POGO 750: The Coercive State

M 4:30 – 7:10 p.m.  Professor Ahsan Butt
Van Metre Hall 317  Email: abutt4@gmu.edu
Research Hall 356
Office hours: by appointment

Course description

This course is a graduate seminar that examines the modern, bureaucratic state as a coercive institution. We will focus on the causes and consequences of coercion by, for, and through the state in various realms. The course will be divided into four sections, varying between one and four weeks in length. In the first, we will interrogate the roots of the Westphalian state, especially its war-making and taxing capacities. In the second, we will grapple with the state’s attempts to control its citizens’ bodies, dealing with the threat of incarceration by a punitive, paranoid, and omniscient state. In the third, we will explore how states create peoples and nations they can be proud of, specifically paying close attention to the processes of tightening the sinews of cognitive attachment between a country and its population. We will close by considering coercion by and in the United States.

Course materials

There are nine books required for this course. You can purchase them from online marketplaces such as Amazon.com. The required books are:

- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*
- Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*
- Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*
- Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45*
- Margaret Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall*
- James Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*
- Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*

The readings for the course also consist of a number of journal articles, all of which are available online. Assigned book chapters will be made available on the course’s Blackboard site.

Course requirements

Students’ final grades will be determined by their performance in three areas:
- 4 response papers (40%). Students can choose which week’s readings they respond to (though, in general, it is advisable to space these out, such that you’re writing a response paper every 2-3 weeks). These papers must not summarize the readings but critically respond to them. This exercise can include grappling with a theoretical, empirical, or methodological issue that plagues one or more of the readings, putting a number of the assigned readings in conversation with one another, or building upon and extending the insights and arguments contained therein. They must be 3-4 pages in length, and have 1-inch margins, size 12 font, and be double-spaced. Response papers are due at noon the day of the class, either as an email attachment or a hard copy delivered to my office.

- 1 research paper (40%). An original research paper on a question or topic that relates to state coercion, broadly defined. On Nov 20, students will write and circulate a 3-5 page proposal outlining their plans for the research paper, and discuss the project in class with the professor and their colleagues on Nov 25. The final paper is due on Dec 13 and must be 15-20 pages (20-25 for PhD students), not including citations and/or footnotes, and have 1-inch margins, size 12 font, and be double-spaced. Only hard copies will be accepted.

- Class participation (20%). This is a seminar course and, as such, depends critically upon students’ active participation in class. Students must come to class prepared, having completed all the required readings, and be ready to discuss and debate issues raised in the readings and lectures. Students will also be required to do 1-2 oral presentations of the day’s readings. These presentations should, as with the response papers, not summarize the readings but critically assess them and should serve as the departure point for class discussions.

**Late assignments**

Assignments must be turned in at the time and place designated on the syllabus. Failure to turn in an assignment on time is unacceptable except with the prior agreement of the instructor (which will be given only in exceptional circumstances, such as a documented illness or family emergency). Except in documented cases of illness or emergency, a penalty of up to a full letter grade may be assessed for each day the assignment is late.

**Academic integrity**

GMU is an Honor Code university; please see the Office for Academic Integrity for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else’s work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the firm expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas,
perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt (of any kind) please ask for guidance and clarification.

**Students with disabilities or special needs**

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474, http://ods.gmu.edu. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS.

**Email policy**

In general, it is best to discuss any issues or concerns with me in person, either in class or in office hours. This is especially true for issues that require elaboration or a back-and-forth exchange. I will be happy to respond to emails in normal business hours (M-F, 8:30 a.m. – 5 p.m.) that require a short, concise response and aim to do so in a timely manner. However, there will be occasions when it takes me 24 hours or more to respond.

**Course schedule**

Aug 26: Introduction

Sept 2: NO CLASS – Labor Day

Sept 9: Origins of the coercive state


Sept 16: The conscripting state: the military


Sept 23: The imperialist state: colonization and war

- Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, chapters 4-5.
Sept 30: The plundering state: taxation
- Murray Rothbard, *Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature and Other Essays*, chapters 1, 3.

Oct 7: The totalitarian state: fascism

Oct 14: The imprisoning state: gulags and jails
- Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*, chapters 3, 7-9, 13-14

Oct 21: The surveillance state: secrets and privacy
- “China has turned Xinjiang into a police state like no other,” *The Economist*. Available from https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/05/31/china-has-turned-xinjiang-into-a-police-state-like-no-other.

Oct 28: The indoctrinating state: education

Nov 4: The classifying state: censuses and counting


Nov 11: The propagandistic state: censorship and misinformation

- Haifeng Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling,” *Comparative Politics* 47(4): 419-444.

Nov 18: The developmental state: growth and poverty


Nov 25: **Student presentations on research projects**

Dec 2: The American state: U.S. coercion at home and abroad

- Lindsey O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War*, chapter 2
Dec 13: Finals papers due at 5 p.m. by email.