Political Science 306
Contemporary Democratic Theory
Peter Breiner

**Required Books**
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)
Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (Yale)
Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin)
John Lanchester, *IOU: Why Everybody Owes and No One Pays* (Simon and Schuster)
Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (Penguin)

In addition, there will be a number of readings on Blackboard.

This course focuses on modern theories of democracy. However, even contemporary democratic theories have to resolve two questions that go all the way back to the original Greek definition of democracy as popular power, popular rule, or popular sovereignty: first, how much direct self-government is necessary for a political community to be called a democracy; and second how much equality of status, wealth, political goods are required for citizens to have equal membership and equal influence on decision-making? From these questions a number of others follow. Is the equality guaranteed to all citizens in a democracy satisfied if we have nominal voting rights, representation, and protections in our private pursuits; or must political equality in addition allow for active participation in deliberating upon and influencing the outcome of legislation? Does democracy require the egalitarian distribution of social and economic goods or should such distributions not be part of democratic decision-making? Whom should we include as citizens—only native-born individuals, immigrants, anyone who happens to be within our borders? Is democracy reconcilable with large nation states? Is the struggle for political equality finished? What should the relation be between democracy and the economy?

We will tackle these questions by reading some of the major arguments in both classical and contemporary democratic theory. First we will read two of the classical theorists of democracy: Rousseau and Madison. Rousseau famously argues that the only legitimate republic is one in which the citizens directly give themselves the laws that they will obey. Madison by contrast argues that the job of a republic is to balance factions against one another through relentless competition. He also proposes a federal structure to provide ways to filter out the common passions of the public by putting barriers to direct popular self-rule in the name of protecting private liberty. For us the question will be who is right and how do they propose to combine popular sovereignty with large-scale states.

We will then discuss a number of contemporary theories that take up the questions raised by the Rousseau-Madison debate. On the one side, we will read a number of political theorists who
argue that democracy and the rule of elites can be made compatible and the criticism of this position. We will then examine number of “models” that have been proposed to deepen democracy in modern societies: among them democratic procedures that render citizens more effectual in influencing decisions; economic democracy, deliberative forms of democracy, and mass protest and revolution (which in a sense isn’t a model at all).

Finally, we will examine series of issues central to contemporary debates over democracy:
1) Is the capitalist market is compatible with democratic citizenship?
2) What are the consequences of the influence of finance and banking for our understanding of democracy?
3) Whether and to what degree does democracy require a welfare state providing a wide array of public goods?
4) Do the political parties in the US further or diminish inequality of income and wealth and does the majority vote their interests on this matter?
5) Is the American constitution sufficiently democratic? In particular does it allow its citizens to hold politicians accountable, and is it a model worthy of being followed by other polities?
6) Is democracy compatible with globalism?

Class Objectives: Throughout this course you will be asked to engage with theories claiming to answer these questions—to analyze them, to find their strengths and weaknesses, to play them off one another, and ultimately deploy them to forge your own theory of democracy.

Course Requirements
The assignments for this course will be the following:
1) A 4-6-page essay on Rousseau and Madison due on in class February 14.
2) A midterm on Schumpeter, Dahl and the critics of elitist and pluralist models of democracy on March 10 whose format is yet to be decided.
3) A 6 page paper on alternative models of democracy—economic democracy, deliberative democracy, and revolution—on Friday March 28.
4) A take-home final essay exam on the following issues in democratic theory: the tension between democracy and markets; the question of whether democracy requires a welfare state; the question of whether political parties make a difference on income inequality; the adequacy of the concept of democratization; and problems of the American Constitution. The take-home exam will be handed out the last day of class. To be handed out the last day of class, May 7, and due in a week.

Grading: Each paper will count 20% of the grade while the final will count 30% of the grade. 10% of the grade will be allotted to participation and engagement. I take improvement into account. You will be graded not just on your knowledge of the arguments, but also on your analytical skill in taking them apart and putting them back together. Good writing will be expected, and poor writing will obviously affect your grade adversely. I will put a guide on Blackboad to writing good political theory papers.
Class attendance: **I should stress that you are expected to attend class.** If you do not attend for three sessions without a legitimate excuse your grade will go down by one half. I will be checking occasionally, but if you are a serious student this proviso should be irrelevant.

