

# The Politics of Plagues

GOVT 213-10

Georgetown University

Summer 2021

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, 17:45-19:45 EST

## Instructor

Professor R. Berg

Office Hours: by appointment

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## Description

Debates about infectious diseases have never been more conspicuous. Yet, the study of plagues and pandemics within political science is far from new. For centuries, political scientists, social theorists, philosophers, and historians have attempted to account for the impact of plagues on political order, economic development, and international affairs to mention only a few topics.

This course is an attempt to consider these collective reflections on the politics of plagues historically and thematically. Attention will be given to such topics as political order, religious intolerance and violence, aesthetics, institutional economics and political economy, demography, as well as sexuality, race, and gender. The goal of this course is not to merely examine central texts in the history of political thought but also to discuss the study of plagues within political science broadly conceived. Its conclusion will be to interrogate the effects of plagues on present issues of social justice.

## Course Texts

To reduce costs, every attempt has been made to use texts in the public domain and freely available texts in the Online Library of Liberty; however, the following are available for purchase at the Georgetown University Bookstore:

- Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Vintage)
- Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Norton)
- Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France* (Picador)
- Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton)
- Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Yale)
- James C. Scott, *Against the Grain* (Yale)

## Tentative Course Schedule<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In some instances, the syllabus might need to be altered, and the Instructor retains the right to do so. In those instances, the Instructor will give notice of those changes in a timely manner.

## Section I: Plagues of Ancient and Classical Eras

**June 7:** Introduction & Overview of Course

**Also:** James C. Scott, *Against the Grain*, Chapters 1-3

**June 8:** *Against the Grain*, Chapters 4-7

**Also:** 2 Samuel 24 ([accessible here](#))

**Also:** Hesiod, *Works and Days*, selections (available on Canvas).

**June 9:** Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, tr. Hobbes, Book 2.31-65 (available on Canvas)

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Books I-IV ([accessible via the OLL](#))

**June 10:** Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Books V-VI ([accessible via the OLL](#))

**Also:** Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome*, Chapters 1-2

**June 14:** Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome*, Chapters 3-5

**June 15:** Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome*, Chapters 6-8

**Also:** Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, selections (available on Canvas)

## Section II: The Black Death

**June 16:** Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, selections (available on Canvas)

**Also:** Colin Jones, "Plague and its Metaphors in Early Modern France," *Representations* (1996)

**June 17:** Screening of *The Seventh Seal*, dir. Ingmar Bergman (1957)

**June 21:** Daren Acemoglu & James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail*, Chapters 4, 6 (available on Canvas)

**Also:** Samuel Cohn, "The Black Death and the Burning of the Jews," *Past and Present* (2007)

## Section III: Demography, Political Economy, Social Theory

**June 22:** David Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," ([accessible here](#))

**Also:** Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* Book I, Chs., I, II, III, XIV

**Also:** Shannon C. Stimson, "Introduction," in Malthus, *Essay*

**June 23:** Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Book IV

**Also:** E.A. Wrigley, "The Preventative Check and the Poor Law," pp. 516-633

**Also:** Kenneth Binmore, "Malthusian Economics," pp. 534-546

**June 24:** Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, Lectures 1-4

**June 28:** Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, Lecture 5

**Also:** Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Lectures 11, 12 (available on Canvas)

## Section IV: Plague Narratives

**June 29:** Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, pp. 1-102 (end: “Well Tom, consider of it a little”)

**June 30:** Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, pp. 102-93

**Also:** John Bender, “The City and the Rise of the Penitentiary,” pp. 318-335

**July 1:** Albert Camus, *The Plague*

## Section V: Modern Plagues: Sexuality, Race, Gender, Justice

**July 5:** Screening of *How to Survive a Plague*, dir. David France (2012)

**Also:** Charles Rosenberg, “What is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective,”  
*Daedalus* (1989)

**July 6:** Wende Marshall, “AIDS, Race and the Limits of Science,” *Social Science and Medicine* (2005)

**Also:** Susan Sontag, from *AIDS and Its Metaphors* in Defoe, *Journal*, pp. 250-8

**Also:** Steve Coll, “The Jail Health-Care Crisis,” *The New Yorker* (2019) ([accessible here](#)).

**Also:** Michael Massoglia, “Incarceration as Exposure: The Prison, Infectious Disease, and Other Stress-Related Illnesses,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2008)

**July 7:** Sara Davies and Belinda Bennett, “A Gendered Human Rights Analysis of Ebola And Zika: Locating Gender in Global Health Emergencies,” *International Affairs* (2016)

**Also:** Sara Davies, “Infectious Disease Outbreak Response: Mind the Rights Gap,”  
*Medical Law Review* (2017)

**Also:** Rosemary Taylor, “The Politics of Securing Borders and the Identities of Disease,”  
*Sociology of Health and Illness* (2013)

**July 8:** Conclusion

## Assessment and Course Requirements

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The requirements for GOVT 213-10 are as follows:

**Reflection Responses:** You are required to submit **four** weekly reflection posts to the course’s Canvas discussion board. These posts should be about 500 words in length and should offer an analysis of one reading or several for the week. **These posts are due on Sunday evenings at 23:59 EST. Individual posts will not be graded, and students that complete them on time should expect to receive full marks.** However, posts that are well below 500 words or display obvious inattention to detail will not receive credit. I will email you if this is the case.

**Long Paper:** You are required to write a paper of about 10 pages from a list of topics that will be distributed the first week of class. Papers are due on the last day of class, and they should be emailed to [rwb32@georgetown.edu](mailto:rwb32@georgetown.edu).

**Attendance and Participation:** The success of this course will depend on your active participation. Please come to class having completed the reading for the day. Excellent participation is characterized by a critical engagement of the readings and as well as insights that compare themes and authors from earlier course readings. **Finally, students who make outstanding, ongoing contributions to class discussion may get a one-half letter grade enhancement on that basis.**

The Assessment Distribution is:

Reflection Responses:	10 percent
Long Paper	70 percent
Attendance and Participation	20 percent

### **The Georgetown University Honor Code and Honor System**

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Students must follow the University Honor Code, which states:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor, and To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

Failure to comply with the Honor Code will result in a grade of F in the course. Information concerning Georgetown's honor system is available at:  
[https://www11.georgetown.edu/programs/gervase/hc/honor\\_system.html](https://www11.georgetown.edu/programs/gervase/hc/honor_system.html).