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Debating Political Ideologies

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DEBATING POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES (PSC 27700)
Spring 2021
Mo/We 5 – 6.15

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Office Hours: By appointment

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course aims to provide an introduction to the main ideologies that structure contemporary political conflict and debate. It is divided in two parts. After an introductory session on the definition of the concept of ideology, the first part is devoted to some of the ‘classical’ political ideologies that emerged over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries and still play a very prominent role in contemporary political conflicts and debates: liberalism, republicanism, socialism, conservatism and anarchism. The second part considers ideological currents that emerged most prominently over the course of the 20th century such as feminism, anti-racism and ecologism. The course ends with a session on the ideology of the ‘end of ideology’ as a way of gauging the question of the continued pertinence of the category of ideology in the 21st century.

Far from aiming to take sides or defend any ideological tradition in particular, the purpose of this course is to deepen the students’ understanding of the complexity and contestability of the issues at stake, in order to provide them with a conceptual ‘map’ to orient themselves amongst the different possible answers that are generally provided to enduring political questions. In keeping with this aim, the course involves a large component of class discussion and debate. About half the classes consist in lectures on exemplary texts from the various ideological traditions to be considered. The other half will consist in structured class debates on issues that emerge from within these traditions. Participation in these debates will be mandatory and graded, inasmuch as they form an integral part of the course.

EVALUATION

a) Participation in class debates (30%)

Each of the ideological traditions covered during the course will form the object of a structured class debate. 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 4 debates over the course of the semester. Each debate will require them to prepare a 3-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 (25%)

After the end of the first part of the course an in-class mid-term exam will be set. The exam will consist of two compulsory comparative questions relating to the readings covered up to that date. Participation in this exam is compulsory.

c) Final exam (30%)

During the last class of the term an in-class final exam will be set. The exam will consist of two compulsory comparative questions relating to the readings and class discussions from the whole course. Participation in this exam is compulsory.

d) Class participation (15%)

Since the purpose of the class is to stimulate collective reflection and debate, students will be required to actively participate in class discussion during lecture sessions and ask questions during the debate sessions. The quality of participation 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.

PART I

Liberalism

Class 2 – John Stuart Mill: ‘On Liberty’ (selections)

Class 3 – Debate: ‘The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it’ (AB)

Republicanism

Class 4 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau: ‘The Social Contract’ (selections)

Class 5 – Debate: Is it possible to force someone to be free? (CD)

Socialism

Class 6 – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: ‘The Communist Manifesto’

Class 7 – Debate: ‘Collective freedom requires the abolition of private property’ (EF)

Conservatism

Class 8 – Edmund Burke: ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’

Class 9 – Debate: ‘Civil society is the offspring of convention and convention must be its law’ (AC)

Fascism

Class 10 – Benito Mussolini and Emilio Gentile: ‘The Doctrine of Fascism’ (selections)

Class 11 – Debate: ‘The rights of the State express the real essence of the individual’ (BE)

Anarchism

Class 8 – Errico Malatesta: ‘Anarchy’ (selections)

Class 9 – Debate: ‘Is state power ever legitimate’ (AC)

Class 10 – Review

Class 11 – IN-CLASS MIDTERM EXAM

Class 12 – Feedback on Midterm Exams

PART II

Americanism

Class 13 – Thomas Jefferson: ‘Declaration of Independence’

Abraham Lincoln: ‘Gettysburg Address’

Richard Hofstadter: ‘The American Political Tradition’ (selections)

Barack Obama: ‘A More Perfect Union’

Class 14 – Debate: ‘America is the land of freedom and opportunity’ (DF)

Anti-Racism

Class 15 – Martin Luther King: ‘Letter From Birmingham City Jail’

Malcolm X: ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’

Class 16 – Debate: ‘The struggle for racial emancipation is a struggle for racial integration’ (AE).

Feminism

Class 17– Simone de Beauvoir: ‘The Second Sex’ (selections)

Class 18 – Debate: ‘Women’s possibilities have hitherto been suppressed and lost to humanity. It is high time they be permitted to take their chances in their own interest and in the interest of all’ (BD)

Environmentalism

Class 19 – Andrew Dobson: ‘Green Political Thought’ (selections)

Class 20 – Debate: ‘Nature has intrinsic, not just instrumental, value’ (CF)

The end of ideology?

Class 21 – Francis Fukuyama: ‘The End of History’

Class 22 – Debate: ‘The triumph of the West is evident in the total exhaustion of viable alternatives to Western liberal democracy’ (Whole class)

Class 23 - Review

Class 24: FINAL EXAM (IN CLASS)

GRADING CRITERIA

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.

[NOTE: Failure to participate or hand in any of the required assignments will result in an automatic F grade for that exercise.]