

**VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL THEORY**  
**University of Toronto**  
**POL 381 H 1 (F)**

Fall 2009  
M 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM  
SSH 1087

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Grading TA: TBA

“War is the father of us all, King of all. Some it makes gods, some it makes men, some it makes slaves, some free.”

---Heraclitus, 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE

“And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.”

---Gandalf the Grey, in *Fellowship of the Ring*

“Whatever is worth being created is worth being destroyed.”

---Mephistopheles, in *Faust*

We seem to be creatures who crave life on the edge of a knife. We are obsessed by violence, in all its forms, and when our own lives do not provide us with a healthy enough dose, we turn to our media and entertainment to supply the deficit. We kill and maim. We fight and batter. We insult and provoke. We defile and decapitate. We are victims and executioners, prisoners and jail wardens, and finally, viewers of the televised versions of such events. And all seems as if preordained, for do we not well know that the Serpent lay in the Garden from the beginning? That Cain slew his brother Abel? That Rome was founded upon the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus? We know that ours is a species founded in blood, and we further know that it will end that way as well. The Last Judgment comes only after rivers of blood have run, and the Norse myths tell us that Ragnarok, the final battle, ends with the destruction of the gods and most of their world. We know all of this so well, and yet the question of violence remains an open one.

This class is centred on four primary questions: 1) What is violence? 2) What are the ethics of using violence? 3) Why are we violent? 4) Is nonviolence a coherent alternative? We will explore each in some detail, beginning with the second question rather than the first because it is sometimes easiest to start with what is most familiar, and we are all acquainted to some extent with the ethics of revolution and war. We all have opinions on the justice of the causes of Hamas or Al-Qaeda, or the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and while we will not be reading anything that directly addresses those cases, the basic issues are much the same. We will move on to the third question, the “why” question, by looking at two basic explanatory frameworks – one biological and the other cultural. Only after these have been explored will we “return” to the question of what violence really is. Hopefully our eyes and ears will be open to new possibilities

by this point, as we then ask ourselves about practices and institutions that are not traditionally considered relevant to the topic of political violence. We will follow this questioning of hidden violence by challenging the basis of the inquiry we have undertaken up to this point, by looking at the question of violence from outside of the tradition of the West. Zen, Hindu, and Shinto texts will help us to sharpen the questions we ask, allowing us to see the preconceptions that shape the Western view of violence, and providing us with yet another new vantage on the issue. This will also lead us into our final weeks, as it is through the texts and practice of Mohandas Gandhi that the civil rights and peace movements of the contemporary world have taken their inspiration. We will be brought to ask, given all we know of violence and its subtle presence in our daily lives, how and if a nonviolent philosophy of life is really possible.

In the end, what then can we say of violence, and in particular of its relation to philosophy and politics? Is it our ever-present fate? Are we condemned, like Oedipus, to enacting our violent tragedy whether we intend to do so or not? Or is it something that can be challenged, thwarted, pushed back, even defeated? Can violence one day come to an end? And can we be the agents of such a portentous change?

The question of violence is the question of our times.

### **Class Style:**

Please come prepared to discuss the materials each day, and this means arguing about them in a thoughtful manner with your instructor and fellow classmates (both in open discussion, as well as in more structured settings such as role-plays, debates, and group-work). These discussions should be respectful of others' views, but in no way does that suggest that we paper over our differences with others. We will learn from each other precisely to the extent that we can figure out exactly how much we disagree with one another.

Please make sure you check email daily, and make sure that your email is up-to-date in ROSI, as I will be emailing the class through Blackboard.

### ***Ridiculousness:***

If it seems odd to have a section of the syllabus with this label, well, that is not surprising. Let me explain. Part of learning political theory, in this class or elsewhere, is learning to be comfortable in uncomfortable situations. What is uncomfortable, you ask? Any intellectual community worth its salt, I answer. We will be confronting radical ideas in the texts in this course, and more than that, your fellow students (and instructor) will espouse ideas that seem, or perhaps really are, ridiculous. It is uncomfortable to disagree with the strongly held beliefs of others. It is uncomfortable to risk exposing one's ignorance in class, when attempting to answer a question posed by the instructor or another student. It is uncomfortable to argue, and uncomfortable to be wrong (or seem wrong to your peers). What then to do? In this class we will be learning how to become comfortable in our discomfort, and like any skill this requires practice. Therefore, *we will be practicing how to actually be wrong or ridiculous*. We will cultivate the practice of public ridiculousness by engaging in a little competition during each class period. Every day we will keep track of avowedly ridiculous statements, to which you should preface your comment to the class with something like "I know this sounds ridiculous, but I think..." I will note such statements, and at the end of each class we will vote on which is the most ridiculous for the day. The "winner" will receive our acclaim, as well as a nominal prize (though will be disqualified from winning more than once, in the interests of inviting more to participate). But more than that they will be benefiting the class by pushing us all to think outside of our conventional boundaries, to see the ordinary in ways that are novel or shocking. I

encourage every person to submit at least one openly ridiculous remark over the course of the semester.

