

**408: Deconstruction, Hermeneutics & Politics:  
Crisis Method & Political Science in the Postmodern Era**

Fall 2007 --Professor D. E. Bohn Tel: 422-3319 Office Hours: 1:30-2:30 T

Since the turn of the century, the foundations of modern political thought have been under attack, one might argue that a certain "crisis" exists, crisis in the compelling power of arguments used over the past two hundred years to legitimate democratic practices. Indeed this crisis involves the very terms we use to make sense of the political landscape and legitimate individual and collective political behavior. In this class, we shall endeavor to describe this crisis and assess its general and specific implications for politics and political understanding.

In a variety of classes, we are exploring this crisis within our department. It is clear that in the modernist era, the claim was asserted that reason by way of theory both precedes and informs practice. The claim by 18th century thinkers and even people like Bentham and other utilitarians involved the idea of **rational political knowledge** through which a **fully logical political order** could be instituted.

However, already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Burke doubted that such a knowledge was possible. He believed in the unfolding of a historical knowledge where reason and practice were bound together in the development of political and social institutions. When the claimed rational knowledge of the political moved too far beyond the horizons of a given time's practices, he foresaw an idealism emerging that could not be fully trusted. Abstract and given to invention, the actual implementation of such thinking could only be achieved through revolution and blood. Hume, in his own very different way comes to similar conclusions. More recently, philosophy has raised serious concerns about any claim of reason to operate in some rarified realm of objectivity beyond the limits of historical development. Here it is argued that reason always works within an historical horizon both informed and limited by the past. In the measure that such a claim is convincing, then it would seem obvious that the relationship between institutions and reason cannot be separated into airtight compartments.

In the same way, efforts to radically implement new untried, but apparently theoretically valid practices without consideration of the effects such changes would have on institutions would seem ill-advised. On the other hand, to cleave to old practices without adaptation or improvement would lead to failure at the other extreme of the political. Political and social processes that do not adapt to the changes implicit in temporal existence, inevitably collapse.

Obvious Issues to be explored: It seems to me, there are a number of issues that need to be considered in a class on deconstruction that speaks to the foregoing issues. 1) the claim that there exists a science, a method by which the assumed "logic" inherent in human action and the coming to pass of events can be made transparent. 2) that this method is "objective" in that it is not conditioned by history, but allows an ahistorical stand point from which human action can be assessed 3) that reality itself involves a determinate field whose uniformities and connections are made transparent by the right method (said otherwise: that the "natural world" or "technical world" is the single true and objective world) 4) that objectivity is achieved by containing historical prejudice to allow reality as a determinate field to become transparent to the scientific observer and 5) that while elements of accident may keep certain aspects of reality from being reduced to lawlike principles, an approximation of objectivity remains within our grasp.

There is a second perspective in which important questions emerge: the area of ethics and values: 1) since

science and its method cannot ascertain the truth of moral axioms, they must be understood alternatively. 2) that reason as a deductive enterprise can judge the consistency of moral reflections but 3) that since these, moral axioms are historical in character they are subject to the relative claims of time 4) that as relative products of human culture, they involve an implicitly inferior level of understanding as compared to scientific knowledge and 5) that for the above reasons no set of human moral norms can be held as ultimately compelling.

We shall examine the foregoing issues in lectures, readings, and spirited discussion. The format of the class is flexible and will follow the direction the discussions take. At the beginning of each week, readings will be handed out. As our discussions develop and new issues are raised of interest to all, additional readings will be distributed the following Monday that reflect these moving interests.

### **Grading and work required for the course:**

**Mid-Term (1) & Final Exams (300 points).** Both objective and essay questions. All exams are general **Précis or Class Lecture and Reading Summaries (400 points).** Analytical summaries of each class lecture and discussions and the readings . They should extract and organize the fundamental concepts and arguments from the lecture or reading material into a clear and concise summary by first listing the central concepts and then showing how secondary concepts relate to the former in the overall argument being advanced. Finally, critical assumptions and how they limit the position being studied should be pointed out. At the end of the semester, the summaries should be submitted on the day following the last day of class for final review and grading.

□ **Précis or Class Lecture and Reading Summaries (400 points).** An analytical Précis of each class discussion should be written after careful consultation with the text material covering the same area. The précis should extract and organize the fundamental concepts and arguments from the day's lecture and assigned reading material to make a clear and concise analytical summary by 1) identifying and analyzing the central arguments along with essential secondary contentions and concepts; then, 2) show the limit within which the foregoing positions works due to design, basic assumptions and/or possible errors. The précis will be submitted for final grading by internet, on the day following the last day of class.

How Summaries should be written. Be both concise and precise. Avoid slang and casual language. Keep précis to no longer than a half a page single spaced in a 12 point font such as Times Roman or CG Times, single spaced, one inch margins on all sides and page numbers at the top right corner. Breaks between lectures should only be three lines. The final summaries should include a title page with the student's name, student number, the course, teacher and class section, followed by a table of contents with the date, number, title, and page of each précis. The should conform to University standards for English composition. **Warning:** plagiarism will result in a failing grade. Software now exists that makes it possible to detect this kind of plagiarism.

**10 page paper (200 points)** Students are required to write a paper developing one of the themes presented in class---in the readings, lectures or discussion. It should follow general departmental writing form, and should not merely describe a problem, but analyze the issue and where possible suggest solutions or at least avenues that might lead to solutions. In some cases, only a limit to what can be said is possible which will be sufficient to meet the paper standard when carefully explained.