ENGL 494: Psychoanalysis, Politics, Culture (Spring 2022 for MaKenzie Munson [800386222])

Over the last twenty years or so, there has been a massive increase in the use of psychoanalytic thought and theory to help understand political and cultural phenomena. In this course we will devote ourselves to learning a bit about what psychoanalysis—through the work of Freud and his greatest interpreter, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and even the latter’s own great interpreter, Slavoj Žižek—might have to say about the realms of politics and culture. For many, what psychoanalysis does when it gets applied to social and cultural issues is focus in on the power of enjoyment (we are fundamentally creatures of what Lacan calls “desire”) and all of the ways in which our enjoyment (in politics, in economic behavior, and everywhere else) is wrapped up and entangled in the fact that we are linguistic creatures. Why is it that—for so many of us—we feel pulled between our interests (political, economic, social, whatever) and where our enjoyment really lies? Psychoanalysis suggests that we are creatures who are split, divided—between what we claim is our own self-interest and what we really love doing; between what we are conscious and unconscious of; between what we want to do and what our parents and other authority figures want us to do; between a profound lack and a haunting abundance and plenitude when we do find something that causes our desire; between the words and symbolic constructions we use to identify ourselves and an unnameable mystery within each of us that words and concepts can never quite fully capture. How is one to explain our profound psychical investments in and enjoyment of disastrous political and economic ideologies? And why is it that knowledge so often fails to disrupt these political identifications? How exactly are we to take into account the profound psychic costs of a (capitalist) world in which we are so often compelled and condemned to be constantly enjoying—and to, in a strong sense, feel morally culpable for an inability to enjoy? Is there political or economic or socio-cultural power in one who is unable or unwilling to constantly “transform all of the disappointments of her life into a positive experience to be invested in the future” (Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*)? In this seminar, all of these kinds of questions will be on the discussion table as we try to wrestle with psychoanalysis on its own terms while also paying careful attention to how theorists have applied the work of Freud and Lacan to politics, economics, culture, racial identity, sexuality, and much more. The course will not assume any background psychoanalytic knowledge, as we will build up a foundation for our purposes here by working through some of the canonical texts of Freud and Lacan as they relate to political, social, and cultural concerns; we will also follow Žižek’s lead by taking what can often be dense theoretical texts and reading them through illustrative examples from popular culture—the children’s books of Shel Silverstein, the films of Pixar, TV and film more generally, may all serve as guides to fundamental psychoanalytic (and political) insights.

**Potential Texts of Study:**

Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*

————, *Civilization and its Discontents*

————, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

————, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian   
Unconscious”

Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*

————, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*

Mari Ruti, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings: The Emotional Costs of Everyday Life*

————, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects*

Sheldon George, *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian Study of African American Racial Identity*

Alenka Zupančič, *What* Is *Sex?*

Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*Molly Rothenberg, *The Excessive Subject: A New Theory of Social Change*Samo Tomšič, *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy*

Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*

Yannis Stavrakakis, “Objects of Consumption, Causes of Desire: Consumerism and Advertising   
 in Societies of Commanded Enjoyment”