

Incorporation of Sustainability Concerns in GVPT 449 Seminar in Political Philosophy: Social Criticism, Spring 2015

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This seminar, which I have taught since my first semester on the faculty, focuses on social criticism as a unique, and understudied, form of political behavior. On the one hand, it is distinct from what the philosopher Michael Walzer calls political *complaint* – ordinary citizens’ garden-variety expressions of dissatisfaction with prevailing political arrangements. On the other hand, it is not what in the humanities is commonly called *critical theory*, a technical scholarly language employed by scholarly professionals in modern universities. Social criticism is more intellectually sophisticated than mere complaint; at the same time, it is something carried out in broader public settings, and in languages accessible to ordinary citizens.

The course traces pre-modern, modern, and contemporary traditions of social criticism. In past years, this survey has occasionally glanced at what might be called “environmental” concerns, but these have not been central to the course narrative. Following the 2014 Chesapeake workshop, I have revised the course to incorporate three key areas of thematic focus associated with the idea of environmental justice:

1. Interconnectedness: the complex patterns of effects, intended and unintended, good and bad, that arise from the interaction of natural and human systems;
2. Good governance: how central social practices and institutions can sustain common goods; and
3. Sustainability: the collection of commitments that enable these goods to be sustained in environmentally responsible ways over time.

To focus on social criticism that takes these ideas to heart, the course features four key readings representing 1/3 of the course calendar: Thoreau’s *Walden*; Jane Jacobs’ *The Life and Death of American Cities*, Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, and *An Act to Establish and Endow An Agricultural College in the State of Maryland*.

By exploring these readings in historical context, students will be able to develop a sense of how these three areas of thematic focus are integral to deep-rooted and long-established traditions of social criticism, rather than products of a relatively recent commitment to things “green.” Thoreau, Jacobs and Berry will provide students with an occasion to think through different ways in which environmental justice is bound up with issues in political economy, urban planning, agricultural policy, and ethics. This emphasis gathers momentum toward the end of the course, which culminates in the study of the University’s founding legislation and Berry’s history of the land-grant colleges; this will enable students to reflect on environmental justice in the immediate context of their own institution. Students’ growing familiarity with these ideas will be assessed through oral presentations, short writing assignments, and substantial research papers.