

PSC 300 [Very] Contemporary Political Theory (Writing Intensive)
9:30-10:45 TR, Spring 2009
Graham 209

Instructor: Greg Knehans
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Course Description:

In recent decades, many of the epistemological and ontological certainties upon which political theorizing has been based have been fundamentally challenged, even discarded. In the mutually constitutive realms of political reality and political discourse, stabilities have been undermined. In the words of Marx, all that is sacred has been profaned, all that is solid has melted into air. The question is thus raised, how do we theorize about the political—or even, can we? In this course, we will examine closely five (very) contemporary political theorists (Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Slavoj Zizek, Bob Avakian and Alain Badiou) to understand how they grapple with the difficult and often paradoxical terrain of power in the 21st century.

1. This course is **writing intensive**. This means that you will be doing a lot of writing this term, produced in response to many different kinds of writing assignments, both formal and informal.
2. This course is **reading intensive**. This means not only that there is a lot of reading but that many of the assignments are difficult – even graduate students have been known to pull their own heads off in frustration at the opacity and obscure erudition of Spivak and Zizek. You will need to set aside *considerable* time for the reading. You are expected to do the assigned readings before the class in which they will be discussed. You may need to review key passages in the assigned readings after we have discussed them as well. You should also get into the habit of taking reading notes to keep track of the main ideas and important quotes from the assignments.
3. This course is **discussion intensive**. The bulk of the semester will be consist mainly of free-flowing, informal but informed discussion (not lectures), in which everyone is required to participant. Contributing questions and points of confusion are an important part of discussions, so do not assume you must understand everything before you can participate.
4. If you are not prepared to commit to a significant amount of reading, writing, and classroom discussion for this course, then you should not enroll in the course this term.
5. You do not have to agree or disagree with any of the theorists we will examine. You **DO** have to understand them.

Required Books:

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. (1999) Harvard University Press.

Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006) Routledge.

Slavoj Zizek. *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008) Verso.

Alain Badiou. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2002) Verso.

Bob Avakian. *Communism and Jefferson Democracy* (2008), *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity* (2007).

Additional required readings on e-reserve, which is accessible through the course blackboard site.

Course Requirements

Response Writings: A total of ten written response pieces. Response pieces are one page **MAXIMUM**; anything longer will be rejected. Response pieces have three parts: a very concise summary of an important point of that

week's reading, a question you have, and a comment. Response pieces should be intelligent and reflect that you have carefully read the material. Response pieces will be due on Tuesday on the readings for that week. You *can not* turn them in by email or on Thursdays.

Exegis Writings: On day IV of each segment, you will turn in a two-page concise exegesis of the theorist. That is, you will explain what the theorist is doing, what their "project" is – in its most essential, fundamental aspects.

Apology Writing: You will do one writing focusing on apologetics. That is, you will find a *substantial, scholarly* critique of one of the theorists – the critique can be of the specific book we are using, or a more general critique of the theorist. You will summarize the critique, then you will defend the theorist in a well-written and well-argued 5 page essay which is true to the theorist's perspective. This will require you to be well-versed in the theorist, which will mean reading more than just the one required text. I strongly recommend that you choose a theorist towards which you do not already have strong partisanship.

Synthesis Writing: The final paper will be 10 page essay in which you will attempt to bring together two of our five theorists, to make a synthesis of them. This will require you to clearly elucidate those aspects of the theorists which are in contradiction and those which are not. You will have to have a good grasp of each theorist. I recommend that you focus on the theorists which you used for the apologetical essays, but this is not a requirement. Further information on this assignment will be given later in the semester.

To receive high marks on the final paper, not only must you write a polished and sophisticated final product, but you must also demonstrate that you have written a thoughtful early draft, and that the final paper directly responds to feedback received. You will turn in your rough drafts with the final paper. For all papers, please use 12 point Times font with reasonable margins. Include a cover page for the final paper, but not the drafts.

Note well: Failure to complete both early drafts will result in a zero for the final paper grade. Revising is a critical part of the final paper project.

The final paper is due May 11th by Noon in my office. Early submissions are welcome. Late submissions will be spat upon and rejected.

Exams: There are no exams for this class.

