William Klein

Fall 2020

**Truth and Sedition.**

**Course Description:**

The truth can set you free, but of course it can also get you into trouble. How do the constraints on the pursuit and expression of “truth” change with the nature of the censoring regime, from the family to the church to the modern nation-state? What causes regimes to protect perceived vulnerabilities in the systems of knowledge they privilege? What happens when conflict between regimes implicates modes of knowing? Are there types of truth that any regime would—or should—find dangerous? What are the possible motives and pathways for self-censorship?

We begin with the revolt of the Hebrews against polytheistic Egypt and the Socratic questioning of democracy, and end with various contemporary cases of censorship within and between regimes. We will consider these events and texts, and their reverberations and reversals in history, in relation to select analyses of the relations between truth and power, including Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Brecht, Leo Strauss, Foucault, Chomsky, Waldron and Xu Zhongrun.

**Historical Orientation:**

The historical basis of the “sedition” aspect of the course derives from Thucydides’ study of the Greek city-states during the Peloponnesian War. These populations were able to communicate across boundaries and so share in “seditious” alliances, which often led to an overturning of the political order along with its conceptual apparatus. The resulting conflicts had an ethical dimension, leading to moral outrage on both sides of the class-based divisions, though the feelings of the aristocratic class have been better preserved in the philosophic literature. As an aristocrat, Thucydides found the democratic discourse to be subversive, and its expression the product of a wartime crisis he called *stasis*. Following his lead, the Roman historians translated this as *seditio,* which gives us, through a complex path, our modern word in English.In this course, we are applying this basic concept, in its unfolding diversity, to different types of states and their internal divisions at select moments of Western history, and we end with the present formation of international protest movements and identity politics.

The broad and unwieldy concept of “truth” is no less historical, since the type of truth involved in these emotional confrontations is decidedly perspectival and at least to some degree embedded in historical systems of thought. Even if we can now see, for instance, that Galileo was discovering many objective, scientific truths, these truths were seen as “seditious” from the point of view of the Catholic church, itself a state as well as a power within states. Censorship—a theme that links truth and sedition—was the expected result. Putting truth and sedition together in this way gives us our field of study. For historical guidance in this endeavor, we will be relying largely on the work of Michel Foucault, who studied the link between power structures or states and modes of truth-telling.

If the course remains largely within the confines of historical states and their potentially seditious populations, it ends in the more amorphous realm of global communications and identity politics in the post-colonial world, where formal institutions are taking new roles in the flow of information and the censoring, offensive or liberatory dynamics, all of which of course implicates our (virtual) classroom itself.

**Books to Buy:**

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, *Behzti (Dishonour),* Oberon Modern Plays.

Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, Palgrave, 2010.

**Schedule of Readings and Conceptual Outline (the weeks are numbered):**

I. Ancient Sedition.

A. Monotheistic Sedition: Inter-god sedition.

1. A Monotheistic Slave Revolt and Genocidal Reversal: *Exodus*. The key chapter here for us is 32. Feel free to skim over the lists of regulations and building directions, but not the way in which they reveal a monotheistic point of view. (Canvas)

The Monotheistic State against Polytheism:

On Islam: Tariq Ali, *Fundamentalisms.* (Canvas)

On Christianity: Jonathan Kirsch, *God against Gods* (Canvas).

Both Kirsch and Ali are fairly hostile to monotheistic states. Ali is a Marxist with a large public. His grandfather was governor of the Punjab before the partition. Kirsch is an American lawyer and amateur historian. Tariq Ali gives a reading of the Satanic Verses (as in Salmon Rushdie’s famous novel), which ties in with the theme of the suppression of seditious idolatry in Exodus. Kirsch gives us a look at the same thing in the early Christian state—i.e., the suppression of pagan religion.

For the first response paper, I suggest trying to simply tell the story of the “civil war” of chapter 32 of Exodus in your own words. You will then have written a new account which will not be a sacred narrative even if you believe the original one is indeed sacred. You could try any genre you like, but whatever you write, it will not be a sacred narrative. This will get us thinking about genres and point of view (or perspectival truth). After this, the topic of the response paper will be up to you, though for the first part I will give you some ideas to interact with if you like.

