FYSEM-UA 205.
UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM

Instructor: Tom Gerety

Wednesday, 11:00–1:30 p.m.
Office hours: Tuesdays, 2-4 p.m. (office to be assigned).

This seminar examines terrorist attacks and movements from an interdisciplinary perspective, seeking to reach a better understanding of the disputed concepts of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’. We will examine the motivations and backgrounds, the plots and ideologies--whether secular or religious--of those who consider themselves justified in deliberately killing non-combatants in furtherance of their goals. We will also examine the challenges of countering terrorism in societies with many ‘soft’ targets and extensive global conflicts and entanglements.

Terrorism itself is what philosophers call ‘an essentially contested concept’, one that is often used for rhetorical or political effect. We will begin with an examination of the various contested definitions of the term, seeking to understand how it is used in law, in moral argument and of course in political disputes. We will read case studies of terrorism and counter-terrorism, including moral and legal arguments about torture, prolonged detention and targeted killings. We will also try to understand how and why young men and women can be so powerfully drawn to violence, particularly violence against defenseless (and often randomly targeted) civilians.

We will visit various sites in New York City and meet with people with direct experience of terrorism and radicalization, including representatives of both the police and the immigrant communities who have suffered profiling, prejudice and mistrust. Looking towards the future, we will examine local, national and international strategies to prevent such attacks.
and to halt the radicalization that brings fresh recruits to terrorist movements.

This seminar will require several kinds of work from each student:

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Seminars work best when all come to class well prepared and ready to discuss and debate. Attendance is essential. You may miss class for truly urgent reasons such as illness, family emergencies or religious observance, but you should always email me with an explanation as soon as you know you will miss a session.

Two of you each week will be asked to lead discussion, aided by your reaction papers, described below, through most of the semester. Such ‘leads’ will take up perhaps fifteen minutes of discussion most weeks and should give each of you a chance to hone your skill in public speaking, including answering the questions posed by me and your classmates.

From time to time, I will begin a seminar meeting with a question that I will ask you to answer in writing. These will test your preparation and your impromptu writing.

Attendance and participation, including oral presentations and in-class writing, will count for 20% of your grade.

WRITING AND EDITING

Clear, cogent, well edited writing is the most important skill we will work on in the seminar. Writing assignments for the class will be as follows:
-After the first week, I will ask you to submit one page ‘reactions’ or responses to the readings on alternate weeks. These should identify and analyze what you take to be the most important theme or concept in the week’s assignment, noting your own agreement or disagreement with the author or authors. These should be submitted the night before the class, by 10 pm at the latest. One will be due the first week and then one every two weeks thereafter. These seven pages will count for 20% of your grade.

-Roughly two weeks before the spring break, I will ask you to reflect in depth on a question I will pose for you ten days in advance. This essay should be five or six pages in length, due immediately before the break. It will count for 20% of your grade.

-During the semester I will press each of you to identify one issue that you would like to make the subject of a final paper. At the end of the tenth week, I will ask you to submit a two page outline of this final paper project. The outline should state the question you intend to answer and should identify, tentatively, the readings and research you intend to do to reach your conclusion. It should also include at least one page of argument. This outline will count for 10% of your grade.

-Before the last class meeting, you should submit a partial draft of your final paper. The paper in its final form will be eight to ten pages in length and the draft should be at least two thirds of that length. The timely submission of the rough draft will count for another 10% of your grade.

-Before the end of the exam period you should submit your final essay. It should take into account my written review of your rough draft and any suggestions we agree on in one-on-one meetings on your outline and your rough draft. The final paper will count for the remaining 20% of your overall grade in the seminar.
SYLLABUS OF READINGS BY WEEK:

(In this field, developments can be shockingly rapid. The syllabus below is tentative and subject to changes, even during the semester of the seminar.)

Books to be purchased or borrowed: Louise Richardson, What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat (Random House Paper, 2007) and Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 (Vintage Paper, 2007). Other readings will be sent to you by postings through the NYU website for our class.

1. Louise Richardson's What Terrorists Want (239 pages to be completed over the winter break in preparation for our first meeting).

2. The Breivik Case, Seierstad excerpts (20 pages); Knausgard, “The Inexplicable,” New Yorker Magazine online, (22 pages),
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/25/the-inexplicable; and Flynn, GQ online (12 pages),

3. Breivik and Norway, Capture and Punishment, Seierstad excerpts (25 pages); Fisher, The Atlantic online (5 pages),
https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/08/a-different-justice-why-anders-breivik-only-got-21-years-for-killing-77-people/261532/;
4. The Boston Marathon Attack, Immigration and Alienation: NYT, Boston Globe, Rolling Stone, etc. (Offprints, 70 pages)


7. Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower, Part II (chh. 7-14, 100 pages).


10. Part II: Hiroshima and other extreme cases, Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, (Offprint of excerpts, 60 pages).


Merari, “Terrorism as a Strategy,”

13. ISIS's Ideas--and Appeal: Articles, Video and Essays,
Graeme Wood, The Atlantic,
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/ (49 pages)
Simon Cottee, The Atlantic,
https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/07/religion-isis-orlando/490958/ (13 pages)

Harvard Law School Video Symposium,
https://today.law.harvard.edu/islamic-state-play/ (90 minutes)

https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2009-12-21/mind-over-martyr

TOM GERETY, Collegiate Professor, joined the NYU faculty in 2005 to teach courses in law and the humanities. He first came to NYU to head up the Brennan Center for Justice at the Law School. He served as President of Amherst College from 1994 to 2003 and of Trinity College from 1989 to 1994. From 1986 to 1989 he was Dean and Nippert Professor at the College of Law of the University of Cincinnati. As a law professor he taught and wrote on constitutional law and political philosophy, with a special emphasis on First Amendment freedoms, including speech, privacy, and religious freedom. He wrote and narrated a PBS series, Visions of the Constitution, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is