

Imagining the Body Politic  
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Office Hours: T 4-6. McClellan 112.

### Course Description:

Why have artists and thinkers so often thought of the political collectivity as analogous to the human body? What assumptions have lain behind their urge to see themselves as belonging to or in charge of a “body politic?” Is the language we use to talk about our political lives somehow dependent on this particular metaphor, so deeply grounded in our most immediate experiences? What changes if we talk instead about our highest political institution, the state, as not just a body but a moral “person,” as many have done? What if we think rather of the body politic as being mainly moved by unconscious but analytically coherent desires? And what if, on the contrary, we do not imagine ourselves as belonging to any such coherent whole, at least as it has so far been imagined?

In exploring these questions, we will try to *see* the key “corporeal” images embedded in political texts, on the one hand, and the key concepts embedded in political art, on the other. We will try to *draw* the ideas of each political thinker we read (as Hobbes himself did in order to illustrate his own ideas), just as we will try to see the ideas in the images of the body politic that we view. And we will try to explore the limits of and problems involved in such imagining.

### Books to Buy:

The Essential Epicurus, tr, with an introduction by Eugene O’Connor, Prometheus.

Hobbes, Leviathan, Gaskin, ed., Oxford University Press.

Ernesto Laclau, On Populist Reason, Verso.

Slavoj Žižek, Violence, Picador.

Carl Schmitt, Theory of the Partisan, Telos.

### Readings:

We will examine several types of imaginative construct, while using throughout the semester a few key works of art and political philosophy as touchstones or experimental fields of inquiry. We will find ourselves much occupied by the groundbreaking work of Thomas Hobbes. The types of construct, along with the representative works we will examine, will be divided as follows:

#### –Imagining the metaphysical grounding of the social or body politic:

Are our bodies part of some larger bodily order or hierarchy that explains their tendencies? On the first day, we will ponder this image by Giovanni di Paolo that represents the Aristotelian view as conceived by the Catholic Church, against which Galileo and his disciple Hobbes reacted in an Epicurean mode. This 15<sup>th</sup>-century Sienese painting of the Creation is now at the Met in New York:



August 28 Introduction

Sept. 4 Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, I. 1-3,7-10 and II.1-3,6, 8-9, 12, 14. (On Canvas)

11 The Essential Epicurus, 19-76;  
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters 1-7, 13.

**–Imagining the theological ground of the social or political body:**

We have seen how the metaphysical imagination can overlap with the theological. Here we will compare:

Sept 18 St. Augustine, *City of God*, chapter 11, parts 1-6, 22-23 (on Canvas);  
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. 31, 32, 35, 38, 44.

A key element of these texts is the way that the secular order is related to the sacred in time.

**–Imagining the human body as analogous to the social or political body:**

Do the parts or organs of the body politic take on an organic order? Does the body politic get sick? Who will cure it? What are its internal tensions? Who will manage them? Need it be a purely corporeal entity? Does the body have a rational consciousness or an irrational unconscious? Who will guide either one? How does the body analogy differ from other classic political metaphors, like the ship of state or the shepherd and “his” flock? In this unit, we will begin looking at the basic metaphor in radically diverse settings.

Sept 25 Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 507-9. This short text gives us an outline of tropes involved in analogical thinking. (On Canvas)  
St. Paul, I Corinthians, chapter 12. (On Canvas)

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Frontispiece, Introduction, chapter 29 (on diseases of the body politic).

**-Imagining the state as a person:**

Corporatist (from the Latin for body, *corpus*) theory considers social bodies as corporations within the corporate body of the state. A touchstone image here, in which each social or political body is represented by a person who looks the part and who takes his or her place in a dual sacred-secular hierarchy (which in turn is subsumed by the body of the church, itself representing the body of Christ, hovering above), is from the Spanish Chapel in Florence:



In the following readings, Quentin Skinner explains how Hobbes, drawing on ancient Roman legal concepts, departs from this corporatist tradition by imagining the state as a moral person.

Oct. 2            Quentin Skinner, “Classical Rhetoric and the Personation of the State;”  
                      --“Hobbes on Political Representation.”  
                      Recommended: “Hobbes and the Concept of the State.” (All on Canvas).

**-Imagining the psyche as analogous to the social or political body:**

Here we will focus on psychoanalytic views pertaining to the unconscious psyche of the collectivity, rather than the rational psyche as developed in the Platonic tradition. Laclau and Žižek disagree about much, but seem to agree that the manipulation of the unconscious is a legitimate or at least necessary political aim.

- Oct. 9 Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd* (On Canvas). Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* was deeply influenced by this anti-populist work.
- Oct. 23 Ernesto Laclau, *Populist Reason*, chapters 1-4.
- Oct. 30 Ernesto Laclau, *Populist Reason*, chapters 4-8.
- Nov. 6 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*. Žižek combines Freudian, Marxist and Hegelian elements to arrive at a composite picture of the social and political body.

6 Page Paper due at end of this section. Bring hard copy to next class.

**–Imagining the body politic as collective bodies in motion:**

This topic can be used to explore the *Corpus Domini* procession in the Spanish Chapel. Here, Hobbes distinguishes humans from bees, whose movements seemed to him to follow logic without requiring speech or *logos*, while the other writers explore the idea that human bodies in groups follow their own logic.

- Nov. 13 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 17;  
 Elias Canetti, "The Pack and Religion," from *Crowds and Power*. (Online)  
 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, Part II. (On Canvas)

**–Gender, race, identity and the body politic:**

What assumptions have been embedded in the classic images of the body politic, and how can these be overcome?

- Nov. 20 James Tully, "Reimagining belonging in diverse societies."  
 Millicent Marcus, "The Italian Body Politic is a Woman."  
 Ronald L. Jackson, "Origins of the Black Body Politic." (All on Canvas).

A touchstone image might be the controversial mural in San Francisco by the Marxist painter Victor Arnautoff's *Life of George Washington*. See <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/san-francisco-mural-victor-arnautoff-dewey-crumpler-1596409>:



**–Imagining the body politic in space: boundaries, exclusion and armed struggle:**

This topic emerges from the above, as is clear from Arnautoff's depiction of Manifest Destiny.

Dec. 4 Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*. This explores the way in which disempowered movements can appeal to third parties outside the boundaries.

Final Paper Due by end of exam period.

### **Learning Goals:**

1. To develop a critical awareness of one's own political imagination through an historical examination of works of art and political theory.
2. To put works from different traditions into dialogue as representatives of diverse but possibly overlapping historical trajectories.
3. To write a short interdisciplinary research paper, drawing on the sources listed above.

### **Papers:**

1. Weekly 1 page response papers (25% of grade).
2. A 6 page paper on one of the topics discussed on the syllabus (25% of grade)
4. A 10-12 page paper on an individual topic, digging more deeply into the conceptual scheme and beyond (50% of grade). A work in a non-written medium can be substituted for part of the paper. An example of recent work for this class in this category is by Lingyuan Wang:



**Academic Integrity:**

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

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