POSC 258/357: POLITICS AND AMBITION

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Winter 2019
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I. Purpose and Scope

... That our government should have been maintained in its original form from its establishment until now, is not much to be wondered at. It had many props to support it through that period, which now are decayed, and crumbled away. Through that period, it was felt by all, to be an undecided experiment; now, it is understood to be a successful one. Then, all that sought celebrity and fame, and distinction, expected to find them in the success of that experiment. Their all was staked upon it;-- their destiny was inseparably linked with it. Their ambition aspired to display before an admiring world, a practical demonstration of the truth of a proposition, which had hitherto been considered, at best no better, than problematical; namely, the capability of a people to govern themselves. If they succeeded, they were to be immortalized; their names were to be transferred to counties and cities, and rivers and mountains; and to be revered and sung, and toasted through all time. If they failed, they were to be called knaves and fools, and fanatics for a fleeting hour; then to sink and be forgotten. They succeeded. The experiment is successful; and thousands have won their deathless names in making it so. But the game is caught; and I believe it is true, that with the catching, end the pleasures of the chase. This field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated. But new reapers will arise, and they, too, will seek a field. It is to deny, what the history of the world tells us is true, to suppose that men of ambition and talents will not continue to spring up amongst us. And, when they do, they will as naturally seek the gratification of their ruling passion, as others have so done before them. The question then, is, can that gratification be found in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others? Most certainly it cannot. Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would aspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle. What! Think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.

“Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us? And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent to successfully frustrate his designs.

“Distinction will be his paramount object; and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.”

-- Abraham Lincoln, 1838

Lincoln’s life demonstrates the power of political ambition to achieve good in the world. But his words remind us that political ambition is a deeply ambiguous thing. It can produce great good, but it can just as easily, perhaps even more easily, produce enormous harm. If ambition’s
ambiguity makes it a topic of intense interest, its inevitable impact on society and history make ambition a topic of great and permanent importance. And if these aren’t already reasons enough to study the phenomenon, here’s another reason: Studying ambition itself—not its effects but the thing itself—is a marvelous window into the human soul; not only insight into politics and history, but an important step toward our own self-knowledge. Our task in this course will be to consider the problem of ambition from several angles: we will inquire into ambition’s relation to politics in general and its relation to democracy in particular. And we will consider the ambition and at three levels. First, what are the potential effects of personal ambition, both for good and for ill? Second, how should statesmen and societies deal with political ambition—especially great ambition, the sort discussed by Lincoln (above). Can ambition be directed away from tyrannical impulses and toward beneficent ones? If so, how? Some thinkers have emphasized the need for a certain kind of education. Others, skeptical that education is reliable, seek to check and/or to channel political ambition by means of institutions. Still others seek to lure ambition away from politics and into realms of endeavor where its effects will be much more moderate. And some seek to radically dissipate or diminish ambition. As you might have noticed, with this question we have moved into the realm of statecraft as soulcraft. Third and finally, what are the inner nature and sources of political ambition? What do ambitious people really want: what are they seeking through their efforts? Do they want what they think they want, so that the achievement of their ambitions would bring fulfillment and happiness? Or do they seek through politics a degree of transcendence that can’t be delivered because, at bottom, what they seek is either deeper than or higher than or simply other than political?

II. Course Requirements

The most important course requirement is that you read all assigned texts closely and before class. The readings will be of varying length and difficulty, but they will always demand careful attention and review. You should come to class prepared to discuss what you’ve understood and prepared to ask about what you haven’t understood. Course grades will be determined by papers (90% total) and class participation (10%). As part of your class participation you may be required to make an oral presentation and lead discussion in one class session. You are also expected to contribute regularly to class discussion throughout the term.

Writing requirements depend on whether you’re enrolled in POSC 357 or POSC 258.