B. Truth in the Democratic, Polytheistic Polis.

2. Euripides: *Ion*. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, chapters 4-6.

3. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, chapters 7-11.

Foucault’s lectures at the College de France ranged from examination of Greek philosophy to American libertarianism. His focus on Creusa’s “confession” in *Ion* reverberates with his interest in the history of Catholic confession as part of the genealogy of psychoanalysis. The history of truth-telling more generally is also his interest. He believed that history does not move in quantum leaps, but develops new patterns that interact with the old ones.

The readings so far give us a chance to reflect on the difference between the polytheistic and monotheistic views, but also on the difference between the genres involved. Could we say that *Exodus* is a sacred narrative, while *Ion* is a sacred comedy? Apollo delivers oracular truth. He is “the god of various light,” who reveals his truth selectively and indirectly. Can there be blasphemy towards such a god? At the end he will not appear so as to avoid public “blame,” while Creusa’s secret blame turns to secret praise. This is not the world of the moral prophet denouncing the worldly powers with the truth of God.

C. Philosophic Sedition in the Polis.

4. The corruptor of youth: Aristophanes, *The Clouds*.

5. The teacher of sedition: Xenophon, *Memoirs of Socrates*, book I (Canvas).

The Critical Conscience: Plato, *Apology* (Canvas)

Here we have a comedy, a memoir and a defense speech, all about a man at the center of the conflicts generated by the Peloponnesian War and the resulting civil war in Athens, which we read more about in the next section.

6. Inter-Polis Sedition (*stasis*),Thucydides’ Guarded, Oligarchic Speech, and the Periclean Vision of Public Discussion:

Leo Strauss on Thucydides (Canvas).

Selections from Thucydides: Pericles’ Funeral Oration and III.10. (Canvas).

Though Foucault did not relate *Ion*, with its confusions and half-truths overturned, to *stasis*, he sees it occurring during a key moment in the development Athenian discourse, where *parresia* is claimed as a fundamental democratic value. Here Strauss gives provocative guidance for reading an oligarchic type of counter-communication passing through the boundaries of the Greek city-states. We will try to locate the speech of Socrates within this dynamic.

**6-8 Page Paper Due on Ancient Sedition (due following week):**

Write a paper on at least two of the primary sources that includes discussion of the genre of the works, the authorial point of view and the relevant forms of state involved. Refer to at least one of the secondary sources. Bring these to bear on a discussion that explores some sort of relationship between pursuing the truth and “sedition.” Remember that “sedition” is an English word with a genealogy leading back to “stasis,” which is translated in our edition as “revolution” or “civil war.” Also remember that *stasis* for Thucydides was a disease of the body politic, not a sign of progressive struggle. But feel free to make use of the word “sedition” in a way that makes sense to you. We are, after all, speaking a language that has been shaped by the past we are studying.

II. Modern Sedition: Science, Protestant Critique, Enlightenment.

7. Galileo against the Church: “Letter to Duchess Christina” (Canvas).

The Seditious Jesus: Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity.*

We now move abruptly past antiquity to find Galileo being persecuted by a hegemonic papal state, which propagated orthodoxy and censored heresy in all the states it controlled. Later in the century, Locke became seditious with respect to the absolutist Catholic state engineered by James II, and he joined a revolution that was not at all bloodless in the end.

8. Spreading Enlightenment and Critique. Sedition becomes Revolution. The Limits and Reversals of Enlightenment.

Kant, “What is the Enlightenment.” (Canvas)

Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others,* chapters 1-2.

Kant argues that one should obey the authorities in one’s life (which include the state itself) while arguing publicly. This is close to what Pericles said in Thucydides, though both the “private” and public institutions had of course changed enormously, and the point of arguing in public had begun to encompass the idea of progress and was not confined to political speech. Socrates argued privately in this sense, while giving up on public deliberations. Foucault traces Kant’s reaction to the French Revolution while exploring the practice of critique.

III. Territorial State Control and Sedition.

9. Hobbes on Censorship and Truth: *Leviathan*, ch. 18 (Canvas).

Milton against Censorship: *Areopagitica*. (Canvas).

Interview with Stanley Fish on Milton and Free Speech. (Canvas)

10. Brecht’s Return to Galileo:

*Life of Galileo*.