Blackboard: I will put the syllabus, assignments, guides to writing, and recommended readings on Blackboard.

Humanities Requirement: This course meets the Humanities Requirement of the General Education Category in the following ways: It addresses central topics in political philosophy, understands theories in their cultural and historical contexts, promotes an ability to assess the strengths and weaknesses of arguments and examines the assumptions underlying both present and canonical works in political philosophy. It ultimately involves the interpretation of texts and arguments.

**Plagiarism**
Plagiarism means to pass off someone else’s work as your own. **Please be warned that should I find you have plagiarized, you will receive an immediate E in the course and further actions will be taken including sending your case before a university committee.**

**Office Hours**
Uptown: M, W, 11:15-12:15 am and by appt. in Humanities B-16. I will always be happy to meet with you after class as well. (If these times are difficult to make you are welcome to visit me in my downtown office, Milne 204, Rockefeller College. Since this is my main office, it will often be easier to meet there for an extended discussion). Downtown office hours: Mon 2-4 and Wed 2-4 in Milne 204. Office phone in Milne 204: 442-5277. Phone in Humanities B-16: 442-3112. E-mail: pbreiner@albany.edu

**Course Outline**

**The Problem Defined**

   Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Bks I, II, III, IV, chs. 1, 2 in *Basic Political Writings*

II. James Madison, Self-Interest, Equilibrium, and Republicanism
   B. Editorials Madison wrote after the ratification of the U.S. constitution (all on Blackboard). (Read these carefully and ask why Madison changed his mind.)

   **Paper on Rousseau and Madison due in class February 14.**

**Models of democracy**

III. Modern Attempts to Overcome the Rousseau-Madison Problem: Democracy as Method and the Elitist Theory of Democracy
   A. Democratic Elitism: Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy,*
chs. 20-23 (Blackboard).


IV. The Criticism of Elitist Democratic Theory
Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Chapter 1, “Recent Theories of Democracy” (Blackboard)
Recommended: Robert Dahl, “Pluralism Revisited” *Comparative Politics* 10, 2 (1978) (Blackboard)

V. The Attempt to Recover a More Democratic Polyarchy—A Right to a Democratic Procedure
Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, chapters Intro, 2, 6, 8*, 9*, 12, 15 (pp. 220-224), 16, 23* (*read with special care.)
Midterm on debate over elite theory and Dahl’s right to democratic procedure within polyarchy, March 10th—format yet to be defined.

VI. Economic Democracy
Michael Walzer, “Property/Power” from *Spheres of Justice* (Blackboard).

VII. Deliberative Democracy
Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere” (Blackboard)
Joshua Cohen “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy” (Blackboard)

VIII. Democracy and Revolution—Is it possible to “Constitute” Political Liberty.
Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* chs, 1, 2, 4, 6.

Paper on workplace democracy, deliberative democracy, and democracy within revolution, March 28.

**Issues in Democratic Theory**

IX. Issues in Democratic Theory I: Democratic Politics vs. Markets.
A. The priority of the market over democracy:
Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* chs. 1, 2 (in readings).
Friedrich von Hayek, “‘Social’ and Distributive Justice” (Blackboard)

B. The imprisonment of democracy by the market.
Charles Lindblom, “The Privileged Position of Business” and “Consequences for Polyarchy” from *Politics and Markets* (Blackboard).

C. Too big to fail? Finance and Democracy.
X. Issues in Democratic Theory II: Democracy and the Welfare State
A. A social democratic defense of the welfare state vs. neo-liberalism: Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (entire)
B. Reread Friedman and Hayek above, section IX.A.


XI. Issues in Democratic Theory III: Income Inequality and Democracy?
Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, chs 1-5, 10
Read either ch 6 (“Homer Gets a Tax Break”) or 9 (“Inequality and Political Representation”) as well.

XII. Issues in Democratic Theory IV: Is the American Constitution Sufficiently Democratic?
Recommended: ch. 4 (“ELECTING A PRESIDENT”). (Blackboard)

XIII. Issues in Democratic Theory V: Globalism a Challenge to Democracy?

**Take home final due one week from last day of class, which is on May 7. Questions handed out on last day.**