HIST 408-BL Constructing the Public

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CONSTRUCTING THE PUBLIC
(Theme: Public Policy and the Future of Cincinnati)

Course Description

This course has gone through many permutations, but it has always been about the American political imagination, its aspirations and failures, its periodic atrophy and reawakening. In part, the course arises from interactions with my fellow Americans, especially students, over the last thirty years. The belief that economic questions always determine our options heavily taxes and threatens to repossess our political imagination. If things cannot be different, why bother with politics? The belief in economic determinism has not always reigned supreme in American history, but it has dominated our politics over the past several generations, as anyone who proposes radical alternatives to the status quo quickly learns. At a time when we appear to be once again questioning economic determinism – or at least that market fundamentalism that defines government as the problem --, it might be useful to explore other times in our history when Americans have believed that politics could reshape society in significant ways. This course tries to do exactly that and, in the process, it seeks to remind us that the fundamental starting point of politics is the possibility of alternative futures.

A second source of this course is my deepening interest in and respect for philosophy. Possibility is also a fundamental starting point of philosophy. The conviction that things can be different is a powerful inducement to thinking seriously about human affairs. Between past and future, Hannah Arendt put it, stand thinking women and men. The immediate task of contemporary philosophy, Stanley Cavell adds, is to overcome "a sense of the exhaustion of human possibility." Few philosophers have spoken more forcefully about possibility and political imagination than John Dewey. A "sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized," Dewey argued, provided the most telling criticism of the status quo. “Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual,” he added, making imagination “the chief instrument of the good.”

The deepest source of this course is my study of American history over the past thirty years. Indeed Dewey’s philosophy spoke to real possibilities embedded in our history and culture. Defining democracy as a "working faith in the possibilities of human nature," Dewey embraced the "capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished." Dewey continued: "I did not invent this faith," but “acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit." Despite the many failures of American democracy, Dewey remained hopeful to the end of his life, believing that “be the
evils what they may, the experiment is not yet played out. The United States are not yet made; they are not a finished fact to be categorically assessed.” The course proceeds in that spirit.

The specific theme this year is public policy and the future of the city. We will explore this theme along three tracks. First, I want to acquaint you with a civic debate about the role of the public and public things (res publica – the origins of the word republican) in American life. This debate began about twenty-five years ago and, to some extent, continues today. The debate most certainly informed the creation of the honors program of which you are a part (several programs in philosophy, politics, and economics already existed, but none in philosophy, politics, and the public). The debate included an inquiry into the role of political philosophies, specifically liberalism and civic republicanism, in creating and perhaps rectifying the imbalance between private and public affairs in the United States. A number of social critics (three of whose work we will read samples of this semester) pointed to the excessively private focus of American life and tried to recover submerged traditions in American life that might revive our interest in public things. In particular, I hope to suggest to you how important political philosophy – and the public policies it informs – is to our lives. In the process, I hope to suggest that our ideas matter, to show that different possibilities existed in our history and, by extension, also exist in our future.

The other two tracks of the course focus on the particular city where we live and work. The second track is an all-too-brief exploration of the history – and particularly the political history – of Cincinnati. I hope you will gain some perspective on the political system that you will be operating in as part of POLI 246 Mass Media and Politics (beginning with at least a rudimentary understanding of who or what the “Charterites” are). I believe this history can also give you some perspective on the issues the city faces today as citizens and their civic leaders try to craft a better future for all. So the third track is a brief introduction to (what I see as) some of the more pressing issues facing the city today. As part of this, I will try to introduce you to a newer civic debate going on, one about the pros and cons of urban sprawl and the possibilities of greening the city. I hope this will contribute to the process of finding a public policy issue to explore and shape in the spring semester of this block of classes.


