Please note that this syllabus should be regarded as only a general guide to the course. The instructor may have changed specific course content and requirements subsequent to posting this syllabus. Last Modified: 10:44:52 06/04/2010

SC335
Theorizing Torture
Fall 2010
Monday 9:00-11:20 a.m.
Room #
Instructor Jared Del Rosso
Office McGuinn 410C
Email delrosso@bc.edu
Mailbox McGuinn 410, MB#15
Office Hours Monday 11:30–1:30

- Course Descriptions –

This course examines the historical uses of torture in order to address its contemporary relevance, as well as the practice of it in democratic societies. In doing so, we will consider important ethical, social psychological, and sociological explanations of torture. We will then evaluate these explanations through close studies of films, documentaries, memoirs, and investigations of historical cases of torture - such as during The Algerian War and at Abu Ghraib.

- Course Requirements -

(1) Preparation, attendance, and participation - 25% of your final grade.
(2) Homework - 25% of your final grade.
(3) Final Project - 50% of your final grade.

(1) Preparation, attendance and participation (25% of your final grade)

Assignment Overview: All students are expected to attend class and participate in class discussions. While I will not regularly take attendance, I will note frequent absences and this will affect your participation grade. Finally, I expect all students to contribute to class discussions. Since there are approximately twenty students in our class, I do not expect all students to participate in all classes; however, I do expect consistent contributions from all students. Keep in mind that adequate participation in class depends on adequate preparation for class and your participation grade will be based on the relevance of your participation to course readings and lectures.

I am aware that class participation can be quite stressful for some students. If you find yourself reluctant to speak in class, please contact me as soon as possible, as I am quite sympathetic to this concern and am happy to offer advice on participating and strategize ways of incorporating you into class discussions.

Purpose: The purposes of the "preparation, attendance, and participation" are several. I find that course lectures are more interesting and useful to students who have thoroughly prepared for class. Additionally, preparing for each class will provide you with the overall background in the study of torture necessary to successfully complete your final project. By asking you to rigorously prepare for class and actively participate in class discussions, I hope to get a sense of our collective concerns about torture, so that I can adequately address them in future class periods.
Grading: A participation grade may often seem quite “subjective,” since they are few firm criteria on which instructors appear to be evaluating students; however, I have found that students who do the following typically earn high attendance, preparation, and participation grades: Regularly arrive on time for class and rarely leave early; inform me of planned absences, late arrivals, or early departures; share their thoughts (through email or in person) on readings and topics that they missed when absent from class; speak with a relevant dean if a personal or familial emergency prevents them from missing substantial class time or delays their completion of assignments; come to class prepared with discussion points, whether in the form of notes or marked passages in assigned readings; come to class prepared to discuss class assignments on the days that they are due; regularly participate in class; and meet with me once or twice during the semester to discuss their progress in and thoughts on the course.

(2) Homework (25% of your final grade)

Assignment Overview: During classes 1–10 I will hand out homework assignments. Students are responsible for completing two assignments during the semester. Assignments, which should be about 500 words (2 double-spaced pages, font size 12, 1 inch margins), are due at the start of the next class. For students to earn credit for an assignment, students must be in attendance on the day that the assignment is due, bring the assignment to class, volunteer to participate during discussion of homework, and must turn the assignment in at the end of class. Students may complete a third homework assignment for extra credit.

Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to facilitate class discussion by having a few students prepared to "go beyond" the readings during each class. The assignment also allows students to practice writing sociologically about torture throughout the semester.

Grading: See the grading scale for written work for more information.
(3) Final Project - 50% of your final grade.

Assignment Overview: All students are expected to complete a research paper of approximately 3,300-4,000 words in which they interpret and critically analyze a significant political account or cultural representation of torture. I will provide an online list of sources, but students are welcome to research a major political or cultural work of their own choosing. Drawing on course readings, lectures, and any other relevant materials, your final paper should seek to answer some of the following questions:

- How does the account or representation communicate the pain and suffering of the torture victim?
- How does the account or representation argue for or against the use of torture?
- What rhetorical strategies of denial and/or acknowledgement are present in the account or representation?
- How does the account or representation relate torture to political and social goods and ideals, such as justice, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, civil liberties, and national security?

Project components: Your final project has five components.

1. Students are expected to produce a one-page response paper by 11.15.2010. The paper should summarize your reading, watching, or viewing experience of the political account or cultural representation of torture you have chosen and should also briefly describe the major topics and themes likely to be addressed in the paper. The proposal is worth 5% of students' final grades and will be graded on a credit / no-credit basis.

2. Students must email a first draft of the paper to the instructor and one other member of the class by midnight on 12.02.2010; the first draft of the proposal is worth 5% of students' final grades and will be graded on a credit / no credit basis.

3. Students must also provide a peer review on one other student's paper by 12.06.2010; the peer review is worth 5% of students' final grades and will be graded on a high credit / credit / no credit basis.

4. A final draft of the paper is due on the day of the scheduled final (TBA). The final paper is worth 30% of students' final grades; see the grading scale below for more information on grading.

5. The final draft must include a one to two page typed summary of how the final draft addresses the peer review and the instructor's feedback. The typed summary is worth 5% of students' final grades and will be graded on a credit / no credit basis.

Purpose: The final project has two major purposes. First, the assignment is meant to allow students to analyze a political account or cultural representation of torture that they find particularly interesting. As such, students are encouraged to explore the resources provided in the online list, as well as to seek out their own resources. Second, the assignment is meant to help students develop the writing skills necessary to communicate their ideas to a public audience. As such, students are encouraged to submit their papers to one of BC's two relevant undergraduate publications, Elements and SocialEyes.
Grading Rubric for Written Work

A or A+: Paper/homework satisfies the requirements for “Credit” and also goes beyond the minimum requirements of the assignment by thoughtfully employing relevant and significant materials; exceeding the minimum page length requirement if necessary; exhibiting extraordinary care and thought with relevant course readings, concepts, lectures, and discussions; and referencing them appropriately and “talking back” to these course resources so one’s own thoughts or criticisms are apparent in the paper.

B+, B, B-: Paper/homework is related to the assigned topic and references important and relevant course readings, concepts, or lectures in an appropriate way; work satisfies the length requirements of the assignment; and the paper is well-organized and its central argument is clear; entry contains few, if any, grammatical mistakes or typos.

C+, C, C-: Paper/homework is related to the assigned topic and uses course readings, concepts, or lectures in an appropriate way; however, the paper may reference course readings, concepts, and discussions sparingly and may ignore significant, relevant ones; the paper may not satisfy the minimum page requirement of the assignment; the paper includes some grammatical mistakes and/or typos that obscure the paper’s claims; and the paper may also suffer from organizational problems that obscure its overall argument.

D+, D, D-: Paper/homework is loosely related to the assigned topic; it displays carelessness with course readings, concepts, or lectures, using terms in inappropriate ways and/or ignoring significant and relevant course concepts; paper does not appear to have been edited, as grammatical mistakes and/or typos obscure the author’s claims; and the paper may be significantly shorter than the minimum page requirements of the assignment.

F: Paper/homework is turned in late without an advance discussion or not at all; entry is unrelated to the assigned topic.

Final Grade Scale

- Final Grade Scale -

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- Course Readings -


All other readings are available through our Blackboard Vista site.

Note: Readings should be completed by the date that they are assigned. I reserve the right to alter the course schedule with due notice.

- Course Schedule -

Part I: Framing the Debate

(Class 1) 09.13.2010 - Class Introduction.

(Class 2) 09.20.2010 - Framing the debate I: What is torture?


(Class 3) 09.27.2010 - Framing the debate II: Does torture work?

   c. Marc Thiessen - "The CIA's Questioning Worked."
   d. Jane Mayer - "A Curious History..."

(Class 4) 10.04.2010 Framing the debate III: The U.S.'s Turn to Torture

   b. Danner - "Abu Ghraib, The Hidden Story."
   c. Danner - "The Logic of Torture."
   d. Senate Armed Services Committee - Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees (Executive Summary)

   In-class film: TBD.

10.11.2010 - No class meeting.
   Columbus Day.
Part II: Theorizing Torture

(Class 5) 10.18.2010 - The historical decline and persistence of torture.


(Class 6) 10.25.2010 - Explaining Torture - Politics and Culture


(Class 7) 11.01.2010 - Explaining Torture - Institutions & their actors


Part III: The Social Construction of Torture

(Class 8) 11.08.2010 - Communicating Pain

c. Rejali - "Speak Frankly about Torture."

(Class 9) 11.15.2010 - Official Denial

Final project response paper due.


(Class 10) 11.22.2010 - The "Modern Memory" of Torture

c. Yglesias - "If Mark Thiessen Doesn't Want to be Compared..."
d. Thiessen - "Yglesias and the Slow Learners"
e. Yglesias - "No one expects the Spanish Inquisition"
f. Thiessen - "Yglesias admits his Ignorance."

(Class 11)  11.29.2010 - Thinking about the Photographs from Abu Ghraib.

First draft emailed to peer reviewer and instructor by 12:00 a.m. Thursday, December 2.

- Viewing of selected images from Abu Ghraib prison.
- Susan Sontag - "Regarding the Torture of Others."

(Class 12)  12.06.2010 - Thinking about the Photographs from Abu Ghraib, ctd.

Peer review due in class.
No assigned reading.

-Academic Integrity-

In class, we will work together to comprehend important readings on the history and dynamics of torture. In the spirit of this collective effort, please feel welcome to speak with classmates about course readings and assignments. However, your work must be original and, when using, paraphrasing, or referencing the work of another, you must include a citation of the source. I will treat plagiarism in accordance with Boston College’s Academic Integrity Policy and Procedures.

“The pursuit of knowledge can proceed only when scholars take responsibility and receive credit for their work. Recognition of individual contributions to knowledge and of the intellectual property of others builds trust within the University and encourages the sharing of ideas that is essential to scholarship. Similarly, the educational process requires that individuals present their own ideas and insights for evaluation, critique, and eventual reformulation. Presentation of others’ work as one's own is not only intellectual dishonesty, but also undermines the educational process.”

Please note that in this class the minimum penalty for cheating or plagiarizing will be failure of that course requirement. Cheating or plagiarizing on a homework will, at the minimum, result in a failing grade for both that requirement and will significantly and negatively impact your "preparation, attendance, and participation" grade. In all cases, I will forward incidents of plagiarism or cheating to appropriate university administrators.

You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with these policies and procedures, which you can find at - http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/academic/resources/policy.html#integrity
- A message on our semester together -

Having taught and assisted in a range of courses at Boston College, I am aware that the semester can produce any number of stresses, surprises, emergencies, and frustrations for students. If you find yourself struggling to understand course readings, class assignments or my grading, I strongly encourage you to speak with me immediately. I am always happy to share my thoughts on your assignments, as well as strategies for improvement. Of course, it is more helpful to have such a discussion before the final week or two of classes, which is when the reality of "the final grade" tends to set-in.

If you find yourself struggling to complete assignments or attend class, I strongly encourage you to let me know about your concerns. Additionally, you may want to speak with you class dean, who can provide you with additional support. You can find your class dean's name at http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/about/contact/a-and-s-deans.html. Contact information is available at http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/about/contact/directory-adm.html.