

The Renaissance Studies Program
“Political Renaissance” Lecture Series
presents the fifth lecture by

VICTORIA KAHN

Machiavelli and Political Theology

5:30 p.m., Monday, October 4, 2010
Solarium, Indiana Memorial Union



This talk argues that the recent interest in political theology in the academy and beyond is not only a response to the rise of global Jihad, or to the problems of liberal democracies, but also—more broadly—a way of questioning what Hans Blumenberg called the legitimacy of the modern age, that is, the legitimacy of the modern project of self-assertion, or the assertion of rationality, without reference to transcendental norms. In Blumenberg’s analysis, this modern project is fundamentally poetic in the original Greek sense of poesis as making or creating; that is, the modern project is informed by the poetic principle elaborated by Hobbes and Vico that we can only know what we have made or constructed ourselves.

Thinking historically about this modern project—and its relationship to political theology—requires us to revisit the early modern texts that are central to the genealogy of modernity, including the modern secular conception of rationality. Taking her cue from Leo Strauss, Kahn focuses on Machiavelli, whom Strauss saw as the origin of this poetic conception of modernity, as well as of a distinctively modern attitude towards political theology. Kahn argues that Strauss was right to see Machiavelli as the origin of a distinctively modern approach to both politics and political theology. Unlike Strauss, however, Kahn argues that we should take Machiavelli’s critique of political theology as exemplary for our own time.

Victoria Kahn is Katherine Bixby Hotchkis Professor of English and
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Also join us for: “Always Already: Conservation and Innovation in the Humanities, a roundtable,” featuring Hélène Merlin-Kajman and Victoria Kahn (UC Berkeley), October 4, 12:00 - 1:00 p.m., Distinguished Alumni Room, IMU

This lecture is made possible through the generous support of the College Arts and Humanities Institute, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Office of the Provost, the Mary-Margaret Barr Koon Fund of the Department of French and Italian. Refreshments to follow.