LDST 374: Contemporary Debates in Democratic Theory

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Office hours, spring semester: Friday, 2 to 4 p.m. (unless otherwise noted), and by appointment. Jepson 135.

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The aim of this class is to engage in contemporary debates about the content of democratic social justice, at the local, national, and global level. The course is motivated by three big questions. First, what does “democratic social justice” mean in a world marked by large disparities of wealth and income (nationally and globally), the domination of much economic activity by large corporations, and limited, fleeting citizen engagement? Second, can existing or emergent democratic institutions solve pressing economic, ecological and social problems? Third, what political and economic alternatives might be available to 21st-century citizens dissatisfied with the performance and structure of existing political institutions and economic systems?

In the course we will veer back and forth between theoretical and applied views of these basic questions. It is hoped that students will gain both an awareness of “classic” perspectives on democracy and exposure cutting-edge work applying democratic theory and theories of justice to contemporary problems. This is primarily a class in democratic and political theory, but we should not understand “theory” in a way that is opposed to “practice.” Theory in this context means having a vision of what democracy ought to be, of how societies might better realize democratic principles, and of how democratic societies might better solve pressing problems. A good political theory gives us an account of the sorts of institutional arrangements and political practices that best allow us to accomplish these practical goals. We will each be striving to become good political theorists (in this sense) during the semester.

The class will meet once a week for two and one-half hours (with a short break at the midway point). It is absolutely essential that all students be fully prepared each week. This means doing the reading prior to class, taking notes, identifying questions, and being prepared to contribute verbally to each class. While I will guide discussion and make explanatory and framing comments, this is not a lecture class. Rather, it is a seminar whose success depends on you. If you are not willing to make the effort to be prepared for class, you should choose another class.

Requirements

1. Do the reading and come to class. If you miss a class without an excused absence, you will lose 5% off your final (overall) course grade (per absence).
2. Each week you must bring to class a one-page “preparation paper” (printed out) in response to the assigned readings. These papers will provide brief answers to these questions:
   a-- What problem or question is the author addressing?
   b-- What is the author’s primary argument?
   c--What are the most important points and arguments in support of the overall argument?
   d--What are the most controversial or contestable claims he author is making?
   e--What key new insight or perspective do you draw from the reading?
   f--What questions do you have, either clarifying or challenging the author’s argument?

You may respond to each of these questions with one or two sentences. You do not have to craft an essay, simply provide answers to the questions. In weeks where there are multiple essays assigned, answer these questions for any one essay (you must of course do all the readings). You may keep these one-pager with you during the class session to help your participation, but they will be turned in at the end of class. The quality of your response will impact your participation grade.

3. Class presentation on January 25 (and handout).
4. Depending on how discussion in class is going, we may or may not assign students to prepare and present comments on particular readings in each class section. My preference is to avoid this but if class discussion lags we will employ this method and everyone will be required to make a presentation.
5. Completion of four major papers: two eight page papers, one six-eight page paper, and one twelve-fifteen page paper. Deadlines are listed in the plan of study.

Composition of Overall Grade

Weekly Preparation and Participation (Includes Evaluation of Weekly One-Page Preparation Paper): 20%

Presentation and Handout in Class January 25: 5%

Written Papers (75%)

   Paper #1, due January 27 (6 pages): 15%
   Paper #2, due February 17 (6-8 pages): 15%
   Paper #3, due March 2 (8 pages): 15%
   Paper #4 (12-15 pages): 30%
Note on In-Class Conduct

We will have a ten-minute break during the middle of class, so do not interrupt the seminar and disturb me or your colleagues by getting up to go to the bathroom during class. Arrive on time (at least one minute early) and stay until the end. Bring the relevant texts to class. I would prefer that you not use a laptop or other electronic device during class. If you need to have a laptop to take notes with, you must email me a copy of your notes at the end of each class session.

We want the seminar to be a lively discussion. Feel free to challenge or ask questions concerning the arguments of the authors, or the professor or your fellow students. The challenge and dialogue is both the substance of democratic discussion and also the way we are going to learn together. That said, of course we want to keep our discussion, however lively it may become, within the bounds of basic civility: criticize the argument of the person, not the person of the argument. That does not mean we should make no effort to distinguish better from worse, more plausible from less plausible, arguments. It rather means we should treat each other as compatriots who are all seeking to find and further develop the strongest possible analyses and arguments.

Required Texts:

Robert Dahl, On Democracy

Stephen Elkin. Reconstructing the Commercial Republic

Clarissa Hayward and Todd Swanstrom, eds. Justice and the American Metropolis

Martha Nussbaum. Cultivating Capabilities

Douglas A. Hicks and Thad Williamson, eds. Leadership and Global Justice (To be circulated at PDF. If you wish to buy a hard copy, these should be available by early March.)

Thad Williamson and Martin O’Neill. Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond (To be circulated at PDF. If you wish to buy a hard copy, these should be available by early March.)

Erik Olin Wright, Envisioning Real Utopias

Part One: Classic Democratic Theory and Contemporary Problems; Twentieth-Century Political Thought


**January 25.** Readings from Catherine Zuckert, ed. *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. All students will select one classic political thinker featured in the Zuckert book to study this week and make a 10 minute presentation on the thinker in class, as well as prepare a detailed written outline of the thinker’s ideas to share with your classmates. I will provide a model of what this should look like in the previous week. You will be expected to read the essay in the Zuckert book about the thinker, as well as excerpts from an assigned primary text of about 100 pages. You also will be required to meet me with me one or two days before class on the 25th to go over a draft of your presentation. (You must have a draft completed prior to the meeting.)

Thinkers to be covered will vary depending on final enrollment, but they will be assigned in the following priority: John Dewey, Carl Schmitt, Antonio Gramsci, Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Hayek, Isaiah Berlin, Richard Rorty, Jurgen Habermas *, Alasdair McIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Oakeshott, Michel Foucault. (I will give a slight degree-of-difficulty bonus to whoever takes up Habermas. The ideas are not that hard, but the language can be taxing.) If needed, more thinkers will be added to this list. This will be one of the most challenging weeks of class and will require quite a bit of effort on your part. It is intended to model what you will be expected to do in graduate school seminars (namely, pick up something you know little or nothing about, read it, make the effort to master it, then present it to others). If all goes well, everyone will understand the work of at least one of these thinkers in some depth, and have a “thumbnail sketch” of the basic ideas of the other thinkers as well. Together these thinkers cover most of the main currents of Western political thought in the twentieth century. (Deliberately excluded from consideration this week: John Rawls, whom we will discuss in more depth later in the course.)

**Paper #1 (6 pages): Due January 27, 5 p.m.**

**Part Two: The Place of Local Politics in the American Regime; The Local Politics of Justice in the United States**


**Paper #2 (8 pages) Due Friday February 17, 5 p.m.**

**Part Three: Global Justice? Global Citizens?**


**Paper #3 (6 pages) Due Friday March 2, 5 p.m.**

**SPRING BREAK**

**Part Four: Reviving the Project of Domestic Social Justice: Liberal Egalitarianism and the Politics of “Property-Owning Democracy”**

March 14. Chapter on Rawls in Zuckert, *Twentieth Century Political Philosophy*; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. (We will read all of Parts I, IV and V, and selected excerpts from Parts II and III.)


**Part Five: “Real Utopias,” Emancipatory Social Science, and Post-Determinist Theories of Social Change**


Final Paper #4 (12-15 pages) due Wednesday April 25, 5 p.m.