A PUBLIC FORUM ON POLITICAL THEORY AND FILM

VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE

Fall 2004

Location: Lehman Auditorium, 202 Altschul Hall, Barnard College
Tuesdays, 7-9pm

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Tuesday, September 7, 2004

Introduction to the Public Forum on Political Theory and Film

• Setting the tone: this is a place for dialogue towards understanding. All are welcome to speak their minds.

• Connections between this film series and Political Theory, the latter course now being taught by me this fall and spring terms. A major theme running throughout Political Theory is the continuing debate between idealist and realist schools of thought, a theme and dialogue that will pervade and hopefully enhance this film series. This debate is central to both political thought and action, but films usually do not enter into a classroom consideration of it. One of our key purposes here, then, is to ask about the relationship between political theory and films: how may they illuminate each other?

• Thucydides wrote in one the earliest of our texts from ancient Athens that “war is a violent teacher,” and demonstrated by his writings that a preoccupation with violence caused by war was not unique to our modern era. Nor was it only a special concern of the Western tradition, as shown by the first text discussed in Political Theory, the Tao Te Ching. The debate over the politics of violence was especially vigorous among contesting schools of thought in ancient China. This film series, following Political Theory, will therefore focus on the sharply conflicting theories and practices (especially in political movements) of violence and nonviolence.

The Quintessential Example of Violence: Hitler and the Holocaust

• Screen excerpts from two historic documentaries: first, of Hitler’s leadership and ideas, in Triumph of the Will, and, second, a tragic depiction of the consequence of the Nazi regime with the Holocaust, Night and Fog. Both have been regarded as among the most powerful and effective documentaries ever produced. Only a brief excerpt will be selected from the first, to show the popularity of Hitler’s leadership and ideas as early as 1934 in Germany.

• Discussion: what are the causes of violence as suggested by these films and related political theories on the subject? Who teaches us more about the nature of war, Lao-Tzu, the idealist, or Thucydides, the realist? In modern theory, how may we assess the contrasting views of Marx and Freud, Milgram and Arendt, for understanding Hitler and the Holocaust?
Tuesday, September 14, 2004
Violence to the Community: Gentrification and Causes of Violence
- Introduction: is there a Socratic spirit today in the streets of NYC? Raphael’s “The School of Athens” as depicting the vitality of discourse in ancient Greece.
- Screen *Stuck in Harlem.*
- Comments by guests: Ben Armstead (star of the film), Courtney Martin and Nikolai Johnson (filmmakers).
- Discussion: gentrification, public education, racism and the economic roots of violence around us.

Tuesday, September 21, 2004
The Potential Violence of Blind Obedience
- Introduction by Harlem youth activist Yarrisa Herrera about complicity and her experience of discovering gentrification and feeling “betrayed”—obedient without realizing it.
- Film of Stanley Milgram’s “Obedience” experiments at Yale, 1960-63, and text.
- Concept of the “banality of evil” from theories of Milgram and Hannah Arendt
- Discussion: is violent behavior situational, as argued by these experiments? What are the implications of this for politics or war?

Tuesday, September 28, 2004
The Quintessential Example of Nonviolence: Gandhi’s Independence Movement
- Gandhi’s theory and practice: model of mass civil disobedience as political power
- Screen excerpts from “Gandhi” and “A Force More Powerful.”
- Gandhi’s nonviolent action or satyagraha vs. passive resistance, which raise theories about the dynamics of nonviolent power and the significance of leadership.
- Theories of justice: restorative (Gandhi’s *satyagraha*) vs. retaliatory justice (passive resistance or *duragraha*). These theories range from the opening dialogue between Socrates and Polemarchus in Plato’s *Republic*, to the concept of restorative justice in South Africa’s experiment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to the current thinking about restorative justice in domestic conflict resolution in Howard Zehr’s *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (1990).
- Under what circumstances does nonviolent power work? What is the meaning and validity of restorative justice? The influence and effects of revenge or of forgiveness?
Tuesday, October 5, 2004
Facing the Holocaust with Nonviolent Resistance from Christians in Europe
• French Protestant rescue of Jews in the village of Le Chambon
• Screening of excerpts from the documentary Weapons of the Spirit
• Nazi persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and their resistance
• Screening of Stand Firm: Against Nazi Assault
• The personal example of Holocaust survivor and Jehovah’s Witness, Mr. Leopold Engleitner, who will be present to comment on the film and his experience
• Discussion: the problem and power of nonviolent non-cooperation against a totalitarian regime. How does this relate to the theories of idealism and realism?

Tuesday, October 12, 2004
Martin Luther King: the Beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery
• Screen excerpts from Eyes on the Prize documentary depicting the lynching of Emmett Till and the response of the Montgomery bus boycott. Excerpts from a feature film of the boycott, “A Long Walk Home.”
• Comparisons and contrasts with Gandhi, focusing on when nonviolent action works.
• Discussion: why was nonviolent action the right response to the murder of Emmett Till? How does this relate to the ideas of idealism and realism in politics? The theory of restorative justice?

