

Political Science 493: Issues in Political Theory
Politics and Film: American Exceptionalism and the Politics of the Other
Fall 2014
Thursdays 5-8:50

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Office Hours: T, TH 12:30-1:50

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine the connection between the ideas of American exceptionalism and the conceptualization of the Other through the texts of political theory and film. It specifically examines how American films (i.e. both films made about America and by American film makers) represent, interpret and challenge conventional ideas about American exceptionalism and America's relationship to other nations, lands, and peoples. The course is divided into two major sections. The first section looks to films and texts that represent ideas at the core of American exceptionalism including popular sovereignty, republicanism, democracy and liberalism. The second section of the course then addresses the ways in which dominant narratives about America and American identity are replicated and challenged vis-à-vis the possibility of the Other's emergence. In this section we look at such varying dynamics as communism and the Cold War, Islamic fundamentalism and the war on terror, and immigration and the shoring up of borders. Throughout this section, we will examine and problematize the ways in which the framing of non-Americans (and those who are deemed not quite American) helps to conjure up and develop a vision of American identity that challenges earlier conceptualizations of "the Republic."

The goals of the course are:

*To acquire knowledge of key political ideas that influence conceptions of American exceptionalism.

*To analyze and evaluate political claims, concepts and subtexts shaping US films.

*To develop critical methods appropriate for reading the visual language of film, and the written texts of political theory.

*To create an original and thoughtful cultural-political analysis of a politically- charged film .

REQUIREMENTS

Readings: The readings will come from three separate sources. Some of the readings will come from the following three required texts available at the Western Student Associated Bookstore and at many online retailers. A smaller set of readings will be available to you via electronic course reserves that are accessible through the Canvas page dedicated to this

course. And finally, there will be a few readings available online. The URL's of these readings are included in the syllabus. Please let me remind you that you are responsible for all of the readings in this course and are expected to **bring the texts with you** to class. **Failure to bring readings to class will result in a zero for participation on that day.** The required texts for purchase are the following:

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, University of Chicago, 2000

Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, Verso, 2009

Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, Vintage, 1997

Please take note: This is a reading intensive course. You must set aside sufficient time, space and energy for reading and rereading what are often *difficult* texts. You will be expected to discuss these readings cogently and thoughtfully during class time, so please be prepared and **do the reading!**

Films: Other than on one occasion the films will all be viewed in class. Please take note that in some cases the films' visual content or subject matter may be disturbing. It is up to each student to assess his or her tolerance for violence, racism, sexuality and language.

Classroom Participation: Given the small number of students this course will be treated as a seminar that requires the participation of all students. I expect that you will attend every class. **Missing more than two class periods without an excused absence will have severe consequences on your grade.** I highly encourage you to come to class faithfully, prepared, and on time. I also expect all students to participate in seminar discussion. This includes but is not limited to asking questions and expressing your opinions about the readings and films. Twenty percent (20%) of your grade will be assessed based on your participation in the course. The success of the course is predicated on student discussion. It is important to note that I expect all students to show each other respect and tolerance.

Participation grades will be assessed as follows:

A= frequent and thoughtful participation in seminar; consistent and prepared attendance.

B= intermittent but thoughtful participation in seminar; consistent and prepared attendance

C= infrequent participation or careless participation in seminar and consistent and prepared attendance

D= no participation in seminar discussions but consistent attendance and preparedness

F= no participation in seminar discussions and inconsistent attendance or demonstrates lack of preparedness.

Discussion Policy: I will not provide long formal lecture in this course. While I often will begin the class with a set of opening remarks and context for the themes of the week, the majority of the course will be predicated on your discussion. **In order to prepare for every class, please come with at least three written reading questions that you would like to discuss. I will collect these questions at the end of each class period.**

Writing Assignments:

Critical response essays: Throughout the quarter you will be required to write **3** critical response essays worth ten percent (**10%**) each for a total of thirty percent (**30%**) of your final grade. Throughout the quarter there are six possible due dates for these critical response essays. Please choose three. These essays will be approximately 2-3 double-spaced pages in which you will engage the written and visual assignments for the section in a thoughtful, intelligent and analytic manner. You should provide a scholarly summary of the arguments of the written text, and compare or contrast how the film engages with the same themes. These are formal assignments and as such should abide by standards of academic writing. **Due to the number of opportunities you will have to do this assignment late critical response essays will not be accepted.**

Final Paper: For your final paper you will write an original piece of critical analysis, drawing from the material and methodologies we use in class, to analyze one or two political films of your choosing. The final paper will be approximately 12-15 pages, double spaced 12 point Times New Roman font. In this paper you will analyze a film(s) of your choice that explicitly or implicitly addresses some of the themes in this class. The paper must draw on a number of readings from the course to help answer: What does this text suggest are core American political values or practices and how does this exemplify, reinforce, or challenge ideas of American exceptionalism? How does the film rely on depictions of the Other to promote or trouble the American ideal? What modes of power does this film address or instantiate? Does this example say anything about the challenges of representing these events or delimiting their effects? I will provide a clear handout on how this paper should be structured in the first few weeks of class.

The final paper will be graded in two parts. Ten percent (**10%**) of your final grade will be predicated on a one page outline/thesis statement due in the fourth week of the quarter. Your final paper will be worth forty percent (**40%**) of your final grade.

Please note: Due to the short duration of the quarter and because the readings, discussions, and papers are vitally linked, it is important that you keep up with the writing. I will only excuse late work for documented emergencies. **Non-excused work will be accepted but severely penalized. A half grade will be taken off for each day the final paper is late. I will not accept late work after the third day.**

Grading: Just to repeat, your grades will be calculated on the following basis: the major writing assignment is worth 50% (10% for outline and 40% final draft) of your grade. Your critical response essays will be worth 10% percent each for a total of 30% and your participation in class will be worth 10%.

