

Problems in Political Theory

The Politics of Sensation

Political Science 815
Tuesdays, 7:15 PM-9:55 PM
BOL B68
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Spring 2011

Professor: Kennan Ferguson
Office: Bolton Hall 620

E-mail: kennan@uwm.edu:
Office Hours Tues 3:30-4:30
and by apt.

The sensations of our bodies are generally thought to transcend the political world, existing instead in a prepolitical, individuated, non-social space. Even those theoretical traditions which emphasize the material and corporeal (e.g., Marxism) tend to elide the ways in which the bodies of political subjects interact with their physical environs, preferring instead to focus on the ideological or economic forces which determine what is thought or valued.

Some have argued that it is precisely the senses which enable an escape from political boundaries. Even if language and thought can be controlled (they have their own rules, their own grammars, their own concepts) perhaps the senses cannot. Judgments of beauty, tastes of deliciousness, sensations on the skin – these have long been thought to resist the control of totalitarian states and bring people back to their inner freedoms.

But what if political environments *make us feel*? (Not emotionally, which they obviously do, but literally?) What if what we sense has a political component? What make us feel, see, touch, taste, and smell in certain ways? What as a consequence becomes unfeeling, unseeable, untouchable, untasteable, unsmellable, and thus unthinkable? One author we will read, Jacques Rancière, argues that humans are connected through “a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together.” (*The Emancipated Spectator*, 56) If this is so, then the networks of sensation normally seen as natural and uncontaminated by the political are more properly conceptualized as part of the overall polity.

This class investigates this nexus of body, sense, and power. We will ask about the developments and contents 1) of common sense, 2) of logics of sensory dispositions, and 3) of distributions of sensibility. Focusing on particular sensory perceptions, as well as the human sensorium as a whole, will highlight the interconnections between the senses and the realms of power and politics.

Paper

Alongside the below readings, you will also be responsible for developing a research paper (at an approximate length of 20 pages) that concerns the politics of sensation as it applies to a topic of interest to you. This paper can be analytical or normative in nature, addressing both the variety of issues brought up in class and the variety of issues the topic itself raises.

A rough deadline to keep in mind follows:

Decide on topic: End of February
Outline subjects and issues: Mid-March
Create overall research project: End of Spring Break
Discuss with professor: April 5
Start writing: Mid - April
Present ideas to class: May 3 or 10
Turn in final paper: May 16

The following books can be purchased at PEOPLE'S BOOKS, two blocks south of campus at 2122 E Locust St, (414) 962-0575. All other readings will be available online. If you order your own copies, please use the same ISBN number so you get the same translation and pagination.

Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Columbia University Press, ISBN-10: 0231059833
David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hackett, ISBN-10: 0915145456
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Hackett, ISBN-10: 0872200256
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, Routledge: ISBN-10: 0415773814
Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation*, Duke University Press, ISBN-10: 0822344793
Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, ISBN-10: 0826489540
José Saramago, *Blindness*, Harvest, ISBN-10: 0156007754
Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, Oxford University Press, ISBN-10: 0195049969

Course Schedule

Many of the readings are available on D2L: those readings are marked with an asterisk (*), below. Please print these out and bring them to class for the discussion.

February 1: Introduction

Part I: Pain and Politics

February 8: Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 3-180.

Part II: Judging Sense

February 15: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*
David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste"*

March 1: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 3-90, 103-117, 141-162, 220-232, 312-323

March 8: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*
Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, "The Theory of Prehensions," 217-280*

Part III: Tractatus Logico-Sēnsus

March 15: Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Series 1-5, 10-14, 20-22, 25-34
Recommended: Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

March 29: José Saramago, *Blindness*

April 5: Elizabeth Grosz, "Sensation. The Earth, A People, Art."*
Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," "Chaos in the Total Field of Vision"*
Kam Shapiro, "Critical Feelings and Pleasurable Associations"*

Part IV: Aestheticized Politics

April 12: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"*

April 19: Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation*

April 26: Veit Erlmann *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality*, 9-68,185-270,
307-342*

Dean Mathiowetz, "Feeling Luxury: Invidious Political Pleasures and the Sense of
Touch"*

Christina Tarnopolsky, "Plato's Politics of Distributing and Disrupting the Sensible"*

Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz, "Regionalism and the Institution of the Yucatecan Gastronomic
Field"*

May 3: Research Presentations, Set 1

May 10: Research Presentations, Set 2

May 16: 5:00 p.m. RESEARCH PAPER DUE