POL 2027H1F Section L0101: Topics in Political Theory II

Plagues in Political Thought

Fall 2019

Wednesdays, 10 a.m.-12 p.m.
Earth Sciences Building, Room 1016M

Instructor:

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:00-2:30 p.m. (or by appointment)

Description:

This course focuses broadly on the problem of plague in political thinking and writing. As the social historian Paul Slack notes in his Plague: A Very Short Introduction, “Everyone knows something about plague.” We may recognize it as a particular disease that wiped out populations in the historical past, a descriptor meant to capture a range of pandemics, or as a metaphor used to describe all manner of unwanted risks and disasters. It has captured the public imagination, and the major contention of this course is that reading plague discourse helps us focus on important political phenomena and questions generated by epidemiological events.

Three novels and one film form the core of this course: Daniel Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year (1722), Albert Camus’ The Plague (1947), José Saramago’s Blindness (1997), and Danny Boyle’s 28 Days Later (2002). To frame our analyses of these fictional representations of outbreaks as works of political thought, we will draw upon relevant social theory from Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, and René Girard.

Together, we will approach a series of critical questions raised by plague literature, questions that deserve the attention of political theorists. How does plague literature help us understand a politics of risk? Under conditions of epidemiological disaster, how do communities assign responsibility or blame for unfolding events? What do their distinctive choices teach us about the dynamics of political communities under duress? Which approaches preserve community, and which contribute to its breakdown? How do the knowledge problems generated by plague give way to new political problems or exacerbate long-standing ones, particularly when it comes to authority and governance? And lastly, is plague or contagion a useful metaphor for understanding social, political, and economic disasters? What gives it force and meaning, other than its visceral power?
Requirements and Grading:

Book List:
The following books are available in the bookstore, or you can borrow them from the Robarts library, where they are on reserve.

Required texts:

- José Saramago, *Blindness* (Harvest Books).

Recommended texts:


Please acquire and use these editions if possible, since class discussion will run much more smoothly if we are all using the same versions of the texts.

Course Requirements and Grade Distribution:

This class is a seminar, so we will spend nearly all of our time discussing the readings. Your questions and comments will structure our discussions, so please come prepared for each class with at least one question or comment that you would like for us to think about as a group. Sometimes I will ask us to work through a difficult problem or question in the readings, but for the most part your concerns will drive our work.

The other component of your work for this seminar is writing. I will ask you to hand in short reflections on readings over the course of the semester. There will also be a final paper and a related presentation.

There are five graded components for this course:

- Class attendance and participation
- 5 reflection papers on readings, 1-2 single-spaced page each
- Final paper abstract, 1-2 single-spaced pages, including rough bibliography
- Final paper, 20 double-spaced pages
- Final paper presentation, 10 minutes

The grading breakdown is as follows:

- Seminar attendance and participation: 25%
- 5 response papers for readings: 5% each, for 25% total (Graded)
- Final paper abstract: 5% (Credit or no credit)
- Final paper presentation: 10% (Graded)
• Final Essay: 35%

Class attendance policy
Attendance is mandatory and an important part of the seminar experience. That said, I understand that things happen that make it impossible to attend class sometimes. For this reason, each of you can have one “free” absence, no questions asked. Any missed classes beyond that will affect your participation grade, unless you provide a documented reason for missing seminar.

Late work policy
I will deduct 3% from your grade for each 24 hours that your assignment is late. No work will be accepted after one week past the deadline.

I do not grant extensions except in cases of emergency, and then only to students who present official documentation that I can verify. Acceptable documentation includes a note from your doctor, a note from the registrar’s office, or a note from your AccessAbility advisor. Without official documentation from you, I will not grant an extension request.

Plagiarism
Plagiarism is unacceptable, and I report all suspected cases via the process outlined on the last page of this course outline. If you are not sure whether something counts as plagiarism, please don’t hesitate to ask me. I will also post a guide to citations and bibliography on Blackboard with your writing assignments.

