

Radical American Democracy

Bard College PS 358

Spring, 2009

Tuesday 4:00-6:20

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Office Hours: W 2-4; Fri 12-1; and by appointment

This seminar is a political philosophical exploration of radical American democracy. While political characterizations of democracy see it as a form of government, this course explores the essence of democracy as a specifically modern way of life. To do so, it turns to some great thinkers of American democracy such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Ellison. What unites these radical democrats is the conviction that democracy is a thoughtful practice of individuals rather than an insitutional form of governance. As an ideal of radical individualism, American democratic thought offers, perhaps surprisingly, an aristocratic critique of the limits of democratic government even as it, seen from another side, makes possible our culture of narcissistic consumerism. Our aim is to understand the democratic spirit of radical individualism that has proven so seductive and powerful since its modern birth in the American revolution.

required texts: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Essays*, Henry David Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction*.

A Seminar

This class is an advanced seminar. You are required and expected to attend every class meeting and to be prepared. Reading the texts is only the bare minimum preparation, and is, on its own, not sufficient. The seminar format requires that you not only read, but also engage with these texts *before* you come to class.

Lateness

As a matter of respect for your fellow participants, you are to arrive on time.

Nourishment and breaks

Feel free to bring caffeine and other non-controlled substances to class. The only requirement is no loud food. We will habitually take a 5-minute break at an appropriate point in the discussion.

Assignments

The principal writing exercise in this class will be a final paper of between 10-15 pages. The topic will be of your choice, but must be approved by me, no later than November 12th. This paper is due on the final day of classes, December 16th. Detailed outlines for your final paper will be due on Wednesday, November 23rd, by 2pm. **There will be no extensions on these deadlines.**

In addition to the final paper, you are required to hand in a written assignment every week. You can take 2 free passes on these assignments, but every assignment missed after that will impact your final evaluation. Either I will assign a topic or you will pick one quotation from the assigned text and, in **200 words or less**, briefly state its relevance, importance, and interest to the author's work and the themes of our seminar. These are not informal response papers, but concise and thoughtful essays. These weekly papers are to be e-mailed to me in Word .rtf format by **9 pm on Monday evening the day before our seminar**. They will be marked and will also serve as a spur to class discussion.

Finally, every participant is required to take responsibility for one 10-15 minute in-class presentation. These presentations will cover one or more of the optional texts listed on your syllabus. The optional texts are designed to provide historical background to our theoretical exploration of American democracy and the presentations are to be informative rather than critical. The presentation will be graded.

August 31: **Introduction: Radical American Democracy**

Democracy and America

Sept. 7

Toqueville: *Democracy in America*. vol. 1 (1835): Introduction; Part 1: chps. 2-5;
Part 2: chps. 7-8.

Optional:

Arthur Schlesinger, jr., *The Age of Jackson*.

Andrew Jackson, "A Political Testament"

Carl Russell Fish, "The Rise of the Common Man 1830-1850"

McDonald, William, "Jacksonian Democracy"

Sept. 14th

Toqueville: *Democracy in America*. Vol. 2 (1840)

Optional:

George Camp, *Democracy*.

Frederic Grimke, *The Nature and Tendency of Free Institutions* (1848)

Nietzsche, Friedrich, "Twilight of the Idols"

Nietzsche, Friedrich, "Excerpts from the Notebooks on Democracy"

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All too Human*

Emerson and the Experience of Democracy

Sept. 21

Emerson, "The American Scholar"

Emerson, "Nature" §1-3.

Optional

George M. Fredrickson, "Prophets of Perfection"

Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson, The Mind on Fire* (California, 1995)

Kant, Preface CPR, 2nd edition.

Sept. 28

Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Emerson, "Nature" §4-7.

Film: *Philadelphia Story*. On reserve.

Optional

Tom Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary*.

Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson, The Mind on Fire*

Oct. 4

Emerson, "Experience"
Emerson, "Napoleon"
Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law"

Optional:

Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*.
Robert D. Richardson Jr., Emerson, *The Mind on Fire*

Thoreau and Democratic Practice

Oct. 18

Thoreau, *Walden*

Optional

(1911). "Anarchism: What It Really Stands For." New York:
Mother Earth Publishing Association.
Henry Thoreau, *A Life of the Mind*, (5-26, 131-159)
Emerson, "Thoreau"

Oct. 25

Thoreau, *Walden*

Optional

Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"
Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law"

Whitman (and Lincoln)

Nov. 1

Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas."

Optional

Kim Townsend, William James' Rugged Individualism"
George Kateb, "Whitman and the Culture of Democracy."

Nov. 8

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. "Song of Myself"

Abraham Lincoln:

"Lyceum Address," 1938.
"The House Divided," June 16, 1858.
"Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions," April 6, 1858.
"Speech at Independence Hall," February 22, 1861.
"Gettysburg Address," November, 19, 1863.

Optional:

Emerson, "Abraham Lincoln"
Daniel Mark Epstein, *Lincoln and Whitman*

Democracy and Invisibility

Nov. 15

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Optional

W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*.

Nov. 22

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison, Excerpt from Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro*.

Arendt, H. (1959a) 'Reflections on Little Rock', *Dissent* 6(1): 45–56 .[ISI]

Arendt, H. (1959b) 'A Reply to Critics', *Dissent* 6(2): 179–181 .

Arendt, H. (1965) Hannah Arendt to Ralph Ellison, 29 July 1965

Hannah Arendt and On Democracy and Revolution

Nov. 29

Arendt, *On Revolution*

Optional

Federalist Papers 10, 40,

Dec. 6th

Arendt, *On Revolution*

Optional

Thomas Jefferson, to Roger C. Weightman, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes from Virginia*

Ben Barber, *An Aristocracy for Everyone*,

Alan Keenan, "The Rule of the People" from *Democracy in Question*.

Declaration of the Rights of Man

Dec. 13th

Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction*.