

POLS 5350—Topics in Political Theory: POLITICS, VIOLENCE, CULTURE 1

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Interrogating the uneasy relationships among politics, violence, and culture

Politics, culture more generally, and, therefore, political theory have a complicated relationship with violence. In most instances, the stated aspiration is to minimize or, sometimes, rid human community of the threat or actualization of physical harm. Violence, the argument goes, must be confronted as either an integral part of human nature or as an aberration, but in either case, it must be overcome for there to be “order,” “progress,” etc. Yet, there is no political order, indeed, no politics, without some form of coercion, without the explicit or implicit use of physical and other forms of violence. Non-violence, seemingly a remedy for our violent circumstances/natures, alas, has not found place as a governing mode. Non-violent resistance, for instance, may lead to regime change or important changes in the regime itself, but, in the end, that “new” regime inevitably utilizes violence. Once we stipulate to the presence of violence (even through “mild” forms of coercion), the first step in understanding its role and function is identifying where and how it works. It is easiest to find in the realm of politics or “the political.” But even those forms of violence have deeper sources, often in the culture which we inherit, in which we move, and which we constantly (if not consciously) recreate. In this course, we will examine this relationship among the terms politics, violence, and culture. The first question must be “What constitutes violence?” From there, we will track the various ways that term is understood (and not), the way it works to define our political, social, and economic relationships. We will also identify and examine ways in which our culture supports and naturalizes these arrangements—whether they are oppressive, repressive, or liberatory. Implicit in our investigation is how we might proceed to undo or at least ameliorate the harmful effects of the omnipresence of violence. In this course, we will think about but not resolve these and related issues. A theorist’s answers are always contingent and, therefore, not as important as finding and asking better questions. Consequently, in this course, by engaging key thinkers on the subject, we will consider violence as both an idea and as a socio-political phenomenon that, in the end, cannot be wished away.

Brief Course Outline:

The course and our discussion will proceed in four “modules”:

Module 1: Critical Theories of Violence

Module 2: Žižek’s Side Glances at Violence

Module 3: Evans on Violence and Western Liberal Humanist Culture

Module 4: Rose on Violence, Gender, and Culture

Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, the student will be able to

- (1) Identify the key elements of the political theorist’s approach through direct engagement with primary texts in political theory.
- (2) Recognize and apply the methods of political theory to key questions of modern political life through reading and reflection, written and oral communication, and both formal and informal modes of interpersonal interaction.
- (3) Identify and be able to practice select norms of the political science profession, including peer evaluation, presentation of work, and the development of a collaborative and scholarly intellectual community.

CANVAS: All written and graded assignments will appear on Canvas. Assignments can be found under the “Syllabus,” “Assignments,” and “Modules” tabs on the Course page. All written and graded work will be submitted via Canvas. Students will also find supplementary handouts and readings on Canvas. All modules, essays, and attendance/participation grades are weighted as part of your final grade.

POLS 5350—Topics in Political Theory: POLITICS, VIOLENCE, CULTURE 2

Textbooks. *The following texts are required* and available at the UT-Tyler Bookstore:

- Richard Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters* (Polity, 2013)
- Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Picador, 2008)
- Brad Evans, *Ecce Humanitas: Beholding the Pain of Humanity* (Columbia University Press, 2021)
- Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and On Violence Against Women* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021)
- All other REQUIRED texts are available on Canvas.

Course Requirements

All grading is done on a 10-point scale: A = 90-100; b = 80-89; C = 70-79... Remember that in graduate courses, a grade of “C” or below is considered a failing grade. The formal requirements of the course and their relative impact on your grade are as follows:

(1) Class Attendance and Participation

10%

Political theory necessarily involves discussion, and, in that vein, discussion involves taking cues from gestures, tone of voice, etc. To serve this end, *we will be meeting weekly in person. To meet the attendance and participation requirement, you are expected to attend these class meetings and to participate in our class discussions.* Students may also be assigned readings each week and called upon to set up our class discussions. Bring your understanding of the readings, your questions, your answers, and your insights to our class meetings and be ready to articulate and discuss them.

