

Political Science 467, Honig, Spring Quarter, 2010

Basic Problems in Democratic Theory: The Political Stakes of the Ethical Turn

“the first duty of the philosopher [say moralists] is to think about ethics, to add a chapter on ethics to each of his or her books and in order to do that, to come back to Kant as often as possible” Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*.

In this seminar we will look at the roles of Oedipus and Antigone in (re-) constituting humanism as it shifts in the late 20th century from a focus on the human as rational and capable of self-knowledge (figured via Oedipus) to a focus on the human as finite, subject to lamentation, and calling for “care” (figured via Antigone). We will spend some time discussing also the Lacanian anti-humanist treatment of Antigone as monstrous, noting the central place of Antigone in Lacan’s ethics, and also her centrality to other efforts to privilege ethics (of finitude, grief, care) over politics.

Since Hegel, Oedipus has stood for the project of humanism. Oedipus correctly answered the Sphinx’s famous riddle -- “Which creature in the morning goes on four legs, at mid-day on two, and in the evening upon three, and the more legs it has, the weaker it be?” -- with “*man*.” With this, Hegel says, Oedipus claimed for Greece and the West the self-knowledge that eluded Egypt. True, Oedipus went on to live a tragic life, finding too late that he was the elusive answer to more than the Sphinx’s riddle. But even if Oedipus and his age were not fully prepared for the task of self-knowledge, Hegel saw Oedipus as a liminal figure who inaugurated philosophy’s defining mission: *know thyself*.

If the father is pressed by Hegel into service on behalf of the humanist project of Enlightenment philosophy, then it is the daughter of Oedipus whom Hegel and his heirs press into service on behalf of a new humanism. Hegel saw Antigone as fulfilling her proper role as a sister when she sought to bury her brother Polynices. In the 20th century, however, Antigone was less famous for sticking to her proper realm than for transgressing propriety on behalf of dissidence against authoritarian power. She was celebrated for her audacity in speaking truth to power and for her willingness to sacrifice herself for a cause. But, increasingly in the last 20-30 years, she has been celebrated as an exemplary figure of care for the dead. This is not Hegel’s properly mourning sister who ought to restore (but can’t help but unsettle) the human world in the face of the rift of death: 20th and 21st century political and feminist theorists prize Antigone for the very thing Hegel worried about: Mourning is said to be Antigone’s mode of dissidence and she is admired for her powerfully *unsettling* lamentation -- public, regime-defying, logic-denying, reason-undermining, sovereignty-unsettling.

This lamenting Antigone personifies not the increasingly discredited quest for self-knowledge as redemptive and universal, but the need to mourn what is left of the

human after the project of self-knowledge has run its course. Philosophy is now defined as the human quest to learn how to die, rather than to know (or: to die knowingly, as Oedipus and Antigone are said to). What are the political implications of this turn to mourning and the turn to ethics in which it is embedded or by which it is enabled?

The new mourning- or mortality-based humanism posits three sites of pre- or post-political universality. *Death* (we may vary in burial and mourning practices but we are all mortal), *song, sound, or pain/cry* (the sound of suffering is universal while language which is always particular, plural and therefore divisive), and *kinship* (humans all have mothers, and are always members of families, even if these vary in structure and significance). Taking Sophocles' *Antigone* and some its philosophical receptions since Hegel as interpretative touchstones, we look at all three sites as re-workings of humanism and, from the perspective of political theory, we assess their implication in the turn to ethics. In particular, we look at the idea of sacrifice as one that operates as a hinge between ethics and politics . . .

NOTE: Please re-read Sophocles' *Antigone* before the course begins. Many of the assigned readings make reference to the play or offer readings of it, so the text should be fresh in your minds.

Student course requirements:

Students will write **weekly thinkpieces**, 1-2 pp long (double spaced), identifying and developing a theme, problem, argument, or idea that is worthy of note or engagement, in the week's assigned readings. These will be emailed out to the entire class and instructor, normally by midnight, Sunday night but absolutely no later than 9 a.m. Monday.

Each week, one or two students will be responsible for **opening the seminar** discussion, using their thinkpieces for that week as a springboard. After the break, I will re-open the seminar for the second half of our discussion.

