AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Course Description

In this course we will examine American political thought spanning from the Puritans to the contemporary Tea Party. Our points of departure will be two famous observations made about the United States. The first is the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville’s claim that the United States had the advantage of having been “born equal instead of becoming so”; the second is the English writer G. K. Chesterton’s characterization of the U.S. as “a nation with the soul of a church.”

Tocqueville’s insight, gleaned from observing the United States in the 1830s, was elaborated at book length in political theorist Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*, published in 1955. Hartz believed that Tocqueville’s insight provided the master key to longstanding puzzles of American political thought, particularly why no European-style socialism on the left and why no hierarchical conservatism on the right. All important American political thought, in Hartz’s view, was bounded by Lockean liberalism.

Chesterton’s 1920 observation points investigators in a different direction, toward the distinctive importance of religion in understanding the American political psyche. Chesterton’s insight has been developed at book length in political scientist James Morone’s *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (published in 2003), which places religious fervor and moral righteousness at the heart of American political reform and thought.

In this course we will put these two interpretations of American political thought in dialogue with each other. At the same time we will rigorously test both the Hartz and Morone theses against the diversity of American political thought as well as various historians’ reading of the American past. We are interested in these two theses, moreover, not only for what they can tell us about past American political thought but also for how well they can help us to make sense of contemporary political thought and argument. If the United State is a liberal society, for instance, why has the “L” word become so politically toxic over the last three decades? And if political thought is characterized by a liberal consensus, why is American politics so polarized? How important, too, is religion and sin in animating contemporary political movements like the Tea Party or current debates about the debt ceiling or taxation? And where is the moral and religious fervor of the contemporary left?

Course Requirements and Grading

The emphasis in this course is on close reading and discussion of texts. Because the course is discussion based, it is imperative that you do the reading for each class session. At times the reading is heavy, so it is incumbent upon each of you to manage your time wisely so that you come to each class prepared to discuss the readings. If you miss a class, whether excused or unexcused, you must write a 600 word paper analyzing the reading that was assigned for the day they miss. Your participation grade in the course will be lowered by 1/3 for every 600 word makeup paper you do not turn in within
a week of your return to class. More than two unexcused absences will result in a full grade deduction from your final course grade; each additional unexcused absence will result in an additional deduction of one full grade from your final grade. Persistent lateness or failure to prepare adequately for class discussions can also result in deductions from the final grade. Your final course grade will be based on your participation in class discussion (1/3), a number of short papers and assignments during the course of the semester (1/3), and a final paper due on Monday December 12 at 5pm (1/3).

**Student Learning Outcomes**

By the conclusion of this course, students must demonstrate
(1) a grasp of the contours of the ideological conflicts that have shaped American political history
(2) an understanding of how contemporary American political thought and debates relate to past American political thought and debates
(3) the capacity to put thinkers and theories in dialogue with each other. This requires demonstrating that you can (a) enter sympathetically into worldviews or ideas that may be different from your own, and (b) maintain a critical distance even from values that you share or ideas you agree with
(4) close attention to textual evidence, both in class discussion and written work
(5) constructive participation in class discussions

**Required Readings**

Four required texts are available for purchase at the Willamette Bookstore: Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (Harcourt Brace, 1955), James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (Yale, 2003), Barry Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservative* (Princeton, 2007; originally published 1960), and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Harvard, 2011). All other items on the syllabus are available as pdfs on the class WISE page. Readings available on WISE must be printed out and brought to class. In class you should always have the reading for that day on the desk in front of you. Sorry, but no laptops may be used during class.

**Schedule of Class Meetings**

1-1 Wed 8/31/2011: Introduction

2-1 Mon 9/5/2011: Labor Day, No class

2-2 Wed 9/7/2011: Contemporary Conservatism
Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservative*, 1-80 (after reading these pages, feel free to read the Foreword by George Will [ix-xxiv] and the Afterword by Robert Kennedy Jr. (121-137)

3-1 Mon 9/12/2011: Contemporary Liberalism
Excerpts from Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006), 13-70, 137-194
3-2 Wed 9/14/2011: The Liberal Tradition
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 1 (3-32)

4-1 Mon 9/19/2011: A Nation with the Soul of a Church
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, introduction (1-28)
McWilliams, “The Bible in the American Political Tradition,” in *Redeeming Democracy in America*, 29-54.

