The Politics of Agonism: From Agamemnon to Agamben

Course Description:
This course traces the genealogy of the *agon* in modern political theory and the role that early Greek poetry and philosophy has played in the formation of this concept. Indeed, although the work of Plato and Aristotle has long been acknowledged as important sources for political thinking today, the poetry of Homer and Hesiod has exerted an equally important but largely ignored influence. In this course, therefore, we will consider how and why the poetry of Homer and Hesiod have become a major source of inspiration for thinking more generally about the politics of competition and its relationship to sovereignty and democracy.

Not only will students study the work of important figures in modern political philosophy, including Hobbes, Nietzsche, Weil, Arendt, Foucault, Derrida, and Agamben, but students will also engage directly with the ancient texts (in translation) employed by those thinkers. Hence, this course is designed to encourage students to actively contribute to the ongoing dialogue between “ancients and moderns,” upon which so much of modern political theory and criticism is based.

Course Evaluation:
Class Participation/Preparation: 20%
Students should come to class with at least two observations and one central question regarding the assigned reading for each class period and be prepared to discuss the assigned readings.
In addition, students will be asked to present on the weekly readings. Students will be graded on their ability to synthesize the arguments, develop important questions for discussion, and generate original observations on the texts.

Close Reading: 20%
Because this course is designed for students to engage simultaneously with ancient texts and modern theorists, students will be asked to provide four close readings over the course of the term. The close readings should be based on passages from the ancient Greek texts that we will be reading in translation. The aim of these close readings will be to generate one’s own interpretation of the passage and to consider how that interpretation relates to the interpretations of the theorists we read in class. Length of each close reading: 600 – 1500 words.

Class Presentation: 20%
The last week of the course will be dedicated to student presentations. In these presentations, students will deliver a paper on their research topic to the class that is 15-20 minutes in length, followed by discussion. Students will be required to write an abstract for their presentation and provide either a handout or powerpoint, or both, along with relevant bibliography.

Final Paper: 40%
Course Outline and Readings:
*In addition to the authors and texts listed below, additional relevant scholarship will be assigned on a weekly basis.

**Week 1: Course Introduction:**
Why Greece? Ancients and Moderns in Political Discourse.

**Week 2: The Politics of Translation: Homer and Hobbes.**
Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is a foundational text in modern political theory, while Homeric poetry has often been touted as “foundational” to Western literature and culture. Hobbes himself was also a translator of Homer, but his translations have been highly contested. In this week, we will explore how Hobbes’ arguments for sovereignty and commonwealth relate to his translations of the *Iliad* and how those translations, in turn, may have shaped the modern reception of Homer.

Ancient: The *Iliad* (selections)

**Week 3-4: Contesting the Value of Homer: Nietzsche and Weil**
Burkhardt and Nietzsche are largely responsible for introducing the concept of the *agon* into modern theoretical discourse. Contrary to Hobbes’ own approach, both Nietzsche and Burkhardt seem to valorize the power struggles represented in Homer and their relationship to Greek culture more generally. By contrast, Simone Weil has famously condemned the *Iliad* for its portrayal of violence and war. In this two week section, we will perform close readings of Homer's *Iliad*. In addition, we will seek to interpret both Nietzsche and Weil in their intellectual contexts and relative to each other on the problem of power as represented in the *Iliad*.

Readings
Ancient: *The Iliad* (selections); *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod*
Modern: Jacob Burkhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*;
Friedrich Nietzsche “Homer’s Contest,” *Birth of Tragedy* (selections)
Simone Weil. *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*.

**Week 5-6: Hanna Arendt: The Greek Solution?**
Hanna Arendt’s work, which remains a major source of critique in contemporary politics, was profoundly inspired by antiquity. In this segment, we will consider how Arendt’s use of ancient Greek literature, and her notion of political action, relates to and differs from other uses and abuses of Hellenism in 20th century Europe.

Readings:
Ancient: *Iliad* (selections); Hesiod *Works and Days* (selections);
Modern: Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition*

**Week 7-8: Foucault, Greece, and the Question of History, Structure, and Power**
Foucault’s engagement with antiquity goes far beyond the *History of Sexuality*. In fact, his inaugural lectures at the Collège de France, recently translated into English, were entirely dedicated to the subject of truth and justice in ancient Greece, with special attention to issues of contest and strife in Homeric and Hesiodic poetry. In this segment, we will perform close readings of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry and consider more precisely how Foucault’s engagement with these ancient texts relate to his theories of power and biopolitics.

Readings:
Ancient: *Iliad*, Hesiod *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (selections);
Moderns: Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*.
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (selections)
   *Lectures on the Will to Know* (2014)
   *Wrong Doing and Truth Telling* (2014)

**Week 9-11: Debating and Deconstructing Sovereignty and Democracy**

In this final segment of the course, we will explore the topic of sovereignty through the texts of Hesiod and Aristotle as discussed in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* and Derrida’s last major works, *Rogues* and *the Beast and the Sovereign*. The tensions between Agamben and Derrida have been well acknowledged. A focus on the ancient texts, which both Agamben and Derrida have in common, may give us further insights into the relationship between the two, as well as the role that the ancient past may continue to play in theorizing the future. We will conclude with how the genealogy of Greece and political thought relates to the most recent work on the agon and politics in Bonnie Honig and Chantale Mouffe. Ultimately, therefore, this last segment will provide an excellent occasion for thinking more generally about the modern disposition towards the Greek tradition, what Derrida referred to as “we other Greeks,” both “we others, still Greeks” and “we others, wholly other than the Greeks.”

Readings:
Ancient: Hesiod *Theogony*; Aristotle *Metaphysics* (Selections); *Politics* (Selections)
Modern: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*
   Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*
   Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically.*

**Week 13: Presentations.**