

THE DEATH OF DEMOCRACY

course syllabus

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PSCI 7024

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Ketchum IB31

F 1:15-3:45pm

course overview

A Google search for “is democracy dead” turns up recent articles with titles like: “How Democracy Dies,” “Is Democracy Really Dying?,” “Alexa, Is Democracy Dead?,” and “Democracy is Dead: Long Live Democracies!” Is democracy dead, or dying? What does it even mean to conceptualize democracy as something that could be alive or dead? Why is there suddenly so much talk about the death of democracy, and what does that say about our political moment?

We will start out by examining popular and academic works by political scientists that aim to explain how threats to democracy develop. Lots of factors are said to be threatening democracy today: technology, climate change, the proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories, assaults on (purportedly) democratic institutions, the bogeyman of neoliberalism, the rise of right wing populism, etc., etc. We will examine narratives that highlight these and other possible threats to the life of democracy.

If democracy is dying, what should we do? Is it possible to save democracy’s life? Is democracy even something that can be saved? Is what needs to be done to save democracy itself something that can be done democratically? Or must we use anti-democratic means to extend the life of democracy further?

We will then consider alternative ways of thinking about the story of democracy, not as a linear narrative, but as a cyclical one. In the canon of Western political thought, there is a strong counter-tradition of thinking of democracy as something that is continually reborn. What alternative stories can we tell about the life of democracy? Is the death of democracy final, or can it be part of a political lifecycle, in which democracy can be born yet again?

In the next section of the course, we will consider whether democracies have an afterlife by thinking of the current threats to democracy in conjunction with Afro-Pessimist thought. What is the afterlife of a democracy like? Is democracy dead on arrival? What does it mean that the founding of American “democracy” included the recognition of slavery and subhuman status for chattel slaves? Does the original sin of slavery mean that American democracy has only ever been abortive? Can we redeem American democracy from its racist origins?

Finally, we will consider some alternatives by thinking both about alternatives in African-American political thought and in democratic theory. Does it matter how we tell the story of democracy? Does it matter that we are currently in a mode in which the story of democracy is told as a story of life and death? How else might we tell the story of democracy? How else should we tell the story of democracy?

reading assignments & course schedule

You should get yourself a copy of the following books, if you do not already own them.

- Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*
- William E. Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy*
- Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*
- Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*
- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*
- Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*
- Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*
- Astra Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone*
- Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*
- Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*

You should also have some English language version of the following (I recommend the Cambridge editions of the translated works, but you can also use the free online versions of these texts where available):

- Aristotle, *The Politics*
- Plato, *The Republic*
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*
- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Please note: the schedule that follows is preliminary, and may be revised in light of class conversations, emerging scholarship, current events, and/or professor discretion.

I. democracy is dying (or maybe it is already dead)

F Jan 17

A selection of post-2016 election commentary:

- Masha Gessen, "Autocracy: Rules for Survival," *The New York Review of Books Daily*, Nov. 10, 2016
- Turkuler Isiksel, "Prepare for Regime Change, Not Policy Change," *Dissent*, Nov. 13, 2016
- Sarah Kendzior, "We're heading into dark times. This is how to be your own light in the Age of Trump," *The Correspondent*, November 18, 2016
- Yascha Mounk, "What We Do Now: How to preserve the ideals of liberal democracy in the face of a Trump presidency," *Slate*, November 9, 2016
- Nick Robinson, "Authoritarian Democracy: A Playbook," *Dissent*, Nov. 14, 2016
- Graham Vyse, "In Defense of Doomsaying," *The New Republic*, November 28, 2016
- Stephen Walt, "10 Ways to Tell if Your President is a Dictator," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 23, 2016 (behind a paywall; file is on Canvas for those who cannot access)

F Jan 24

- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*

F Jan 30

- Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*

F Feb 7

- Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*

F Feb 14

- William E. Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy*

F Feb 21

- Steve Johnston, *Tyrannicide: Trump, White Nationalism, and Democratic Resistance* (manuscript on Canvas)

II. democracy will be reborn

F Feb 28

- Aristotle, *The Politics* (selections TBA)
- Plato, *The Republic* (selections TBA)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (selections TBA)
- Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror"
- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (selections TBA)

