

**History 281: Democracy & Dictatorship –  
from Ancient Athens to Putin & Trump  
Fall 2019 (M/W/F, 11 to 11:50am, 209 Burnham Hall)**

**John Abbott**

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**Course Description**

It was not so long ago that democracy seemed ascendant or secure nearly everywhere. Political theorists spoke confidently of an “end of history,” as most world regions gravitated towards the forms and (sometimes) even the content of democratic governance. Today, those rosy expectations of world democratic harmony have been badly shaken by a new politics of resentment and xenophobia, a furious backlash often joined with a rejection of liberal democracy’s pluralist compromises and an insistence upon a new authoritarian politics (with some going so far as to try resurrecting the ghosts of the fascist past).

These ominous trends have not gone unnoticed, least of all among historians (including many who have devoted their careers to studying the not-so-distant fascist or communist past). One result has been a veritable flood of books and articles addressing issues of democracy and dictatorship, analyses that combine close observation of current trends with careful scrutiny of the historical record. What do we mean by “democracy,” anyway? What are its practices, behaviors and norms, and how did these evolve over time?

I’ve designed this course with these questions very much in mind. The complex of democratic norms today under assault – popular sovereignty, rule of law, civil liberties, pluralism and respect for minority viewpoints and populations – has a long history, and a central aim of this course is to excavate the historical scaffolding that undergirds them. In examining the evolving standards of democratic practice, we will also examine the different forms of social organization – from city-states to agrarian societies to advanced capitalism – that have informed and shaped these governing systems. In particular, we will look more closely at the dynamic social relations introduced by industrial capitalism over the nineteenth century and twentieth centuries, and consider how these have both invigorated and threatened democratic principles and norms.

This is a brand new course, ripped as it were from today’s headlines, and as such should prove a stimulating experience for us all. Welcome aboard!

**Assigned Readings**

Jim Miller, *Can Democracy Work? A Short History of a Radical Idea from Ancient Athens to our World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018)

Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Broadway Books, 2018)

Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: the Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (Penguin, 2017)

Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (Tim Duggan Books, 2018)

Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford U Press, 2015)  
*A Class Documentary Reader* (available in three pdf files at Blackboard) provides additional readings. Additional readings also available at Blackboard (see schedule below)

### **Class Requirements and Grading**

- a) **Two exams**, a midterm and final, worth 50 percent of your grade (combined).
- b) **One essay** (ca. 5 pages) worth 20 percent of your grade. We will ask you to write an essay addressing questions of democracy and dictatorship as applied to one or another country or world region – historical experiences not directly covered in this class. Potential topics include: democracy and dictatorship in Latin America, eastern Europe, Africa or the Middle East (e.g. the Arab Spring). You will want to meet with us outside class between Week Seven and Week Ten for additional guidance on pursuing these projects, and submit a formal (if brief) paper proposal at the beginning of Week Eleven. The papers themselves come due at the beginning of Week Fourteen. You will also need to post, at Blackboard, a summary of your paper, and then join in discussion with others who addressed related questions. That **Discussion Board activity** (your own post and your commentaries on others' work) is worth an additional 10 percent of your semester score.
- c) **Participation in classroom discussion** and classroom attendance, altogether worth 20 percent of your final grade. Combined in this grade will be your online quiz scores, several of which will be assigned over the semester (see course schedule below). Each of these consists of ten multiple-choice questions designed to measure basic comprehension of key concepts and materials.

### **Course Ethics**

This course has been designed to encourage classroom discussion and the free exchange of views. The sometimes contentious nature of course materials requires that we show one another the utmost courtesy, respect and consideration so as to ensure a consistently high level of discussion, instruction and interaction.

### **Course Policies**

- a) *No phones* out during class (not negotiable). Laptops are permissible for those who sit in the front row. In those cases where students use laptops for purposes unrelated to class, they will be asked (once only) to put these away.
- b) *Make-up exams* will be allowed only when you can produce a valid (written) excuse.
- c) *Incompletes* will only be considered in cases where the student has completed all the work up to the final exam, but cannot take the final for a valid reason.
- d) *Plagiarism* in any form will be dealt with harshly. Recycling papers from the internet or elsewhere, copying other students' work, or cutting-and-pasting from other sources will be punished to the fullest extent of university policy. Count on this.
- e) *Classroom citizenship*. Classroom behavior is one of many factors determining your final participation grade. Showing up prepared, answering or asking questions, taking notes and

paying attention – these will be appreciated and duly noted. On the other side of the ledger: consistently showing up late, talking during class, using laptops for purposes other than note-taking and other disruptive behavior will also be duly noted. A special category in hell is reserved for those students who come to class, sign the attendance sheet, and then walk out. You really don't want to call that kind of attention to yourself.

f) *Religious holidays*. In those instances when classroom schedules conflict with religious holidays, students should provide us advance notification of their absence. We will in turn make every reasonable effort to honor these requests and make necessary accommodations.

g) *Disability accommodations*. We are committed to working with the Disability Resource Center in ensuring a barrier-free environment to all students at UIC. Please let us know as early as possible in the semester as to anticipated accommodations.

h) *Know your rights*. UIC is devoted to the principles of academic freedom, equality of opportunity and human dignity. Freedom from discrimination for both students and employees is central to our academic mission. Students are encouraged to study UIC's policies and procedures pertaining to these issues, accessible at the web pages of the Office of Access and Equity (go to <http://oae.uic.edu/>).

## Course Schedule

### Week One: Democracy in Crisis? Defining our terms

- M Course Introductory
- W We took these truths to be self-evident: liberal democracy, the rule of law, the discourse of rights. Reading: Levitsky & Ziblatt, pp. 1-32. Also (recommended): Snyder, 1-13; Miller, 1-18
- F Democracy and the Demos. Ancient Athens. Reading: Miller, 19-36.

