POS 306 Contemporary Democratic Theory

Course Description and Objectives: The word “democracy” is a term that we tend to use interchangeably with “democratic institutions.” But there are differences between democratic ideas and democratic institutions. What are these differences? Why are they important? Our project this semester is to consider the meanings of democratic ideas and ideals and to evaluate our institutions in light of these ideas; to take stock of the threats which face them; and to expand our understanding of the possibilities open to us in terms of democratic governance.

Our primary focus will be on the following democratic ideas—equality, liberty, and self-government—and the institutions in place to uphold them. We will begin with Aristotle because his understanding the importance of equality and inequality continues to shape how we view political participation and citizenship. Machiavelli offers an important, modern revision of the importance of character and economic class in democratic governance.

With these two thinkers as a backdrop, we will tackle more modern theorists and the questions: 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? In other words, how robust do the institutions need to be to uphold the ideal? 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?

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).
By the end of the course you should be able to read and discuss theories of democratic arrangements and action carefully and critically; and you should be able to apply the many concepts we've discussed in a coherent and critical assessment of contemporary democratic institutions and issues.

**Course Requirements:** Since this is a large group, close interaction between myself, you, and the text can be difficult. To emphasize that the reading and discussion of the texts are the most important parts of the course, you will be assigned permanent teams for the semester, both to engage with the assigned readings and to complete small reading activities/quizzes.

Grading for the course will be as follows:

10% Attendance

20% Pop Reading Quizzes (6) and In-class Exercises (Think of this as part of attendance, too. You can't make these up if your absence is unexcused. Some quizzes you will take with your teams; some by yourself.)

20% 4 pg Aristotle and Machiavelli Paper

20% 4-6 pg Rousseau and Madison Midterm

30% Take-home Final Exam

**Course Readings:**


*Democracy And Its Critics*, Robert Dahl. Yale University Press

*I'll Fares the Land*, Tony Judt. Penguin


Complete texts available on Blackboard:

*The Discourses*, Machiavelli

*The Federalist Papers*, James Madison

*The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx

**Attendance** is mandatory. Missing more than three classes (unexcused) will result in a half-letter grade deduction from that portion of your grade, per day.

**Plagiarism** means to pass another’s work off as your own. This includes sources like wikipedia. This is not a research class. Assignments should be completed only using course readings and your notes from class. However, if you make use of external sources in your writing, you must cite them. Plagiarized essays will result in at least one of the following: failure of the assignment, failure of the course, documentation filed with Student Affairs

Please let me know if you work with the Office for Students with Disabilities at the beginning of the semester so that I can make the appropriate arrangements/accommodations.
Course Outline:
Subject to change. While readings are listed, the schedule is flexible. Reading assignments and guiding questions will be announced in class.

Introduction

Democratic ideas vs democratic institutions and mechanisms
What ideas do we consider central to democracy? Do we think in terms of ideas or institutions?

Foundations of democratic ideas in Aristotle’s Politics.
Read Books I, III, VI (Chapters 1-5) VII (Chapters 1-10; 13-15)

Foundations for democratic institutions in Machiavelli’s Discourses.
Read: Introduction pgs 19-47, 54-69; Book I Sections 1-7, 16-18, 25-27, 34, 55-58; Book III Sections 7-9

February 12 SHORT PAPER on Aristotle and Machiavelli’s use of democratic

Modern Interpretations

JJ Rousseau’s reading of Aristotle:
Read: Discourse on the Origin of Inequality; The Social Contract Books I, II, and III Chapters 1-4

James Madison’s response Federalist Papers #10, #48, #51 and selected editorials

Contemporary Interpretations/Models
What institutions are proposed, and what ideas do they uphold/reflect/discard?

Elite Democracy
Read: Joseph Schumpeter Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (BB)

Pluralist Democracy
Read: Robert Dahl A Preface to Democratic Theory “The American Hybrid” (BB)

The Critique of Elite Democracy and Reconsidering Polyarchy
Read: Carol Pateman Participation and Democratic Theory Chapter 1 “Recent Theories of Democracy” (BB)
Robert Dahl Democracy and Its Critics Chapters 2, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15 (pgs 220-224), 16, 23

March 12 MIDTERM EXAM/ESSAY DUE

Workplace Democracy
Read: Michael Walzer, “Property/Power” from Spheres of Justice (BB).
Deliberative Democracy
Read: Joshua Cohen “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy” (BB)
Jurgen Habermas “Three Normative Models of Democracy” (BB)

Democratic Revolution
Read: Karl Marx The Communist Manifesto
Emma Goldman “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For”

3/14-3/22 No Class

Issues Facing Democratic Ideas and Institutions

Democracy and Markets/Democracy and Finance
Do capitalism and democracy go together? Which takes priority?
Market over democracy
Read: Milton Friedman Capitalism and Freedom (BB)
Friedrich von Hayek “Social and Distributive Justice” (BB)
Charles Lindblom “The Privileged Position of Business” and “Consequences for Polyarchy” (BB)

Democracy and the Welfare State
Read: Tony Judt Ill Fares the Land

Democracy and Inequality
Read: Larry Bartels Unequal Democracy Chapters 1-5, 6, 9, 10