III. the afterlives of democracy

F Mar 6

- Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*
- Hortense Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother": Psychoanalysis and Race," *Boundary 2* Volume 23, Number 3 (Autumn 1996)
- Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* Volume 17, Number 2 (Summer 1987)
- Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 103 Volume 28, Number 2 (2010): 31-56

F Mar 13

- Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes* 29 (2016)
- Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*
- Frank B. Wilderson III, "Afro-Pessimism & the End of Redemption" in *The Occupied Times*, March 30, 2016, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=14236>
- Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* Volume 13, Number 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 183–201.

F Mar 20

- Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* Volume 3, Number 3 (Fall 2003)
- Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

F Mar 27 NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK**M Mar 30 Seminar Paper Proposal Due by 5pm****F Apr 3**

- M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Guest Editors, "Special Issue: Afro-Pessimism and Black Feminism," *Theory & Event* Vol 21, No 1, January 2018
- Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* Number 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 1–47

F Apr 10 TO BE RESCHEDULED (WPSA)

- *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe

M Apr 13 Ten Pages Due by 5pm**IV. alternatives to the death narrative****F Apr 17**

- Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* Volume 112, Number 4 (Fall 2013) 737–780.
- Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*

M Apr 20 Peer Reviews due by 5pm**F Apr 24**

- Astra Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone*

M Apr 27 Critical Response due by 5pm**W May 6 Final Seminar Paper and Narrative Reflection due at 5pm**

course requirements

class preparation

The discussions in this course will focus on the readings assigned for that day on the syllabus. I expect you to come to class having completed the reading assignment and prepared to discuss that reading critically, imaginatively, and insightfully. *Always bring the text with you to class.* It is in your best interest to use a *physical* copy of the text where possible, not an electronic version.

The material that we are studying in this course is challenging. To get the most out of this course, I encourage you to flag passages and ideas that remain difficult or confusing after seminar, and come to my office hours to talk about them.

participation

Participation includes participation in class discussions as well as participation in discussions with the professor outside of class. Only the first is required, but the latter is strongly encouraged and, if significant, can raise your overall participation grade.

Classes will consist primarily of discussion; there will be no formal lectures for this course. Students' participation in class discussion should include demonstrating both speaking and listening skills; in other words, students are encouraged to speak and to speak often, but also to listen to their peers & to respond thoughtfully to others' comments. Students should demonstrate familiarity and critical engagement with the course material, as well as intellectual curiosity. The point is not to have understood everything before coming to class – but to show up with questions, difficulties, and issues ready to explore the course material.

attendance

Regular attendance in class is essential for successful learning. In our class discussions we will not only discuss information not contained in the reading but we will also practice the critical analytic skills you are expected to develop. To reinforce the importance of attendance in this class, the maximum grade you can receive for participation is dependent upon your class attendance. Students may miss one seminar *for any reason*. Additional unexcused absences reduce the maximum possible class participation grade by one letter grade each. For example: a total of 3 absences reduces the maximum participation grade to a C; 4 to a D. This means that five or more unexcused absences result in a failing grade for class participation, and therefore in a failing course grade.

Excused absences include absences due to religious observances and documented personal, family, or medical emergencies. Whenever possible, students should inform the professor in advance of such absences in order to make necessary arrangements. Absences resulting from discretionary events (such as non-emergency health care, non-essential travel, etc.) cannot qualify as excused. The professor reserves the right to distinguish excusable from non-excusable reasons for missing class or requiring an extension for written work. The professor recommends that students who require more than two excused absences (for a total of more than three absences) withdraw from the course, but she will work with students to assess each situation individually.