Incompletes in this course will only be granted in exceptional circumstances and with approval in advance.

Grades in this course are awarded according to the following policy. Students earn letter grades in the following manner:

- A= Outstanding work relative to course expectations
- B= Work that is significantly above course expectations
- C= Work that meets course expectations
- D= Work that is passing, but below course expectations
- F= Work that fails course expectations

Academic Dishonesty: Students are encouraged to form reading groups, read and edit each other's work, and or discuss any component of the class with others. However, the end product must be your own (no jointly written papers and no passing off someone else's work as your own.) **Violation of this rule will result in a grade of zero for the assignment as well as a formal write up.** Each student is expected to familiarize themselves with the terms of the University's Academic Dishonesty Policy and this class will operate under the assumption that every student is guided by those codes. If you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism or any other concerns about ethical conduct in the classroom please do not hesitate to come and see me.

Disability Resources: If you have a documented disability please contact me as soon as possible in order to make sure that you have the full accommodations that you might need to succeed in this course.

Cell Phone and Laptop Policy: In this day and age we are all linked to our smart phones, I pads, and laptops. However, I ask, out of respect for your fellow students and me, that you do not engage in distracting behavior in class. This includes, but is not limited to, phones going off in class, text messaging, and checking email in class. The first time your cell phone or other portable device goes off you will get a warning. After the second time I will simply ask you to leave the classroom and penalize your final grade by 5%.

I would strongly prefer that you do not use laptops in class. Studies increasingly show that the use of laptops lowers student performance and understanding. See for example this study.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/body/taking-notes-by-hand-could-improve-memory-wt/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=pbsofficial&utm_campaign=nova_next

However, I am aware that many of the readings are available online. It is my preference that you print the readings and bring them class. Should you find it necessary to use a laptop or Ipad type device, please make sure its use does not distract you or others.

Email policy: Throughout the quarter you will probably contact me via email. In turn, I will often send you updates as well as course assignments for the class. Please note that I will only be using your Western email addresses so please check your email diligently. **I also**

request that when emailing you abide by the standards of business decorum. This means that all emails should have a subject, a greeting, and proper language. I will not respond to emails that do not follow this decorum.

Other Comments: I strongly encourage and welcome you to visit me during office hours. This will help me clarify certain issues in the course and help me to understand how the course is going for you and your fellow students. It is my goal to help you succeed. If you are having difficulty understanding the reading materials or films please come and see me immediately. If you cannot come to see me at my given office hours, please contact me to make an appointment at an alternative time. You can also contact me by email.

If you have a condition or situation that affects your ability to participate fully in class or to meet all course requirements (this may include medical or family emergencies and commitments) please meet with me as soon as possible so that we can work together to arrange appropriate adjustments.

COURSE CALENDAR AND SCHEDULE

September 25: Introduction to Course

Film Viewing: *12 Angry Men*

American Exceptionalism

American Exceptionalism: An Introduction

October 2: D. Bell, “The “Hegelian Secret’ : Civil Society and American Exceptionalism” (Canvas)

Seymour Martin Lipset, “Ideology, Politics, and Deviance” (Canvas)

Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 3-15

Federalist Papers, “Federalist 14” and “Federalist 51” (Available Online)

Film Viewing: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

Democracy in America

October 9: Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 19-55, p. 180-192, p. 220-235

Film Viewing: *Election*

First Critical Response Paper Due

Liberty and Individualism

October 16: Film Viewing: *The Dark Knight*

Please read ahead for next class as I will not be in class due to attendance at a conference

Final Paper Thesis and Outline Due on Canvas

October 23: Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 479-492

Josiah Strong, from *Our Country* (Online)

http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/107/110026/ch18_a3_d2.pdf

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty: Introductory* (Canvas)

Henry David Thoreau, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (Online)

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm>

Second Critical Response Paper Due

Politics and the Other

The Other Within: Slavery

October 30: Frederick Douglass, Excerpts from *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Canvas)

Abraham Lincoln, "A House Divided"

<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>

"The Gettysburg Address"

<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>

Albert Beveridge, "March of the Flag"

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text5/beveridge.pdf>

Film Viewing: *12 Years a Slave*

Third Critical Response Paper Due

The Other Within and Without: Communism

November 6: Joseph McCarthy, "America's Retreat from Victory"

http://www.realnews247.com/america's_retreat%20_from_victory.htm

"The Communist Threat"

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/speech-explaining-the-communist-threat/>

Michael Rogin, "Political Repressions in the United States" (Canvas)

Film Viewing: *Good Night, and Good Luck*

Fourth Critical Response Paper Due

The Other Within: Immigrants and Multiculturalism

November 13: Mai Ngai, “Illegal Aliens: A Problem of Law and History” (Canvas)
Bonnie Honig, “Immigrant America?” (Canvas)
Cristina Beltran, “Going Public: Hannah Arendt, Immigrant Action and the Space of Appearance” (Canvas)

Film Viewing: *Sin Nombre*

Fifth Critical Response Paper Due

The Other Without: Islam

November 20: Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, Introduction, Chapter 1: Parts I & II, Chapter 2 and 3.

Film Viewing: *Argo*

Sixth Critical Response Paper Due

The Other Without: Frames of War

November 27: No Class: Thanksgiving Holiday

At Home Film Viewing: *Zero Dark Thirty*

December 4: Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, Introduction, Chapter 1-3
Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics” (Canvas)

Seventh Critical Response Paper Due

December 10: Final Paper Due via Canvas by 4:00 pm

** I reserve the right to change any and all assignments on the syllabus with notice.*