Laptop Policy
Unless you have a documented reason for using a laptop or tablet during our seminar, I ask that you power down all your electronic equipment.

Student Resources and Support
Your success in this course is important to me. Here are some resources I hope you will use if ever you need them:

Accessibility:

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach Dr. Nacol /or Accessibility Services as soon as possible.

The staff members of Accessibility Services (Located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400) are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations. Please call 416-978-8060 or email accessibility.services@utoronto.ca.

The sooner you let me know what you need, the sooner I can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.
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Assignments:

Short Response Papers: You must complete five response papers (1-2 single-spaced pages each) this term. On the first day, I will divide you into two groups (A & B) and you’ll write response papers for the weeks designated for your group on the syllabus. These papers are due by 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday evening before our Wednesday class meeting. NB: There will be no opportunity to make up these assignments if you miss a deadline. They will be graded.

These papers have no strict guidelines except one: Please do not summarize the readings. You can assume that your reader has read the texts and has a working understanding of their major points and arguments. Instead, use this assignment as an opportunity to raise an interesting question, puzzle, or criticism about the reading. I may refer to your response paper to guide our class discussion the next day, too, so think of this as an opportunity to help set our agenda.

Final Paper: This semester you will develop a topic of your choice and write a research paper of 20 pages (or about 6000 words). To get started, you will write a short project abstract that includes a rough bibliography. This should be 1-2 single-spaced pages, and it will be due Monday, 11 November. You will receive feedback and credit for doing it. You will also offer a short presentation (12-15 minutes) on your research question and general argument to your classmates during our last two meetings on either 27 November or 4 December. The completed seminar paper is due on 4 December, by 11:59 p.m.

I will distribute some guidelines for your abstract and presentation in late October.

Important Dates:

- **September 18**: Last day to sign up for in F/Y courses on Acorn
- **November 4**: Last day to drop F courses from academic record and GPA
- **November 11**: Final paper abstract due
- **November 27 or December 4**: In-class presentation for final paper
- **December 4**: Final paper due
- **December 5**: Deadline to request late withdrawal
- **January 10**: Last day to file a petition for fall term work
Schedule of Readings:

Please bring your texts and notes to every class, since we will work from them. Please read in advance of class. All readings beyond the book list are marked with ** on the syllabus. These are available on our class Quercus site.

I. Beginnings

11 September: Introduction to the course.

(a) Syllabus review
(b) Discussion of course themes and goals

18 September: The Plague of Athens and Disaster in Communities (Group A)

(b) Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Introduction and Ch. 1, pp. 1-67
(c) Paul Slack, *Plague: A Very Short Introduction* (Strongly recommended but not required!)

II. Theoretical Tools for Thinking about Plague

25 September: Biopolitics, Populations, and Governance (Group B)

(c) Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Malden: Polity Press, 2011), Ch. 4, pp. 112-144.** (Recommended but not required)

2 October: Risk Perception, Blame, and the Construction of Scapegoats (Group A)

(a) Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Chs. 1, 2, 5 & 6, pp. 3-37 & 83-121.**

III. London’s Great Plague Novel: Defoe’s *Journal* and Its Sources and Legacies

9 October: Defoe’s *Journal*—Looking Back on the Great Plague (Group B)

(a) Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*
16 October: The City as Body--Sources and Legacies of Plague in London (Group A)


23 October: Film Screening: Deserted London in 28 Days Later (Group B)


NB: Response papers will pertain to the film this week, since there is no reading. They will be due by 5 p.m. on Friday, 25 October.

IV. Plague as Social and Political Metaphor

30 October: Plagues, Material and Metaphorical (Group A)

(b) Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*

6 November: Reading week, no class.

13 November: Camus, the Plague of Oran, and Resistance (Group B)

(a) Camus, *The Plague*

20 November: Disaster and Humanity in Saramago’s *Blindness* (Groups A & B)

(a) José Saramago, *Blindness*

27 November: Future Directions, I

(a) Graduate student paper presentations

4 December: Future Directions, II

(a) Graduate student paper presentations