**HCOL 086 – Spring 2018**

**Thinking and Acting: Theories of Engagement**

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| Class meetings TR 1:15-2:30, UHN 34F | Professor Joseph Acquisto |
| Plenary lectures: Thursdays, 5:05-6:20, Billings Lecture Hall | Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:30-1:00 and by appointment |
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“A generous and elevated mind is distinguished by nothing more certainly than an eminent degree of curiosity.” –Samuel Johnson

This course will examine the ways power and privilege have been theorized, with attention to class, gender, race, and other categories, by those who go on actively to support, and also to engage in, activity that promotes political change in the world that is in line with the complexity of their own abstract reflections about engagement with the world. We will spend time looking at the relationship between education and democracy, with readings that trace the necessity of an informed citizenry, the obstacles to cultivating a life of the mind in a democracy and ways to overcome them, and the question of how best to cultivate cosmopolitanism in education. In the next section of the course, we will inquire why the habits of mind encouraged by the formation of intellect (the questioning, creative life of the mind as opposed to the goal-oriented, narrowly focused problem-solving of intelligence) so often lead, not to withdrawn contemplation but rather to progressive political engagement (and to resistance from dominant mainstream culture threatened by intellect). We will then examine theoretical and autobiographical writings by those who have both articulated and lived theories of social change across questions of class, race, culture, and sexuality and how the life of the mind informed, shaped, and altered the course of their political engagement. These figures include a diverse range of intellectuals, artists, and political figures from both within and beyond the United States.

The course takes its inspiration from the essay by Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” which you read in HCOL 85 and in which she explores the problem of the move from theoretical discussions of justice to real political action in the world. While all recognize the need to base political action on firm philosophical principles, the life of the mind, in its constant questioning, problematizing, and reconsideration of its own foundations, does not at first glance seem to support political action, which ideally rests on commitment to firmly held convictions. And yet no thinker would want to shut down the possibility of acting for political change, broadly defined, on account of the ever-changing interrogations of what we mean by “equality,” “justice,” and so on.

Required Texts:

* Course packet (on Blackboard): please download it and bind it by the second day of class
* Plato, *Gorgias* (Hackett)
* Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Yale)
* Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (Houghton Mifflin)

Assignments and Grades

“Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.” -- John Locke

“Latent in every act of complete reading is the compulsion to write a book in reply. The intellectual is, quite simply, a human being who has a pencil in his or her hand when reading a book.” --George Steiner

Class Participation 10%

Homework Writing Assignments 15%

Two Short Papers 10%

Research paper 20%

Poster assignment 25%

(10% group poster project grade, 15%individual contribution to the project)

Final Exam 20%

Course Objectives

--to examine the ways in which some people have theorized political engagement, race, class, and/or sexuality, obstacles to change, and ways to overcome those obstacles to promote positive change.

--to foster an active learning style in relation to the required readings for the class and to continue to develop the ability to outline and evaluate complex arguments

--to encourage and model good critical thinking skills

--to assess and improve writing skills through practice and feedback

--to foster confidence and respect in class discussions

--to create an enriching intellectual community and work collaboratively in large and small-group settings

**Note on late work:** Late work will incur a penalty of one letter grade per day: an A becomes a B after one day late, etc.

**Note on attendance:** Attendance at **all** **class sessions is required** except in cases of documented serious illness or emergency. For all other situations, you are allowed two absences, after which **your final grade for the course will be lowered by two grade points for each additional absence**. You should always come to class **on time** and well prepared. Make-up exams are given only in the case of documented emergency.

**Note on laptops:** Use of laptops in class is not permitted.

**Note on respect**: Please **turn off cell phones** and **refrain from eating** during class.

This syllabus attempts to be complete, but the instructor reserves the right throughout the course to make appropriate changes in a timely way.

**About your professor:**

Originally from Syracuse, New York, I lived more recently in New Haven, Connecticut where I completed a doctorate in French literature at Yale University before coming to Vermont in 2003. I specialize in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, with particular emphasis on lyric poetry and the novel as well as relations among music, philosophy, and literature. I am the author of four books, *French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music* (2006), *Crusoes and Other Castaways in Modern French Literature: Solitary Adventures* (2012), *The Fall out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation* (2015), and *Proust, Music, and Meaning* (2017). Besides French, I have studied Spanish, Polish, Latin, and Old French. In my free time I am a voracious reader. I enjoy taking long walks as well as listening to and making music of many kinds, but especially classical, jazz, and folk. I am proud not to drive or watch television and to own neither a cell phone nor a laptop.