*Office Hours:*

Please do come to them. Though I do not require you to see me for a formal visit, I encourage every student to schedule an appointment with me as early in the semester as possible. The more we know each other, the better we can create a learning community in which we can challenge each other to rise to the level of the readings in the course. More than that, we become better students, better thinkers, and better citizens when so engaged in what philosopher Jacques Derrida has called “the community of the question.”

**Assignments and Grading:**

*Basics*

- 1) Postings to Online Discussion Board (10 X 2% each), due by 4 p.m. on the day of **every** class (except November 30 – no posting due that day): 20%
- 2) Essay (10-12 pages), due in class October 19: 40%
- 3) Final Exam (date TBA): 40%

All late essays will incur a penalty of 3% per day, up to 8 days.

*Rubric:*

A basic rubric for the how the essay will be graded can be found here:

<http://www.bsu.edu/english/writingprogram/rubric.htm>

Please refer to this when writing your essay, as well as if questions arise after the essay has been handed back. Questions can be addressed to the instructor informally, but a formal grade challenge should be issued via a memorandum of no more than 250 words explaining the basis of the challenge.

*Online Postings:*

Prior to each class meeting, with the exception of the first day (Sept. 14) and the last day (Nov. 30), each student is required to post one item to the Discussion section of Blackboard by 4 p.m. that day. This posting is to be no shorter than 50 words, but should be less than 150 words. The grade will be based on whether the posting meets these requirements – it will not be graded for content, though postings that are clearly not related to the week’s readings, or that demonstrate a lack of acquaintance with the readings, will not be counted. As long as the basic requirement is met, each student will receive the full 2% for the posting, amounting to 20% for successfully posting all materials by the semester’s end.

Each posting should address a question to the text, or to one of the other student’s postings for that week. They can take many forms, and the following are just a few examples: 1) puzzle through what the author means... e.g. “Author X seems to state that Z is the case, but I cannot understand how this argument works, since the Author also says Y. One way to resolve this seeming dilemma is to include B in the argument, which removes the contradiction; 2) argue with the author... “Author M states X and Y, both of which result in an argument that is immoral (state why) and threatens democratic legitimacy (state why). Author M’s position is of no use to us in crafting a theory of the ethical use of violence; 3) “Student U has posted that Author P is wrong because of K. While I agree that K is a problem, Student U does not take into account Author P’s argument J, which answers the contradictions raised by Student U.” Hopefully these dreary examples will give you an idea of the flavour of the postings, but please do make your commentary livelier than what I have just written above! I expect that these postings will

facilitate class discussions by placing a number of issues on the table well before the actual class session, and I will likely be responding to some of the issues raised in my lectures/group projects for the week.

*Essay:*

It is important that you cite the material you have relied upon in writing your essay, though for the online postings I am less interested in careful citation than I am in seeing your first-blush reactions to these texts.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com website.

If you have questions about when you need to provide citation for a source, please see the Toronto Libraries' guide on avoiding plagiarism. If you have questions about how to provide citation on your sources, please see the Toronto Libraries' guide on citation formats. Use any citation format that you like; the main thing is that you give credit to the sources you use.

**Accessibility**

For issues regarding this course and accessibility, please contact:  
Accessibility Services, Robarts Library, 130 St. George Street, 1st Floor (ground entrance off St. George St.), North end of building, next to ATRC, Telephone: 416-978-8060, TDD: 416-978-1902, Email: [disability.services@utoronto.ca](mailto:disability.services@utoronto.ca)

**Readings:**

Albert Camus, *The Just Assassins* (online text of the play)  
Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*  
Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*  
*Violent Origins*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly  
Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*  
Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*

Optional: Hent de Vries, *Violence and Religion*

Additional readings can be found online via Blackboard or directly via the URL.

**Schedule:**

September 14: Introductions

September 21: The Good Terrorists  
Albert Camus, *Les Justes* (*The Just Ones*), English translation at <http://www.segnbora.com/justes/justa.html>

September 28: The Conscience of a Revolutionary  
Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, entire

October 5: Rejoinder to Koestler and Camus: The Need to Kill  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, entire (skim 27-70)

**ESSAY DUE: October 19, hard copy due in class**

October 19: The Basis in Biology  
Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, 3-138

October 26: The Basis in Biology II  
*On Aggression*, 165-219, 236-274  
Robert Sussman, “The Myth of Man the Hunter, Man the Killer and the Evolution of Human Morality” (BLACKBOARD)

November 2: The Sacred and Violence: Rene Girard  
*Violent Origins*, 73-149 (The Introduction, from pp. 1-73, is not required, but is highly recommended).

November 9: Culture, Religion, Killing: Walter Burkert and Jonathan Smith versus Girard  
*Violent Origins*, 149-235

November 11: What is Violent? – Sex and Gender  
Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 13-69  
Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, vii-xvii (BLACKBOARD)

November 16: What is Violent? II – Food, Sanity, Beauty  
Matthew Scully, *Dominion*, 247-286 (BLACKBOARD)  
Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness*, 3-41, 276-289 (BLACKBOARD)  
Yukio Mishima, “Patriotism,” from *A Death in Midsummer* 93-118 (BLACKBOARD)

November 23: Nonviolence I  
Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 3-104

November 30: Nonviolence II  
Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 105-145, 189-233

**FINAL EXAM: To Be Announced**