

**Democracy and Its Critics**  
PLPT 403, Thursday 3:30-5  
Pav. VIII, Rm. 103  
Fall 2008

Professor M. Rogers  
Office: Cabell 147

Phone: x4-3614  
Office Hours:

**Description**

Democracy is a term that is often invoked. Yet there is little agreement on its meaning in modern times. This course examines several influential theoretical interpretations of democracy. In this course, we will mostly focus on the normative (that is, ideal standard or model) of democracy and will attempt to tease out its limitations and possibilities. As such, special attention will be given to the conceptual accounts of democracy offered by the various thinkers we read as well as the conflicts and tensions that are contained therein. Themes that are central to this course include the meaning of democracy's intrinsic worth, the role of deliberation, the epistemic and moral virtues needed to sustain democracy, the problems and possibilities of pluralism, and the role of dissent and revolution. Our investigation will be guided by several questions: What is the meaning of democracy? Is democracy the ideal form of political organization for human beings? Is democracy a set of procedures or is it a mode of existence or way of being-in-the-world? What is the relationship between democracy on the one hand, and freedom and equality on the other?

**Required Books**

John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems  
Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political  
Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition  
Michael Oakeshot, Rationalism in Politics  
Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers  
Chantal Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox

All readings marked with an [\*] can be found under the "Resources" section of Collab.

**Requirements**

This is a reading and discussion intensive course.

**Presentations**

**Every Thursday one student will be assigned to give a presentation on the reading of the day.** Your presentations are to be made available in the Discussion section of Collab for each student on **Tuesday**, sometime after **7:00 pm**. Presentations should be no longer than 15 minutes. Comments should be posted by **8:00 pm, Wednesday**, the evening before class. **Presentations are to be read in class and commented on by non-presenters in the Discussion section of Collab before you enter the classroom!**

**PLEASE NOTE: BOTH PRESENTATIONS AND COMMENTS SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO CLASS.**

### *As You Prepare Your Presentations:*

- Presentations should critically engage the material by distilling, if possible, the strengths and weaknesses of the readings.
- Presentations should not **simply** be a summary of the readings; **rather, students should engage in a conversation with the thinker(s).**
- Students should not hesitate to place the thinker(s) in conversation with one another; in fact, students are encouraged to do so.
- Presentations should also leave us with 3-6 questions to guide discussion, although we will also use comments to guide discussion
- Presentations are to be made available in the Discussion section of Collab for each student on **Tuesday**, sometime after **7:00 pm**.

### *As You Prepared Your Comments On The Presentations:*

- Non-presenters should critically engage the presentations.
- Non-presenters should critically engage the assigned readings.
- The first two points are connected. In doing the first of these (engaging the presentations), you will find a way to do the second (engage the assigned readings).
- Non-presenters should prepare responses to the discussion questions. These need not be part of your submitted comments, although that would be acceptable as well.
- Your comments do not need to be extensive, but they should be **substantive**.
- Comments should be posted by **8:00 pm, Wednesday**, the evening before class.

### *Why Assign Presentations and Comments?*

- First, philosophers can be notoriously difficult to understand and comprehend. As we read, we need a running list of places of ambiguity, insights, and clues to what the author is attempting to say. Each text is an answer to questions and concerns of the highest order. As such, this running list is an attempt to figure out those questions, the answers, and assess the worth of both. Posting is an opportunity for you to do this and for us to figure out as a group what the texts are about.
- Second, the postings become cumulative wisdom that you can draw from as you write your papers. There will be markers in your postings to pages, passages, and links among pages that become a short-handed way for you to think through the text in a short amount

of time without reading it again. (All of these texts, however, should be read again at some point.)

- Third, posting provides us with the opportunity to make our discussion dynamic and exciting. Nothing is more depressing than trying to figure out for the first 45 mins of the class what you want to ask of each other and the text. So the postings will have generated a common point from which we can move.
- PAPER PROPOSAL (5-7 PAGES)  
**Latest Submission Date:** 10%
- CLASS PARTICIPATION, PRESENTATIONS, AND POSTINGS 40%
- FINAL PAPER (15- 20 PAGE) 50%

### **Paper Drafts**

I will read at least 1 draft of both proposal and final paper if asked.

### **Excuses**

Assignments are due on the dates outlined in the syllabus. Although there may be times when something arises and you cannot turn in an assignment on time, these should be rare circumstances. You will have plenty of time, however, to prepare accordingly for your assignments. Nonetheless, things sometimes happen unexpectedly, and I am willing to work with you if a situation beyond your control arises.