**Schedule of Readings and Assignments:**

“Think before you speak. Read before you think.” --Fran Lebowitz

**THEORIZING EDUCATION, DEMOCRACY, AND PLURALITY**

January 16 Introductions, revisiting “Thinking and Moral Considerations”

January 17 Plenary: Prof. Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, “Religion, Rebels, & Jihad: Or, How Muslims were Racialized in India”

January 18 Louis Menand, “Why Do All Professors Think Alike?” from The

Marketplace of Ideas

Slavoj Žižek, “Don’t Act, Just Think”

http://bigthink.com/videos/dont-act-just-think

Žižek, “More Than Ever, We Need Thinking”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtPghWHAQfs>

January 23 Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”

January 25 Plato, *Gorgias* through page 50

January 30 *Gorgias* to end

February 1 Sandy Grant, “Enjoy!”

February 6 Alexis de Tocqueville, “Why the Americans Are More Addicted to

Practical than to Theoretical Science” from *Democracy in America*

John Dewey, “The Democratic Conception in Education”

February 7 Plenary: Alison Bechdel, “Dykes, Dads, and Moms to Watch Out For”

February 8 Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, “The Call to Theory”

<https://wp.nyu.edu/therevealer/2017/07/25/the-call-to-theory/>

February 13 Richard Hofstadter, excerpts from *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

Two-page paper due

**ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM: THOUGHT AS RESISTANCE**

February 15 Hofstadter continued

February 20 Susan Jacoby, excerpts from *The Age of American Unreason*

February 22 Jacoby continued

February 27 *Berkeley in the 60s*: film available on Youtube.

Mario Savio, Sproul Hall speech

Geoffrey Stone, “Darfur and the Kalven Report: A Personal Journey”

Two-page paper due

February 28 Plenary: Prof. Pablo Bose, “Welcome and Hope/Fear and Loathing: The

Politics of Refugee Resettlement in the Current Climate”

March 1 Alex Ross, “The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming” <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-frankfurt-school-knew-trump-was-coming>

Andreas Huyssen, “Breitbart, Bannon, Trump, and the Frankfurt School”

http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/09/breitbart-bannon-trump-and-the-frankfurt-school/

Theodor Adorno, “Resignation”

March 6 Town Meeting Day: No Class

March 8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*

“SPRING” BREAK

March 20 Sartre continued

Annotated bibliography for research paper due

March 21 Plenary: About Effective Poster Presentations

**THE INFORMED LIFE: EDUCATION, POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION, FREEDOM, AND REVOLT**

March 22 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*

March 27 *Fun Home* continued

March 29 *Fun Home* continued

April 3 Peter Sloterdijk, “’The Observer Has Come’: The Creation of Persons Fit

for Epochē” from *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*

April 5 Andrew Douglas, *In the Spirit of Critique* 1-13, 43-63

\*\*Sunday, April 8 by 11:59 PM: final draft of poster due to Prof. Acquisto by email

attachment.

April 10 In-Class Rehearsal Day for Presentations

Research Paper Due

April 11: Research Presentations with Prof. Christensen’s class, Kalkin 2

April 12 Douglas, 91-117

April 17 Martin Luther King, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence”

James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone”

James Baldwin on *Florida Forum*, 1963

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpRziHGxeEU>

Audrey Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

April 18: Research Presentations with Prof. Christensen’s class, Kalkin 2

April 19 Nina Eliasoph, excerpt from *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce*

*Apathy in Everyday Life*

April 24 Prof. Acquisto is presenting his research at a conference: no class

April 25: First-Year Research Symposium, UVM Alumni House, 61 Summit Street

April 26 Eliasoph continued

Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* 1-18, 212-224

May 1 Jonathan Lear, excerpt from *Radical Hope*  1-63

Revised Research Paper Due

May 3 *Radical Hope* 103-149

William Deresiewicz, “Solitude and Leadership”

Final Exam: May 10, 7:30-10:15 AM