**A Few Words About POLI 246 Mass Media and Politics:** I hope the readings and discussions in “Constructing the Public” will inform your participation in “Mass Media and Politics” this fall and “Public Policy Practice” in the spring. POLI 246 examines the intersection between contemporary political practice and the role of the media in political and cultural affairs in the United States. The focus here is on the techniques of electoral (and legislative) politics and, more broadly, on the various ways power is exercised in society. We will make use of both critical inquiry and practical application. In participating in the electorate process (and in the spring term crafting some sort of campaign designed to shape public opinion and the public agenda), you will engage in strategy- and policy-formulation, coalition-building, negotiation, organization, media relations, broadcast and narrowcast communications, including the hands-on production of image-based messages.
The Block as a Whole: Taken as a whole, these two blocked courses are designed to develop engaged and informed citizens who are both reflective and effective. Although Dr. Beaupre and I have been collaborating in developing the ideas in these courses for more than two decades, we continue to disagree on many important points. So he may see these things somewhat differently than I do. But for me, politics requires a combination of vision and power or, to put it somewhat differently, argument and technique. Without an argument about where we are and a vision of where we want to go, the most sophisticated technique, the most effective exercise of power, leads nowhere. Argument and vision without technique, without power, without a strategy and a means of implementation, is equally pointless. The two have to be brought together and that is what I hope these two linked courses will do. The interaction between argument/vision and technique/power is not seamless or smooth, nor is one or the other the exclusive terrain of either course. We may even decide that the political system as presently constituted frustrates our best intentions. Beaupre will surely tell me - more than once - that my ideas are impractical and unworkable. But in such tensions lies a good deal of the learning. I hope the experience will contribute to your development as citizens, people who see the world critically, care enough about it to engage in public affairs, and try to make a difference in our communal consciousness.

Student Learning Outcomes for HIST 408: Students who read the texts, participate in the discussions, and complete the assignments in this course will be able to:

1. Understand and engage the civic debate about the imbalance between the private and public aspects of American life.

2. Construct and evaluate arguments about the role of political philosophies and values in the development of American society.

3. Compare and assess the contrasting visions and policies that shaped the history of the United States.

4. Describe and assess the role of civic culture and public policy in the historical development of the city of Cincinnati.

5. Analyze and evaluate competing proposals for shaping the future of the city of Cincinnati.

6. Construct and articulate a vision for the future of Cincinnati, including appropriate public policies to secure that future.

7. Write effective prose in a variety of professional and public formats.

8. Speak clearly and efficiently on complex issues.

Student Learning Outcomes for the PPP Sophomore Block: Constructing the Public also contributes to the overall outcomes for the PPP Sophomore block. Students who embrace the opportunities in year-long block of four courses (HIST 408, POLI 246, HIST 300, POLI 329) will find that they have:
9. Developed a love of discussion, debate, and deliberation, a taste for wide and challenging reading in a variety of disciplines, and a desire to do careful scholarship and engaged social criticism

10. Acquired the habits of articulating and questioning their values, being open to new ideas, and connecting their values to their intellectual inquiries

11. Built confidence in their capacity to conduct research and organize a mass of chaotic evidence into an analytical narrative and improved their ability to find sources that can illuminate a contemporary issue

12. Gained an appreciation for past struggles to construct a better society, an humility about the difficulty of changing society, an understanding of the historical context of contemporary issues, and a recognition of their place in an historical continuum, connecting past, present and future.

13. Found ways of putting to constructive use their anger about injustice, their faith in the possibility of social change, their hope for social justice, and their passion for setting things right.


Course Requirements for HS 408: Grading is on a 1,000 point scale. The paragraphs on the readings (see below) are due before each day’s class and should be posted on the appropriate discussion board on Blackboard. All other assignments should be loaded to turnitin.com (links are provided on the Blackboard page) by 11:59PM on the due date. Grading rubrics for all assignments can be found on the Blackboard site under Course Content.

A. Class attendance and participation. This includes keeping up with the reading and participating on a regular basis in class discussions and producing a written response of at least 200 words (500 words for the first week) for each of the twelve reading assignments (see course schedule below). There is a writing prompt (a specific question) included in each reading assignment below. Use this prompt if it is helpful but do not feel limited by it. The paragraphs are due before that day’s class. While these paragraphs do not need to be polished writing, they should be coherent so that they can provide a foundation for the other writing you will do during the semester. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-8. (200 points for the paragraphs, 100 points for in-class participation, total of 300 points)

