

Humanities Seminars Program

What is Politics?

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DRAFT SYLLABUS

Initial Contentions:

Politics is the process of making decisions applying to members of a group. As Harold Lasswell described it, politics is about who gets what, when and how, to which we would add where.

At the present conjuncture, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.

This course is intended to take up a series of contemporary issues with an eye to placing these matters in appropriate contexts so that their origins, current status and interconnections become understandable, and hopefully, approachable. Beginning with an overview of the formal and informal mechanisms that shape our views of the world, the course will examine how industrial state capitalism has come to dominate our thinking as the only way to organize the political economy to satisfy human needs and wants. Finally, the course will take up questions of response and resistance to these phenomena. Here we intend to assess the achievements and difficulties involved as social movements agitate for change, as well as the role of critical pedagogy in attaining desirable social change.

Each week, the Tuesday lecture (by Professor Waterstone) will provide the necessary historical, theoretical, conceptual and substantive context for that week's topic. The Thursday lecture (by Professor Chomsky) will focus on concrete historical and contemporary examples to draw out and illustrate the phenomena discussed on Tuesdays. Additionally, each Thursday session will feature a question and answer segment with Professor Chomsky conducted by a UA faculty member with expertise in that week's topics.

Introduction, January 12:

Our first class meeting, on 12 January, will provide a general introduction to the course, and cover course organization and logistics. Following that, we plan to proceed as follows:

Week 1—How do we know what we know?

Tuesday, January 17: We will take up an overview of the formal and informal mechanisms that shape our views of the world (what we take as common sense). This will include, among others, the role of families and peers, the mass media, the

education system, religion, and the culture industries. The week will conclude with an examination of the role of critical pedagogy in producing a viewpoint that is always healthily skeptical of the taken-for-granted, pervasive common senses that prevail in societies at particular times and places.

Thursday, January 19: We will concentrate on concrete examples about the role of the mass media, the PR industry, the educational system, and religion.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: The manufacture of consent

Faculty Expert: Jeannine Relly, Associate Professor, School of Journalism

Week 2—Today's dominant common sense

Tuesday, January 24: We will take up the ways in which the current, prevailing common sense represents a "capitalist realism"; a worldview that posits that there is no realistic alternative to industrial state capitalism. Here we examine how this orientation has come to dominate our thinking regarding how we organize the political economy to satisfy human needs and wants. Are there alternatives? How are these characterized, trivialized, and criticized? How dominant is the capitalist worldview in reality? Given a choice, might many people opt for other ways to organize society?

Thursday, January 26: We will discuss "really existing capitalism," and compare it with the mythical capitalism that is a core part of contemporary ideology. Again, using concrete examples we will examine economic history (and its differing characteristics in various parts of the world over time), the creation of the so-called "Third World," current forms of neoliberal capitalism, and the role of markets and "free" trade.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: Principles of capitalism and democratic socialism

Faculty Expert: David Schmitz, Director, Center for Philosophy of Freedom

Week 3—Consequences of the "capitalist realism" orientation, Part 1.

Tuesday, January 31: We will begin to make the connections between the essential features of this form of late stage capitalism and its most pressing effects. These requirements of capitalism include, most critically, organizing the globe geopolitically to facilitate the spread of this form of political economy. At different historical moments this set of activities (which almost always has had as its objectives the securing of advantageous access to resources, markets, labor, and/or other favorable conditions of production or sale of commodities) has been termed colonialism, imperialism, and/or neo-imperialism. In all of these forms, however, the quest for geopolitical dominance has posed grave dangers for those populations in the way of such expansion. At the present moment, these dangers are manifested as such existential threats to the human species as potential nuclear war and nuclear terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons,

and constant and expanding militarism and warfare. In this week we will examine the various forms these threats have taken at different moments and in different regional contexts, as well as the rationales that have been used to justify such troubling developments.

Thursday, February 2: Concrete illustrations of the foregoing points. One focus would be on the threat of imminent destruction throughout the nuclear age, and the shocking record of near terminal disaster in part from accident and in part from highly adventurist choices of political leaders, including some that are very well documented but very poorly understood, like JFK's decisions at the peak of the missile crisis. And on the escalating dangers today, particularly at the Russian border, largely a result of NATO expansion since 1991, where we will focus on what is now known from recent archival scholarship.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: Militarism and nuclear threat

Faculty Expert: David Gibbs, Professor, Department of History

Week 4—Consequences of the “capitalist realism” orientation, Part 2.