(2) Modules: Readings and Assignment Worksheets **4 Modules (10%; 10%; 15%; 15%) = 50%**

The course is divided into 4 units or modules. You can find the modules under the “Modules” tab on the course’s Canvas page. Each module consists of the occasional video and your assigned readings. Each module is also divided into worksheet assignments. Each assignment contains both specific readings and an *Assignment Worksheet* that must be completed in the week that it is assigned. *These assignments cannot be made up.*

The Assignment Worksheets require you to write *Analytical Summaries* of assigned readings. For each reading, you will be asked to post a *one paragraph* (neither more nor less than 200 words) analytical summary of the assigned reading on Canvas. Your analytical summary paragraph should (1) identify the main argument(s) of the work, (2) the major points the author is trying to make, and (3) how he or she used those points and examples to make the argument. *Your paragraph should NOT be a list of answers to the above questions, a set of statements from your notes, or a list of any sort. Rather, it should be a well-conceived and readable description of the work that would communicate its meaning and significance to someone who, while being a professional colleague, has not read the work.*
NOTE: You are graded by Module and each worksheet makes up a significant percentage of each module grade. Missed worksheets cannot be made up.

(3) Semester Midterm Essay (15%) and Final Essay (25%)

40%

Students will be asked to write analytical essays on some aspect of the class material using specific works we have read. *These WILL NOT be research papers.* Students are expected to limit themselves to the material we have read and discussed in the service of developing their own substantial analytical capabilities. The first essay will be five pages in length and be due on Canvas Monday, October 4 at 12 noon. *Students will present their papers in class that evening and the class will discuss them.* The final essay will be 6-7 pages in length and will be due on Monday, November 28 at 12 noon. *All essays must be submitted on Canvas as Word documents, 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, etc.* An essay stylesheet is available on Canvas. Students are expected to follow it. In addition, below are some further guidelines for writing your essays:

WARNING: IGNORE THE FOLLOWING PAPER GUIDELINES AT YOUR PERIL:

(1) DO NOT try to avoid addressing the issues by talking about the author’s writing style, difficulty, etc. In this class, as in each of your graduate courses in political science, *you are considered a professional willing to work to understand difficult material.* You can always ask the professor for help, too, but do it BEFORE the day you turn in/present your paper.

POLS 5350—Topics in Political Theory: POLITICS, VIOLENCE, CULTURE 3

(2) *Write in reasoned, professional terms.* Use your best English: there is no excuse for misspellings; make sure all of your sentences have subjects, verbs, and objects; make sure they match in number; do not use contractions; write in paragraphs (change to a new *but related* thought = new paragraph) above all, do not write the way you speak! Write like a professional.

(3) *Focus on one or two ideas or issues that are common to all the readings.* Do not simply rehearse the argument of the author—in the allotted space, you do not have the time! Your task is to discuss the readings in terms of the one or two most important ideas or issues that you have identified. As a start, consider the issues raised in our discussions in class and where this author/idea fits. *Add your own insights where appropriate. Raise questions and critical issues—do not rant.*

(4) *These are NOT research papers.* Limit yourself to the text before you. The assignment is designed to get you to read closely, carefully, and analytically. Resist the urge to run to the internet. Force yourself to deal with the text, come to some understanding of the issues raised, and craft your own argument.

Syllabus

All assignments may be found on Canvas and may be accessed through either the “Modules” link, the “Assignments” link, or the “Syllabus” link. Work for each module will be turned in on Canvas and most are due by the end of the week it is assigned (Sunday @ 11:59pm). Assignments will be closed thereafter. Students are strongly encouraged to read ahead and to turn in their Worksheet Assignments before the Sunday deadline.

MODULE 1: Critical Theories of Violence

- Aug 22 M **Introduction: Violence and Politics**
--Bernstein, from *Violence*, “Introduction” (pp. 1-11)
--Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (excerpt) (on Canvas)
--Arendt, “Reflections on Violence” from *New York Review of Books* (Feb. 27, 1969) (on Canvas)
- Aug 28 S **Worksheet 1.1 due at 11:59pm.**
Aug 29 M **Critical Beginnings—Schmitt, Benjamin, and Arendt**
--Bernstein, Chapter 1, “The Aporias of Carl Schmitt” from *Violence* (pp. 12-46)
--Bernstein, Chapter 2, “Walter Benjamin: Divine Violence?” from *Violence* (pp. 46-77)
--Bernstein, Chapter 3, “Hannah Arendt: On Violence and Power” from *Violence*, Chapter 3 (pp. 78-104)
- Sep 5 M **LABOR DAY**
- Sep 11 S **Worksheet 1.2 due at 11:59pm.**
Sep 12 M **Fanon: Violence and the Cost of Anticolonial Liberation**
--Fanon, from *Wretched of the Earth*, Chapter 1 “On Violence” (pp. 1-51) (on Canvas)
--Jean-Paul Sartre, from *Wretched of the Earth*, (pp. xliii-lxii) (on Canvas)
--Fanon, from *Wretched of the Earth*, Chapter 5 “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” (pp. 181-234) (on Canvas)
--Bernstein, “Frantz Fanon’s Critique of Violence” from *Violence*, Chapter 4 (pp. 46-77)

