

Exploring the American Dream

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I. Course Description

This seminar undertakes an exploration of what has come to be known as the “American Dream,” from the time of the pilgrimage to the New World to the present. The central question of the course is, simply, what does it tell us about the American experience that this phrase has become so evocative? Whether understood as an ideal that has or can be realized; as a promise that has been broken and in which we today have “lost faith”; or ironically (in the sense that the American Dream is in fact a nightmare) as something that reflects misplaced aspirations and character flaws; what does it tell us about the American “way of life” that it is perhaps most frequently cast in terms of dreaming?

Over the course of the semester we will explore the connections and contradictions of the strikingly broad range of hopes and ideas associated with the American Dream(s): openness, freedom, equality, justice, rights, self-government, the “self-made man,” opportunity, work, success, prosperity, wealth, home ownership, mobility, car ownership, entrepreneurship, expansion, progress, independence, community, diversity, tolerance, patriotism, immigration, education, and so forth. And we will explore the meaning(s) of the American Dream across the spheres of politics, religion, economics, and culture.

Drawing upon a wide range of sources, from America’s defining documents and speeches (Jefferson, Lincoln, and many others), to works of history, sociology, law, and political philosophy (Locke, JS Mill, and others), to works of foreigners observing America up close or from afar (Tocqueville), the course is designed to provide the perspective from which we can better understand and evaluate this enduring representation of what it means to be American.

II. Course Goals

We will pursue four goals in this course. 1) We will carefully read, try to understand, and critique (in that order) each authors writings. As best as we can, we will attempt to leave our prejudices and preconceived notions behind and approach the readings on their own terms, thereby allowing them to unsettle our own often unnoticed assumptions. 2) After analyzing the work of each author, we will attempt to synthesize - compare and contrast - the readings from week to week, across the course. Hopefully, we will never lose sight of “the big picture.” 3) While necessary, understanding and evaluating the readings is not sufficient to meet the goals of the course. The ultimate purpose is to bring the insights gleaned from the readings to bear on the world in which we live. At its best, political theory illuminates and helps us interpret our own experiences, ideas, beliefs, and values. 4) Everything in this course is geared to persuasive argumentation. We want to leave this course able to recognize, develop, and communicate (both orally and in our writing) persuasive arguments.

III. Assignments and Grading

Two separate take-home midterm papers of 5 pages each (typed, 12pt font, double-spaced, 1-inch margins). For these papers you will analyze select readings and present an argument regarding one of the themes or debates thus far addressed in class.

One take-home final paper of 10 pages (typed, 12pt font, double-spaced, 1-inch margins). For this paper, you will complete a project based upon an analysis of the course readings and limited outside research.

You are also expected to be aware of what is happening in the world through reading the reputable news-sources of your choosing.

Midterm Paper 1 (25%)
Midterm Paper 2 (25%)
Final Paper (40%)
Class Participation (%10)

IV. Texts

- 1) *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, Arthur Goldhammer trans., 2004.
- 2) *American Political Thought: A Norton Anthology*, Isaac Kramnick and Theodore J. Lowi, eds., 2009.
- 3) *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen, 2004.
- 4) *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*, Judith N. Shklar, 1991.
- 5). *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner, 1998.
- 6) Course Reader

V. Course Policies

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own. You can find a fuller discussion of using sources and avoiding plagiarism on the Writing Center Website. (<http://www.yale.edu/writing/>)

Papers will be marked down one full letter grade for each day late. The only exception is for documented medical emergencies. You are expected to contact me by phone in advance of paper due-dates to discuss any other possible exceptions.

You may appeal your grade by submitting a written statement explaining why the grade is inappropriate. You have one week after the paper is returned to submit your statement to me.

VI. Course Reading & Assignment Schedule

Please bring the relevant book to class.