- 8-29 Introduction: **Please read before coming to class**  
John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us"\*  
John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness"\*  
Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy"\*

### ***Democracy, Deliberation and the Public***

- 9-4 John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems, chaps. I-IV
- 9-11 Dewey, The Public and Its Problems, V-VI and Afterword
- 9-18 Jurgen Habermas, "Deliberative Politics: A Procedural Concept of Democracy," "Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power"\*  
John Dryzek, "Insurgent Democracy: Civil Society and the State"\*  
Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy"\*

### ***Liberal Democracy and Its Problems***

- 9-25 Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, entirety
- 10-2 Heiner Bielefeldt, "Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism" in Law as Politics\*  
Dominique Leydet, "Pluralism and the Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy," in Law as

Politics\*

Chantal Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, pp. 1-13, 36-59.

Carl Schmitt, "Democracy and Parliamentarism" and "The Principles of Parliamentarism"\*

***Democratic Action Under Modern Conditions***

**10-9 Out of Town: Reading on Your Own**

Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, chaps. I-IV

10-16 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, pp. V-VI

10-23 Arendt, Human Condition, cont'd

Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, The Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas"\*

George Kateb, "Political Action: Its Nature and Advantages"\*

***Democratic Rationalism and Its Problems***

10-30 Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," "Political Education," "The Masses in Representative Democracy," "The Tower of Babel" in Rationalism in Politics

***Race, Democracy, and the Problem of the Past***

11-6 Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers, entirety

11-3 Thomas McCarthy, "Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the USA: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery"\*

Charles Mills, "White Ignorance"\*

Claus Offe, "How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens"\*

***Radical Democracy***

11-20 Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy"\*

Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, chaps. 4-Conclusion

12-4 Student Presentations

## Writing a Political Philosophy Research Paper

### A. The Purpose of the Assignment

For this course, you write a political philosophy research paper to refine a number of fundamental skills. They include the following: (1) the ability to comprehend, reconstruct, and analyze complex, and at times, elusive philosophical arguments that have political and ethical implications; (2) the ability to argue persuasively for your own views; and (3) the ability to articulate your thoughts in a clear, concise, and organized manner. These fundamental skills, however, are framed by one overarching aim: To find a set of concerns or issues that you have crafted in the context of your engagement with the texts for this course as well as outside material you have consulted. Something must be at stake for you in this paper!

Your papers will typically be of either two kinds. One kind of research paper will be exegetical. That is, you will find some specific tensions and/or problems and/or insights within the writings of one or more of the thinkers and seek to explore its place within their writing. These research papers usually consist of close textual analysis that largely stays with the horizon of the writings of the thinker. Here the tensions and/or problems and/or insights are generated by the thinker—it is internal to their writing. **Secondary sources will be helpful here, but usually to anchor or frame your argument.** You can imagine a sentence or two that reads as follows: *‘Several important Dewey scholars have maintained x. Although this position is insightful it fails to consider y, thus giving us an incomplete picture of Dewey’s political philosophy.’* This kind of research paper can be very rewarding, since it allows you to draw widely from the writings of the thinker in question to sustain your argument. It provides you with room to say: *‘These scholars have only been able to read Dewey in the way that they do because they exclude these several important essays. I want us to now focus on these other essays in addition to the works these scholars draw on.’*

Another kind of research paper will also be exegetical, but close textual analysis will largely be subordinate to the specific tensions and/or problems and/or insights on the table. In other words, the thinkers are instrumental to exploring a larger subject matter that extends beyond them. So you may want to use Schmitt’s discussion of liberalism to raise larger questions about the problem of pluralism in modern times. You may, in this kind of context, have specific examples you want to pursue. Or you may want to distill from Dewey’s writings specific norms for democratic decision making and then apply them to some specific issue where deliberation is important, but somehow unrealized. **But notice, the question is not about getting Schmitt or Dewey “right,” but harnessing their philosophical outlook to help grapple with the issue on the table. There is a limit to how you may use a thinker for your own ends (so you cannot deliberately mis-describe what they are up to for your own purposes), but there is far more latitude in this kind of research paper. Here, secondary sources are important since they help you frame the problem that extends beyond the specific thinker.** One of the important differences in this research paper when compared to the first kind is that you are not necessarily obligated to adhere to the diversity of the writings of the thinker in question. You can easily say that while The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy creates problems for Schmitt’s position, I wish to concentrate only on The Concept of the Political for purposes of addressing this problem.

Once more, the problem is externally generated and the thinkers are central, but only in an instrumental way.

All of these distinctions are loose and so should be cautiously adhered to.