4-2 Wed 9/21/2011: Puritan Foundations
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapters 1-3 (31-116)
John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)

5-1 Mon 9/26/2011: Revolution in a New World
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapters 2-3 (35-86)

James Madison, Federalist No. 10 (1788)
Patrick Henry, “Debate in the Virginia Ratifying Convention” (1788)
Herbert Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For* (1981), 7-23, 71-76

6-1 Mon 10/3/2011: Whiggery
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 4 (89-113)
John Quincy Adams, “First Annual Message to Congress” (1825)
Rufus Choate, “The Position and Functions of the American Bar, as an Element of Conservatism in the State” (1845)
Daniel Barnard, “The Family, the Nation, and the Church” (1848)

6-2 Wed 10/5/2011: Jacksonianism
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 5 (114-142)
Andrew Jackson, “Bank Veto Message” (1832)
Orestes Brownson, “The Laboring Classes” (1840)

7-1 Mon 10/10/2011: Abolitionism
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapters 4-5 (119-168)
William Lloyd Garrison, Excerpts from *The Liberator*
Frederick Douglass, “What are the Coloured People Doing for Themselves?” (1848),
“Lectures on Slavery” (1850), and “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (1852)

7-2 Wed 10/12/2011: Midterm Reading Break

8-1 Mon 10/17/2011: The Southern Defense of Slavery
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapters 6 and 7 (145-200)
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapter 6 (169-182)
George Fitzhugh, “Sociology for the South” (1854)
Twelve Southerners, “I’ll Take My Stand” (1930)

8-2 Wed 10/19/2011: Lincoln v. Taney
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapter 7 (183-215)
Roger Taney, *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857)
Abraham Lincoln, Speech on the Dred Scott Decision in Springfield, Illinois (1857), and “First Inaugural Address” (1861)

9-1 Mon 10/24/2011: The New Whiggery?
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 8 (203-227)
William Graham Sumner, “Sociological Fallacies” (1884), “On the Case of a Certain Man Who is Never Thought Of” (1883) and “The Conquest of the United States by Spain” (1899)
Josiah Strong, “Our Country” (1885)

9-2 Wed 10/26/2011: Progressivism
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 9 (228-255)
Herbert Croly, “The Promise of American Life” (1909)

10-1 Mon 10/31/2011: The Woman’s Sphere
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapters 8-9 (219-280)
Catherine Beecher, “A Treatise on Domestic Economy” (1841)
Susan B. Anthony, “Speech about her Indictment” (1873)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Women and Economics” (1898)

10-2 Wed 11/2/2011: Prohibition
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapters 10-11 (281-344)

11-1 Mon 11/7/2011: The New Deal
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 10 (259-283)
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapter 12 (347-377)
Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The Four Freedoms” (1941) and “A Second Bill of Rights” (1944)
Herbert Hoover, “The Fifth Freedom” (1941)
11-2 Wed 11/9/2011: The Cold War
Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapter 11 (284-309)
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapter 13 (378-406)
Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservative*, 81-120

12-1 Mon 11/14/2011: The New Left and the Sixties
SDS, “Port Huron Statement” (1962)

12-2 Wed 11/16/2011: Religion and Contemporary Conservatism
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, chapter 15 (450-492)
Pat Robertson, “A Portrait of America” (1993)

13-1 Mon 11/21/2011: The Age of Fracture
Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, chapters 1-3 (1-110)
Ronald Reagan, “First Inaugural Address” (1981)

13-2 Wed 11/23/2011: No class, Happy Thanksgiving

14-1 Mon 11/28/2011: Race
Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, chapter 4 (111-143)

14-2 Wed 11/30/2011: Gender
Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, chapter 5 (144-179)
National Organization for Women, “Bill of Rights” (1967)
Redstockings Manifesto (1969)
Phyllis Schlafly, “The Power of the Positive Woman” (1977)

15-1 Mon 12/5/2011: Community and Nostalgia
Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, chapters 6-7 (180-255)

15-2 Wed 12/7/2011: Summing up
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, epilogue (493-497)
Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, epilogue (256-271)