

Experiments In Democracy: New Voices in the U.S. Public Sphere

Cross-listed as Urban Studies 265 and Media Studies 281
Fall 2006

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Class meetings Wed, 9:15am-12:05pm, PH 347

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Democracy in the United States is founded on the premise that political power rests in the hands of the people, and that active participation on the part of the public is the cornerstone of successful democratic practice. But what is the public? Who counts (and who doesn't count) as the public in America? And how do different groups—immigrants, young people, sexual minorities, people of color, working people, and many others—find their public voices? In recent decades, the value and legitimacy of the American public sphere has come under intense scrutiny. As America becomes increasingly diverse, both voters and political leaders have expressed a growing distrust of public interests and priorities, and many Americans now favor private solutions to problems that were once solved by our public welfare and education systems. Some have even gone so far as to argue that the public sphere is so fragmented, so dominated by private interests, that it has ceased to be a public sphere at all.

This course in “applied civics” encourages students to interrogate their own relationship and that of their families, friends, and classmates to the U.S. body politic and to the public sphere. It is designed to teach students at Queens College how democracy works in America by asking them to participate in it. After students learn about important historical and contemporary examples of democratic action in America, they will develop their own “democracy projects,” interventions into the public sphere that they devise and implement for themselves.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. Students will learn the strengths and weaknesses of the American democratic tradition, with particular emphasis on historical and contemporary examples of democratic action in pursuit of political, social, economic, civil, and cultural rights.
2. Students will gain familiarity with a broad range of contemporary theories of democratic action, public deliberation, and civic engagement.
3. Students will design, implement, and evaluate their own democracy projects.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Class Participation. This course is offered as a “pro-seminar,” which means that we will read and discuss foundational texts slowly, carefully, and critically. Each week we will read and discuss approximately 50 pages of text. Please come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, ask questions, and listen and respond to others’ questions and comments.

Pop Quizzes. A series of in-class quizzes are required for the course. These tests will be assigned randomly and serve primarily to evaluate how well you are keeping up with the readings. They will be in short answer format (define and explain, compare/contrast, etc.), and each will take up no more than ten minutes of class time. Latecomers will not be given additional time and absentees will not have opportunities to take these tests at other times.

Exam. An exam comprised of short answer and essay questions is scheduled during the ninth week. Additional detail on the midterm will be provided as the semester progresses.

Democracy Project Proposal + Presentation + Final Report. The main assignment for the course asks you to design, implement and evaluate a “democracy project.” Each student, working either alone or in a group, will identify an issue of considerable public interest, define the relevant “public sphere” where deliberation on the issue is likely to take place, and attempt to make his or her voice heard on that issue. Students are encouraged to be as creative as possible in designing these democracy projects. We are expecting—and will approve—projects of all sorts, from conventional civics or community participation to creative acts of protest, from lobbying to direct action. You could design an intervention to take place on Queens College campus or, alternatively, begin working with a New York-based community group, political organization, or media outlet that works on or covers questions of citizenship, rights, and civic inclusion. These might include any of the following:

- alternative/independent newspapers and magazines,
- community TV and radio,
- public service announcement producers,
- public interest PR firms,
- legal defense firms,
- tenants’ associations,
- soup kitchens, food, coat and clothing drives,
- homeless and battered women’s shelters,
- needle exchange programs,
- “job-and-life-skills” programs,
- religious and other charities,
- scholarship foundations and other public service philanthropies,
- human rights and civil rights groups (including social justice, labor, and immigrant rights organizations),
- artist collectives (including musicians, spoken word artists, street theater and puppetry troupes, visual artists of various kinds),
- art museums, galleries, and shows.

Graded assignments include an initial 5-page proposal (typed and double-spaced), brief workshop-style presentations describing various aspects of the democracy project, and a final 10-page report due at the end of the semester. If you work in a group, you may write your own, individual final report or work together with your fellow group members. Group reports must be a minimum of 18 pages long with 8 pages added for each additional author after the first two. Additional detail on each of these assignments will be provided as the semester progresses.

Whatever your specific organization or activity, this assignment should ultimately make you think about what the public means to you, to probe the implications of the public sphere for your everyday lives, and to join the debate on how best to build democracy in America.

