

POLITICAL ISSUES: THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE

Course Description

The issues covered in any given day's newspaper are transient, but some political questions endure across the ages: What is the purpose of politics? What are its possibilities and dangers? What is justice? What is the best life, and what regime best facilitates it? This course seeks to introduce students to the study of these questions by surveying a broad selection of the Western intellectual and civic tradition's reflections on them. The course is divided into four units. The first explores what purposes politics should serve. The second considers the meaning of justice. The third engages the American civic tradition's contribution to these questions. Finally, we shall consider the limits of what politics can and should attempt to achieve.

Course Goals

We cannot in a semester or, indeed, in a lifetime answer these questions finally or even engage all the Western tradition's reflections on them. Our purpose in this course is to introduce the student to the *study* of these questions so that he or she can continue to explore them in a thoughtful, disciplined and meaningful way whether through further classroom study or as engaged citizens. The student should be able to identify the differences between classical and modern approaches to these questions; discuss thoughtfully and critically the purposes of politics, including what various thinkers have understood those purposes and the limits of them to be; understand some of the outstanding reflections on these topics in the American civic tradition; and discuss the dangers of utopian designs in politics. Above all, the student should develop his or her ability to interrogate texts in a thoughtful and rigorous manner.

Required Readings

Amy Kass, Leon Kass and Diana Schaub, *What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech and Song*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Hawthorne's Short Stories*

The paper topic (due April 23) is to analyze one of the short stories on the syllabus from the Hawthorne volume and reflect on what, if anything, it teaches us about politics.

Course Readings

As our schedule permits, we will read the following as well as any additions I make during the course. With the exception of *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, readings are either on Blackboard, in *What So Proudly We Hail* or available by other means I will indicate in class. I will tell you each week what to read for the following week. We will spend between 3-4 weeks on each of the following four units.

A. What are the purposes of politics?

1. Aristotle, *The Politics* (Blackboard: 1.1-2, 2.7-8 3.1-9, 4.10-11, 5.9-11. 7.2, 8.4)
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Blackboard)
3. Mayflower Compact
4. Declaration of Independence
5. Franklin Roosevelt, Commonwealth Club Address (Blackboard)

B. What is justice?

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Blackboard)
2. John Rawls (no reading—lecture only)
3. W.E.B. DuBois, “The Talented Tenth”
4. Kurt Vonnegut, “Harrison Bergeron”
5. Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions”

C. American ideas

1. Federalist 10, 51, 84 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/fed.asp)
2. Washington’s Farewell Address
3. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Blackboard)
4. John F. Kennedy, “Address on the Nation’s Space Effort”

D. The Limits of Politics

1. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
(http://files.libertyfund.org/files/656/0005-02_Bk.pdf -- pp. 88-129, 191-95, 272-78, 361-65)
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Short Stories* (“May-Pole of Merry Mount,” “The Birthmark,” “The Celestial Railroad,” “Earth’s Holocaust,” “Ethan Brand”)