Introduction.

Anytime you take a dead author or artist seriously (even if he or she makes you laugh), you could say that he or she has been “reborn”—has had some kind of “renaissance.” OK, so far so good. Now, imagine that so many of your contemporaries have taken so many of that dead author’s or artist’s contemporaries seriously that an entire culture has in effect been reborn in the shape of another. What if, on top of this rebirth, the effect of the new serious interest is such that you and your peers feel reborn—as though, before this experience, you had not been quite alive? If you have followed so far, then you have an idea of what the myth of The Renaissance is all about.

Now, it would certainly be a nice thing to understand this feeling that people may have had half a millennium ago. But to truly do so, would you not need to start by reconstructing the myth of the dark ages? Would you not need to do a credible job of investigating the ways in which people felt more or less dead before the Renaissance (whether it began in the 12th, 13th, 14th, or even 15th century, as various people have argued)? Perhaps, for instance, they didn’t appreciate beauty? But surely time and reality will intervene! I’m afraid they will indeed constrain you in this course to treat the Middle Ages as a mysterious black hole from which no meaningful light will escape. What then? It seems to me that you are left with one option: to see for yourself if the ideas and writings of the ancients seem worth taking seriously, and to see for yourself if the ideas and writings of the Renaissance seem alive—without asking whether or not the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas were by comparison dead (if you start the Renaissance after him, say in the 14th century).

In order to limit the field of our inquiry in these matters, in a way that more or less matches my capacities, I have focused on texts that could be said to concern themselves with political consciousness, and I will ask you to consider the following types of question:

1. In what sort of socio-political organization did the writer live? Was it in transition from one form to another? Did the writer express a critical awareness of the structure? Can we sense that there was something about that structure that gave vitality to his work?

Some rough forms that we will encounter are:

a) The city-state (polis) in league relationships with other city-states,
b) Large territorial empires,
c) The medieval city-state surrounded by large territorial states,
d) Absolute monarchies,
e) Papal states,
f) Abstract, impersonal territorial states. We will not encounter bicameral representative democracies with checks and balances such as the American state. However, we should not assume that since we live in such a state, older types of organizations and the baggage they carried are not still in evidence—which is why some of these older authors are not as irrelevant as they might as first glance appear.

2. What was the role of the writer vis-à-vis the power structure? Was he an apologist, a critic, a closet doubter, an artistic observer of complexity?

3. Does the writer believe political life necessarily involves telling lies? And does that include the author’s own work?

Then there are the types of question we might ask not just about the authors but about political life itself, using the texts (if they are serious and alive) to further our own formulations:

1. Why do we submit to—or rebel against—authority?
2. Is politics a corrupt sport for parasitical lawyers and agents of multinational corporations, or a defining element of the western self?
3. Are emotions like fear and guilt at the heart of our political life? Or does politics depend on the restraint of emotion? Does the reason of statesmen and founding “fathers” or perhaps the logic of various impersonal processes keep us from the violence of unrestrained emotions?

In the lectures, I will attempt to organize these questions under three categories: power (as in that which enables me to do something), communication (as in what you or I say I am doing) and reason (as in what you or I think I am or should be doing). Though admittedly awkward and abstract-sounding, this structure should collect questions that arise naturally from close readings of the texts. But since we will be dealing not only with texts but with historic periods and their connections and discontinuities, we will also need to see in what ways our questions are historical questions. You can see the rough way in which I have historicized “the grid” in the lecture schedule below: we move from thinking about princes and subjects to citizens to the abstract state in a fashion that could be described as more circular than linear.

The papers and exams will in turn be your attempt to connect the structure of questions (call it “the grid”) to the texts in various ways—puzzles I hope you will enjoy working on!

Requirements:
1. Attendance at lectures.
2. Attendance at weekly recitations.
3. Once a week turn in a 1-2 page response paper at either the Monday or Wednesday lecture. This will not be graded separately from class participation, but it will be a necessary part of class participation. Use the opportunity to connect the text being discussed that week to some aspect of “the grid,” and then bring your ideas to the discussion section at the end of the week. Of course, this must be original work and make specific reference to the assigned text (with page numbers).
4. Two 6-8 page papers. Topics to be announced.
5. A midterm exam.
6. A Final Exam.

Grades: The two papers, the exams and class participation are all given equal weight (1/5).

Books to Buy at NYU Bookstore:

Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Penguin.
King James Version of Bible
Virgil, Aeneid, Allen Mandelbaum translation, Bantam.
Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, Penguin.
Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. JCA Gaskin, Oxford University Press.

Other texts are in digital format and can be found for free on the Blackboard site for this course, under “Course Documents”.

Lecture and Reading Schedule.

A. Heroic and Holy Rule: The Virtues, Callings and Challenges of Princes, and the Experience of Subjection.


Jan. 24 Shakespeare, Julius Caesar.

Jan. 31 King James Bible: “Job”.
Feb. 2 Bible: 1 Samuel 8, 2 Samuel 22; Hobbes, Leviathan, chapter 35.

Feb. 7 Virgil, Aeneid, Books I, IV.
Feb. 9 Virgil, Book VI.

Feb. 16. The Prince continued.

Feb. 21  Presidents’ Day.  No class.
Feb. 23  Moses Finley, “Authority and Legitimacy in the Classical City-State,” (Blackboard).
March 2  Plutarch, “Lycurgas” (Blackboard)
March 7  More, Utopia, Book I.
March 9  Utopia, Book II.

Spring Break, March 14-20.
March 21  **Midterm Exam**
March 23  Plato, Republic. Books 1, 2, 9.
Schlegel, “The Ironic Consciousness” (Blackboard).
March 28  Plato, Republic, pp. 91-200 (412b-521c)
March 30  Plato continued.
April 4  Machiavelli, Discourses, Book I: 1-4, 9-10, 12.
April 6  Machiavelli, Discourses, Book II, 2, Book III, 1, 6.
April 11  John Freccero, “Medussa and the Madonna of Forli” (Blackboard)
April 13  Quentin Skinner, “The Italian City Republics” (Blackboard)

C. Private Pursuits, Public Safety and the State.
April 18  Epicurus, The Essential Epicurus, pp. 19-42, 61-85.  **Paper II Due**
Paul Kristeller: “Epicurus” (Blackboard)
April 20  Hobbes, Leviathan, chapters 1, 6, 10, 12-17.
April 25  Hobbes, chapters 18, 21, 38.
April 27  “On Restraining Your Will” (Blackboard)

May 2  Conclusion
May 4  12:00-1:50  **Final Exam**