Democracy: Ancient and Modern

Spring 2015

DEMOCRACY: ANCIENT AND MODERN

(CLST 275, HISTORY 234, POLSCI 211)

TTh 1:25-2:40, Gross Hall 103

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Course description:

The ancient Greeks invented democracy, and it remains their most famous legacy. How can understanding democracy as it was conceived and practiced in ancient Greece contribute to our own understanding and practice of democracy? Does modern democracy fulfill the promise of ancient democracy, or betray its fundamental tenets? In this class, we will explore these questions through a comparative study of Athenian and American democracy. The goal of the course is to promote critical reflection on central aspects of democracy that continue to be matters of concern and debate, including freedom, equality and rights; constitutions and institutions; citizenship; rhetoric; decision-making; foreign policy; corruption; religion and hope. We will draw on philosophy, history, drama, short stories, cinema, political speeches, evidence from material culture, and even graduation addresses. The course will offer students with a wide range of interests (e.g., politics, public policy, ethics, law, literature, history, the ancient world) a unique opportunity to look at democracy through a fresh lens.

Several sessions of the course will be taught by outside visitors: Jon Favreau (President Obama’s former chief speechwriter) and Charles Hill (diplomat-in-residence at Yale; former special consultant on policy to the secretary-general of the United Nations) will join Professors Ryan Balot and Melissa Schwartzberg (leading scholars working on democracy) to help students relate expert knowledge to real-world experience. Students will have the opportunity to interact with these guests inside and outside of the classroom during their visits to Duke. During the second half of the semester, four class meetings will be designated “seminar sessions.” During these days, the class will be divided into smaller seminar groups. For each session, a different “team” of students will lead the
discussion. The team's job is to help "set the agenda" for our discussion by identifying a few questions or points of interest that arise from the readings or are related to the readings.

Textbooks


Grading

- **Attendance, class participation, and quizzes (15%)**: Please come to class having read the assigned reading and answered the reading questions indicated on the course schedule for that date. You are to write out your answers to the reading questions. In addition, on the same sheet of paper, please write one question of your own prompted by the readings. These will be collected from time to time and will count towards your participation grade. There may also be occasional, brief, unannounced reading quizzes. These will count towards the class participation grade. Students will lead/participate in seminars and complete any assignments given by visitors.
- **Papers (30%)**: You will be asked to write two short (5 page) analytical papers on the themes covered.
- **Midterm (25%) and Final (30%) Exams**: We will have midterm and final exams. Please see Course Schedule for dates.

Policies

- **Academic dishonesty**: Students are expected to adhere to the Duke Community Standard. See online.
- **Attendance and participation**: Students are expected to attend each class and complete assignments on time. Students are excused from class and may make arrangements to make up missed work in the following four circumstances: illness, personal emergencies, religious observance, and varsity athletic participation. Please see the Trinity College Undergraduate Handbook of Academic Requirements for procedures to follow in these circumstances.

Course Schedule

* denotes a reading available in the Resources folder on the Sakai course site

**UNIT 1: DEMOCRATIC VALUES: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY**

1/8 (Th): *Declaration of Independence*; Kurt Vonnegut, *Harrison Bergeron*

Reading questions:

(1) What does the *Declaration of Independence* mean by a “self-evident truth?” In what self-evidently true sense can we say that “all men are created equal”?

(2) Would you like to live in the America of 2081 described in *Harrison Bergeron*? What aspects of this society are appealing? Appalling?
(3) Does the society portrayed in *Harrison Bergeron* represent the fulfillment of the ideal of equality of the *Declaration of Independence*, or a perversion of the concept of equality in the *Declaration*?

**1/13 (T):** Aristotle, *Politics 3.12, 5.9, 6.1-5* (Lord, pp. 103-4, 165-7, 182-90)*; Pericles’ Funeral Oration* (Herrman, pp. 11-21)

Reading questions:

(1) In *Politics* 6.2, Aristotle presents (but does not necessarily endorse) the democratic views of freedom and equality. How do democrats define these terms? Do they conflict? Why or why not?

(2) Aristotle argues that it is a mistake to “aggregate” everything in a society according to the presupposition or defining principle of the regime (6.1). That is, it would be a mistake for a democracy to organize everything according to equality (cf. *Politics* 5.9). Why does he hold this opinion? Does our discussion of *Harrison Bergeron* support Aristotle’s reasoning?

