Contemporary Political Theory: The Politics of Monstrosity

(*draft syllabus – subject to change*)

From global warming to the threat of financial crises, from Islamic terrorism to the potential spread of deadly viruses, the world is beset by problems so large and intractable that only a language of excess seems able to describe it. The popular imagination, meanwhile, is once again filled with vampires, zombies and other ghouls – some of whom were last seen in the West in the mid-19th century, yet bear an uncanny resemblance to the various financial institutions, diseases and illegal immigrants that are said to threaten life as we know it. Our social world is on the brink of crisis, in other words, and there are frightening things are at our doorstep.

* During the first week, my office hours will be from 12-2pm.
What is the role of the monstrous in political life? What are we to make of these peculiar figures and their apparent proliferation? When the CDC (jokingly?) warns of a possible zombie apocalypse, does it focus our attention or is it a distraction? To the extent that it focuses our attention, what does it focus it on? More generally speaking, what kind of politics does the language of monstrosity make possible, and what does it preclude?

This course – while not strictly speaking a course about monsters – proceeds from the assumption that monsters (and what is considered monstrous) form a starting point from which to ask questions of political and theoretical significance. In particular, we shall raise questions concerning the social construction of race, gender and identity, and the nature of social norms more generally. To that end, we will draw on the work of various authors, many of whom are associated with an intellectual movement broadly known as post-structuralism. Although this movement has over the years aroused the suspicions of many (both inside and outside of academia), it has also done much to draw our attention to seemingly marginal formations (including those that we deem monstrous) and their importance in the making of a social and political relations. More than a course about monsters, then, this is an introduction to contemporary political theory, but we shall allow monsters to be our guide.

1. **Reading/Viewing Assignments**

The readings for this course are not exceedingly long. Some of them are, however, quite difficult. Be sure to give yourself enough time to read these texts carefully (and to read them again, if needed). I won’t expect you to have understood everything in these texts, but I will expect you to have tried. So read with a pen in hand, take notes, ask questions. The readings do form the backbone of this class, so please come prepared to discuss them – for your sake and for that of your colleagues.

Throughout the term, we will also be watching and discussing a number of films (so far, the list includes such titles as *The Dark Knight; The Mummy*). These are not difficult films, but analyzing them well does require a particular kind of effort. The readings should be of help in interpreting the films, and it is my hope that the films will help us understand the readings in turn.

To the extent possible, I will make the readings available on-line or in hard copy, or indicate where you might procure them. As for the movies, they are available on different websites (e.g. on amazon.com); we will not be watching them in class (with the occasional exception, perhaps), and will save class time for discussion.

2. **Weekly on-line responses.**

Every week, you will be expected to contribute to the on-line discussion on the D2L website.

**Specifically, I am asking 3 sets of things. By Wednesday night,**

1. **Identify (and quote) a passage** from the reading that you found *particularly insightful* (or, on the contrary, problematic). **Paraphrase** the passage, in your own terms. **Explain** why you thought this passage was persuasive (or not).
2. **Identify (and quote) a passage** which you found *particularly difficult*. Again, **try to paraphrase** the passage in your own terms, and **explain** the nature of your confusion.

3. **Read** the passages/descriptions of your colleagues, and **respond** where you can, as helpfully as possible. If you think you can help clear up a colleague's confusion, please do so. If you share in the confusion, please say as much – if anything, it will make us feel less alone.

3. **Written Assignments**

   There are four written assignments during the course of the semester – roughly one per month. The topics for these assignments will be handed out at least a week in advance. This will give you enough time to carry them out, but only if you have kept up with the readings. The schedule of assignments is as follows.

   Assignment 1. Tuesday, Sept. 18 (to be turned in at the start of class, and via D2L)
   Assignment 2. Thursday, Oct. 11 (to be turned in at the start of class, and via D2L)
   Assignment 3. Saturday, November 10 (via D2L)
   Assignment 4. Sunday, December 2 (via D2L)

   (The due dates – and, though this is unlikely, the number of assignments – may be subject to change.)

4. **Take-home final.**

   The final for this class is a take-home. We will discuss the format in due time. The due date (tentative) is December 17, 2012.

**Grade breakdown**

- Assignment 1: 10%
- Assignments 2, 3, 4: 20% each
- Take home: 15%
- Participation (in class and on-line): 15%

**Time commitment**

This course should require a total time commitment of approximately ten hours per week. Of this, students will spent two hours and forty minutes in class; they will spend the remaining time engaged in reading, study, and preparation.

**UWM Policies and Procedures**

In this course, we will abide by the UWM policies and procedures as described in the following document.

http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf

**Students with disabilities**

Students with disabilities should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document.
Religious observances
Students who plan to observe religious holidays should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document.
http://www4.uwm.edu/secu/docs/other/S1.5.htm

Students called to active military duty
Students who are called to active military duty should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document.
Students: http://www4.uwm.edu/current_students/military_call_up.cfm

Schedule of Readings & Assignments

1. September 4-6. The Monster Mash
   J. Cohen, “Monster Theory: Seven Theses”

   Mary Shelley, Frankenstein
   J. Cohen, “Monster Theory: Seven Theses”

3. September 18-20. Making Strange (2)
   Mary Shelley, Frankenstein
   Franco Moretti, “Dialectic of Fear”

4. September 25-27. Introducing Deconstruction
   Collins, Introducing Derrida (selections)
   S. Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (pp. 15-43)

5. October 2-4. Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice
   J. Derrida, “Force Of Law,” 11 Cardozo Law Review (pp. 935-973)

6. October 9-11. The Joker: Justice Deconstructed?
   J. Derrida, “Force Of Law,” 11 Cardozo Law Review (pp. 935-973)
   C. Nolan, The Dark Knight (2008)

   S. Hall, “Race: A Floating Signifier”
   S. Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (selections)

9. October 30-November 1. Orientalism Then and Now
   E. Said, Orientalism, pp. xv-xxx; 1-110.

10. November 6-8. Why They Hate Us
    The Mummy (1999)

    Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

12. November 20. 'Why did you make me like this?'
    Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Mask
    Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

    J. Butler, Gender Trouble, pp. i-xxxii; 3-41; 181-190.

14. December 4-6. The Zombie Apocalypse
    Readings to be determined
    Max Brooks, World War Z.
    Center for Disease Control, Zombie Apocalypse

15. December 11. Where is the Politics?
    Readings to be determined. Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid.