Narratives of Freedom

Statement of Purpose and Intent

In this course, I put key enlightenment-era (late 17th to 18th Century) texts that are part of the "Social Contract" tradition in political philosophy in conversation with key texts from the Black Atlantic and American slave narrative tradition. These readings are supplemented with important texts outside those eras and genres to put them in historical context and to demonstrate their importance and continuing influence in political and scholarly debates.

Each of these intellectual stands is worthy of courses of its own and, indeed, are the subjects of sub-disciplines in their corresponding disciplines. The pairing of these two intellectual strands and giving each its proper due is intellectually demanding. Learning these two traditions together, however, magnifies the monumental ideas they contain and vigorously criticize and defend: *domination, natural law, liberty, equality, democracy, political representation, civic fraternity and sorority, individual civil rights, slavery, property, consent, and tolerance.* Both of these intellectual strands have much to say about all these ideas yet are not typically put into conversation with each other. It is generally accepted that, for example, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* discusses these concepts, but serious and careful readers of, for example, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*, or Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*, realize that these books also grapple with, expound on, and criticize their society's deeply immoral and unjust application of those very ideals and continue to practice the sort of domination that their founding documents denounced.

On the subject of slavery and specifically the enslavement of Africans in the New World, obviously, the slave narratives offer first-person and critical accounts of that history, but the texts of the social contract tradition through what they directly address and what they are silent about speak volumes about how political philosophers of the Enlightenment Era thought about the idea of "race," exactly at the moment when it was emerging as a modern concept, and slavery, exactly when Western European powers were practicing and spreading it throughout the New World. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau devotes an important chapter of his *Social Contract* to theorize about the moral psychology of the slave and ultimately condemns slavery; while John Locke, in the *Second Treatise of Government*, devotes a chapter to justify slavery as a consequence of natural law but rejects it as a heritable status before he offers his consequential theory of property. Their books seemingly express broadly political abolitionist sentiments, and this also seems to be consistent with the part their ideas played in the birth of democratic liberalism and civic republicanism. However, at the same time, Rousseau and Locke both, in their distinct ways, were involved in the justification of colonialism in the New World and the displacement and attempted eradication of Indigenous Americans. Likewise, both elided the subject of the enslavement of Africans in the new world in their principal political treatises, although they were quite aware of the practice of slavery. Locke, in particular, directly participated in the English slave trade by authoring the "Fundamental Constitution of Carolina," in which he wrote the laws, among other things, governing and legitimizing the enslavement of Blacks in the British colony of Carolina.

Moreover, just as both traditions present formal political treatises, they both provide "narratives." Slave narratives, of course, are largely autobiographical. The enlightenment political texts also provide narratives, but instead of ones rooted in personal experience, historical truths, and self-reflections, they present fantastical "just-so" stories that offer imaginative fictional accounts of the birth of the emergence of modern "man," the birth of society and civilization, and the origins of property and political power.

These treatises and narratives lead us to directly confront a conceptual conflict behind centuries of racial, class, and gender domination and struggle. There is a glaring and fundamental contradiction between the ideas of liberty, freedom, and democracy set forth and defended by the leading political thinkers during the birth of liberalism and republicanism and their direct involvement in the rise and spread of the European and American slave trade, modern racism, and genocidal practices against Indigenous Americans. Some call this contradiction "odd" and "peculiar," and they argue that this dissonance can be easily resolved by the application of reasoned consistency and fairness; while other scholars see the conflict as deeply rooted in the original and core political concepts. This has led such critics to declare that the "social contract" is conceptually twinned with "sexual" and "racial" contracts: *We* the people consent to form a government of the people, by the people, for the people, *and* we consent to exclude non-male, non-white, non-Christian, non-European others.

This course analyzes and critiques these twinned contracts and guides the students to a deeper understanding and appreciation of these traditions and texts. Without a doubt, it is a challenging course that picks at the wounds of these traditions to explore what, if anything, is worthy of recovery and repair and why the key ideas and arguments from both strands have retained their intellectual, affective, and moral force.

Why specifically pair the texts of the social contract tradition with slave narratives when similar work can be accomplished by pairing the former with, say, early feminist political treatises, accounts of the devastation of Indigenous Americans, or accounts and analyses of the rise of class exploitation from that period? Those alternative pairings are worthwhile, but this pairing does more than expand upon our understanding of the social contract tradition, its theoretical assumptions and blind spots, and its contributions to historical national failures. This course is equally about the slave narratives and their legacy in political philosophy generally and black political philosophy specifically. The course opens up and exposes a rich source of political analysis, criticism, and theory in the slave narratives.