(3) According to Pericles, what are the key features of the Athenian democratic regime?


Reading questions:

(1) Why does Tocqueville believe that equality is more fundamental to American democracy than liberty? Do you agree?

(2) In *Idiots First*, what is the cosmic universal law? What does Ginsburg mean when he says “I ain’t in the anthropomorphic business.” (p. 101) How is this principle embodied in each of the people who oppose Mendel?

(3) Does *Idiots First* raise any concerns about the commitment to equality in our society? If so, what?


Reading questions:

(1) Cartledge and Edge argue that the Athenians recognized individual liberty; Rahe argues that they did not. What is most difficult piece of evidence for each position? Which article did you find more persuasive?

(2) What, according to Hauerwas, is the problem with the prominence of “rights talk” in contemporary American society?

(3) Given Hauerwas’ critique, would we be better off if Jefferson had revised the *Declaration of Independence* to remove the language about rights? Why or why not?

**UNIT 2: DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONS**

**1/22 (Th):** Lang, *The Athenian Citizen*, pp. 2-18; Old Oligarch, *Constitution of the Athenians*; John Thorley, *Athenian Democracy, Ch. 3*

Reading questions:
(1) According to the Old Oligarch, what has made Athens' constitution so successful?

(2) On p. 46 the Old Oligarch writes that “except for minor changes here and there…significant alterations [to Athenian society] cannot be made without taking something away from democracy.” How and in what ways does Athens’ commitment to democracy characterize her social attitudes, festivals, attitudes toward empire, form of military, and workings of courts and boule? List some examples.

**1/27 (T):** U.S. Constitution*; Federalist Papers 9,* 10,* 47,* 51*

Reading questions:

(1) According to the Federalists, what is the key problem that the US Constitution is designed to address?

(2) What devices does the Constitution use to address this problem?

(3) Describe the Federalists’ view of ancient democracies.

**1/29 (Th):** Burke, “Speech to the Electors at Bristol”; Federalist 57*; Brutus, Essay III

Reading questions:

(1) According to Burke, should a representative vote according to the will and preferences of his constituents? Why or why not?

(2) What does “Brutus” mean when he writes that representatives should “resemble those who appoint them” as a “sign” to the “thing signified”? Is this a good goal? A realistic one?

(3) According to Madison, what mechanisms or devices encourage representatives to be faithful to their constituents? Do you think American politics supports Madison’s confidence in these devices?

**UNIT 3: DEMOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE AND DECISION-MAKING**

**2/3 (T):** Plato, Republic, 487e-489e and 514a-520e; Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 61-98 (focus on pp. 87-98); Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”*; Optional: "Know it all: Can Wikipedia Conquer Expertise?"

Reading questions:

(1) Consider the “ship of state” metaphor in Plato’s Republic. Whom do the ship-owner, sailors, and true pilot represent? How does this metaphor critique the suitability of democratic knowledge to rule the state?

(2) Consider the image of the cave in Plato’s Republic. How might this image suggest problems for the rule of expert knowledge and democratic knowledge alike?

(3) Identify the two types of centralization found in Tocqueville. Explain these concepts in your own words. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of the kind of decentralized administration found in America?

(4) Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales cites Hayek’s article as an inspiration behind Wikipedia. Does Wikipedia’s "success" vindicate Hayek and constitute an argument for democratic knowledge against expert knowledge? Why or why not?

**2/5 (Th):** Melissa Schwartzberg, “Equality and Knowledge in Athenian Democracy” (Ober, "Classical Athenian Democracy and Democracy Today”*; Aristotle, Politics 1.1-2, 12; 3.1, 4-13; 16; 4.9; 6.2; 7.8, 14)
1. According to Aristotle, who is a citizen? What are the defining traits of a good citizen?

2. In deciding who should rule in a particular polis, what factors are important to keep in mind?

2a. In particular, under what circumstances should "the many" rule, and what are the advantages and disadvantages to giving them political power?

2/10 (T):  Plato, Protagoras 309a-329b; Nicholas Denyer, “The Political Skill of Protagoras”*

Reading questions:

(1) Name three devices from Democratic Athens that, according to Denyer, produced rational, non-coercive ways of producing harmonious agreement among citizens.

