to assigned readings for the week. Students will be evaluated on the overall effort that they make over the term to contribute well to seminar discussions and the value of the oral contributions that they make in this regard. In this regard, students will be assessed in reference to the extent to which they productively provoke and encourage strong critical engagement amongst all class members with problems raised in the readings. Students will also receive a grade for the collection of weekly critical responses that they submit over the term. These short writings will be assessed in terms of the degree to which they cut to the heart of ideas and questions presented in the texts we read and the degree to which they offer an initial critical response to assigned readings that demonstrates a rich sense of what is at stake in these readings. Final grades for this portion of course requirements will be determined from an equal combination of both weekly oral and written contributions.

Seminar Presentation:

Each student will be required to offer one seminar presentation (of 45 minutes in duration), based on a critical reading and engagement with one week's assigned readings. These seminar presentations will be evaluated and graded on the bases of the quality of students' reading of assigned texts and the quality and depth of critical engagement with these texts. The final objective of these presentations will be to provoke serious discussion over problems derived from the text in relation to the concerns of the course. These presentations should not aim for a mere interpretation of the texts under consideration, but, rather, they should aim also, and more importantly, to offer a strong critical response to the texts based on the presenter's reading and interpretation of the texts. In this respect, it is expected that the presentations will be

made in a contentious form, where the presenter is identifying one or more problems worthy of consideration in the assigned texts and taking a stand with respect to this or these problems, that she or he seeks to defend in the development of her or his presentation. It is also expected that each student's presentation be formed in such a way as to set out important questions and lines of inquiry for the rest of the class to pursue afterwards.

Proposal Essay:

Prior to preparing and writing the major seminar paper in this course, each student will be required to write a short essay in which she or he proposes a problem of study for her or his major seminar paper and defends the structure and rationale of this problem of study as relevant to the task set for her or him in the seminar paper assignment (see below).

- due date and time: no later than 11:10am., Wednesday, November 18th
- required length: 2,000 – 2500 words
- required manner of submission: hard copy, in person

Seminar Paper:

For the major paper in this course, each student is asked to form a study in which she or he identifies and addresses the politics of her or his own research interests in Theory and Criticism. In these papers, students will be expected to take seriously the questions of politics pursued in the course and to establish vigorous critical analyses on the political/apolitical character of their own scholarship in Theory and Criticism. Ultimately, students are expected to assess the stakes of politics in their own respective studies and the implications of these stakes in their scholarly ambitions.

- due date and time: no later than 12:00noon., Monday, December 14th
- required length: 6,000 – 8,000 words
- required manner of submission: as email attachment to
<mfranke@huron.uwo.ca>

Overall Distribution of Assessment:

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| - Participation in and Contributions to Seminar Discussions | 15% |
| - Seminar Presentation | 15% |
| - Proposal Essay | 20% |
| - Seminar Paper | 50% |

Reading Schedule

Week One - September 16th

Immanuel Kant, The Conflict of the Faculties (*at least Part I*)
 Jacques Derrida, "Mocholos; or, the Conflict of the Faculties," in Richard
 Rand, ed., Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties (University of
 Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 1–32

Week Two - September 23rd

Jacques Derrida, "Privilege: Justificatory Title and Introductory Remarks,"
Who's Afraid of Philosophy, pp. 1 – 66

Week Three - September 30th

Immanuel Kant, "Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,"
Kant: Political Writings, 2nd, ed., Hans Reiss, ed., (Cambridge University
 Press, 1991), pp. 54 – 60
 from: Michel Foucault, The Essential Foucault, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas
 Rose (The New Press, 2003):
 - "What Is Enlightenment?," pp. 43 – 57
 - "What Is Critique?," pp. 263 –278
 - "Omnes et Singulatim: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,"
 pp. 180 – 207

Week Four - October 7th

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, Parts I and II
 - "Part I: Of Man," pp. 13 – 123
 - "Part II: Of Commonwealth,"
 - Chaps. XVII, XVIII, XX, XXI, XXVI, pp. 125 – 138, 149 – 167,
 197 – 216

Week Five - October 14th

from : Max Weber, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology:
 - "Politics as a Vocation," pp. 77 – 128
 - "Science as a Vocation," pp. 129 –156

Week Six - October 21st

Hannah Arendt, "Introduction *Into* Politics," The Promise of Politics, pp. 93 – 200

Week Seven - October 28th

Jacques Rancière, "Plato's Lie," The Philosopher and His Poor, pp. 3 – 53
 Rey Chow, The Age of the World as Target (*at least Intro. and Part I*)

Week Eight - November 4th

Jacques Rancière, Disagreement

Week Nine - November 11th

Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics
 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics"

Week Ten - November 18th

from: Alberto Moreiras, The Exhaustion of Difference
 - "Intro. Conditions of Latin Americanist Critique," pp. 1 – 25
 - "1. Global Fragments," pp. 27 – 48
 - "2. Negative Globality and Critical Regionalism," pp. 49 – 75
 - "3. Theoretical Fictions and Fatal Conceits," pp. 76 – 126
 - "4. Restitution and Appropriation," pp. 127 – 161

Week Eleven - November 25th

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, Retreating the Political
 (*selections yet to be determined*)

Week Twelve - December 2nd

from: Alain Badiou, Metapolitics, trans. Jason Barker (Verso, 2006).
 - "1. Against 'Political Philosophy'," pp. 10 – 24
 - "4. Politics Unbound," pp. 68 – 77
 - "5. A Speculative Disquisition on the Concept of
 Democracy," pp. 78 – 94
 - "7. Rancière and the Community of Equals," pp. 107 – 113
 - "8. Rancière and Apolitics," 114 – 123
 - "10. Politics as Truth Procedure," 141 – 152
 from: Alain Badiou, Conditions
 - "4. The Philosophical Recourse to the Poem," pp. 35 – 48
 - "Part IV - Philosophy and Politics," 145 – 176

Week Thirteen - December 9th

Jean-Luc Nancy, The Sense of the World (*selections yet to be determined*)