Great Trials in American Political History

What is it about a white bronco speeding down the California highway that captures the attention of the nation? Why do American school children still learn about the Salem witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century or the Scopes ‘monkey’ trial of the 1920s? These trials are sensational events, fascinating to us for the element of human drama involved. But they also reflect deeper concerns and themes present in American politics and culture at the time of the trial. The thesis on which this class is based is that trials which capture the public imagination reveal a great deal about the occupying themes of an age, whether it be concerns with slavery and segregation; the role of religion in public life; the integrity of the government; or shifting gender expectations. In this course we will consider some of the great public trials of American history and what they may tell us about sifting public understandings of justice.

Course Expectations and Grading:

This will be a discussion and readings based course, in which the students will write several short papers and one longer paper for which they will write a précis a couple of weeks before the paper is due. Students will also be expected to make a presentation based upon the précis of one of their fellow students. We may have a couple of guest lecturers to discuss particular trials over the course of the semester. I also plan to use one or two video documentaries on these trials. The main point of the course will be to use these trials as a way of analyzing American popular and political culture, including shared (or competing) understandings of justice, so I will provide the students with background on American political history and philosophy as well as instruction in textual interpretation.

Regular attendance & participation are required. You should always come to class prepared to discuss the assigned reading. I will take attendance at each class (you will not be counted as present if you arrive more than 10 minutes late or leave more than 10 minutes early), and make notes about students with regard to their level of preparation and participation. Please come to class each time with one or two questions about the reading to help guide discussion. (I may also send you some questions or advance commentary on the readings from time to time.)

The short papers will be 1-2 pages in length. There will be three papers, due January 29, February 26, and March 26. For these you are expected to either summarize and critique the argument of a text, or complete an exercise. More detailed instructions will be given in class.

For the longer paper, students are asked to select a sensational, public trial from the last five years to analyze and place in a larger political and cultural framework. The trial you select must be approved by the professor. This paper is expected to be 18-25 pages in length and is due on Thursday, May 8, by 4 pm in Burdine 536.

Finally, at the end of the semester, students will present a summary and commentary on each others’ final papers. For the presentations, students will be organized in groups of two. The members of each group will exchange their précis (a précis is a short summary or abstract of your paper project), and they will present each others’ précis to the entire class. In addition, authors will provide the class with a 2-4 page précis of their paper for discussion (this is due one week before the scheduled presentations). After the author’s group partner presents their paper to
the class, the rest of the class will add any questions or comments they have on the basis of the presentation and the précis, and then the author will have a chance to respond.

I will be using Blackboard during the course of the semester, to send messages, post documents, make announcements, and so forth. So be sure to regularly check the course website.

The grade for the course will be determined as follows: short papers, 15% each; attendance and participation 15%; précis and presentation, 10%; and final paper, 30%.

Books: (available for purchase at the Co-op)

Barbara Goldsmith, Other Powers
Edward Larson, Summer for the Gods
Ronald Radish and Joyce Milton, The Rosenberg File
Paul Boyer, Salem Possessed

In addition there will be a small reading packet available for purchase at Paradigm (on 24th Street near Guadalupe, behind the Gap). I also recommend that students make use of a style book to assist them with their writing assignments. Both the Co-op and other bookstores, such as Barnes & Nobles, have such books available for purchase.

Schedule of Topics and Assignments:

1. Trials and Democracy (Jan 13 – 22)

The Federalist Papers, #65, 81 & 83

The Bill of Rights (the first ten amendments to the US Constitution)

Gretchen Ritter, “Jury Service and Women’s Citizenship before and after the Nineteenth Amendment” Law and History Review

Recommended: “Twelve Angry Men” (film)

January 20 – Martin Luther King Day – no class

2. Public Spectacles (Jan. 27 & 29)

Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Can you be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” in The Black Public Sphere


January 29 – First paper due

3. The Salem Witch Trials (Feb. 3 – 12)
Paul Boyer, *Salem Possessed*

4. The Beecher-Tilton Affair (Feb. 17 – 26)
Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers*

**February 26 – Second paper due**

5. The Scottsboro Boys (Mar. 3 & 5)
“Scottsboro: An American Tragedy” PBS Video
Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, chapter four.

**March 10-14, Springbreak**

6. The Scopes Trial (Mar. 17-26)
Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods*

**March 26 – Third paper due**

7. The Rosenberg Trial (Mar 31 – Apr. 9)
Ronald Radish and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File*

**April 9 – Precises due**

8. Reflections on O.J (April 14-16)
Toni Morrison, “The Official Story: Dead Man Golfing,” in Morrison, ed., *Birth of Nation ‘hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the OJ Simpson Case*


Apr. 21 & 23 – in class presentations
Apr. 28 & 30 – in class presentations

**May 8, 4 pm, final papers due**