(2) How does Protagoras determine his fee? How is this similar to the other democratic devices for achieving rational consensus?

(3) Protagoras argues that citizens learn how to do politics from birth as they grow up in the polis. This view seems to undermine his ability sell his wares, that is, the ability to teach politics. After all, if we learn politics naturally, why do we need a teacher like Protagoras? Has Protagoras contradicted himself and rendered his services superfluous? Why or why not?

(4) To what extent are Athens’ democratic devices for achieving consensus confined to democracies? Can you think of similar examples in non-democratic societies? In contemporary America?

(5) Do you think democratic devices for achieving consensus would work in resolving contemporary disputes, for example, the dispute between Israel and Palestine over Gaza? Why or why not?

UNIT 4: DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

2/12 (Th): Plato, Crito*; Lysias 16; Xenophon, Oeconomicus 11

Reading questions:

(1) What arguments do the ‘laws of Athens’ provide for Socrates’ obligation to remain in the city to face the death penalty?

(2) Does our decision to live in a country and make use of its resources constitute a tacit consent to be governed by its laws?

(3) According to the evidence of Lysias and Xenophon, what are some duties and qualities of an Athenian citizen?


Reading questions:
(1) According to Coolidge, what is the most important duty of an American citizen? Why does he single out this duty?

(2) If a pro-democracy ancient Athenian were to walk into our classroom, what criticisms might he offer in response to Coolidge’s views?

(3) According to Lincoln, what is the key to the perpetuation of our democratic political institutions?

2/19 (Th): Tom Cole; Edward Everett Hale, *The Man without a Country*; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

Reading questions:

(1) What does Hale’s story tell us about patriotism? Does Nolan love America simply because it is his “own” country regardless of her values? Or does he love principles such as freedom and hence America inasmuch as she happens to embody them?

(2) On p. 16, Nolan tells the narrator: “‘And for your country, boy,’ and the words rattled in this throat, ‘and for that flag,’ and he pointed to the ship, ‘never dream a dream but of serving her as she bids you, though the service carry you through a thousand hells. No matter what happens to you, no matter who flatters you or who abuses you, never look at another flag, never let a night pass but you pray to God to bless that flag.’” Do you agree with this sentiment? Or does the thought of loyalty to a country “no matter what” strike you as dangerous? Is patriotism a virtue or a vice?

(3) How does Martin Luther King Jr. define civil disobedience?

(4) Does MLK’s advocacy of civil disobedience contradict Lincoln’s advocacy of reverence for the law? What about the Crito’s argument for respecting the laws’ authority?

UNIT 5: DEMOCRATIC RHETORIC


Reading questions:

(1) Funeral orations have been called “the invention of Athens” because they were a fundamentally democratic form of discourse. What democratic features can you identify in Plato, *Menexenus* and Lysias, *Oration 2*?

(2) As I will point out in the lecture, Plato exposes two dangers of democratic rhetoric— (i) pandering to the people and (ii) manipulating the people. Can you find examples of pandering and/or manipulation in these funeral addresses? In contemporary political discourse?

(3) Is Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address also a democratic speech? What democratic features does it share with Athenian funeral addresses?

2/26 (Th): Jon Favreau (Barack Obama, *Keynote Speech at 2004 Democratic National Convention* (See video [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJL_ejQXg18); see transcript [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJL_ejQXg18)); *2007 Jefferson-Jackson Dinner Speech*; *2nd Inaugural*: rescheduled for April 21.
Reading questions:

(1) What democratic virtues do we find Vonnegut promoting in the Rice graduation address?

(2) What, according to Vonnegut’s Rice address, is the purpose of higher education? Do you think a Duke education promotes this goal?

(3) What do you think about Vonnegut’s faith in information over "guessing"? (See Southampton College address.) Can we (i.e., citizens of democratic America) really move past "guessing" to rely completely on information? Can a democracy really be ruled by persons other than those who believe that "what really matters is being listened to"?

