American Political Thought

Government 458 / 658
Spring 2006
Cornell University
W 10:10-12:05

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Office Hours: W 2:00-4:00

Course description and aims

O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
--Langston Hughes

It is sometimes claimed that the greatest contribution that the United States has made to the history of political thought is the idea of America itself; however, the history of political thought in the United States is marked by ongoing political contention rather than consensus. In this course we will explore a selection of key texts that have helped shape and contest the political idea -- and the political ideals -- of America, texts that comprise the traditions and countertraditions of American political thought. Beginning with a sermon delivered at sea to Puritans on their way to the “New World,” and ending with a seminal twentieth-century debate over the viability of a democratic public, the course will emphasize how intellectual argument in America has shaped and been shaped by the larger political culture of which it is a part. We will study key historical texts that are not only rewarding to think about but also rewarding to think with in light of contemporary political dilemmas. With this in mind, we will also engage secondary readings that illuminate the historical context of our primary sources and their contemporary political resonance.
Course mechanics

This is an advanced political theory research seminar. Every student should come to class prepared to engage in lively conversation based on the week’s reading. In addition to bringing the pertinent texts to class, undergraduate students will be asked to write weekly short (1 page!) reader responses. The reader responses should avoid summary, and instead critically engage a particular question or theme relevant to the reading. Responses will be turned in at the beginning of each Wednesday class and will be counted as a part of the final participation grade (30% of the total). Each student will also be asked to help lead discussion during one class period. On the day the student leads discussion, he or she will deliver a 10-15 minute presentation on the readings. These presentations should be at once synoptic and evaluative. A sign-up sheet will be provided the second week of class.

In addition to these short writing assignments and seminar participation, students will write a research paper (around 20 pages) due during finals week (see below). Students must submit a proposal of their research topic the eighth week of class. Papers will focus on a topic covered in the seminar while also drawing on additional material. The final paper (including the graded proposal) will be worth 70% of the total grade. There will be no final exam.

Books to purchase

Available at Cornell University Bookstore:

Hannah Arendt, On Revolution
Jacob Cooke, ed., The Federalist Papers
John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems
W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk
Emma Goldman, Anarchism and Other Essays
David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, eds., The American Intellectual Tradition I
Walter Lippman, Public Opinion
William Graham Sumner, What Social Classes Owe Each Other
Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience and Other Essays
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America
Herbert Storing, What the Anti-Federalists were For

Material marked “*” available on e-reserve or in online journal.
Material marked “**” in American Intellectual Tradition
Material marked “***” on reserve in Government reading room.
Weekly Readings

Week 1: Introduction: The Idea and Ideals of America

Wednesday, January 25th:

Required:

Louis Hartz, “The Concept of a Liberal Society”***
Michael Rogin, “American Political Demonology: A Retrospective”*
David Campbell, “Imagining America”*
Dorothy Ross, “Liberalism”*
Hegel, Lectures on World History (handout)

Recommended:

Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad
John P. Diggins, The Lost Soul of American Politics***
Eric Foner, The Story of American Freedom
Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition***
Richard Rorty, Achieving Our Country
Judith Shklar, American Citizenship***
Robet H. Wiebe, Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy
James P. Young, American Liberalism: The Troubled Odyssey of the Liberal Idea

Week 2: Community, Theology, and Dissent in Colonial New England

Wednesday, February 1st:

Required:

John Winthrop, “Speech to the General Court” (1645)* “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)**, “The Antinomian Crisis” (1636)*
David S. Lovejoy, “Anne Hutchinson and the Naked Christ”*
Perry Miller, “The Puritan Way of Life”*
Anne Hutchinson, “The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newton.” (1637)**

Recommended:

Sacvan Bercovitch, The Puritan Origins of the American Self***
The Book of Exodus:  http://www.online-literature.com/bible/Exodus/
Edmund S. Morgan, The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop***
Week 3: Fashioning the Modern American Self

Wednesday, February 8th:

Required:


Recommended:

D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature***
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America***

Week 4: Revolution and “the People”

Wednesday, February 15th:

Required:

Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*
Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*
Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence* (1776)**
Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence”*

Recommended:

Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*
Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America***
Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*
Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People***
Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution***

Week 5: The Constitution and the New Political Science

Wednesday, February 22nd:

Required:

*The Federalist Papers* (at least numbers 1, 10, 14, 49, 51)
Isaac Kramnick, “The Great National Discussion”: The Discourse of Politics in 1787,”

Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 593-618***

Recommended:

Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination***
Lance Banning, *Sacred Fire of Liberty*
Richard K. Mathews, *If Men were Angels: Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason*
Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic***

**Week 6: Anti-Federalists**

Wednesday, March 1st:

Required:

Herbert Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists were For.*
“Essays of Brutus” included in Ball’s edition of *The Federalist Papers*

Recommended:

Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders***
Jackson Turner Main, *The Anti-federalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788*
Sheldon Wolin, *Presence of the Past***

**Week 7: Democracy in America I**

Wednesday, March 8th:

Required:

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835-1840)

Recommended:

William Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*
Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny***
Michael Rogin, “Liberal Society and the Indian Question”**
Week 8: Democracy in America II

Wednesday, March 15th:

Required:
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835-1840)

Recommended:

Week 9: Transcendentalism, Individualism, and the State

Wednesday, March 22nd:

Required:
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance”***
Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*

Recommended:
George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture***
David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*
Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*
Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America’s Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity*

Week 10: Abolition and Its Enemies

Wednesday, March 29th:

Required:
Frederick Douglas, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852)**
David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*
John Calhoun, *A Disquisition on Government**
George Fitzhugh, *A Sociology for the South**

Recommended:
Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition’s Public Sphere*
Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*
Mason Lowance, ed., *Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader***
Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*
John Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race***

**Week 11: Lincoln and Union**

Wednesday, April 5th:

Required:


Recommended:

Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg***

**Week 12: Capitalism and Social Darwinism**

Wednesday, April 12

Required:

William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe Each Other*

Recommended:

Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought***
Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age***

**Week 13: Emma Goldman and American Radicalism**

Wednesday, April 19

Required:

Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*

Recommended:
Candace Falk, *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History***
Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*

**Week 14: Race and American Nationalism**

Wednesday, April 26

Required:

W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (film screening)

Recommended:

Adolph Reed, *W.E.B. DuBois and American Political Thought***
Michael Rogin, “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision”***

**Week 15: Progressives and the Fate of Democracy**

Wednesday, May 3

Required:

John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*
Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*

Recommended:

Andrew Feffer, *The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism*
James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in American and European Social Thought***
Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*
Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy***

Final Paper Due May 12:00 15th at 307 White Hall