Tuesday, October 19, 2004
What We Learned: Vietnam
• The tragedy of the Vietnam war. How may it be explained from the earlier perspectives on the causes of war? Do the theories of Marx, Freud and Milgram apply?
• Screen excerpts from Fog of War, Platoon and Hearts and Minds on Vietnam
• Discussion: interpretations of why the war and its consequent tragedies occurred: are its events examples of Milgram’s theory of situational violence, as he argues in his analysis of the My Lai massacre? How much of a role did Americans’ dehumanization of the enemy play in sustaining support for the war? What are the lessons that might be drawn for today about the experience of war for our society, recalling Thucydides classic principle of war that it is a “violent teacher”?

Tuesday, October 26, 2004
What We Forgot: Iraq
• How effective is current anti war movement work (e.g., www.moveon.org/)? Is noteworthy nonviolent resistance being staged on the Internet daily, globally or do these efforts have little effect on American support or government prosecution of the war?
• Screen excerpt from Fahrenheit 9/11, commented on by Carl Deal and Lewanne Jones, both directly involved in the film’s composition and production.
• Discussion: what happened in the case of this war from the perspectives of political theory? How does Fahrenheit 9/11 illuminate issues of contemporary American politics, the violence of war and its consequences?
Tuesday, November 2, 2004
ELECTION DAY!

Tuesday, November 9, 2004
Postmortem analysis of the election results from the perspectives shared here of film and political theory. What aspects of our presentations and discussions are useful in understanding the results? What will help us to comprehend and cope now with our future in America? Suggestions of particular films and/or writings are welcome that might prove helpful by offering relevant insights into politics, leadership, violence and nonviolence, idealism and realism, meanings of justice.

Tuesday, November 16, 2004
Realism in Political Theory: Machiavelli’s *Prince*

- Analysis of Machiavelli’s theories of realism evidenced in his emphasis on the leader’s mastery of the art of warfare (ch.14);
- Machiavelli’s realist’s repudiation of idealism in politics. Virtuous action in the “‘real world’” of politics often means loss or power, so the leader must learn “how not to be good”(ch.15);
- Machiavelli’s realism rests on his conceptions of human nature (“men are rotten”); of appropriate or strategic violence as necessary and desirable to maintain power; that for the successfully powerful and respected leader, “it is better to be feared than loved”; and how profoundly fear effects people, so the leader must use it amply (ch.17);
- Machiavelli’s memorable metaphor of the leader as striving to imitate both the wily fox and the awesome lion. Foxiness, he asserts, is superior in politics: lying and deceiving without hesitation are essential means of wielding power. Realism dictates that the leader shrewdly devise methods for maximum manipulation of the masses. The ends always justify the means (ch.18);
- In all successful leadership, manliness or *virtu* is key to maintaining power (ch.25)
- Screening of excerpts from feature film *The Bronx Tale* and the documentary *Outfoxed*
- Discussion: Is the realism of Machiavelli the most relevant and instructive of political theories for today in America? If not, what is the most persuasive idealistic argument against it?
**Tuesday, November 23, 2004**

The Realism of Thomas Hobbes, Philosopher of Fear

- Hobbes, 17th century English theorist, writing *The Leviathan* over a century after Machiavelli’s *Prince*, reinforces and develops further the latter’s realism, beginning with a rejection of idealism in politics. (Political Theory I Packet, pp. 18-19, 56-67)
- Hobbes’ grim diagnosis of contemporary society is based on a theory of human nature that stresses the primal passion of fear as dictating human behaviour, especially our terror of violent death.
- This extreme emphasis on fear directs all of Hobbes’ subsequent philosophical conclusions: that human anxiety over being attacked and killed leads us to obsession with security. But our subsequent quest for protection through abundant of power only provokes insecurity in others, increasing their fear of us.
- Therefore we are caught in an terrible dilemma, that Hobbes famously reduced metaphorically to a “state of nature” in which everyday life becomes “a war of every man against every man,” “worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” (quoted in Political Theory Packet, p.61)
- Hobbes’ desperate theoretical escape from this horror is not through democracy but authoritarianism. People, driven by their relentless fear of death and drive for security, willingly yield their liberties to a supreme sovereign that must give them peace at any price.
- Screening of excerpts from the documentary, *Bowling for Columbine* and the feature film of Orwell’s *1984*

**Tuesday, November 30, 2004**

Malcolm and Martin: What Are Their Legacies?

- Review of Martin Luther King’s theory and practice, as seen in this series
- Introduce Malcolm X’s life journey and ideas, his commitment to Islam and its meaning.
- Contrast and compare Malcolm’s thought and experience, in the context of his *Autobiography* and *Final Speeches*, with King’s religion and political leadership
- Screen excerpts from Spike Lee’s feature film, *Malcolm X*; Mike Wallace interview with Malcolm on *60 Minutes*, and *Boyz N the Hood*
- Discussion: what do these two Americans, both devout religious believers, teach us about the dynamics and quality of political leadership? Since they were each assassinated at age 39, victims of violence in America, what hope is there for their type of inspirational leadership? For the future of nonviolence in political movements?

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