B. Historically- and Philosophically-Informed Essay on the Future of Cincinnati or the Ohio Valley Region: Five-thousand word essay (that is approximately 20 double-spaced typed paged) on the history, current state, and possible futures of the city of Cincinnati or the Ohio Valley Region, or the state of Ohio. If you have some alternative – but related – idea for your paper, feel free to make a proposal. I would love it if one or more of these essays addressed the environmental history/state/future of Cincinnati (for the sort of thing I have in mind, see http://theecologicalcity.com/). This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-4, and 7. (400 points, as detailed below)
Richard Arum and Josipa Roska’s *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2010) created quite a stir this past year. The authors found that college students actually learned quite little during their years in college. They based their conclusion on the results of a standardized test called the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Quite unlike the multiple choice questions of the SAT and ACT, the CLA required students to “read a set of documents on a fictional problem in business or politics and write a memo advising an official on how to respond to it.” The results showed that 45 percent of the students “had made effectively no significant progress in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing in their first two years.” See Anthony Grafton, “Our Universities: Why Are They Failing,” *The New York Review of Books* (November 24, 2011), 38ff.

Some of the particular organizations/initiatives that might provide the foundation for an essay on the future of Cincinnati include Green Umbrella, Civic Garden Center, Mill Creek Restoration Project, Cincinnati Green Plan, city of Cincinnati Office of Environmental Quality, Cincinnati Planning Department, Clean Cincinnati, Cincinnati Waterworks, the Metropolitan Sewer District, Cincinnati office of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, Confluence, or the Water Technology Innovation Cluster, zero-waste retailing (several large firms in the city), PNC Bank green building initiatives, the Land Conservancy of Hamilton County, People Working Cooperatively, Paddlefest. You can also consult the Green Umbrella web site (http://www.greenumbrella.org/member-organizations) for a list of over 130 affiliated organizations, businesses, government entities, and educational institutions.

Paper proposal, including tentative thesis statement and annotated bibliography, Sunday, September 22 (50 points)

Polished draft of the essay, Sunday, November 17th (50 points)

Completed essay, Friday, December 13rd (300 points)

C. **In-Class Group Presentations**, December 4 and 11: I will divide you into four groups, based on your paper topics. I will ask each group to make a short presentation (20-30 minutes) about your essays (see B. above) and white papers (see D. below). I will also ask you, after your reports, to ask the class a series of questions designed to encourage a discussion of the various issues raised in your presentations (50 for group effort, 100 for individual contribution). (Total of 150 points) This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcome 8, as well as contributing to 1-6.

D. **Final Examination, White Paper**: A 750 to 1,000 word (approximately three to four, double-spaced typed pages) white paper on a public issue you believe the class should pursue in the spring. A white paper is an authoritative report on a public issue, used as a guide for decision-making. It is exactly the sort of clear, precise, and effective writing that most college students cannot do. (See text box at right). As several commentators have said, college students today are lazy, don’t know anything, and no one wants to hire them. And college professors, the same commentators are argued, don’t teach or care about students and add nothing to their capacities. But we will be different. Although this assignment is due final exam week, you should be working on it early in the semester. Ideally, your white
paper will be organically connected to your longer essay but you may choose to highlight some other issue if you wish. In any event, the white paper should (1) be respectfully addressed to your classmates and instructors, (2) explain the context and implications of the public issue in question, (3) explore the range of options available in addressing the issue (including any public officials, public agencies, and/or electoral implications relevant to the issue, and (4) make a recommendation and a strategy, including whatever relevant cautions and caveats you want to make, as to a course of action in the spring. (150 points) This assignment develops student learning outcomes 5, 6, and 7.

****Late assignments will be penalized at the discretion of the instructor, generally five percent per 24 hours.

Please note the following policy from page 52 of the Xavier University Catalog (the History Department and your instructors take this seriously):

“The pursuit of truth demands high standards of personal honesty. Academic and professional life requires a trust based upon integrity of the written and spoken word. Accordingly, violations of certain standards of ethical behavior will not be tolerated at Xavier University. These include theft, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized assistance in assignments and tests, unauthorized copying of computer software, the falsification of results and material submitted in reports or admission and registration documents, and the falsification of any academic record including letters of recommendation.”

“All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student’s own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another’s efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one’s own.”

“Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an ‘F’ in the course, and expulsion from the University.”

**Grading Scale:** 92-100 = A, 90-91=A-, 88-89=B+, 82-87=B, 80-81=B-, 78-79=C+, 72-77=C, 70-71=C-, 68-69=D+, 62-67=D, 60-61=D-, below 60 =F.

