POLT 330: RESPONDING TO DISASTER: POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE

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Course Description

As the recent earthquake, tsunami and reactor meltdown in Japan have once again demonstrated so vividly, disasters—whether seemingly “natural”, like earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes; or “political”, like terrorist attacks, wars, and genocides—can turn our worlds upside down and make it difficult to know how to respond to them. Disasters upend the very terms of everyday life, the terms in which we formulate and enact responses to our world. In this course we ask: How do disasters do this? And how do political practices, philosophical critiques, and literary evocations shape, and how are they shaped by, the ways in which we apprehend and respond to such disorienting phenomena? We will approach these questions in two ways. First, we will explore critically some theoretical work that addresses relationships between politics, philosophy and literature (or stories more broadly). Then, armed with what insights and questions we amass, we will turn our attention to two disasters: 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. With respect to each we will investigate how the tools offered by politics, philosophy and literature help us to make sense of disasters; and, more specifically, what sorts of sense they help us to make.

Course Objectives

First Objective: Think Broadly. In this course we will learn to think about politics from an interdisciplinary perspective. Politics does not, of course, happen in a vacuum; it always coexists and intersects with economics and art, with philosophy and literature, and more. To understand our politics, then, it can be helpful to work at these intersecting fields. We will pay attention not only to the ways how these perspectives differ, but also to what they share with one another.

Second Objective: Think dangerously, not recklessly. We will cultivate our analytic skills, especially careful reading and critical thinking. Together I hope that we will come to appreciate the subtlety and intricacy of these texts, their arguments, their ambiguities, their tensions and contradictions. And I hope that we will also learn how to treat texts respectfully, but not reverently; to engage thoughtfully and constructively with their arguments; but also to seek out actively those moments where the arguments seem to falter, and to try to understand how and why. We will learn, that is, to think dangerously, but not recklessly.
Third Objective: *Say what you mean, mean what you say.* In addition to careful reading and critical thinking, the ability to express those thoughts clearly and concisely is a vital skill. In this course we will learn how to make arguments: How to state a claim and defend it with evidence. Moreover, we will learn the value of clarity in both speech and thought. We will be dealing with some difficult texts and ideas, and one of our major tasks will be to clarify them—though without simplifying them so much that they lose their force.

Expectations

What you can expect of me:
This class depends on the quality of our discussions. I will not lecture except where some context seems appropriate, and never for long. I am here to help guide the conversations, and to participate in it when and as it seems important to do so.

Outside of the classroom, I will hold regular office hours. This can be a useful time to bring up questions or confusions that we do not address in class, or to discuss any concerns about your progress in the course. **In addition, each of you must schedule two meetings with me to discuss your topic and your progress on the seminar paper.**
You can also expect assignments to be graded and returned promptly, with comments and questions about what you’ve written, and suggestions about how to improve.

What I expect of you:
This course is both reading-intensive and writing-intensive. We read approximately one book per week. The course is writing-intensive because writing is a discipline best improved through regular practice. You will learn it best by doing it.

This class demands regular, thoughtful and constructive participation. I expect you to come to each class having read and thought about the material for that session. You may find it helpful to take notes on the readings, and to jot down questions to pose in class as they occur to you. .

In addition, you will be responsible for 3 kinds of writing assignments:

*Response papers* (check syllabus for more specific requirements, as they vary):
These are opportunities to respond thoughtfully and critically to any of the readings for that week. A “critical” response may, but need not, consist of a disagreement with the author. Did something jump out at you as especially interesting or important? What on earth does that odd claim mean? Do you see some apparent contradictions in or between works? Then write about that! There will be no assigned topics or questions, but you must start each response with the question you plan to address. These papers should *not* simply summarize the author’s argument. Rather, they should make an argument in the form of an answer to the question with which you begin.

*Research Paper:* This is a significant (20-25 pp.) piece of original research that addresses the themes of the course. Think of this as a step-by-step process. After
selecting a topic (in consultation with me), you will submit a research question; an 
annotated bibliography of 10 sources; an introduction and thesis statement; an 
outline of your argument; and your final paper.

Course reflection: The purpose of this assignment is more “therapeutic” than pedagogical. Did this course challenge how you think about yourself and the political world you inhabit? If so, how? If not, what is the most surprising idea or argument that you encountered during the course? Has your response to it changed over the course of the semester?

Lastly, you will each make a research presentation during the last three class sessions: November 26, Dec. 3, and Dec. 10

Grading

These three components—participation, weekly responses, course reflection and research paper—will be weighted as follows:

Participation—30%
Responses and Course Reflection—20%
Research essay and presentation—50%

All written assignments due in class should be submitted during that class. All other assignments should be submitted via Blackboard

Plagiarism

The use of other people’s words or ideas without proper acknowledgment is a serious academic offence, for which you may be subject to a range of sanctions by me and by the College. Do not bother trying—I will catch you. If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism, please see Page 2 of the document “Students’ Rights and Responsibilities:


If you still have questions, please discuss them with me.

Late submission policies: Missing deadlines creates a lot of headaches for you and for me. Don’t do it. Late assignments will be penalized ONE HALF LETTER GRADE PER DAY, INCLUDING WEEKENDS.

Disability: If you require specific accommodations because of a disability, you must come speak to me and provide a letter from Disability Services by September 13.
Books for Purchase (at the campus bookstore)

The following texts are available at the Oberlin Bookstore:

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*
Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow of No Towers*
Maria Pia Lara, *Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment*
The 9/11 Commission Report
Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*
Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*
Josh Neufeld, *A.D.: New Orleans After The Deluge*
Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun*

Schedule

Monday, Sept. 10  Introduction
Monday, Sept. 17  Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*
Monday, Sept. 24  Maria Pia Lara, *Narrating Evil*
Response Paper Due (1-2 pp., single-spaced)
Monday, Oct. 1  The 9/11 Commission Report
Monday, Oct. 8  Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*
Huehls, “Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11’s Timely Traumas”
Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow of No Towers*

Deadline for Topic Consultation

Friday, Oct. 20  Paper proposal due
Monday, October 22  Off for Fall Recess
Monday, Oct. 29  Review Keniston and Quinn
Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
Response paper (2-3pp, single-spaced)
Annotated Bibliography
Progress meetings this week

Wednesday, Oct. 31  Introduction and thesis statement
Monday, Nov. 5  Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*

**Wednesday, Nov. 7**  Detailed Outline Due

Monday, Nov. 12  Stein and Preuss, “Oral History, Folklore and Katrina
Josh Neufeld, *A.D: New Orleans After The Deluge*

Monday, Nov. 19  Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun*

Monday, Nov. 26  Presentations of Draft Papers
*Response Paper (2-3 pp., single-spaced)*

Monday, Dec. 3  Presentations

Monday, Dec. 10  Presentations

***Research Paper and Course Reflection due Saturday, Dec. 22 by 11:00am. Please submit via Blackboard.***