PUNISHMENT, POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Office Hours

Tuesday 200-330 and Thursday 200-330

Other than war, punishment is the most dramatic manifestation of state power. Whom a society punishes and how it punishes are key political questions as well as indicators of its character. This course considers connections between punishment and politics in the contemporary United States. We will ask whether we punish too much and too severely, or too little and too leniently. We will consider the politicization and racialization punishment and examine particular modalities through which the state dispenses its penal power. Among the questions to be discussed are: Does punishment express our noblest aspirations for justice or our basest desires for vengeance? Can it ever be an adequate expression of, or response to, the pain of the victims of crime? When is it appropriate to forgive rather than punish? Throughout we will try to understand the meaning of punishment by examining the way it is represented in politics and popular culture.

Books for the course are available at the Amherst Bookstore.

Stephen Mitchell, The Book of Job
James Whitman, Harsh Justice
Herman Melville, Billy Budd
Fox Butterfield, All God’s Children
Austin Sarat, When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American Condition
Austin Sarat, Mercy on Trial: What It Means to Stop an Execution

Other readings are available on the course website on CMS.

Please note that there are several films on e-reserve.
I. INTRODUCTION: PUNISHMENT AND PAIN

1. \textit{Introduction} (January 25)

Francis v. Resweber, 329 US (1947) 459
“Ohio Plans to Try Again as Execution Goes Wrong,” \textit{New York Times} (September 2009)

FILM: \textit{Noon Wine}

2. \textit{The Phenomenology of Suffering: If There Is Punishment There Must Be Guilt, But Without Punishment Can There Be Innocence?} (February 1)

Stephen Mitchell, \textit{The Book of Job} (P)

3. \textit{Punishment and the Constitution of Culture} (February 8)

James Whitman, \textit{Harsh Justice}, Introduction, Chapter 1, 2, 3, 5, Conclusion (P)

II. PUTTING PAIN TO WORK


Herman Melville, \textit{Billy Budd} (P)
Herbert Morris, “Persons and Punishment”
Robinson v. California, 370 US (1962) 660


Marc Klass, “Victim Impact Statement”

III. THE PAINS OF PUNISHMENT

FILM: Sling Blade

6. *Imprisonment and Indignity-I (February 29)*

Ruffin v. Commonwealth, 62 Va. (1871) 1024
Fox Butterfield, All God’s Children (P)

FILM: Shawshank Redemption

7. *Imprisonment and Indignity-II (March 7)*

Simmons v. Galvin, No. 08-1569 (July 31, 2009)
Brown v. Plata, No. 09-1233 (May 23, 2011), (Kennedy, 1-8, 12-24, 26-33, 41-48, 51-52 and Scalia 1-12, 14-16)


IV. COMPETING IMPULSES: SEVERITY AND ITS LIMITS

FILM: I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang


Joan Dayan, “Held in the Body of the State: Prisons, Memory, and the Law”


Erving v. California, No. 01-6978 (2003) (O’Connor and Breyer)

FILM- Pierrepoint, The Last Hangman

11. Execution Politics: America and the Future of Capital Punishment -I (April 11)

William Connolly, “The Will, Capital Punishment, and Culture War”
Austin Sarat, When the State Kills: Capital Punishment and the American Condition (P)

FILM: Dead Man Walking

12. Execution Politics: America and the Future of Capital Punishment -II (April 18)

Alex Kotlowitz, “In The Face of Death,” NY Times (July 6, 2003)

V. BEYOND PAIN?


Martha Nussbaum, “Equity and Mercy”
Austin Sarat, Mercy on Trial: What It Means to Stop an Execution (P)

14. Conclusion (May 2)