Course Outline and Reading Assignments: Reading Assignments other than Sandel and Lasch are on e-reserves: [http://library.xu.edu/eres/courses.aspx?return=toolkit.aspx&page=pm&cid=1580](http://library.xu.edu/eres/courses.aspx?return=toolkit.aspx&page=pm&cid=1580) (the password is public). There are also optional but recommended websites, videos, and readings listed at the end of each week’s materials.

PART ONE: CIVIC CULTURE, PUBLIC POLICY, AND URBAN HISTORY

August 28 (folder 1): Introduction to a Three-Track Course: 1. What is right and what is wrong with civic culture in the United States? Why should we care about politics? Do public debate and public policy make any difference? 2. What are some of the key conflicts and dynamics in Cincinnati’s history and politics? 3. What are some of the more pressing issues facing Cincinnati today?

Optional website: The official website of Cincinnati’s municipal government: http://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/cityofcincinnati/

September 4 (folder 2): Rights or Responsibilities, Civically and Ecologically Considered: Has American society been defined in terms of rights and/or responsibilities? Have those rights and/or responsibilities been understood as individual, social, civic, and/or ecological matters?


Optional Website: Housing Opportunity Made Equal (HOME), Cincinnati’s fair housing agency: http://www.cincyfairhousing.com/

September 11 (folder 3): The Land of Opportunity, Yes, But What Kind of Opportunity? Have Americans always agreed on the meaning – and the extent – of opportunity? Or have there been important divisions among Americans and across time about opportunity?


Optional website: extraordinarily detailed 1796 map of Ohio River, showing early Cincinnati – zoom in and explore: http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~1276~100101::Composite-of-A-General-Map-Of-The

September 18 (folder 4): Virtue in a Commercial Republic: What is civic virtue, how did it shape early American politics, and what’s happened to it?
Optional Website: Cincinnati Panorama of 1848 (fascinating, detailed, and annotated set of daguerreotypes of the Queen City, well worth exploring): http://1848.cincinnatilibrary.org/

September 25 (folder 5): Class, Race, and Imagination in Civil War and Today: What role have class exploitation, racial discrimination, and imagination (or its absence) played in Cincinnati’s development?

Optional Website: National Underground Railroad Freedom Museum: http://freedomcenter.org/

Optional Video: I hesitate to suggest any videos of the riots, not least because of the ugly comments and commentary they occasion, but here’s two (one an award-winning story from the time and the other a retrospective) that I believe are pretty even-handed (and the second one, wisely, has comments disabled): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGxYOOG9AwU ; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVnkt72FQH8

October 2 (folder 6): Were the Political Boss and the Political Machine Public Enemies? What sort of crisis did Cincinnati face in the 1880s and what sort of resolution had been achieved by 1920? What role did Boss Cox and his political machine play in the resolution? Has that resolution left a legacy down to our own day?

Optional video: “Tricks of the Trade: Behind the Cincinnati Waterworks”
October 9 (folder 7): **Whose Reform and For What? The Charterites in Historical Context:** What goals, values, and interests shaped municipal reform in the early decades of the 20th century? Have there been any enduring consequences of municipal reform?


October 16 (folder 8): **A Suburbanized Metropolis in a Consumer Republic:** What are the key factors that explain the post-war decline of Cincinnati and the expansion of its suburban rim?


Optional Field Trip: Montgomery Avenue in Avondale, on either side of I-71, a neighborhood business district gutted by the interstate

Optional Website: [http://www.queencitydiscovery.blogspot.com/p/suburbia-lost.html](http://www.queencitydiscovery.blogspot.com/p/suburbia-lost.html) (odd little memoir, documentary on Cincinnati suburbs, worth a look)


PART TWO: INVITATION TO A CIVIC DEBATE: URBAN SPRAWL AND GREENING THE CITY

October 23 (folder 9): **Sprawl and Anti-Sprawl:** What is urban sprawl and what are the major arguments for and against it?


October 30 (folder 10): **What’s the City For?** What, if anything, are cities good for?


November 6: no class (day after Election Day)

November 13 (folder 11): **Theoretical/Environmental Perspectives on Sprawl/Greening the City:** What seems to have been happening to cities over the last forty years and what, if any, have been the environmental consequences? How might we respond?


November 20 (folder 12): **Urbanism in the Age of Sprawl:** What is urbanism and what has
happened to it in the age of sprawl?


November 27: no class, Thanksgiving Holiday

December 4: Presentations

December 11: Presentations