In this seminar, we engage the ideas of modern liberal democracy, exploring how the American system has sought to balance the deepest themes of ancient political thought against the imperatives of individual freedom, security, and economic progress that are so central to modern liberal thought. We examine the relation of nature, reason, rights, and citizenship in forming the core of the American political ethos, and we assess the institutional designs of government shaped by the Founders. We inquire into the legacy of the Founding through the slavery crisis and the statecraft of Abraham Lincoln. Finally, we search for the philosophical roots of the differences between conservatism and liberalism in the contemporary world.

Books:
- Course Reader, with timeline and notes from Prof. Staloff

Discussants: Discussants are assigned to specific questions below and should be ready to offer a reflective response to their assigned question during the seminar. Discussants do not need to prepare a formal written response, but they are encouraged to work from personal notes.

Class Sessions: We will meet via Zoom. All times are Eastern Standard Time; please adjust for your particular time zone.

Resources

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: *The Great Thinkers* ([http://thegreatthinkers.org/](http://thegreatthinkers.org/)) and *Contemporary Thinkers* ([http://contemporarythinkers.org/](http://contemporarythinkers.org/)) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Relevant pages include John Locke, The Federalist, and Tocqueville (on *The Great Thinkers*), and Walter Berns, Herbert Storing, Martin Diamond, and Harry Jaffa (on *Contemporary Thinkers*).

**Monday, June 29, 2020**

10 a.m. to 11 a.m. ET    Non-Liberal Republics

Readings:
- Plutarch, “Lycurgus,” excerpts
• Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, Part 1, Ch. 2, pp. 27–44
• Edmund Burke, selections from *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and *Letters on a Regicide Peace*
• *The Federalist*, Nos. 1, 14, 38, excerpts

Questions:
1. Would you like to live in Lycurgus’s Sparta? In the colonial New England Puritan regime described by Tocqueville? How do these systems differ from America’s form of liberal democracy? [Discussant: James Beckwith]

11 a.m. to Noon ET  Theoretical Underpinnings

Readings:
• David Hume, “Of the Original Compact,” excerpts
• John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, excerpts
• United States Declaration of Independence
• Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, excerpt
• Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, excerpt
• Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826, excerpt

Questions:
1. What was the basis of the colonists’ objections to the British government and rule prior to the Revolutionary War? [Discussant: Dominic Pino]
2. What do these authors mean when they refer to a state of nature and natural rights?
3. The ultimate ground or foundation to which the Declaration appeals is stated to be the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God; what were the possible alternative foundations, as mentioned in the letter to John Cartwright? What are the implications of making “nature” the main foundation? [Discussant: Quinn Boyle]
4. What does the Declaration mean by a natural right to liberty? By the truth that “all men are created equal?”

Wednesday, July 1, 2020

10 a.m. to Noon ET  The Creation of the Constitution

Readings:
• *The Federalist*, Nos. 10, 51
• Brutus, “Federal v. Consolidated Government,” excerpt
• Centinel, “Number 1,” excerpt
• *The Federalist*, No. 15, excerpts
• *The Federalist*, No. 23
• Herbert Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For*, Ch. 3
• *The Federalist*, No. 63
Questions:
1. What type of citizen is necessary in the new republic? In what measure does the citizen need to possess virtue? [Discussant: Jack Beyrer]
2. Why is the “extended republic” of the Constitution an innovation?
3. What were some of the main objections to the Constitution? [Discussant: Guy Denton]
4. What were the Federalists’ chief arguments against the Articles of Confederation?
5. Why study the Anti-Federalists? Have the fears of the Anti-Federalists been borne out?
6. What are the purposes of the separation of powers? What particular qualities were sought from the senate and from the presidency?

Friday, July 3, 2020

10 a.m. to 11 a.m. ET      Constitutionalism

Readings:
- Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Madison, September 6, 1789, excerpt
- Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, excerpt
- The Federalist, No. 49
- Constitution of the United States, Article V

Questions:
1. What is a written constitution? How did it revolutionize the relationship between government and the people? For good or for ill? [Discussant: Zane Zovak]
2. Is it a wise idea to “sunset” the Constitution every generation? What reasons does Jefferson give in favor of re-doing the Constitution every generation, and why does Madison oppose the plan? Whose position do you favor?

11 a.m. to Noon ET    The Slavery Crisis of the 1850s; Lincoln’s Statesmanship

Readings:
- Abraham Lincoln, Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838, excerpts
- Stephen Douglas, Lincoln-Douglas Debates, excerpts
- Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln-Douglas Debates, excerpts
- Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858, excerpt
- Alexander Stephens, “Corner Stone” Speech, March 21, 1861, excerpt

Questions:
1. What are the direct and indirect consequences of mob rule, and how are they related to “the perpetuation of our political institutions”? According to Lincoln, who has the harder task in perpetuating the institutions—the revolutionary generation or the current generation? [Discussant: Daniel Bring]
2. What were the different positions of Lincoln and Douglas on the crisis of the 1850s? Does Lincoln’s claim that the meaning of the Declaration of Independence was at the center of the crisis make sense?
3. What were the different views of Lincoln and Douglas on the Declaration of Independence?

Tuesday, July 7, 2020

10 a.m. to 11 a.m. ET Lincoln as President

Readings:
• Abraham Lincoln
  • Message to Congress, July 4, 1861, excerpt
  • Letter to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862
  • Final Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863
  • Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863
  • Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865
  • Letter to Governor Michael Hahn, March 13, 1864

Questions:
1. According to Lincoln, why is secession unconstitutional? Why is the suspension of habeas corpus constitutional? [Discussant: Clara Prizont]
2. How does Lincoln understand the relation between Union and Emancipation?
3. Before his election, Lincoln often stated that he had no intention, and no constitutional authority, to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed. How, then, did he come to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and how did he justify it? [Discussant: Darcy Bohlin]
4. How does Lincoln understand equality and freedom, the key terms of the American creed? Is there a difference between holding equality as a “self-evident truth” and regarding it as a “proposition” to which we must be dedicated? What is the “new birth of freedom,” and how does it relate to the original birth of the nation “conceived in liberty”?
5. Does the Second Inaugural read as a speech that you would have expected from the Abraham Lincoln of the 1850s? What “new” themes are found? What is Lincoln’s theology? What is the role of charity in political life?

11 a.m. to Noon ET Progressivism-Liberalism

Readings:
• Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Commonwealth Club Address, 1932
• Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural, 1933

Questions:
1. What is the meaning of the idea that history progresses? Do you accept the proposition that things have gotten better? Does the record of the twentieth century provide evidence in favor of or against the idea?
2. What, in terms of American politics, is progressivism?
3. What is the progressive’s critique of the Founding? In what way was the Founding, especially the Constitution, inadequate? [Discussant: Avi Kumar]

4. Compare and contrast progressivism with liberalism. How do both inform contemporary partisan debates?

5. How does Dewey understand the meaning of liberalism?

Thursday, July 9, 2020

10 a.m. to Noon ET  Progressivism-Liberalism Cont’d / Conservatism

Readings:
- F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, Chapters 3–9, 11

Questions:
1. What does Hayek mean by “planning”? For Hayek, is all planning bad? Why is centralization dangerous even if the motives of the central planners are benign? [Discussant: Mason Davis]

2. Why does centralization ultimately lead to loss of freedom and to totalitarianism?

3. How does central planning effect prices in a market economy? What information do prices convey?

4. Is government interference in the economy ever justified, according to Hayek? If so, in what circumstances?

5. What is the relationship of economic freedom to political freedom? To intellectual freedom? [Discussant: Mariam Wahba]