POLS 5350—Topics in Political Theory: POLITICS, VIOLENCE, CULTURE 4

MODULE 2: Zizek's Side Glances at Violence

- Sep 18 S** **Worksheet 2.1 due at 11:59pm.**
Sep 19 M *Zizek: Violence on the Side*
--Slavoj Zizek, from *Violence* (pp. 1-104)
- Sep 25 S** **Worksheet 2.2 due at 11:59pm.**
Sep 26 M *Zizek: Violence and (In)action*
--Zizek, *Violence* (pp. 105-218)
- Oct 3 M** **MIDTERM ESSAY DUE (Student Presentations begin at 6pm.)**

MODULE 3: Evans on Violence and Western Liberal Humanist Culture

- Oct 9 S** **Worksheet 3.1 due at 11:59pm.**
Oct 10 M *Evans' Ecce Humanitas: Violence and Sacrifice*
--Evans, from *Ecce Humanitas*, Preface and Chapters 1-3 (pp. xv-xxvii, 1-100)
- Oct 16 S** **Worksheet 3.2 due at 11:59pm.**
Oct 17 M *Evans' Ecce Humanitas: Violence and the Fall of Liberal Humanism*
-- Evans, from *Ecce Humanitas*, Chapters 4-6 (pp. 103-187)
- Oct 23 S** **Worksheet 3.3 due at 11:59pm.**
Oct 24 M *Evans' Ecce Humanitas: Violence and Sacrifice*
-- Evans, from *Ecce Humanitas*, Chapters 7-9 (pp. 191-287)

MODULE 4: Rose on Violence, Gender, and Culture

- Oct 30 S** **Worksheet 4.1 due at 11:59pm.**
Oct 31 M *Rose: Reframing Gender, Reframing Violence*
--Rose, from *On Violence...*, Introduction and two (2) out of Chapters 1-3 (your choice)
- Nov 6 S** **Worksheet 4.2 due at 11:59pm.**
Nov 7 M *Rose: Feminism, Modernism, Sex, and Race*
--Rose, from *On Violence...*, Chapters 4-6 (pp. 169-264)
- Nov 13 S** **Worksheet 4.3 due at 11:59pm.**
Nov 14 M *Rose III: History, Trauma, Borders, and Justice*
--Rose, from *On Violence...*, Chapters 7-9 and "Afterword" (pp. 265-368)
- Nov 28 M** **FINAL ESSAYS DUE on Canvas BY 12noon CDT.**

IMPORTANT: This syllabus reflects the minimum requirements of our professional relationship over the course of this semester. By staying in this class, you signify that you understand the contents of this syllabus and you agree to the terms and conditions stated herein.

Notes on Classroom Etiquette or THE RULES

--Class starts promptly. Be here on time. After the first week or so of the semester, you WILL be denied entry if you arrive more than 5 minutes late. Late arrival is disruptive to the classroom experience of your classmates and, perhaps even your professor. In any case, it works against the mission of the classroom. To this end, I suggest you not drive from class to

POLS 5350—Topics in Political Theory: POLITICS, VIOLENCE, CULTURE 5

class—gas is too expensive and we could all use the exercise.

--The format of the class is lecture, student presentation, and conversation. The classroom is a safe place to ask questions. But they should be questions that derive from work with and in the material and NOT because you did not do the assignment.

--You will not read newspapers, textbooks, or study for other classes while in this class. If you do so, you will be asked to leave—and in no uncertain terms.

--Turn all cellphones and other electronic devices off (or set to vibrate) for the duration of class. You are not to accept calls or engage in text messaging during class. If you do so, I will confiscate your device. If you are awaiting a call or message of extreme importance, I suggest you skip class.

--You may use a laptop, but only for the purpose of taking notes. If I catch you surfing the web, playing games, or engaged in some other activity not related to the work of the class, you will lose your laptop privileges.

--You are responsible for material missed due to absence. I suggest you exchange notes with other responsible students in any case, but particularly if you have to miss. I am happy to answer questions about this material, but will not rehearse my lectures or our class discussions.

--Some semesters, life gets in the way. Should you have one of these semesters, I am more than happy to talk to you about what to do. But if the trauma is too great, I strongly suggest you drop one or all of your courses. Your education is vitally important, but there are things that outrank even education sometimes—and *you have to make that call when it is necessary*. I cannot grade you on how well or poorly you deal with your life at given moments. Your grades reflect your performance in class—not how well you are dealing with other things. I wish all of us a semester in which these things aren't issues.