Campus policy regarding religious observances states requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with

scheduled exams, assignments, or required attendance. You must notify the professor of any such conflicts *by the end of the first week of classes* so we can work out alternatives.

a note on coffee (and other forms of sustenance)

Our seminar meets at the very end of a long week. You should feel free to bring caffeinated beverages and food to seminar, especially if you believe these will help you to be on time, alert, and fully engaged in the course. If the group wishes, we can organize a coffee pool, and rotate responsibility for bringing coffee/snacks for the group. Food that is loud to unwrap or eat, noxious to others, or delicious-smelling is not allowed; an exception will be made for delicious-smelling food only when there is enough to share.

weekly writing assignments

Through weekly writing assignments, we will be focusing in this class on developing two important writing skills that are central to all good writing:

- pre-writing
- writing for an audience

Your task for each writing assignment is simple: in no more than 300 words, raise a problem or a question about the reading for that week that you would like to discuss in the seminar. You should presume that your readers have done the reading (as have you), but you may need to explain the context for the question or problem you wish to raise. This need not be a formal piece of writing, but it should be proofread for spelling and grammar issues. It also need not be a full 300 words; feel free to submit shorter assignments if you believe that you can express the question or problem in fewer words. Writing assignments are due by email to the professor and your classmates by **Thursday at 5pm**, the day before class. The intention with this deadline is to encourage you to think through the material in advance of class, leaving space for you to process and relax with the material before class on Friday. **Late assignments will receive a failing grade.** You are required to submit assignments on time for at least 11 of the 14 weeks of the semester, and you are encouraged to submit assignments for every week.

You are expected to read through the writing assignments shared by all members of the class in advance of our seminar on Friday, although you do not need to have worked out a response to your classmates' writing in advance.

The weekly writing assignments will be graded on a simple pass/fail scale. A failing grade will be awarded in those cases when the writing does not indicate a serious effort to respond to the assignment (e.g. a perfunctory question that shows no curiosity or imagination about the reading; a comment that does not demonstrate that you have done the reading; assignments that consistently demonstrate that you have *begun* but not *completed* the reading). A passing grade is an indication of serious engagement with the assignment.

If you are ever curious about how you are doing in the course, please do not hesitate to come and see me in office hours. I recognize that awarding only pass/fail grades can be disconcerting to students who want to know if they are on track to get an A or a B. If this is you, please come talk to me!

book reviews

By class on Friday, January 24th, each student must sign up to review one of the non-canonical books listed above on page 2 (excepting the first and last books we read). Any number of students may write a

review on the same book, but no student may write a review of a book that the student has previously read. Book reviews are due by noon on the day of the class for which we are reading the book. See handout on Canvas for more details.

seminar papers

In preparation for the final seminar paper, students must meet the following deadlines:

- by 5pm on March 30, a 2-3 page proposal for the topic of the seminar paper
- by 5pm on April 13, at least 10 double-spaced pages of draft material for the seminar paper, plus a timetable indicating how you intend to break down the remaining work and complete it for the final deadline. These drafts will also be shared with two classmates.
- by 5pm on April 20, a peer review of the two classmates' draft work, submitted to the professor AND to the other students
- by 5pm on April 27, a critical response to the peer reviews and updated timeline for completion
- by 5pm on May 6, the final seminar paper, 20-25 pages in length (double-spaced, times new roman, normal margins, that sort of thing) AND a separate narrative reflection on the writing process explaining any choices the author made in the revision process that diverge from what was expected or planned earlier

Extensions may be granted for the intermediate deadlines at the professor's discretion, with the exception of the deadlines on April 13 and 20, which involve classmates' schedules. Extensions will not be granted for the final paper, except in the case of a documented medical or family emergency. **Late papers will not be accepted.**

All seminar paper assignments must be submitted (1) on Canvas to the appropriate dropbox in .doc or .docx form ONLY, and (2) in paper form to my mailbox in Ketchum. This includes the intermediate assignments, as well as the final seminar paper.

auditors

I welcome auditors in this course, and I treat them as full participants in the seminar. Auditors are expected to attend regularly, to come prepared, and to participate in class discussions. I do not require auditors to submit written work, but I strongly encourage them to participate in the weekly writing assignments so as to deepen their engagement with the material. I reserve the right to ask auditors to leave the class if they are unable to meet these expectations.

grading

Final course grades will be calculated as follows:

25%	Participation
10%	Weekly Writing Assignments (at least 11)
15%	Book Review
50%	Final Paper

N.B.: Failure to complete any single course requirement will result in failure of the entire course, regardless of whether other course requirements have been met.