COURSE POLICIES

Grading. Participation, 20%
Quizzes, 10%
Exam, 30%
Democracy Project, 40%

Incompletes. Please note that incompletes will not be granted, except in extraordinary circumstances and only with proper documentation. After-the-fact requests for extensions and incompletes will not be considered.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism. Queens College takes cheating and plagiarism very seriously; if caught you may fail the course and/or be suspended from the college. So don't cheat. This means that you should not take the words or ideas of another person and submit them without acknowledging the original author. Examples of plagiarism include taking phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or statistical findings from a variety of sources and piecing them together, without citing them, into a homework assignment. Taking phrases, paragraphs or entire papers from the Internet and representing them as your own falls under this category. There are now sophisticated search engines that prove beyond a reasonable doubt when students have downloaded web-based material and submitted it as their own. You must always indicate when you have used an idea from someone else's work; anything else constitutes stealing from others and violates both the ethics of this class and established academic standards.

Participating in Seminar Discussion. Active classroom participation will be extremely important for this seminar, and we will work together to create a supportive and lively learning environment. All of us are responsible for reading the texts before class. If you normally have lots to say in your classes, we encourage you to participate enthusiastically. But be aware that others may want to talk too. If you don't normally talk in your classes, feel free to bring notes or brief written comments to inspire you. In order to ensure a good balance of participation by all seminar members, we ask you to pay attention to the general group dynamic. For example, in the middle of a heated discussion, it is important to make sure that everyone has a chance to talk.

Please note also that people come to this class with different kinds of academic expertise, different life experiences, and different styles (both personal and cultural). These differences can, and hopefully will, contribute positively to the substance and quality of class discussion. However, because these differences are often related to social inequalities, they can also be a source of

misunderstanding and frustration. It is thus important to keep in mind that active, respectful class participation is as much about listening and engaging the ideas of others as it is about speaking one's own mind.

As your professors, we have established the learning objectives for this course, and it is therefore our obligation to ensure to the best of our ability that we reach them. We will use a variety of classroom strategies to balance the sometimes-contradictory requirements of providing accurate summaries and commentary about the texts we read on the one hand and allowing as much free-flowing discussion on the other. At times we will guide class discussion; at other times we will allow discussion to progress without much intervention. We may interrupt discussion to make a point, or add summary or framing comments at the start or end of class.

Required Reading. A packet containing all the required readings will be available for purchase at the beginning of the semester.

Office Hours.

Jeff Maskovsky's office is Room 250M in Powdermaker Hall. His office phone number is 718-997-5129. His e-mail address is Jeff_Maskovsky@qc.edu. If you cannot make it during the office hours listed below, please contact him by email or phone to schedule an appointment. Mondays and Wednesdays, 12:30pm-1:30pm or by appointment.

Roopali Mukherjee's office is Room 202A in the G Building. Her office phone number is 718-997-2975. Her e-mail address is profmukherjee@earthlink.net. If you cannot make it during the office hours listed below, please contact her by email to schedule an appointment. Fridays, 1:30pm-3:30pm or by appointment.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Required readings are listed below and must be completed before class each week. Screenings are scheduled during class hours in our regular classroom. This schedule may be adjusted.

Part I. Introduction to American Democracy

8/30 Introduction

Review of syllabus and course policies.

Screening, *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election* (Joan Sekler and Richard Ray Perez, 2004, 47 min).

9/06 No Class (classes follow a Monday schedule).

9/13 America's Democratic Tradition

• Alexis de Tocqueville, 1996/1850. "Democracy in America." In Mitchell Cohen and Nicole Fermon, eds. *Princeton Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts Since Plato*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 398-424.

- Henry David Thoreau, 2001/1849. “Resistance to Civil Government.” *Collected Essays & Poems*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 226-46.
- Martin Luther King Jr., 1986/1963. “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” In James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings & Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Harper Collins, 289-302.
- Nina Eliasoph, 1998. *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1-22.
- Robert D. Putnam, 1995. “Bowling Alone: American’s Declining Social Capital.” *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), Jan 1995, 65-78.

Part II. The American Public Sphere

9/20 The Decline of the Public Sphere

- Brian McNair, 1999. *Introduction to Political Communication*. New York: Routledge, 16-22.
- Michael Parenti, 1995. *Democracy For The Few*. New York: St. Martin’s, 33-39.
- Ben H. Bagdikian, 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon, 1-17.
- Granville Williams, April 2001. “Bestriding The World.” Download at <http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/granville.shtml>
- *The Media Ownership Chart*. 2001. Download at <http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/front.shtml#chart>
- Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics & Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale UP, 22-61.
- Neil Postman, 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking, vii-viii, 155-58.

Screening, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (Robert McChesney and Mark Crispin Miller, 2003, 30 min).

