

Political Science 284W: Democratic Theory

Spring 2025 Δ Tuesday 2:00-4:40 Δ Meliora 206

Instructor: James Johnson

Office Hours: Friday 12:00-1:30 & By Appointment

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The course this year will focus on some intersections, actual and potential, between the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism and aspects of the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality among African Americans. We will be especially concerned with the multiple relationships between power, conflict, knowledge, education, expertise, authority, and democracy. And we will ground such abstract concepts by discussing the role of “parallel” institutions primarily in the realm of education. In effect, we will be asking if ‘theory’ holds or might hold in practice. In many respects our inquiry will be speculative; in all ways it will be tentative and subject to revision. My hope is that there are general lessons to be learned from the particular topics we take up.

READINGS: The required reading for this course is difficult, it is diverse, and there is a lot of it. Moreover, none of the reading is presented in predigested textbook form. In both senses the reading load for this course might seem totally unreasonable! It is. My excuse is that the problems we will be addressing are crucially important and complex. I also respect you students enough to not dumb the material down to the lowest common denominator. It is imperative that you do the reading and that you do so prior to class.

I have ordered books (marked *) at the University Bookstore but all also are readily available from your preferred e-purveyor. Nearly all are available electronically via Rush Rhees Library. I will make the other readings available via a course Blackboard page. Several of the assigned readings are, as is clear from the syllabus, available directly on-line – I have indicated where this is the case.

I

Taking MLK Jr Seriously – Four Essays: In Cornel West, ed. 2015. *The Radical King*. Beacon Press. [“Nonviolence & Social Change”; “Where Do We Go from Here?”; “Black Power”; “Beyond Viet Nam – A Time to Break Silence” – all originally 1967.]

II

* Barbara Ransby. 2003. *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. UNC Press. [[Available via Rush Rhees Library on-line](#)]

III

*John Dewey. 1927. *The Public & Its Problems*. Swallow Press. [[Available via Rush Rhees Library on-line](#)]

Charles S. Peirce. 1877. “The Fixation of Belief.” In *The Pragmatism Reader*. Edited by Robert Talisse & Scott Aikin. Princeton University Press.

Charles S. Peirce. 1878. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” In *The Pragmatism Reader*. Edited by Robert Talisse & Scott Aikin. Princeton University Press.

John Dewey. 1939. "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." In *The Pragmatism Reader*. Edited by Robert Talisse & Scott Aikin. Princeton University Press.

IV

Jeffrey Isaac. 1999. "Is the Revival of Pragmatism Practical, or What Are the Consequences of Pragmatism?" *Constellations* 6: 561-587.

Eddie S. Glaude Jr.. 2010. "The Problem of African American Public(s): Dewey and African American Politics in the 21st Century," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7: 9–29.

Michael Dawson. 1994. "A Black Counterpublic?" *Public Culture* 7: 195-223.

Michael Dawson, et. al. 2012. "The Future of Black Politics," *Boston Review* (January-February) 12-30.

V

* John Dewey. 1938. *Experience & Education*. Collier-Macmillan. [Available via Rush Rhees Library on-line]

Tampio, Nicholas. 2016. "In Praise of Dewey," *Aeon* (July). <https://aeon.co/essays/dewey-knew-how-to-teach-democracy-and-we-must-not-forget-it>

Sarah Bruch and Joe Soss. 2018. "Schooling as a Formative Political Experience: Authority Relations and the Education of Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 16: 36-57.

VI

* Deborah Meier. 1995. *The Power of their Ideas*. Beacon Press.

VII

* Robert Moses & Charles Cobb. 2002. *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. Beacon Press. [Available via Rush Rhees Library on-line]

W.V.O. Quine. 1981. "Success and Limits of Mathematization." In *Theories & Things*. Harvard University Press.

Andrew Hacker. 2012. "Is Algebra Necessary?" *The New York Times* (July 28th). <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/opinion/sunday/is-algebranecessary.html?r=2>

Jeffrey Isaac. 1999. "The Algebra Project and Democratic Politics," *Dissent* 46:72-79.

VII

Myles Horton & Paolo Friere. 1990. *We Make the Road by Walking*. Temple University Press. [pages 67-95].

Septima Clark. 1964. "Literacy & Liberation," *Freedomways* (Winter) 4:115-24.