Class Participation: When you don't read in advance, don't engage with the ideas expressed by the writers, the instructor, and the other students, or when you attend class only sporadically, both your learning and your classmates' learning is greatly inhibited. Additionally, class becomes really boring. So you are expected to show up, to pay attention, and to prepare the readings in advance of the class period for which they are assigned. As many of the readings are quite challenging, I strongly encourage you to take notes as you read and bring them to class for reference during discussions. I will note participation daily. Obviously, if you aren't here, you can't participate. That said, just showing up and staying awake isn't participation. Participation includes paying attention, asking questions, contributing to class discussion in a way that demonstrates that you have completed the reading, responding politely to your classmates' questions, etc. Uninformed discussion will hurt, not help, your grade.

Honor Code: I expect all students in this course to abide by both the letter and spirit of the university's academic integrity policy. Violations of the university honor code will be prosecuted. The full text of the Academic Integrity Policy can be viewed at: <http://www.uncg.edu/reg/Policy/HonorPolicy.html>. Specifically pertinent to this course is the following infraction: "Plagiarism: Intentionally or knowingly representing the words of another, as one's own in any academic exercise." Do NOT engage in plagiarism. If caught, you will fail (receive a zero for the assignment). If you have any questions regarding what constitutes plagiarism, please see me immediately. **PLEASE NOTE:** While it is very easy to plagiarize off of the internet and other sources, it is just as easy to find where you plagiarized from. Typically, if I suspect plagiarism, it takes me less than a minute to find the source.

- Response Pieces: 15%
- Exegesis Writings: 15%
- Apology: 15%
- Draft of Synthesis Essay: 10%
- Final Synthesis Essay: 25%
- Class Participation: 20%

Use this handy list to keep track of your grades. Or not:

RP 1 _____	RP 6 _____	Exegesis 1 _____	Apologetic _____
RP 2 _____	RP 7 _____	Exegesis 2 _____	Sytnthesis Draft _____
RP 3 _____	RP 8 _____	Exegesis 3 _____	Sytnthesis Final _____
RP 4 _____	RP 9 _____	Exegesis 4 _____	
RP 5 _____	RP 10 _____	Exegesis 5 _____	

Schedule of Class Meetings and Readings (subject to chage):

Tuesday, 1/20 – Course Introduction I
Thursday, 1/22 – Course Introduction II
Tuesday, 1/27 – Butler I; "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire"
Thursday, 1/29 – Butler II; "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix"
Tuesday, 2/3 – Butler III; "Subversive Bodily Acts"
Thursday, 2/5 – Butler IV; "Conclusion" (Exegesis #1 due)
Tuesday, 2/10 – Spivak I; "The Setting to Work of Deconstruction"
Thursday, 2/12 – Spivak II; "Philosophy 1"
Tuesday, 2/17 – Spivak III; "Philosophy 2"
Thursday, 2/19 – Spivak IV; "History" (Exegesis #2 due)
Tuesday, 2/24 – Avakian I; "Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy I"
Thursday, 2/26 – Avakian II; "Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy II"
Tuesday, 3/3 – Avakian III; "Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity, Part 1"
Thursday, 3/5 – Avakian IV; "Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity, Part 2;" (Exegesis #3 due)
Tuesday, 3/10 – Spring Break
Thursday, 3/12 – Spring Break
Tuesday, 3/17 – Zizek I; Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2
Thursday, 3/19 – Zizek II; Chapter 3
Tuesday, 3/24 – Zizek III; Chapter 4 (Apology due)
Thursday, 3/26 – Zizek IV; Chapter 5
Tuesday, 3/31 – Zizek V; Chapters 7 & 9 (Exegesis #4 due)
Thursday, 4/2 – Badiou I; "Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou"
Tuesday, 4/7 – Badiou II; "Introduction/Does Man Exist?/Does the Other Exist?"
Thursday, 4/9 – Badiou III; "Ethics as a Figure of Nihilism/The Ethic of Truths"
Tuesday, 4/14 – Badiou IV; "The Problem of Evil" (Exegesis #5 due)
Thursday, 4/16 – Butler V; "Violence, Mourning, Politics" (Draft of Synthesis Essay due)
Tuesday, 4/21 – Spivak V; Reading TBA
Thursday, 4/23 – Avakian V; "The Role of Dissent in a Vibrant Society"
Tuesday, 4/28 – Zizek V; Chapter 8
Thursday, 4/30 – Badiou V; "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?"
Tuesday, 5/5 – Course Wrap Up
Monday, 5/11 – (Final Synthesis Paper due)