### Week Two: Who is fit to rule?

- M **No class (Labor Day holiday)**
- W The social imaginary of Athenian democracy and its realities. Reading: Miller, 36-52; Pericles Funeral Oration (in Documentary Reader I, hereafter referred to as DR I, available at Blackboard)
- F Popular rule or governance by the wise? Plato's epistemological challenge. Reading: *The Republic* (excerpts, DR I, pp. 3-9)

### Week Three: Rome

- M Forging the republic: early Rome. Reading: Polybius (DR I, pp. 10-17)
- W Inequality and empire: the Republic in crisis. Reading: Sallust (DR I, pp. 17-19)
- F Legacies of Rome: the stoic and Christian inheritance. Readings: Cicero (DR I, 20-22) and Peter Brown, "Rome, Sex and Freedom," available at Blackboard. **Online quiz (covering weeks two & three) due by Friday midnight**

#### **Week Four: Might and Right**

- M Inventing the medieval state; the discourse of Rights. Reading: Aquinas, Magna Carta (DR II); Additional (recommended) reading: Joseph Strayer, *Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (excerpts, available at BB)
- W Inventing sovereignty. Bodin on sovereignty, Hobbes' *Leviathan* (DR II)
- F Inventing (and reinventing) the social contract. Locke, *Two Treatises* (DR II)

#### **Week Five: the Rights of Man**

- M Rousseau's democratic vision. Reading: *The Social Contract* (excerpts, DR II)
- W Critical reason and public discussion. Reading: Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" (DR II)
- F Reinventing the demos: capitalism and industrialization. Adam Smith & Adam Ferguson excerpts (DR II). **Online quiz (covering weeks four & five) due Friday midnight**

#### **Week Six: the French Revolution**

- M Reform and revolution: the Revolution's moderate phase. Reading: Miller, 53-72; Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (DR II)
- W Popular democracy and the Terror. Reading: Miller, 72-89; Reading: Levy in Mass, George Danton, "Concerning Arbitrary Measures and Arrests" (both DR II)
- F Reinventing the demos: nationhood and nationalism. Reading: Herder, Mazzini & Renan excerpts, DR II

#### **Week Seven: The American Paradigm**

- M Contradictions of American democracy: the War of Independence. Reading: Miller, 91-108; 1787 Debates over Slavery (DR II)
- W A house divided against itself. Reading: Miller, 108-31
- F The long arc of democratic agitation, from the Chartists to the Paris Commune. Reading: Miller, 139-72

#### **Week Eight: Liberalism and Democracy**

- M **Midterm exam**
- W The liberal tradition Reading: *Liberalism, A Very Short Introduction*
- F The argument for liberty. Readings: Mill, *On Liberty* (excerpts, DR III)

#### **Week Nine: The Age of the Masses**

- M Liberalism redefined. Readings: Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (excerpts) and Keynes, "Am I a Liberal?" (both in DR III)
- W War, democratization and state-building. Reading: James Sheehan, "Without war, there would be no state" (available at Blackboard)
- F Recasting the demos: from "community" to "society." Readings: David Harvey, "Money, Time, Space and the City," available at BB. **Online quiz (covering weeks eight & nine) due Friday midnight**

#### **Week Ten: Total War and Democracy**

- M The public sphere under siege. Readings, Max Weber on authority, Sorrel, *The Crowd* (DR III)

- W The Great Deluge: World War I and the democratic project. Adam Tooze, “World War I: A Great War under the ‘Condition of Democracy,’” available at Blackboard
- F The deserted temple: democracy between the wars. Reading: Miller, 173-212; Mussolini, “What is Fascism?”

### **Week Eleven: Leninism and the Party-State**

- M Revolutionary Russia and the Leninist Party. Reading: Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* Excerpts, DR III. **Brief research proposal due at beginning of class**
- W The Party State under Stalin and Hitler. Reading: Richard Overy, “The Party State,” available at Blackboard
- F Mao and the Cultural Revolution; the party-state in China. Readings available at Blackboard. **Online quiz (covering weeks ten & eleven) due Friday night**

### **Week Twelve: Democracy and Dictatorship in the Cold War**

- M Hannah Arendt & *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Readings: Arendt, excerpts from *Origins*, DR III; Ian Kershaw on postwar Germany, at Blackboard
- W Libertarianism, anti-communism, capitalism & democracy. Reading: McClean, *Democracy in Chains*, pp. 1-111
- F Elites against Democracy. McClean, *Democracy in Chains*, 115-234

### **Week Thirteen: Education and democracy**

- M The university under attack. Film: *Starving the Beast*. *Note: to facilitate your essay-writing, there are no assigned readings for M & F this week.*
- W *Starving the Beast*, cont.
- F Technology, Media and Disinformation. Lanchester on Wu, Meek on Guardian. **Online quiz (covering weeks twelve & thirteen) due Friday night**

### **Week Fourteen: Post-Cold War (No End of History)**

- M The Putin State. Reading: Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, pp. 15-109. **Research papers due at beginning of class. Discussion Board entries (summary of research paper) due by end of Tuesday**
- W Dangerous liaisons. Reading: Snyder, *Road*, pp. 111-216.
- F **No class (Thanksgiving holiday)**

### **Week Fifteen: Beyond the Nation-State**

- M Equality or oligarchy. Reading: Snyder, 217-81
- W How democracies die. Reading, Levitsky & Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, pp. 33-175
- F The Trump State. Reading: Levitsky & Ziblatt, pp. 176-231

### **Final exam (tba)**