Confronting the Liberal Now: Exile, Counterpoint, and Slow Humanism.
May 12 2015

Institute for Social Justice Seminar Series

Location:
Date: Tuesday May 12
Time: 2pm to 4pm
Venue: Australian Catholic University, Council Room - Level 11, Tenison Woods House, 8-20 Napier Street, North Sydney

Speaker: Jeannie Morefield

Abstract
This talk investigates the presentist response of contemporary liberal internationalism to political crises and makes an argument for confronting and re-imagining global power through an approach inspired by the work of the late postcolonial scholar, Edward Said. Those foreign policy pundits in America who currently hold most sway over the Obama Administration are liberal internationalists who claim to ground their perspective in the practical politics of a world conditioned by historical power. In reality, their approaches lean heavily on idealist, exclusionary visions of international order that are deeply embedded in a politics of fear. Such a politics - unmoored from history and power - responds to any kind of perceived crisis in the international order by insisting upon quick, unreflective, military and “humanitarian” intervention, right now. Said’s approach, by contrast, while always attuned to the urgency of politics, demands that scholars and activists slow down and approach such crises from a “precarious exilic realm,” a perspective Homi Bhabha has called, Said’s “slow humanism.” Speaking from this realm and committed to a practice of critical engagement grounded in attention to historical counterpoint rather than historical amnesia, Said insisted public intellectuals resist dominant narratives of crisis by carefully pulling these crises out of the ever-looming present and back into history, thus calling into question the very solutions that liberal internationalism is dedicated to justifying. The talk concludes by thinking more broadly about the kind of paradigm shift in both political inquiry and knowledge production that Said’s approach to history, power, and crisis calls forth.

Bio
Jeannie Morefield is Professor of Politics and Chair of the Politics Department at Whitman College. Working at the intersection of political theory, history, and international relations, she is the author of Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo American Decline and the Politic of Deflection (Oxford University Press: 2014) and Covenants Without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire (Princeton University Press: 2005). Professor Morefield is currently writing a book on the political thought of Edward Said that examines Said’s work in the context of contemporary discourses of international crises and humanitarian intervention, arguing that Said’s notion of counterpoint brings a necessary critical-historical perspective to these notably presentist worldviews. She has written for History of Political Thought, Political Theory, Theory and Event, and other journals as well as contributing chapters to edited volumes concerned with both political theory, international relations, and the history of international and imperial thought. She serves on the editorial boards of Humanity, Contemporary Political Theory, and Political Research Quarterly and is currently the co-chair of the “Foundations of Political Theory” section for the American Political Science Association’s 2015 meeting. Professor Morefield is from Seattle and received her BA from Oberlin College and Ph.D. from Cornell University.

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