9/27 Publics and Counter-Publics

- Nancy Fraser, 1992. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” In Craig Calhoun, ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.” Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 109-142.
- Michael Schudson, 1992. “Was There Even A Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case.” In Craig Calhoun, ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.” Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 143-163.

Part III. Deliberation and Dissent: Case Studies in American Democratic Action

10/4 Political Rights: First Wave Feminism

- Abigail Adams, 1998/1776. “Remember the Ladies.” In Edith B. Gelles, ed. *First Thoughts: The Life and Letters of Abigail Adams*. New York: Twayne, 14-19.
- Mary Wollstonecraft, 1996/1792. “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.” In Cohen and Fermon, 362-70.

- “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Seneca Falls.” 1994/1848. In Miriam Schneir, ed. *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*. New York: Vintage, 76-82.
- Frederick Douglass, 1994/1848. “Editorial from *The North Star*.” In Schneir, 83-85.
- Sojourner Truth, 1994/1850. “Ain’t I A Woman?” In Schneir, 93-95.
- Susan B. Anthony, 1994/1868. “Woman Wants Bread, Not the Ballot!” In Schneir, 137-42.
- Emma Goldman, 1994/1910. “Marriage and Love.” In Schneir, 318-24.

Screening, *Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton & Susan B. Anthony* (Ken Burns and Paul Barnes, 1999, 60 min).

Democracy Project Proposals due.

10/11 Civil and Social Rights: The Civil Rights Movement and Immigrant Rights

- Malcolm X, 1991/1964. “The Harvard Law School Forum.” In Anthony Epps, ed. *Malcolm X: Speeches At Harvard*. New York: Paragon House, 161-82.
- “SNCC Speaks for Itself.” 1984/1966. In Albert and Albert, 119-25.
- Stokely Carmichael, 1984/1966. “What We Want.” In Albert and Albert, 136-44.
- Francesca Polletta, 2004. *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*. Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 55-119.
- Saurav Sarkar, 2006. “What They’re Marching For,” *The Nation*, June 19, 2006.
- Daniel Tichenor, 2006. “Same Old Song,” *The Nation*, August 28, 2006.
- Roberto Lovato, 2006. “Voices of a New Movimiento,” *The Nation*, June 19, 2006.
- Bob Moser, 2006. “White Heat,” *The Nation*, August 28, 2006.

Screening, *Eyes on the Prize II: Ain’t Scared of Your Fails*. (Henry Hampton, Jr. 1995, 90 min).

10/18 Cultural Rights: AIDS Activism and the Religious Right

- Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, 1990. *AIDS DemoGraphics*. Seattle: Bay, 13-26, 109-42.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, 2004. “The Faith Factor.” *The Nation*. Nov 29, 2004.

Screenings, *Fight Back, Fight AIDS: 15 Years of ACT UP* (James Wentzy, 2002, 75 min) and *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (Calvin Skaggs and David Van Taylor, 2004, 100 min).

10/25 Economic Rights: Labor Struggles and Global Justice

- Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, 1979. *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Vintage, 96-180.
- Michael Zweig, 2000. *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 9-37, 115-39.
- Jeremy Brecher, 2000. “Globalization From Below,” *The Nation*, December 4, 2000.
- Susan George, 2002. “Another World Is Possible,” *The Nation*, February 18, 2002.

Screening, *American Dream* (Barbara Kopple, 1992, 102 min).

11/1 **Exam.**

Part IV. Strategies for Grassroots and Media Campaigns

11/8 Power and the Grassroots

- Saul D. Alinsky, 1989. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Vintage, 126-64.
- Francesca Polletta, 2004. *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, 1-25, 176-201.

Screening, *The Take* (Avi Lewis, 2004, 87 min).

11/15 Democratic Action Through Media Activism

- Amy Goodman, 2005. "Going to Where the Silence Is." *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, Spr 2005, 25-29.
- Paul Krugman, 2005. "The Revolution Is Being Televised: You Just Don't Want to Believe What You're Seeing." In Kristina Borjesson, ed. *Feet to the Fire: The Media After 9/11*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 175-92.
- Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke, July 2006. "Welcome to the Media Revolution." *In These Times*, 20+.
- *Riverbend Blog*. Available at <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/> Read postings from last two days.

Screening, *Independent Media in a Time of War* (Branda Miller, 2003, 29 min).

Part V. Democracy Project Presentations

11/22 No Class (classes follow a Friday schedule).

11/29 Designing An Intervention: Goals, Strategies, and Expectations

12/6 Democracy in Action: Experiences in the Public Sphere

12/13 Evaluating Civic Action: Measuring Outcomes of Democratic Action

Final reports due.