Students will also write **seminar papers** on topics to be approved by me. These should be close readings of 1-2 assigned texts studied in class. Often these will explore further ideas first developed in a thinkpiece. Papers, 10-12 pp long, are due August 1.

Course Schedule:

The Ethical Turn

“The ethical turn that affects artistic and political practices today should not be interpreted as their subjection to moral criteria. Today, the reign of ethics leads to a growing indistinction between fact and law, between what is and what ought to be, where judgement bows down to the power of the law imposing itself. The radicality of this law

is that it leaves no choice, and is nothing but the simple constraint stemming from the order of things. This brings about an unprecedented dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and redemption that can be traced not only in contemporary politics, but in philosophical reflection and film” (Jacques Ranciere, “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics” in *Critical Horizons*)

1. Tragedy’s incitements, from rationality to mortality, from politics to ethics?

Assigned Reading:

Sophocles’ *Antigone*

Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief: Mourning, Membership and the Politics of Exception” in *Political Theory*

Jacques Ranciere, “The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics” in *Critical Horizons*

Recommended:

George Steiner, *Antigones*

Miriam Leonard, *Athens in Paris*

Secondary recommendation: exemplifying the move from politics to ethics:

Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Antigone’s Daughters” and “Antigone’s Daughters, Revisited”

From Oedipus to Antigone

It is in [philia] only that “the soul steps into and through the mirror to find a perfectly concordant but autonomous counterpart. The torment of Narcissus is stilled; the image is substance, it is the integral self in the twin presence of another. Thus sisterliness is ontologically privileged beyond any other human stance. In it the homecomings of idealism and Romanticism are given vital form. This form receives supreme, everlasting expression in Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

Between the 1790’s and the start of the twentieth century, the radical lines of kinship run horizontally, as between brothers and sisters. In the Freudian construct they run vertically, as between children and parents. The Oedipus complex is one of inescapable verticality. The shift is momentous; with it Oedipus replaces Antigone” (George Steiner, *Antigones*, p. 18)

“a theoretical shift from Oedipus to Antigone defines the ethical and political—if we can speak of politics at this level—dominant of our post-Oedipal times. Today, it is Antigone’s death-driven fidelity to a principle of justice beyond Creon’s terrorizing law—“a sort of justice without law, a justice beyond law,” as Derrida also might put it—that sets the criteria for the authentic ethical or political act (indeed, the very notions of ethics and politics in this line of arguing often seem to become indistinguishable, if the latter does not collapse into the former altogether). As such, though, we remain by and large within the bounds of the Sophoclean model of tragedy (Bruno Bosteels, “Force of Nonlaw: Alain

Badiou's Theory of Justice" <http://www.cardozolawreview.com/content/29-5/BOSTEELS.29.5.pdf>)

2. From Oedipus to Antigone, I – Brother /Sister: A Perfect Equality?

Assigned Reading:

Hegel on Oedipus and the Sphinx (Philosophy of History 296-298 ff)

Hegel on Antigone, *Phenomenology of Spirit* #444-476, *Philosophy of Right*, #166

Recommended:

Patricia Mills, "Hegel's *Antigone*," in Feminist Interpretations of Hegel

Recommended or further reading:

Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks*, chapter 3, 89-121.

Phiroze Vasunia, *The Gift of the Nile: Hellenizing Egypt from Aeschylus to Alexander*

Derrida, *glas*, 107-189

Simon Critchley "A Commentary Upon Derrida's Reading of Hegel in *Glas*" in Barnett, *Hegel After Derrida*

John Seery, *Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death*

3. From Oedipus to Antigone, II – Father/Daughter: From Reason to Desire? Death: beautiful, good, good enough

Assigned Reading:

Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar 7

Recommended:

Catherine Belsey, "Reading and Critical Practice" in *Critical Quarterly*, vol 45, no. 3 (22-31).

Vernant, "A 'Beautiful Death' and the Disfigured Corpse," in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*.

Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, (ch 1, 4, 5 and epilogue)

4. From Oedipus to Antigone, III – Mother/Daughter: Beyond the State?

Assigned Reading:

Luce Irigaray, "The Eternal Irony of the Community" in *Speculum of the Other Woman*

Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*

Recommended:

Christine Battersby, "Antigones of Gender" in *The Phenomenal Woman*

Adriana Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone" in *Stately Bodies*

Butler/Connolly – "Politics, Power and Ethics" *Theory and Event* 4 (2)

Recommended or further reading:

M. Lloyd, "Butler, Antigone, and the State" in *Contemporary Political Theory*..

Carver and Chambers, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics*
John Seery, "Acclaim for *Antigone's Claim* Reclaimed, or Steiner Contra Butler" in
Precarious Politics, ed. Carver and Chambers
Olga Taxidou, "The Allure of *Antigone*" and "Mourning and Tragic Form" in *Tragedy,
Mourning, and Modernity* (Chs. 1 and 6, pp.18-40 and 159-192)

5. From Oedipus to Antigone, IV – On the Politics of Fathers/Sons, Mothers/Daughters,
Sisters (/Brothers) or: Terror, Politics, Care

Assigned Reading:

Thomas Elsaesser, "Antigone Agonistes: Urban Guerrilla or Guerrilla Urbanism?
The Red Army Fraction, *Germany in Autumn* and *Death Game*" in *Rouge*
(<http://www.rouge.com.au/4/antigone.html>).
Diana Taylor, "Caught in the Spectacle" Chapter One and "Trapped in Bad Scripts: The
Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo," Chapter 7 in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender
and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*

Highly recommended:

Griselda Gambaro, *Antigona Furiosa* in *Information for Foreigners* ed. Marguerite
Feitlowitz.
Germany in Autumn (film) Fassbinder et al (optional evening screening: excerpts: Ch. 1 -
Hans Martin Schleyer's Letter, Ch. 2 - When Cruelty Reaches a Certain Level [the
Fassbinder segment], Ch. 4 - State Ceremonies, Ch. 6 - Political Prisoner [interview with
Horst Mahler], Ch. 11 - Party Meeting, Ch. 12 - Mythology [the Antigone segment], Ch.
13 - Burial --Ch. 14.)

Recommended or further reading:

Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters" and "Antigone's Daughters, Revisited"
Diana Taylor, "The Uneasy Relationship Between Motherhood and Feminism," pp. 345
ff in *The politics of motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right*
Sara Ruddick, "Rethinking 'Maternal' Politics" (ibid) pp. 369 ff.
Mary Rawlinson, "Antigone, Agent of Fraternity" (MS)
ZIZEK, SLAVOJ, *THE SUBLIME OBJECT OF IDEOLOGY*
GEORGINA PAUL, "ISMENE AT THE CROSSROADS: GENDER AND POETIC
INFLUENCE" in [German Life and Letters, Volume 60, Issue 3](#), Pages 430-446,
Published Online: 18 Jun 2007

6. (Beyond) From Oedipus to Antigone, V – Aeschylus against Sophocles

Assigned reading:

Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (selections)
Bruno Bosteels, "FORCE OF NONLAW: ALAIN BADIOU'S THEORY OF JUSTICE"
<http://www.cardozolawreview.com/content/29-5/BOSTEELS.29.5.pdf>
Eleanor Kaufman, "WHY THE FAMILY IS BEAUTIFUL (LACAN AGAINST
BADIOU)" in *Diacritics* 32.3-4 (2002) 135-151

Universal Vulnerability

“By insisting on a ‘common’ corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism” Judith Butler (*Precarious Life*)

7. Universal Vulnerability. I

Assigned Reading:

Stephen White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen (selections)*

Richard Rorty, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”

Bruce Robbins, “Sad Stories in the International Public Sphere: Richard Rorty on Culture and Human Rights” in *Feeling Global* 129-146

Recommended, or further reading:

Patricia A. Owens, “Xenophilia, Gender, and Sentimental Humanitarianism” *Alternatives*, 2004.

