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Democracy and Its Critics

Carlo Invernizzi Accetti
CUNY City College

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DEMOCRACY AND ITS CRITICS (PSC 37900)

Spring 2021

Mo/We 12.30 – 1.45

Instructor: Carlo Invernizzi Accetti

Email: caccetti@ccny.cuny.edu

Office Hours: By appointment

This course proposes an introduction to some of the central questions in the political theory of democracy. It is based on readings from classical and contemporary authors in the field, but will also require students to engage directly with the material, by participating in a number of structured class debates around each of the questions addressed.

It is divided in three parts. The first focuses on debates that surrounded the theoretical elaboration of three key historical models of democratic government: the controversy over the relative merits of democratic rule in ancient Athens, the pre- and post-revolutionary debates over the notion of ‘popular sovereignty’ in France, and the reflections on the specific nature of the American experiment of popular self-government.

The second part considers some more contemporary debates over the specific nature and value of the democratic form: first by asking whether democracy can be reduced to a mechanism for allowing the peaceful circulation of elites; and second by addressing the question of whether democracy is capable of making ‘rational’ (i.e. ‘good’) political decisions.

Finally, the third part will focus on two more practical issues of implementation: the question of the democratic legitimacy of political representation, and that of its compatibility with constitutionalism.

Far from aiming to take a position on any of the questions we will be discussing, the course aims to deepen the students’ understanding of the *contestability* of the issues at stake, and therefore to foster debate and controversy both between and within them.

EVALUATION

a) Participation in class debates (30%)

Each of the sections of the course will end with a structured class discussion. This will take the form of an Oxford-style competitive debate between two teams on a given proposition. Students will be assigned a team and required to participate in 3 debates over the course of the semester. Each debate will require them to prepare a 2-minute presentation and to be ready to answer questions both by the opposing team and by the rest of the class (who will be serving as informal jury). Participation in these debates is compulsory and will be graded by the instructor.

b) Midterm exam (30%)

An in-class mid-term exam will be set. The exam will consist of three compulsory comparative questions relating to the readings covered up to that date. Participation in this exam is compulsory.

c) Final exam (30%)

After the end of classes two final exam questions will be circulated by email to all registered students, based on the reading materials but also inviting further reflection. They will have 48 hours to respond to both questions, within a maximum space of 1500 words each (3000 words total). Final exams will have to be returned by email to the instructor by email.

d) Class participation (10%)

Since the purpose of the class is to stimulate collective reflection and debate, students will be required to actively participate in class discussion. The level and quality of participation in this exercise will be evaluated by the instructor and assigned a grade.

e) Attendance

Attendance in this class is compulsory and will be monitored. After the first three absences without a doctor's note the student's final grade will be reduced by one point at every further absence. (Note: a similar policy applies to lateness: if you are not present in class when the register is called, you will be marked late, and after three lates your final grade will be reduced by a point, so please check your watches and be on time!)

READING ASSIGNMENTS

All reading assignments will be scanned by the Professor (from OER sources) and circulated with the students via Blackboard contents.

CLASS AND READING SCHEDULE

Class 1 – Introduction: course overview and distribution of assignments

Class 2 – Herodotus: ‘The Histories’ (selections)

Class 3 – Plato: ‘The Republic’ (selections)

Class 4 – Aristotle: ‘The Politics’ (selections)

Class 5 – Debate 1: *Is democracy the best form of government?* (AB)

Class 6 – Rousseau: ‘The Social Contract’ (selections)

Class 7 – Montesquieu: ‘The Spirit of the Laws’ (selections)

Class 8 – Constant: ‘The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns’ (selections)

Class 9 – Debate 2: *Does freedom require limited government?* (CD)

Class 10 – Madison, Hamilton and Jay: ‘The Federalist Papers’ (selections)

Class 11 – Tocqueville: ‘Democracy in America’ (selections)

Class 11 – Lincoln: ‘Gettysburg Address’ (selections)

Class 12 – Debate 3: *Does the US Constitution secure liberty for its citizens?* (EF)

Class 13 – Review

Class 14 – **MIDTERM**

Class 15 – Prezworski: ‘A Minimalist Theory of Democracy’ (selections)

Class 16 – Kelsen: ‘The Essence and Value of Democracy’ (selections)

Class 17 – Debate 4: *Is democracy just a method to ensure the peaceful circulation of elites?* (AC)

Class 18 – Habermas: ‘Popular Sovereignty as Procedure’ (selections)

Class 19 – Lefort: ‘The Question of Democracy’ (selections)

Class 20 – Debate 5: *Is democracy rational?* (BE)

Class 21 – Bourdieu: ‘Delegation and Political Fetishism’ (selections)

Class 22 – Urbinati: ‘Political Representation as a Democratic Process’ (selections)

Class 23 – Debate 6: *Is political representation compatible with democracy?* (DF)

Class 24 – Holmes: ‘Precommitment and the Paradox of Democracy’ (selections)

Class 25 – Waldron: ‘Precommitment and Disagreement’ (selections)

Class 26 – Debate 7: *Is constitutionalism compatible with democracy?* (Whole Class)

Class 27 – Review

Class 28 – **FINAL EXAMINATION**

GRADING CRITERIA

(Applicable to mid-term and final exam answers, as well as contributions to class debates)

A

A structurally sound and original argument, based on a solid and insightful comprehension of the assigned material. You state your thesis clearly and concisely at the start, in response to the assigned question. You then proceed to substantiate it convincingly through arguments arranged in a logical structure designed for the purpose. You also draw from relevant examples from the assigned reading materials. Overall, the grader gets the impression that you master the material assigned and are capable of reflecting critically about it.

B+

A tight argument based on an adequate comprehension of the assigned material. The thesis is stated clearly at the start and provides an answer to the assigned question, even if it is not necessarily original or insightful. You provide arguments to substantiate your thesis, although the structure could be improved. There is adequate reference to the assigned reading material, which demonstrates comprehension, if not insight. Overall, the grader gets the impression you have understood the material assigned, even though your critical reflection on it remains limited.

B

An attempt at an argument based on an uneven comprehension of the assigned material. There is an overall thesis which is apparent from the start of the paper and addresses the assigned question, but it is not particularly convincing or insightful. There is an attempt to substantiate the thesis through arguments, but these are not all sound and not always arranged in a logical order. There is adequate reference to the assigned reading materials, but the treatment of it demonstrates some lacunae or misunderstandings.

C+

There are some arguments which reflect some understanding of the assigned materials, but it is not clear how they cohere in an overall thesis in response to the assigned question. As a result, parts of your response appear erratic and/or irrelevant to the issue at hand. In addition, your understanding of the assigned reading material demonstrates some important limitations and lacunae.

C

There is no clear argument or structure. Some evidence of reading and comprehension of the assigned reading material is displayed, but this remains very incomplete and erroneous in significant ways.

D

There is no argument or structure and the understanding of the assigned reading materials proves to be insufficient.

F

The required task has not been completed or evidence of plagiarism has been found.