David Thompson. 2016. "A Little Co-Op Helped End Black Disenfranchisement," *The Post & Courier* (Charleston, SC; 13 February). https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/a-little-co-op-helped-end-black-disenfranchisement/article_3da95a8f-f167-5703-b64c-de9ddd482e7c.html

Charles Cobb. 1963 [1991]. "Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program," *The Radical Teacher* (Fall) #40: 36.

Charles Cobb. 2011. "Freedom's Struggle & Freedom Schools," *Monthly Review* (July-August) 63:104-113.

VIII

Charles Payne. 1989. "Ella Baker and Models of Social Change," *Signs* 14: 885-899.

Randall Calvert. 1992. "Leadership & Its Basis in Problems of Social Coordination," *International Political Science Review* 13:7-24.

Charles Payne. 2010. "Miss Baker's Grandchildren: An Interview with the Baltimore Algebra Project," In *Quality Education as a Constitutional Right*. Edited by Theresa Perry, et. al. Beacon Press. [pages 3-32].

Eli Tucker-Raymond, et. al. 2016. "Opting in and Creating Demand: Why Young People Choose to Teach Mathematics to Each Other," *Journal of Science Education & Technology* 25:1025-1041.

IX

* Jay Gillen. 2019. *The Power in the Room*. Beacon Press. [Available via Rush Rhees Library on-line]

Steve Dubb and Jessica Gordon Nembhard. 2024. "The Past and Future of Black Co-ops: A Conversation with Jessica Gordon Nembhard," *Nonprofit Quarterly* (December 11). <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-past-and-future-of-black-co-ops-a-conversation-with-jessica-gordon-nembhard/>

Nathan DiCamillo. 2018. "The Little Bank that Could," *New York Times* (April 13). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/business/the-little-bank-that-could.html>

X

* Roberto Mangabeira Unger. 2009. *The Left Alternative*. Verso.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger. 2019. *The Knowledge Economy*. Verso. [Available via Rush Rhees Library on-line] Pages 83-137.

Jack Knight & James Johnson. 2007. "The Priority of Democracy: A Pragmatist Approach to Political-Economic Institutions and the Burden of Justification," *American Political Science Review* 101: 47-61.

Alexander Livingston. 2017. "Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey's Democratic Theory," *APSR* 111:522-34.

XI

Peter Orszag. 2011. "Too Much of a Good Thing," *The New Republic* (6 October) 11-12.

Philip Kitcher. 2006. "Public Knowledge and the Difficulties of Democracy," *Social Research* 73: 1205-24.

Elizabeth Anderson. 2007. "The Epistemology of Democracy," *Episteme* 3:8-22.

Elizabeth Anderson. 2011. "Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony," *Episteme* 8: 144–164.

Steven Epstein. 2000. "Democracy, Expertise & AIDS Treatment Activism." In *Science, Technology Democracy*. Edited by D.L. Kleinman. SUNY Press.

James Johnson. 2011. "Between Political Inquiry & Democratic Faith: A Pragmatist Approach to Visualizing Publics," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 3:167-85.

Class participation: The course is small and will run - as much as is possible – as a seminar. Given the nature of the undertaking it is imperative that everyone actively participate in class. That means that I expect you not only to keep up with the reading, but also to read with care and to demonstrate this in class discussions. In order to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate and that a small subset of the class does not dominate the discussion, I will call on students more or less at random. The regularity and quality of your participation and especially your willingness to stick your neck out in seminar discussion will constitute 50% of your final grade for the course.

Given the nature of the class attendance is not optional. If you need to miss class for some reason, please let me know.

Paper: The remaining 50% of your course grade will reflect a final seminar paper. This is an open-ended assignment of the sort that will likely make you uncomfortable. Good. It runs counter to most of how you have encountered courses in your educational career. There is no template. There is no predetermined number of pages (think at least 20). The topic and 'genre' of the paper are open to negotiation but should be connected closely to the matters we address in the class discussions. My expectation is that you will discuss your paper with me on multiple (*at least three!*) occasions during office hours over the course of the semester. I have indicated in the aspirational class schedule below the dates by which time you need to consult with me.

Grading: I do not care what grade you get in the course. By that I mean that while I would like you to do well, and hope that happens, whether you do so or not really depends on you. If you do the required work, it is extremely likely a good grade will follow; if not, it is almost certain that a good grade will not follow. The work here includes both participating in class discussion and writing a final paper.

Please note! There is no party line in the course, meaning I do not care if you agree or disagree with me, with one another, or with any (or all?) of the readings. I care about your willingness to stick your neck out, to think critically, and to articulate and defend *your* views clearly both orally and in writing.

