

Literature and Political Imagination: Defeats, Resistance, and Alternative Futures

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Deadline for proposing a paper: **October 31, 2022**

To propose a paper, please visit the ACLA website: <https://www.acla.org/annual-meeting> (the portal for submitting an abstract will open on October 1)

We live in a world that seems to have largely lost faith in politics and the dialectic of history. Our “horizons of expectation” are remarkably narrow or naïve, if existent at all. In the regime of historicity that François Hartog (2003) has defined as “presentism,” hopes for radical political change have collapsed under the weight of the neoliberal hegemony. Although experienced differently across the world and its societies, this stagnant, expanded present seems to have paralyzed and stifled the utopian imagination. In this historical predicament, grand narratives of political transformation have run out of steam. Utopias have become a private matter, a project of self-accomplishment and self-advancement reified and promoted by the culture industry.

Our incapacity to articulate new forms of politics is *discursive* and *imaginative*: ‘we’ know that something is profoundly wrong in today’s world, but we struggle to describe and imagine a different sort of society. We know what needs to be dismantled, but we are at loss when we face the challenge of *building* a different world, when we seek to propose a positive idea of the common ‘good’. Yet much of what appears natural and insurmountable today dates from the 1970s and 1980s: “the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor” (Judt 2010, 2). And while most twentieth-century revolutions have been defeated, hijacked, or left to wither away, throughout the globe we continue to witness a plurality of movements demanding political change.

This seminar aims to discuss how literature engages with “the conflict between resignation and hope, between capitulation and the obstinate search for an alternative, between abandonment and birth” (Traverso 2021, 6)—a conflict that characterizes the political landscape of our time. If our political predicament is defined by “symbolic misery” (Stiegler 2013) and a faltering political imagination, literature might help us to open new avenues of transformation by working through the past and imagining alternative futures. Literature can foster a critical understanding of past and present political challenges, represent different forms of resistance and struggles of liberation, and explore paths of healing, repair, and living “otherwise” (King et al. 2020). In considering structures of violence and oppression that continue to permeate our societies, this panel will analyze the multiple intersections between literature and politics and the possibilities that they open.

The key questions that this seminar seeks to address are:

- Can literature foster a critical elaboration of political defeats and rekindle our political imagination?

- How does literature represent the challenges of political action?
- What happens when literature tries, implicitly or explicitly, to promote a certain political ethos, a vision of the world, or a particular ethical sensibility?
- How can literature enact resistance or facilitate reparative work (if at all)?
- Can literature point to new “horizons of expectation”?
- Can literature evoke or cultivate a sense of political responsibility?
- Do pressing political and societal problems necessitate new literary forms or works?
- Does the connection between literature and activism, or any political project, risk impoverishing the text, making it too didactic?

Suggested topics include (but are not restricted to):

- Literature and activism
- Literature and political resistance
- Literature and revolutions
- Literature as a form of repair
- Literature and the end of utopias
- Literature and “left-wing melancholia” (Traverso 2016)
- Literature as a medium for working through political events and defeats
- Literature as a medium for imagining an alternative politics
- Literature and the need for new political narratives
- The aesthetic and social challenges faced by literary texts addressing political questions

This seminar welcomes scholars working in all languages, geographical areas, and theoretical frameworks, and encourages proposals that take an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary approach.