3/5 (Th): Midterm Exam

UNIT 6: DEMOCRACY AND FOREIGN POLICY

3/17 (T): Charles Hill, “From Democracy in America to American Democracy in the World”; Readings: Pericles Funeral Address; Aristotle, Politics 3.7-9; Hamilton, Federalist 6; Friedman, "Democracy Is in Recession"; Hill, ISIS's Sledgehammer against Civilization


Reading questions:

(1) What is Thucydides' view of human nature? Consider especially the account of the plague (pp. 46-50).

(2) Why does Pericles encourage the Athenians to defend their empire? How, if at all, might his reasons relate to Thucydides’ view of human nature?


Reading questions:

(1) Does the entire Mytilenian incident support Cleon’s contention that “a democracy is not capable of ruling an empire” (p. 67)?

(2) Why did the Sicilian expedition fail? Can you find a passage in last class’ readings where Athens’ downfall is foreshadowed?

(3) “When one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that.” (p. 103) What does this quotation from the Melian dialogue mean? To what extent does it represent Thucydides’ outlook on foreign policy?

Reading Questions:

(1) What is George Washington’s advice regarding foreign policy? Is there any relationship between the principles undergirding his domestic and foreign policy advice?

(2) Compare Washington’s approach to foreign policy with that of Thucydides. Do they fundamentally agree or disagree?

(3) What arguments does Beveridge give in favor of American imperialism?

(4) What are William Jennings Bryan’s arguments against a war of conquest in the Philippines (and, by extension, against American empire)? How well does he respond to Beveridge’s arguments?

UNIT 7: CORRUPTION, DEMAGOGUERY AND THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY

3/31 (T): Courtney Monahan; Aristophanes’ Wasps (Part 1) (Part 2)*

Reading Questions:

(1) What does Aristophanes convey by characterizing the jurors as wasps?

(2) What deficiencies of democracy are hinted at in this play? Is Aristophanes highlighting problems with democracy itself or with the corruption of democracy?

(3) What does ContraCleon’s failure to restrain his father say about the Athenian democracy’s capacity to deal with demagogues?

4/2 (Th): Seminar: “Democracy and the Tyranny of the Majority?” (Plato, Apology of Socrates*; read a modern historian’s perspective on whether Socrates was actually guilty here)

(1) What are the charges that Socrates’ faces in the Apology?

(2) How well does Socrates answer these charges?

(3) What counter-penalty does Socrates propose after he is convicted? Why do you think he suggests this particular punishment?

(4) Was the Athenian jury right to convict Socrates? Was he guilty of the charges brought against him? Or is this a case of the tyranny of the majority trampling on individual freedom?

4/7 (T): Ryan Balot, “The Platonic Critique of Democratic Tyranny” (Plato, Gorgias pp. 792-95, 826-69)

UNIT 8: RELIGION & DEMOCRATIC HOPE


(1) Carter calls "separation of church and state" a "peace treaty." What does he mean by this? Why might democracy and religion be in conflict?
(2) What, according to Carter, was the origin of the metaphor of the wall of separation of church and state?

(3) Carter argues by presenting a number of historical examples that "our public conversation would have been impoverished, not enriched" had we "kept religion out of public life." What examples does he provide to illustrate this claim? Do you find them compelling?

(4) Why, according to Osborne, is it difficult to imagine Athenian democracy without religion?


Reading Questions:

(1) What is Thucydides' view of hope? Pay attention to the treatment of hope in four episodes: (i) Debate in Sparta in 432 AD; (ii) Mytilenian Debate; (iii) Melian Dialogue; (iv) Athens’ defeat in Sicily.

(2) How does Lasch define progressivism? What are its characteristic traits? Why is he critical of this tradition?

(3) How does Lasch distinguish hope from optimism?

4/16 (Th): Seminar: "Democratic Corruption and Hope" (movie: “All the King’s Men”)

Discussion Questions:

(1) Consider the character of Willie Stark. What motivates him? Do his motivations change as the film progresses?

(2) To what extent does Willie Stark’s fate “echo the kind of doom that democracy may invite upon itself”?

(3) Consider the treatment of demagoguery in Aristophanes’ *Wasps* or Plato’s *Trial of Socrates*. Have we really solved democratic corruption by addressing the tyranny of the majority, as Madison had hoped?


Paper 2 Due

4/27 (M): Final Exam 9AM-12 NOON