Aspirational Semester Schedule

Week One

January 21 – Introduction

Week Two

28 – MLK Essays

Week Three

February 4 – Ransby

Week Four

11 – Dewey (1927; 1939); Peirce (x2)

Week Five

18 – Isaac; Glaude; Dawson (x2)
Consultation #1

Week Six

25 – Dewey (1938); Tampio;
Bruch & Soss

Week Seven

March 4 – Meier

Week Eight

11 – *Spring Break* – No Class

Week Nine

18 – Moses & Cobb; Quine;
Hacker; Isaac

Week Ten

25 – Horton/Friere; Clark;
Thompson; Cobb (x2)
Consultation #2

Week Eleven

April 1 – Payne (x2); Calvert;
Tucker-Raymond

Week Twelve

8 – Unger (x2); Knight & Johnson;
Livingston

Week Thirteen

15 – *No Class*

Week Fourteen

22 – Gillen; DiCamillo;
Dubb/Gordon Nembhard
Consultation #3

Week Fifteen

29 – Orszag; Anderson (x2)
Kitcher; Epstein; Johnson

May 2nd – Last Day of classes.

May 9th – Final papers due - 5:00 pm

Course & Instructor Policies – The Fine Print (Spelled out at length because the University Legal Counsel insists on this sort of legalistic stuff)

Religious Observances: If you need to miss class for religious observances, please just let me know.

Students with Disabilities: If you have a documented disability of any sort that you believe will impact your ability to meet the expectations laid out in this syllabus, I encourage you to speak with me in person as early in the term as is possible. If you are not comfortable speaking to me directly, you should contact the Office of Disability Services who can assist you in making your needs clear to myself and your other teachers. In any

case, we can make reasonable accommodation regarding the assignments. You can find them here: (<https://www.rochester.edu/college/disability/index.html>).

Policy on Electronic Devices: My policy on electronic devices in class (meaning any screen connected to silicon chips) is restrictive. No cell phones at all! Turn them off and put them away when you get to class. Laptops or tablets are allowed solely for access assigned readings or notes. In general, you should disconnect from the social media and phone/text communication media. In fact, *if you have readings or notes you will need in class, you are better off getting them off of your devices and onto paper.* If I detect you engaged in social media during class I will ask you to shut off your device and put it away. If this happens a second (or subsequent) time I will ask you to leave class. This will obviously impact your ability to participate in discussions and thereby your final grade.

Policy on classroom interactions: In order to create a classroom environment that supports respectful, critical inquiry through the open exchange of ideas, we will observe the following guidelines: (i) Treat every member of the class with respect, even if you disagree with their views; (ii) Recognize that reasonable persons can differ on any number of perspectives, opinions, and conclusions; (iii) Because constructive disagreement sharpens thinking, deepens understanding, and reveals novel insights, I do not just expect disagreement but encourage it; (iv) Welcome and listen to all viewpoints with the caveat that none is immune from scrutiny and debate; (v) Your grade - to repeat - will be based on the quality of reasoning and evidence you bring to bear in presenting and defending your views whatever they happen to be. *There is no party line in the class.* So, whether or not you agree with the instructor has no bearing on your grade.

Statement on Academic Honesty: I operate on the assumption that every student in the course is familiar with and abides by the College policies on Academic Honesty. If you are not familiar with those policies, please go to the Board on Academic Honesty web page and make yourself familiar with it. You can find that page here: <http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/>.

CALVIN & HOBBS



In any event, I take a very dim view of cheating and plagiarism of any sort. It makes me very cranky. Very! I will refer any and all suspected instances of cheating or plagiarism to the Board on Academic Honesty. The easiest way to avoid such unpleasantness is to not succumb to temptations to cheat, plagiarize, bend the rules, exploit loopholes, and so forth. Exploiting loopholes generally is not a winning strategy.

As a default, if you are unsure in any way about whether something is “allowed” just ask me.

Policy on late assignments: Except in the direst circumstances, I very much frown upon late assignments. I will deduct one third of a letter grade for every day an assignment is late. (This means if your grade would have been a B+, one day late gets you a deduction to B, two days a deduction to B-, etc.). If you anticipate a problem getting an assignment in on time (due to, say, religious holidays, travel for athletic teams, etc.) please speak to

me *in advance*. I will make reasonable accommodation to address such difficulties. I will gladly accommodate faith-based exceptions to any expectations or assignments laid out above.