Statement to House Committee on Un-American Activities (Canvas).

11. Truth and Propaganda:

The Mainstream Press as Propaganda (fake news?): Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (Canvas).

IV. The Security State and Beyond. The Late Modern Subject in Advancing Technological Domains.

12. Collecting and Revealing Secrets:

The Totalitarian Data Double: Maria Los, "Looking into the Future: surveillance, globalization and the totalitarian potential." (Canvas)

Whistleblowing: Glen Greenwald on Snowden and Wikileaks. (Canvas)

Bruce Schneier, *Data and Goliath*. Selections.

Xu Zhongrun, “Viral Alarm: When Fury Overcomes Fear.” (Canvas).

“Humble Recognition, Boundless Possibility.”

“Imminent Fears, Immediate Hopes.”

13. Truth and the Offended or Isolated Subject:

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, *Behzti (Dishonour),* Oberon Modern Plays.

*The A to Z of Free Expression*. *Free Expression No Offense*. (Both on Canvas)

Waldron, “Brave Spaces.” (Canvas).

Truth Bubbles: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-> truth-and-misinformation-online/

**Final Paper.**

Here are some preliminary ideas. You might want to start exploring one or more of these themes in your response papers, so that the final paper emerges organically.

1) One idea is to write a play or dialogue, either on your own or in collaboration with one or more classmates. You could be yourself or one or more of the thinkers/characters from the course. The exact topic of this historico-philosophic investigation can emerge in due course. We will have virtual meetings to discuss the topic of your final essay, and no doubt look for additional sources online.

2) Make contact with an international or foreign organization and include them in a dialogue or paper, perhaps on constitutional reform or environmental action or some other area where a critical posture towards American policy is unavoidable.

3) Reflect on the history of the word “sedition,” starting from *stasis.* You need not be a linguist to do this. This could lead to broader questions about the nature of historical understanding. Is “revolution” somehow incipient in *stasis*? Or is it mere anachronism to think so? Alternatively, when we think of “revolution” as progressive, to what extent must we somehow carry with us the idea of *stasis* as political disease requiring some sort of healing reconciliation? This topic could lead to an examination of “Truth and Reconciliation” commissions in today’s “unsettled” states.

4) What is the line between critique and sedition or treason? What is the line between protest and revolution? Do revolutions happen when new truths are ready to emerge? Or do some revolutions occur (perhaps like Locke’s Glorious Revolution) when well-established, hegemonic truths are challenged? But these would be difficult to answer unless one already had studied a particular revolution. If, for instance, one knew Locke’s *Second Treatise* and could read some of Steve Pincus’ *1688*, one could make a significant dent in these problems.

5) What is the line between criticism and offense? Do some people deserve to be not just offended but shamed? A look at Anthony Appiah’s *The Honor Code* would be interesting here.

6) We tend to assume that sedition favors the wave of the future, but what if the future looks bleak for any given minority? Or if a brutal minority succeeds in seizing power? Has this course tended to assume this progressive flow of history?

7) Those of you interested in literature might want to focus on genre, perhaps especially the dramatic forms, which allow for the conflict of truth-tellers. This could be linked to the development of parliamentary democracy with its roots in Athenian experience. And this in turn could be linked to anti-parliamentary discourse from Hobbes to Schmitt.

8) Identity and gender could be pursued going back to the first day of class. This could lead to an exploration of Foucault’s ideas about normation and normalization.

Papers:

1. Weekly 2 page response papers due by 10 AM Wednesday mornings (30% of grade). At some point in the semester I will make comments on your writing that I will ask you to respond to in the next paper. And at various points we will jointly examine one of the papers followed by a writing exercise in class. The prompt for the paper due the first day of class is given with the assignment. After that, make sure to focus on a passage that we can discuss in class.

2. A 6-8 page paper on one of the topics discussed on the syllabus (30% of grade). See prompts.

4. A final 8-10 page paper (30% of grade). See prompts.

Discussion:

This is 10% of the grade. If you contribute to the discussion in whatever way (unless in doing so you make it very clear that you haven’t read the material), you get the full credit here.

Academic Integrity:

Of course, plagiarism is not allowed. See the guidelines at:

<https://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>