

## Political Science 382: Modern Political Theory

### *Democracy, Capitalism & Race*

Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, W.E.B. DuBois

Fall 2021

Tuesdays & Thursdays 2:00-3:15

Lubar S185

Prof. Ivan Ascher

ascher@uwm.edu

Office hours: Thu 11am-1pm, Bolton 640

(Syllabus subject to revisions - 9/2/21)

Is American society democratic? Is it capitalist? Is it racist? For better or worse, these questions are hard to avoid in today's political climate. We all seem to have an opinion on the matter, and we all seem to think our opinion is empirically informed. And yet, we also find it difficult to discuss these matters intelligently, if only because there seems to be so little agreement on what these terms even mean.

This course in modern political theory is an introduction to the work of three modern political theorists - Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, and W.E.B. Du Bois - each of whom can help us think through these questions together in a manner that is less polemical than constructive, less prescriptive than theoretical. Over the course of the semester, we shall be reading three major texts.

The first text we will discuss is Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), which one critic has described as both the best book "ever written on democracy and the best ever written on America." We will then turn our attention to Volume 1 of *Capital* (1867), which its author Karl Marx appropriately subtitled *A Critique of Political Economy*. We will end the semester with a discussion of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which W.E.B. Du Bois presciently anticipated that the problem of the twentieth century would be the "problem of the color-line." Each in their own day, these texts provided critical insights into the nature of democracy, capitalism, and race. What were these insights, and how were they achieved? How pertinent are they today, what are their possible limits? Are these texts compatible, and might we learn from their comparison? These are among the questions we will consider in this course, both through class discussions and essay-writing.

### Requirements

This being a reading- and writing-intensive course, the first requirement is that you come to class **having done the reading carefully** and **willing to discuss it**. This is a seminar-style course, which means students' participation is essential. To help facilitate our reading and discussion, you will often be given reading questions in advance, and these will serve as a basis for in-class discussions. Please make sure to bring your written answers to class. Please also **make sure to bring the books to class**.

You will be asked to write **three papers** or **dialogues** over the course of the term. These will require **drafts and peer review**. Each of these accounts for 20% of your grade. Your **answers to the weekly reading questions** will account for 30% of your grade, and your participation in class discussion will account for the remaining 10%.

Please note that **attendance is mandatory**. You are allowed two unexcused absences over the course of the semester. **If something comes up, do let the instructor know** in advance. And you can't let them know in advance, let them know after the fact: professors aren't here to police you; we just want to make sure you get the most out of your college experience. You are also expected to **meet with the instructor in office hours** at least once over the course of the semester.

#### **Books for purchase**

Unless you already own a copy of these texts, please be sure to obtain the editions specified below. We will be making frequent reference to text, and you will be citing pages in your papers; it is important that we all use the same edition.

Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (translation by Arthur Goldhammer) (Penguin). ISBN: 1931082545

Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (translation by Ben Fowkes) (Vintage) ISBN: 9780394726571

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Norton Critical Edition) ISBN: 978-0393973938

#### **Time commitment**

This course should require a total time commitment of **approximately ten hours per week**. Of this, students will spend two hours and thirty minutes in class; they will spend the remaining time engaged in reading, thinking, and writing.

#### **UWM Policies and Procedures**

In this course, we will abide by the UWM policies and procedures as described in the following document: <http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf>

#### **Students with disabilities**

Students with disabilities should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document: <http://www4.uwm.edu/sac/SACltr.pdf>

#### **Religious observances**

Students who plan to observe religious holidays should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document: <http://www4.uwm.edu/secu/docs/other/S1.5.htm>

#### **Students called to active military duty**

Students who are called to active military duty should notify the instructor immediately so that we can make appropriate accommodations. We will follow university procedures as described in the following document: [http://www4.uwm.edu/current\\_students/military\\_call\\_up.cfm](http://www4.uwm.edu/current_students/military_call_up.cfm)

### **Academic misconduct**

Cheating on exams or plagiarism are violations of the academic honor code and carry severe sanctions, including failing a course or even suspension or dismissal from the University.

<https://uwm.edu/deanofstudents/academic-misconduct/>

### **Incompletes**

A notation of “incomplete” may be given in lieu of a final grade to a student who has carried a subject successfully until the end of a semester but who, because of illness or other unusual and substantiated cause beyond the student's control, has been unable to take or complete the final examination or to complete some limited amount of term work.

### **Students in Need**

Any student who faces challenges securing their food, housing, or technology, or is struggling with mental, physical, or emotional health, and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students ([dos@uwm.edu](mailto:dos@uwm.edu)) for support. Furthermore, please notify the professor if you are comfortable doing so. This will enable them to provide any resources that they may have and can connect you to the Dean of Students as well.

### **Panther Community Health and Safety Standards**

UWM has implemented reasonable health and safety protocols, taking into account recommendations by local, state and national public health authorities, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a member of our campus community you are expected to abide by the [Panther Interim COVID- Related Health & Safety Rules](#). These standards apply to anyone who is physically present on campus, in UWM-controlled facilities, or participating in a UWM-sponsored activity.

Masks are always required while indoors on UWM campuses and in UWM- controlled facilities, with limited exceptions - environments where hazards exist that create a greater risk by wearing a mask (for example, when operating equipment in a lab with the risk of a mask strap getting caught in machinery, or when flammable materials are being used). Such exceptions must be approved in advance. Thankfully, the only flammable materials we are using are paper books, and those should be fine.

**Schedule of Readings & Assignments**  
(as of 9/2/21)

**Week 1. 2 September. Introduction to the course**

**Week 2. 7-9 September. Tocqueville (1): The democratic social condition, physical environment and mores of a people**

*Reading assignment (about 65 pages)*

*Democracy in America*, Volume One, Author's Introduction and Part I, Ch 1-4; V2, Author's Preface to Volume Two (pp. 3-65; 479-482).

