Two features are often said to distinguish American from European political thought: an “exceptional” commitment to liberal, democratic, or republican political ideals and institutions, and a “peculiar” attachment to racist, nativist, and imperialist political practices. This course traces the interaction of these two contradictory tendencies through the writings of prominent American political thinkers from the Founding to the present day, considering how each has informed Americans’ contributions to fundamental questions in political philosophy, to the design of constitutions and political institutions, and to the conduct of foreign affairs. Along the way, we give in-depth consideration to the ideas that arose in the course of the American Revolution and the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, the Civil War, the Progressive Era, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Rights Movement, and contemporary debates surrounding distributive justice.

Grades:

Grades for this course will be based on an in-class midterm exam (40%), a take-home final exam (45%), and participation in lectures and discussions (15%).

Books for Purchase:


Books Recommended but not Required:

Columbia College Faculty Statement on Academic Integrity:

The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.

Scholarship, by its very nature, is an iterative process, with ideas and insights building one upon the other. Collaborative scholarship requires the study of other scholars’ work, the free discussion of such work, and the explicit acknowledgement of those ideas in any work that inform our own. This exchange of ideas relies upon a mutual trust that sources, opinions, facts, and insights will be properly noted and carefully credited.

In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others’ ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent.

Any breach of this intellectual responsibility is a breach of faith with the rest of our academic community. It undermines our shared intellectual culture, and it cannot be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities should anticipate being asked to leave Columbia.

For more information on academic integrity, please consult the Columbia University Undergraduate Guide to Academic Integrity, available here:

Lecture Schedule

Wed 9/9: Intro – Exceptionalism and Peculiarity in American Political Thought

- No Readings

Mon 9/14: Ideas of Independence I: The English Constitution and the American Colonies


Wed 9/16: Ideas of Independence II: The Age of Revolutions

- Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” K&L 594-598.

Mon 9/21: The U.S. Constitution I: Union or Confederation

- The U.S. Constitution, K&L, 170-81.

Wed 9/23: The U.S. Constitution II: The Separation of Powers

- The U.S. Constitution, K&L, 170-81.

Mon 9/28: The U.S. Constitution III: Judicial Review and the Bill of Rights

Wed 9/30: Manifest Destiny


Mon 10/5: American Freedom, American Slavery


Wed 10/7: The Great Emancipator


Mon 10/12: Transcendentalism

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”, K&L 471-76
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Politics”, K&L 476-84.

Wed 10/14: American Imperialism/American Anti-Imperialism


Mon 10/19: Midterm Review
Wed 10/21: Midterm Exam – In Class

Mon 10/26: Socialism and Social Darwinism


Wed 10/28: Pragmatism and Progressivism

- William James, “Pragmatism: A New Name for Old Ways of Thinking” K&L 1024-1030.

Mon 11/2: No Lecture – Columbia University Holiday

Wed 11/4: Progressivism and Internationalism


Mon 11/9: Progressive Women

- Jane Addams, “If Men Were Seeking the Franchise”, K&L 877-882.

Wed 11/11: The Long Civil Rights Movement I: Accommodation, Uplift, or Exodus?

- Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address”, K&L
- Marcus Garvey, “The True Solution of the Negro Problem”, K&L
Mon 11/16: The Long Civil Rights Movement II: Equality and Non-Violence

- Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream”, K&L 1317-1321.

Wed 11/18: The Long Civil Rights Movement III: Black Nationalism


Mon 11/23: Conservatism (Guest Lecture by Aaron Zubia)

- William F. Buckley, Jr., “God and Man at Yale”, K&L 1228-1231.

Wed 11/25: Feminism

- bell hooks, “Feminist Theory from Margin to Center”, K&L 1426-1433.

Mon 11/30: A Theory of Justice I


Wed 12/2: A Theory of Justice II

Mon 12/7: Rawls’s Critics


Wed 12/9: Exceptionalism and Peculiarity in Contemporary America

- Readings TBA

Mon 12/14: Final Exam Review

Final Exams due by email to aaz2115@columbia.edu on Mon 12/21 by 5 pm.