

Ideas & Politics since the Founding

PSc 286.LH4 (CRN 57053)

Spring 2006 / Tuesdays 6-8 pm / Hall of the States

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Course Description

Emphasizing political theory and intellectual history, this course examines some of the origins and legacies of the United States' founding documents, the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution (1787). We will explore the ways in which these two documents--the former associated with what political theorists call perfectionism, the latter with pragmatism--have been in tension throughout American history.

With its claim about unalienable rights endowed to us by a Creator, the Declaration helped initiate the modern movement for human rights. Its assertion of universal rights has served scores of dispossessed and marginal groups seeking a more just and moral society, a program known in political theory as perfectionism. The Constitution, on the other hand, is associated with an entirely different strain of American thought, pragmatism. Rather than involve itself in the perfectionism of "soulcraft" (to take up another well-known distinction), the Constitution stands for the pragmatism of "statecraft," managing the exercise of power through a highly politicized legislative process.

The course is in three sections. In the opening section, we examine the tension between perfectionism and pragmatism in the contentious writing of both documents. In the second section, we examine three moments in American history that also illuminate this tension: the debate about slavery prior to the Civil War, the rise of philosophical pragmatism after the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century. Finally, we consider the tension in the contemporary human rights movements and other movements introduced by students in the class.

Assignments

Four short response papers (40%): these 3-5 page papers should each examine a significant question raised in one or more of the texts. Ideally some of these papers will serve as opportunities for reflection on subjects to be explored in the research paper.

Three in-class presentations (30%): these fifteen-minute presentations should emphasize the student's own response to the readings, and include some outside research to support the arguments made.

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Research paper (30%): this 20 page paper should include at least 12 outside sources in addition to any of the required texts for the class. The two primary criteria of evaluation will be (1) a clear and well-developed argument, including consideration of counter-arguments, as well as (2) responsible and critical use of evidence.

Policies

Assignments submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. The grade of incomplete is available only to students who have completed a majority of the assignments by the conclusion of the term.

Required Texts

These books are available in the GW bookstore as well as online.

- Clar et al., eds., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, Penguin, 1991. 0140154035 \$18 (list)
- Ishay, ed., *The Human Rights Reader*, Routledge, 1997. 0415918499 \$35.95 (list)
- Kramnick, ed., *The Federalist Papers*, Penguin Classics, 1987. 528pp 0140444955 \$13.95 (list)
- Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, Vintage, 1998. 336pp 0679779086 \$14.95 (list)
- McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution*, U Kansas P, 1986. 0700603115 \$14.95 (list)
- Menand, ed. *Pragmatism: A Reader*, Vintage, 1997. 0679775447 \$16.00 (list)
- Storing, *The Anti-Federalist: An Abridgement of the Complete Anti-Federalist*, U Chicago P, 1985. 382pp 0226775658 \$14.40 (list)
- Thompson, ed. *Antislavery Political Writings, 1833-1860*, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2003. 0765604035 \$25.95 (list)

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Schedule

This schedule is preliminary; specific reading instructions for all of the texts will be provided in a final schedule at the second class meeting.

I The Documents

Jan 17	Introduction
Jan 24	Reading: Maier, <i>American Scripture</i>
Jan 31	Reading: McDonald, <i>Novus Ordo Seclorum</i> , esp. chapters 1-3 and 5-6
Feb 7	Reading: Kramnick, <i>Federalist Papers</i> , esp. Editor's Introduction and Papers 1, 2, 6, 8-10, 14, 27, 29-31, 35, 37, 39, 45, 46, 51, 54, 55, 57, 62, 63, 69, 84, 85
Feb 14	Reading: Kramnick, <i>Federalist Papers</i> , cont.
Feb 21	Reading: Storing, <i>Anti-Federalist</i> [specific selections TBA]

II Legacies

Feb 28	Antislavery / Reading: Thompson, <i>Antislavery Political Writings</i> [specific selections TBA]
Mar 7	Antislavery / Reading: Thompson, <i>Antislavery Political Writings</i> [specific selections TBA]
Mar 14	Spring Break
Mar 21	Pragmatism / Reading: Menand, <i>Pragmatism</i> [specific selections TBA]
Mar 28	Pragmatism, cont. / Reading: Menand, <i>Pragmatism</i> [specific selections TBA]
Apr 4	Class rescheduled for May 2
Apr 11	Civil Rights / Reading: Clar et al, <i>Eyes on the Prize</i> [specific selections TBA]
Apr 18	Civil Rights, cont. / Reading: Clar et al, <i>Eyes on the Prize</i> [specific selections TBA]

III Today

Apr 25	Human Rights / Reading: Ishay, <i>Human Rights Reader</i> [specific selections TBA]
May 2	Human Rights / Reading: Ishay, <i>Human Rights Reader</i> [specific selections TBA]