*Discussion questions (answers due on Thursday in class)*

1. Tocqueville claims that a new political science is needed for a world quite new. What do you understand him to mean by this, and why?
2. What are the differences between France and America? Why are they important to Tocqueville's understanding of democracy?
3. What does Tocqueville understand by the "social state of the Anglo-Americans," and how does it shape American democracy?
4. Why are "origins" important for Tocqueville? Do you think they are still important? (Why or why not?)
5. Central to democracy, according to Tocqueville, is a certain distribution of property, wealth, income, opportunity. What are the features of this distribution?

**Week 3. 14-16 September. Tocqueville (2): Making Democracy Work**

*Reading assignment (c. 76 pages)*

*Democracy in America*, Volume One, Part II, Ch, 1-4, 6-8 (pp. 197-223; 264-318)

*Discussion questions (answers due on Thursday in class)*

1. What does Tocqueville mean when he writes that "local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science"?
2. What does Tocqueville mean when he writes of the "omnipotence of the majority" (in volume 1)?
3. What does he mean when he says that trial by jury may not be good for the litigants, but that it is "very good for those who have to decide the case"?
4. What role do each of the following play: lawyers, political association, freedom of press and of assembly, and religion?
5. "Extreme freedom corrects the abuse of freedom," writes Tocqueville, "and extreme democracy forestall the dangers of democracy." What do you think he means by this?

**Week 4. 21-23 September. Tocqueville (3): How the "democratic social condition" influences habits of thinking**

*Reading assignment (c. 71 pages)*

*Democracy in America*, Volume Two, Part I, Ch 1-10; Volume Two, Part II, Ch 1-9 (pp. 483-529; 581-616).

*Discussion questions (answers due on Thursday in class)*

1. What are the main characteristics of the American philosophic method?
2. What are “general ideas” for Tocqueville, and why have Americans never been as enthusiastic as the French for general ideas in political matters?
3. How does religion in America benefit and benefit from democratic tendencies?
4. How might Tocqueville make sense of Facebook and its influence on habits of thinking?
5. What is individualism, and do you see it still at work in today’s America?

**Week 5. 28-30 September. Tocqueville (4): Individualism, tyranny, and the concentration of political power**

*Reading assignment (c. 85 pages)*

*Democracy in America*, Volume Two, Part II, Chapters 1-10; Volume Two, Part IV (pp. 581-619; 787-834)

*Discussion questions (answers due on Thursday in class)*

1. How is individualism promoted by the equality of conditions, and how can it be conducive to tyranny?
2. Tocqueville says that ‘Americans have used liberty to combat the individualism born of equality.’ What does he mean?
3. How is democracy conducive to a taste for physical comfort, and how does it make people restless?
4. Tocqueville thought industry could give rise to a new aristocracy. What do you think he would make of the United States today?
5. Tocqueville writes of the omnipotence of the majority in volume 1, and in volume 2 he writes of the kind of despotism democratic nations have to fear. Do you think the object of his fear is the same in Volumes One and Two?

**Week 6. 5-7 October. Tocqueville (4). Democracy, Inequality, and Revolution**

*Reading assignment (c. 113 pages)*

*Democracy in America*, Volume One, Part II, Chapter 10 (pp. 365-478)

*Discussion questions (answers due on Thursday in class)*

1. In discussing the “three races” in the United States Tocqueville has a striking line in the introductory sections of Chapter 10: “These topics are like tangents to my subject, being American, but not democratic, and my main business has been to describe democracy.” What do you suppose he is trying to say here?
2. Why does Tocqueville believe changing the law is not enough to secure equality for blacks?
3. Why is inequality more intense in those states without slavery?
4. Why does Tocqueville say that “slavery...does not attack the American confederation directly, through interests, but indirectly, through mores?” (376)
5. What do you think Tocqueville would make of present-day talk of “structural racism” in America?

**Week 7. 12-14 October. Tocqueville (6): In-class film discussion & Paper due**

So as to give you time to work on your paper, there is no reading for this week; but you will be asked to watch a film at home and come to class ready to discuss it.

Write an essay on one of the questions distributed in advance. Possible topics will be distributed in advance.

- Draft due on Tuesday morning
- Peer response due on Tuesday evening
- Final draft due on Saturday evening

**Week 8. 19-21 October. Marx (1). *On The Jewish Question***

*Reading assignment*

John Cassidy, "The Return of Karl Marx," *The New Yorker*, October 20 & 27, 1997.  
Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, Part 1.

**Week 9. 26-28 October. Marx (2). *Capital: The Commodity & Money***

*Reading assignment*

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapters 1-3  
pp. 125-177

**Week 10. 2-4 November. Marx (3). *Capital: Surplus value & Exploitation***

*Reading assignment (c. 92 pages)*

*Capital*, Chapters 4-9 (247-339)

**Week 11. 9-11 November. Film discussion and Marx paper due**

**Week 12. 16-18 November. DuBois (1).**

*Reading assignment*

*Souls of Black Folk*. The Forethought (pp.1-2)  
*Souls of Black Folk*. Chapters I-III

**Week 13. 23 November. DuBois (2) No class 25 November**

*Reading assignment*

*Souls of Black Folk*. Chapters IV-VI

**Week 14. 30 November-2 December. DuBois (3)**

*Reading assignment*

*Souls of Black Folk*. Chapters VIII-X

**Week 15. 7-9 December. Final paper writing**

**Week 16. 14 December. Wrap-up**