Tuesday, February 7: Here we examine a second essential feature of industrial state capitalism: the quest for ever expanding profits. A critical implication of this need is the contradiction between the quest for infinite growth and the material reality of a finite planet. While long problematic in more localized settings, the scale of the capitalist system now poses such existential threats as climate change, massive environmental degradation, and irretrievable resource depletion. Again, we will make clear the linkages between essential elements of this stage of capitalist development, its environmental impacts, and the reasons that, and ways in which, recognizing such connections are downplayed and obscured.

Thursday, February 9: The principal focus here will be on the second major threat to survival: global warming. The discussion will review the basic facts and bring out one of the most astonishing features of modern history: the extraordinary marginalization of the most crucial question that has arisen in human history and even worse, the fact that a major political organization in the most powerful state in history not only denies the facts but is urging that we race to the precipice – and that all of this passes virtually without comment; hardly a word in the recent presidential campaign or coverage, even on the left. We will also extend Tuesday's discussion, through concrete cases, of the incompatibility of capitalism with survival—given its demand for unsustainable growth and ignoring of externalities—along with its incompatibility with democracy.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: Climate change

Faculty Expert: Tracey Osborne, Assistant Professor, School of Geography & Development

Week 5—Consequences of the “capitalist realism” orientation, Part 3.

Tuesday, February 14: Here we take up questions of the more mundane and pervasive, but nevertheless devastating, effects of the current globalized and neoliberal forms of late stage capitalism. We will explore the roots and impact of the neoliberal globalized stage of state capitalism, with the tendencies towards plutocracy, monopolization and secular stagnation, as well as the shifting nature national power (vis a vis the power of global capital) in the contemporary period. Again, we will demonstrate the necessary connections between these phenomena and the current stage of capitalist formation.

Thursday, February 16: We will review a number of specific examples of these effects, which include increasing wealth and income inequality, reductions of state support for citizens (often under the harsh requirements of imposed austerity programs), privatization and enclosure of commons resources and services, the increasing production of surplus/disposable people (which includes a portion of the massive, current refugee and immigrant streams, as well as enormous and growing prison populations), and the policing and surveillance of domestic populations.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: Rising inequality, or neoliberalism and its discontents
Faculty Expert: Jeff Sallaz, Associate Professor, School of Sociology

Week 6—Response and resistance

Tuesday, February 21: The phenomena we have been discussing thus far in the course do not take place without impact and consequences. In this week we take up questions of the multi-faceted ways that those affected by the machinations of late stage, neoliberal, globalized capitalism respond. Each of the sets of impacts that we have examined have given rise to social movements of many kinds, from peace and environmental activism, to calls for social, political, cultural, and economic justice. In this week, we will examine the ways in which these diverse movements might find common ground, and thus political alliance and solidarity.

Thursday, February 23: We will begin with an examination of historical predecessors to today's social movements that include anti-slavery and anti-colonial resistances, early contests over industrialization and waged labor, and the civil rights and feminist movements. With this background, we then intend to assess the achievements and difficulties involved in such contemporary phenomena as the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, the indignados, the Bernie Sanders' and Donald Trump mobilizations, the Brexit vote, and other social movements agitating for social change, as well as similar things that will undoubtedly be in the news at the time of the course. We will pay special attention to rising resistance to neoliberalism, and examine the different forms this resistance has taken in particular regions around the globe. Finally, we will also examine the response of elites and states to these proliferating movements.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: Resistance and social movements

Faculty Expert: Michelle Téllez, Assistant Professor, Department of Mexican American Studies

Week 7—Prospects for progressive change

Tuesday, February 28: Given all of the foregoing, we return to the title of the course “What is Politics?” in order to provoke contemplation on what would constitute progressive change, and how such change might be brought about. In approaching these matters we also return to the potential contribution of critical pedagogy and the role of informed and activist intellectuals, scholars and citizens.

Thursday, March 2: We will tie together themes already discussed, and explore conceptions of the common good from the Enlightenment to the present. In terms of the educational system, we will contrast the traditional concept of education as a vessel into which one pours water with the Humboldtian view of education as laying out a string along which the student pursues his/her own course, with the goal of encouraging innate curiosity and the desire to inquire and create, to challenge and to discover. We will connect these concepts to the current state of education, bringing in the current imposition of business models particularly in reaction to the liberating and democratizing tendencies of the 1960s.

Readings: TBA

Q & A Topic: Critical pedagogy

Faculty Expert: Stephanie Troutman, Assistant Professor, Department of English