## B. Adopting a Position

You may believe that there are no right answers in political philosophy. I disagree, for while interpretation is a slow process of arriving at conclusions about a thinker's work, we are not precluded from believing that some interpretations are better than others. What makes some interpretations better than others has to do with the relationship that obtains between the argument being made by your essay and its connection to the internal dynamics of the texts under consideration, the historical milieu in which the text was written, and the nature of the problem being pursued. The strength of this relationship, I believe, moves us closer to what is accurately going on within the text. Or, this relationship moves us closer to how the thinker may best help us address some perceived problem. Notwithstanding, you should feel comfortable adopting positions that challenge conclusions developed throughout this semester. For purposes of evaluation I'm concerned to see how your argument is crafted (What, in other words, is really at stake here? Is this an argument that can be pursued within the allotted space or is it overly ambitious? Is it interesting, compelling, smart, insightful, etc?), executed (How have you organized the paper and how is it written?), and **textually based** (How do you make use of the text and do your interpretations fit with what we know is going on in the writings of these thinkers?). As such, writing abilities (e.g. proper use of grammar and punctuation, and careful, yet lively construction of prose) will be assessed alongside your engagement with the problem and texts under consideration.<sup>1</sup>

## C. Format and General Pointers

In a paper ranging from 15-20 pages, you should use section headings to indicate transitions in the treatment of your overall argument. Please use 12point font, 1in margins, and double space the essay throughout.

Please use footnotes. For example: Hobbes points out that it is competition for goods that "first, maketh men invade for Gain".<sup>2</sup> If you quote more **than four typed lines**, the quotation should be distinguished from the rest of the text by indenting **1in from the left margin, without quotation marks, and singled space like so:**

When a man reckons without the use of words, which may be done in particular things, (as when upon the sight of any one thing, wee conjecture what was likely to have preceded, or is likely to follow upon it) if that which he thought likely to follow, followes not; or that which he thought likely to have preceded it, hath not preceded it, this is called

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on sentence construction and principles of composition please consult William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1979), chaps. I-II.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (1651: New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 88.

ERROR; to which even the most prudent men are subject. But when we Reason in Words of generall signification, and fall upon a generall inference which is false; though it be commonly called *Error*, it is indeed an ABSURDITY, or senseless Speech. For Error is but a deception, in presuming that somewhat is past, or to come; of which thought it were not past, or not to come; yet there was no impossibility discoverable.<sup>3</sup>

Writing is a difficult and frustrating process, but it can also yield great enjoyment when you have found a comfort zone. Of course, essays must be written in Standard English, but I encourage you to write at a level that is most comfortable for you. Do not feel the need to employ some of the technical language of political philosophy that I may use in class. If for example the structure of a sentence gets too complex, I encourage you to reconsider it altogether. Do not delete it. Instead, try to figure out how to break it up or to restate the point in different terms. Additionally, you should treat the sections of your paper in the same way. You might even write the paper in sections, ensuring that it does justice to that part of the argument you have sought to treat. If one or more paragraphs go on a tangent, do not delete them. Instead, try to figure out what the paragraphs as a whole need to say in the context of that section to move the paper along. You should save the bits you do not use. After all, they may be relevant in some other part of the paper.

Our usual understanding of philosophy pushes our writing toward lofty formulations and initial pontifications. I encourage you to reject all of this as you begin your paper. Your introductory section should state very clearly your argument and give indication of how you will substantiate your thesis. This will require you to stick closely to the text as the foundation for the claims you will develop throughout your essay, but how closely you will need to stay to the texts ultimately depends on the kind of research paper you are writing (see above). Spend time with those passages in the text under consideration that you believe aid the development of your arguments and those that seemingly undercut the claims you wish to advance. Do not ignore those “bad” passages, those moments when a thinker seemingly goes in the opposite direction of your argument. You must make sense of those “bad” passages as well, even if it is to tell us that we should not pay attention to them. Part of the reason why you address these passages is to make the reader feel confident that despite inconsistencies or contradictions within the text under consideration, your argument nonetheless captures the general tenor of what the text does or does not say and can potentially be harnessed in the specific way that you say. In this regard you may want to write an outline. (To be honest, I never write outlines.) After each paragraph and section you write, you should read what you have written thus far. This will allow you to achieve consistency, smooth transitions, and coherence. In this regard, you will come across key words or phrases, such as, “state,” “civil society,” “truth,” “deliberation,” “public reason,” “reason,” “rationalism,” “freedom,” “democracy,” “equality,” “public,” “contingency,” “alienation,” “private,” etc. Spend time with these words in the context of the writers under consideration and define them.

Make sure to proofread the draft. In doing this, you want to check that each paragraph moves the reader forward along a path that develops your argument. Here you want to reevaluate the analyses you will have offered for this or that particular passage or claim. Do not assume that the passage does the work of explanation. I expect you to explain in your own words how a

---

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 33-34.

particular passage fits into the context of the argument. You want to think at every stage of the reevaluation what kinds of counter-arguments can be made and whether or not you have anticipated and addressed them. At this juncture you may need to take a break from the paper, perhaps a couple of hours or a day. This will give you some critical distance to better assess the paper.

Once you feel comfortable at the end of the paper, you will need to proofread once more. Now you are checking for spelling or grammatical errors that may obstruct coherence or intelligibility. You won't catch them all, but try to catch enough of them.

Well, I guess I have said enough. Have fun!

Professor M. L. Rogers