Bryan Turner, *Vulnerability and Human Rights*

Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy* (selection on Burke and Arendt)

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (selection on Billy Budd)

8. Universal Vulnerability. II

Assigned Reading:

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Interview, with J. Stauffer, *The Believer*, Mar 10, 2006

Recommended or further reading:

M. Lloyd, “Towards a Cultural Politics of Vulnerability” in Carver and Chambers, ed.

Carver and Chambers, *Judith Butler’s Precarious Politics*.

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

9. Universal Vulnerability. III -- Human and/versus Bodily Integrity

Assigned Reading:

Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*

Cavarero, *Horrorism*

Gillian Rose, “Deadly Embrace” in *London Review of Books*, Nov 4, 2004

David Scott, “The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad” in Hirschkind and Scott, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern*

Recommended, or further reading:

Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-2* (11-6, 357-8, passim)

Bernard Williams, (selections from *Utilitarianism*, *against*, and *Shame and Necessity*)

Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (selection, the critique of Utilitarianism)

John Sutton Baglow, “The Rights of the Corpse” in *Mortality*, Aug. 2007, 223-239

Universal Voice

“Man has immediately in one of his organs, the Voice, an element which admits and requires a more extensive purport than the mere sensuous Present. We have seen how Song is united with Dance, and ministers to it. But, subsequently Song makes itself independent, and requires musical instruments to accompany it; it then ceases to be unmeaning, like the modulations of a bird, which may indeed express emotion, but which have no objective import; but it requires an import created by imagination and Spirit, wand which is then further formed into an *objective work of art*” (Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, The Greek World, p. 243).

10. Universal Voice, I -- Mourning and Singular Sound

Assigned Reading:

Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice*

Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*

Derrida, *Grammatology* (selection, on Rousseau and L-S)

Recommended or further reading:

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*

Cavarero, *Stately Bodies*

Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*

11. Universal Voice, II – Repetition, Writing, Literarity

Assigned Reading:

Jacques Ranciere, *Dis-agreement*

Jacques Ranciere, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*

Recommended or further reading:

Diana Taylor, “Trapped in Bad Scripts” (op cit)

Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*

Samuel Chambers, “The Politics of Literarity” *Theory and Event* 8:31, 2005 pp 1-21

Andrew Schaap, “Enacting the Right to have Rights: Jacques Ranciere’s Critique of Hannah Arendt” in *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming).

12. Humanism. Anti-Humanism, Agonistic Humanism: Two to Three Ways to Queer Antigone

“Although not quite a queer heroine, Antigone does emblemize a certain heterosexual fatality that remains to be read. Whereas some might conclude that the tragic fate she suffers is the tragic fate of any and all who would transgress the lines of kinship that

confer intelligibility on culture, her example, as it were, gives rise to a contrary sort of critical intervention: what in her act is fatal for heterosexuality in its normative sense? And to what other ways of organizing sexuality might a consideration of that fatality rise?" (Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p.72).

Assigned Reading:

Alenka Zupancic, "Lacan's Heroines: Antigone and Sygne de Coufontaine" in *New Formations*, No. 35, pp. 108-121.

Julia Lupton, "Antigone in Vienna" in *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (127-157).

Derrida, "Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know), Chapter 3, *The Gift of Death*, (53-81)

Lee Edelman, *No Future* (selections, TBA)

Butler, *Talk, Talk, Talk* Interview

Bonnie Honig, "Ismene's Forced Choice: Sacrifice and Sorority in Sophocles' *Antigone*" (*Arethusa*, forthcoming, Jan. 2011)

Recommended:

borderlands, special issue on Ranciere and Queer Theory --Esp:

Hector Kollias, "How Queer is the Dēmos? Politics, Psychoanalysis, and the Impossibility of Emancipation" in *borderlands*

Oliver Davis, "Rancière / Queer Theory: from disagreement to irritable attachment" in *borderlands*

Richard Stamp, "The torsion of politics and friendship in Derrida, Foucault and Rancière"

Patricia MacCormack, "Inhuman Evanescence"

Recommended, or for further reading:

Bonnie Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism" in *New Literary History* (June 2010)

Catherine Belsey, "Reading and Critical Practice" in *Critical Quarterly*, vol 45, no. 3 (22-31).

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