Requirements for students enrolled in POSC 357:

1. A five to seven page interpretive paper on a selected portion of the text chosen in coordination with the instructor. This paper, which will count for 30% of your grade, will serve as the basis for some part of the day’s discussion. Please send me an email listing, in order, your top three preferences for the reading on which you’d like to write.
2. A twenty-page seminar paper will count for 60% of your grade. The seminar paper will be due on Monday, March 18. Seminar paper topics must be approved by me by Monday, March 4 (preferably earlier).
3. The remaining 10% of your grade will be based on class participation, including your class presentation: since this is a seminar, your active and sustained participation is expected.
Students enrolled in POSC 258:

Choose one of the following options.

- **Option 1**: A twenty page seminar paper (90% of your course grade) due on Monday, March 18.

- **Option 2**: A five to seven page interpretive paper (30%) to be presented in class and a fifteen page seminar paper (60%) due on Monday, March 18. The shorter paper would serve as the basis for some part of the day’s discussion.

- **Option 3**: Two ten page papers (45% each), the first due on Monday, February 8, the second on Monday, March 18.

- **Option 4**: Three six to eight page papers (30% each). The first paper must be submitted by Friday, February 1; the second, by Friday, March 1; the third, by Monday, March 18.

Let me know your preferred option by Monday, January 14.

All papers should be submitted electronically <lcooper@carleton.edu> as Word documents with normal margins and eleven- or twelve-point type.

*Late papers will be penalized three points per day.* Extensions will be granted for good cause, but except in case of unforeseen emergency, extensions must be requested at least three days prior to the due date.

### III. Academic Honesty

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. When you submit an assignment for a grade you will be understood to have done all the work yourself, having received no unauthorized aid. Students who are found to have violated this standard can expect severe sanctions.

### IV. Assigned Texts

The following books are available for purchase at the bookstore:

- Plutarch, *Greek Lives*
- Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*
- Shakespeare, *Macbeth*
- Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*
- Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*
- Plato, *Symposium* (translated by Seth Benardete)

Other required readings will be available on Moodle.
V. Class Schedule

Note that this is an approximate schedule. It is likely that we will make adjustments as the term proceeds.

A. Introduction

January 8: Plutarch, “Alexander” (in Greek Lives)

B. The Problem of Ambition: A Philosophic Survey

January 10: Fukuyama, “By Way of an Introduction” and chapters 13-15; and Kojève, “In Place of an Introduction” (Moodle)

January 15: Fukuyama, chapters 16-19

January 17: Fukuyama, chapters 23-26

January 22: Fukuyama, chapters 27-31 and “Selection from Nietzsche” (Moodle)

C. Ambition and Democracy

January 24: Foundations—read “Selections from the American Founders” (Moodle)

January 29: The Domestication of Ambition—read “Franklin” and “Selections from Tocqueville” (both on Moodle)

January 31: Aspiring to Equality—read “Douglass” and “Stanton” (both on Moodle)

February 5: Democratic Statesmanship, Ancient and Modern—read “Roosevelt” and “Pericles’ Funeral Oration” (both on Moodle).

**Recommended: Plutarch, “Pericles” (Greek Lives, pp. 144-79)**

February 7: Democracy and Great Ambition—read Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” (aka “Lyceum Address”) and “Rousseau on the Legislator” (both on Moodle; Lincoln’s speech is also readily available online)

D. The Problem of Great Ambition

February 12: Shakespeare, Coriolanus—read the entire play for this class

February 14: No class. We will hold a make-up session on Sunday, February 24—see below

February 19: Shakespeare, Coriolanus

February 21: Shakespeare, Macbeth—read the entire play for this class
February 24: Sunday make-up session, begins at 5 PM: Macbeth

February 26: Shakespeare, Julius Caesar—read the entire play for this class

February 28: Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

E. The Soul of Ambition

February 24: Plutarch, “Alcibiades” (in Greek Lives) and Plato, Alcibiades I (Moodle)

March 5: Reread Plato, Alcibiades I

March 7: Plato, Symposium, 172a-178a and 198a-212c

March 12: Plato, Symposium, 212c-223d