Part I: Point of Departure

Week 1: (Introduction)

- a. David Kamp, Is It Time to Rethink the American Dream?, Vanity Fair, April 2009
- b. Barack Obama, 2008 Democratic National Convention Speech
(http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/conventions/videos/20080828_OBAMA_SPEECH.html)
- c. James Truslow Adams, *Epic of America*, 1931 (excerpt)
- d. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (ch. 1)
- e. Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again*, 1938 (Norton Anthology 985-988)
- f. H.L. Mencken, *On Being an American*, 1922
(<http://www.io.com/gibbonsb/mencken/american.html>)
- g. Jim Cullen, *The American Dream*, (Intro. & chs. 1-2)
- h. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (Intro. & chs. 1-2)

Week 2: (Pilgrimage)

- a. American Political Thought Norton Anthology (11-72)
- b. Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Vol. I, Part I, Chapter 2)
- c. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber (excerpts)
- d. Slater and George, Speeches on Chinese Immigration, 1882 (Norton Anthology 893-901)
- e. Woodrow Wilson, Americanism and the Foreign-Born, 1915
(<http://www.apstudent.com/ushistory/docs1901/amrcnism.htm>)
- f. Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America, 1773-1986, Thomas Dublin. ed. (excerpts)

Week 3: (Declaring Independence)

- a. Thomas Paine, Common Sense (131-149 in Norton Anthology)
- b. The Declaration of Independence
- c. Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, Garry Wills (excerpts)
- d. Frederick Douglass, Lectures on Slavery & What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? (Norton Anthology 591-598)
- e. Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Introduction to Vol. I)
- f. The Radicalism of the American Revolution, Gordon Wood (excerpts)

Week 4: (Constitutional Visions)

- a. Preamble to the US Constitution
- b. The Federalist No. 1 (Norton Anthology 192-195)
- c. James Madison, "Property," National Gazette, March 29, 1792
(<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch16s23.html>)
- d. Thomas Jefferson (excerpts from various letters, to be distributed)
- e. Letters from an American Farmer, 1782, (excerpts)
- f. Alexander Hamilton (Norton Anthology 297-319)
- g. John Adams, A Defense of the Constitution of Government of the United States of America, 1787 (Norton Anthology 181-191)
- h. George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796 (Norton Anthology 319-323)
- i. Drew McCoy, The Elusive Republic, 1980 (excerpts)
- j. Benjamin Barber, The Compromised Republic: Public Purposelessness in America; Martin Diamond, Ethics and Politics: The American Way; Joseph Cropsey, The United States as Regime and the Sources of the American Way of Life (in reader)

Part II: Freedom, Individual, Community

Week 5: (Individuality and Individualism)

- a. JS Mill, On Liberty (chs 1-3)
- b. Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Vol. II, Part I, chs. 1-2; Vol. II, Part II, chs. 1-5, 8)
- c. Victoria Woodhull, The Principles of Social Freedom, 1871 (Norton Anthology 866-869)
- d. Emma Goldman, Anarchism: What it Really Stands For, 1907 (Norton Anthology 818-828)
- e. Brooks Adams, The American Democratic Ideal, 1916 (Norton Anthology 882-888)
- f. David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (excerpts)
- g. Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (excerpts)
- h. C. Fred Alford, Rethinking Freedom (excerpt)
- i. Jim Cullen, The American Dream (chs. 3-4)

Week 6: (A Dream of Transcendence)

- a. Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman (Norton Anthology 465-506)
- b. Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Vol. II, Part I, chs. 8, 17; Vol. II Part III, chs. 1-2, 8)
- c. Port Huron Statement, Students for a Democratic Society, 1962 (Norton Anthology 1290-1301)
- d. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Norton Anthology 1305-1322)
- e. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light 1944 (1211-1217)
- f. Foner, The Story of American Freedom (ch. 12)

Week 7: (Into the Wild: Expanding the Dream)

- a. John Locke, Second Treatise of Government (ch. 5)
- b. Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Vol. I, Part I ch. 1; Vol. I, Part II, ch. 10 pp. 365-391; excerpts on the West)
- c. Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History, 1893 (excerpts)
- d. John L. O'Sullivan, The Great Nation of Futurity & Annexation
- e. Josiah Strong, Our Country, 1885 (Norton Anthology 901-907)
- f. Theodore Roosevelt, The Winning of the West (Norton Anthology 907-909)
- g. Albert Beveridge, The March of the Flag, 1898 (Norton Anthology 915-919)
- h. Platform of the American Anti-Imperial League, 1899 (Norton Anthology 919-921)
- i. Foner, The Story of American Freedom (ch. 3-4)

