Draft

Government 327: Contemporary Political Theory

Basic Information

Class Meets:
Professor: Matthew Scherer
Office Hours:
Office: Research Hall 364
Email: mschere2@gmu.edu

Course Description

This is a course in contemporary political theory. We will proceed with three books published since 2011: Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011) Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), and Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives* (2019).

Your professor will provide additional optional readings where appropriate, but the main work of this course will be to engage in the work of political theory: that is reading, thinking about, discussing, and writing about our central texts. You should bring actual paper copies of whichever text we are reading to class with you. We will try in this course to slow down, focus on a limited number of exemplary books and engage deeply with them. Topics include: politics, the ‘public’, liberalism, capitalism, slavery, globalization / transnational circulation, race, gender, subjectivity, ideology, freedom, America, and modernity.

Assignments:

60% of your grade will be determined by three medium length writing assignments. You will write two 5 page papers and one 10 page paper. We are reading four books. You will choose two of these books and write a 5 page paper on each. You will write a 10 page final paper using any combination of these books you select (you may revise your earlier papers and include parts of them in revised form in this final paper). You will consult with your professor about your final paper.

20% of your grade will be determined by short reading response assignments. We have 25 substantive meetings planned. You may write a short reading response paper for any of these meetings responding to the reading assigned for that day. These will be due at 10pm the night before class (i.e. Monday or Wednesday night). Each paper that earns a passing grade will earn 2% and extra papers may earn extra credit up to 6%. I.e. if you write 16 papers and 14 receive passing
marks you earn the full 20% plus 6% extra credit. Or if you write 8 papers and receive passing marks on 5 you will earn 10% out of a possible 20% toward your final grade, effectively dropping your grade by 10%, which corresponds to a full letter.

20% of your grade will be determined by class participation.

Schedule of Readings

Class 1. Introduction to the course

- optional: Louis Althusser, “Ideological State Apparatuses”

Part One.

Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (2011)

- Introduction
  - Cruel Optimism, Introduction.
  - Optional: The New Yorker: Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety: How Lauren Berlant’s cultural criticism predicted the Trumping of politics
  - Optional: Lauren Berlant, Trump, or Political Emotions
  - Slides
- One, Cruel Optimism
  - Slides
  - Charles Johnson, “Exchange Value”
- Two, Intuitionists
  - Berlant Chapter Two Questions
- Three, Slow Death
  - Berlant Chapter Three Questions
- Four, Two Girls
  - Ny Times Piece on Mary Gaitskill
  - Berlant Chapter Four Questions
- October 10, Class 12: Five, Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal
- October 15, Class 13: Six, After the Good Life, an Impasse (fall break, combine with class 14)
- October 17, Class 14: Seven, On the Desire for the Political
Part Two

Lisa Lowe, The Intimacies of Four Continents (2015)

- 1. The Intimacies of Four Continents
- 2. Autobiography of Empire
- 3. A Fetishism of Colonial Commodities
- 4. The Ruses of Liberty
- 5. Freedoms yet to Come

Part Three


- Book One: She Makes an Errant Path Through the City
- Book Two: The Sexual Geography of the Black Belt
- Book Three: Beautiful Experiments

Wrap up

TBA

Classroom Policies and University Policies:

- Cell phones, pagers, and other communicative devices are not allowed in this class. Please keep them stowed away and out of sight. An increasing number of studies indicates that using laptops in the classroom tends to diminish student performance. Through the first exam, no electronic devices at all will be permitted in class. Please see the professor if you have a special need for a computer. After the first exam, the class will discuss and vote on a technology policy for the remainder of the semester.

- Email your teaching assistant at any time to schedule a meeting or ask a question. You can also email Professor Scherer, but he only checks email during the week between 12pm and 8pm, and is not likely to reply as quickly. In order to preserve your privacy rights, the university requires you to use your Masonlive account to email professors (see http://masonlive.gmu.edu for more information).

- Blackboard can remind you how to log into the course wiki.

- Late work will cause you problems in this course. In the event that you miss an exam, if you contact the professor in a timely fashion, you may be able to write a make up exam. Any make up exams given in this course will be more difficult than ordinary exams, and a full letter grade will be deducted from your score. It is not a good idea to miss an exam. If you anticipate having difficulty completing the required work for this course on time, contact the professor in advance to discuss your best options.
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.

If you have a learning or physical difference that may affect your academic work, you will need to furnish appropriate documentation to the Office of Disability Services (SUB I, Rm. 4205; 993-2474; http://ods.gmu.edu). If you qualify for accommodation, the ODS staff will give you a form detailing appropriate accommodations for your instructor. In addition to providing your professors with the appropriate form, please take the initiative to discuss accommodation with them at the beginning of the semester and as needed during the term. Because of the range of learning differences, faculty members need to learn from you the most effective ways to assist you. If you have contacted the Office of Disability Services and are waiting to hear from a counselor, please tell me.

The University has many resources available to support students beyond the classroom. These include:

- The University Writing Center offers both in-person and online writing assistance for students, including online writing guides, reference guides, and style manuals. Additionally, the Writing Center provides assistance to faculty who are interested in holding in-class writing workshops, developing effective writing assignments, or evaluating students’ writing. http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/

- Academic Advising and Transfer Center advises students who are thinking about changing majors or who need assistance with their transition to Mason from another institution. http://advising.gmu.edu/

- Counseling and Psychological Services. Students can take advantage of psychological services, a variety of learning services, multicultural services, and educational programs that support students’ educational goals. http://caps.gmu.edu/

- The Academic Counseling Program provides individual support to students with learning differences such as attention deficit disorder or learning disabilities. http://caps.gmu.edu/learnservices/academiccounseling.php
• Academic Skills Workshops and individual study skills counseling provide learning experiences to improve academic skills. http://caps.gmu.edu/learningservices/workshops.php

• The Certificate in Academic Skills Program provides a structured, yet individualized program of study to develop academic skills. http://caps.gmu.edu/learningservices/skillscertificate.php

• The Tutor Referral Program maintains a roster of undergraduate and graduate students available to provide fee-for-service tutoring assistance. Learning Services staff are available to consult with faculty and staff regarding student learning needs. http://caps.gmu.edu/learningservices/tutorreferral.php

• Office of Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. http://ods.gmu.edu/

Grading Scale:

• A 100-93
• A- 93-90
• B+ 90-87
• B 87-83
• B- 83-80
• C+ 80-77
• C 77-73
• C- 73-70
• D 70-60
• F 60-0