Week 8: (Dreaming Together: Tolerance, Morality, Community)

- a. John Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration (excerpts)
- b. James Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance
(http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/madison_m&r_1785.html)
- c. Thomas Jefferson, selections (to be distributed)
- d. Richard John Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square
(<http://www.heritage.org/Research/PoliticalPhilosophy/HL572.cfm>)
- e. Michael J. Sandel, The Public Philosophy of Contemporary Liberalism (Norton Anthology 1477-1494)
- f. Robert Bellah, et. al.. Habits of the Heart (excerpts)
- g. Hiram W. Evans, The Klan's Fight for Americanism, 1926 (Norton Anthology 980-985)
- h. Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, 1987 (Norton Anthology 1438-1449)
- i. Michael Walzer, What Does It Mean to Be an "American"?, 1990 (Norton Anthology 1449-1464)

Week 9: (Citizenship)

- a. Judith N. Shklar, American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion
- b. Michael Schudson, The Good Citizen (excerpt)
- c. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Seneca Falls Declaration, 1848 (Norton Anthology 529-533)
- d. Susan B. Anthony, Speech About Her Indictment, 1873 (Norton Anthology 869-871)
- e. Foner, The Story of American Freedom (ch. 8)

Part 3: Equality, Justice, Prosperity

Week 10: (Reconstructing the Dream: Work, Opportunity, and Progress)

- a. Abraham Lincoln (Norton Anthology 654-668, 683-685)

- b. Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 1867 (excerpts)
- c. Orestes Brownson, *The Laboring Classes*, 1840 (Norton Anthology 456-464)
- d. George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South: or, the Failure of Free Society*, 1854, (Norton Anthology 624-636)
- e. Jim Cullen, *The American Dream* (chs. 5-6 & conclusion)
- f. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (chs. 5-7)

Week 11: (Selling the Dream: Welfare, Wealth, and the Free-Market)

- a. William Graham Sumner, *What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 1884 (Norton Anthology 703-727)
- b. Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth* (Norton Anthology 730-737)
- c. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899 (Norton Anthology 1013-1017)
- d. Eugene V. Debs, *Unionism and Socialism*, 1904 (Norton Anthology 834-840)
- e. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 1909 (1065-1086)
- f. FDR, *The Four Freedoms*
(<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrthefourfreedoms.htm>)
- g. FDR, *The Second Bill of Rights*, 1944 (Norton Anthology 1190)
- h. Herbert Hoover, *Rugged Individualism and The Fifth Freedom*, 1941 (Norton Anthology 1137-1141, 1144-1147)
- i. Charles Beard, *The Myth of Rugged American Individualism*, 1931 (1156-1163)
- j. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922 (Norton Anthology 1058-1064)
- k. Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 1980 (Norton Anthology 1411-1425)
- l. Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand, YouTube videos (links to be e-mailed)
- m. Norton Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth* (excerpts)
- n. Norton Garfinkle, *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth* (excerpts)
- o. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (chs. 9-11)

Week 12: (Buying Into the Dream: Race, Class, and Education)

- a. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 (Norton Anthology 950-964)
- b. Stokely Carmichael, *Toward Black Liberation*, 1966 (Norton Anthology 1339-1343)
- c. Cornell West, *Race Matters*, 1993 (Norton Anthology 1471-1477)
- d. Jennifer Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, 1996 (excerpts)
- e. Jennerif Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, 2004 (excerpts)

Week 13: (Comparing Dreams: America and Europe)

- a. Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (excerpts)
- b. Henry Luce, *The American Century*, 1941 (excerpts)
- c. Tony Judt, *Reappraisals*, (ch. 23, *The Good Society: Europe vs. America*)
- d. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (excerpts)
- e. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (ch. 13)
- f. Gary Althen, et. al., *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States* (excerpts)

