

Politics 4459F/9757A: ‘America’ in Political Thought
September – December 2012

Instructor: D. Long Room: 4112 Time: Wednesdays, 12:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
Office hours:

IMPORTANT NOTICE RE PREREQUISITES/ANTIREQUISITES: You are responsible for ensuring that you have successfully completed all course prerequisites, and that you have not taken an antirequisite course. Lack of prerequisites may not be used as a basis for appeal. If you are found to be ineligible for a course, you may be removed from it at any time and you will receive no adjustment to your fees. This decision cannot be appealed. If you find that you do not have the course requisites, it is in your best interest to drop the course well before the end of the add/drop period. Your prompt attention to this matter will not only help protect your academic record, but will ensure that spaces become available for students who require the course in question for graduation.

Office of the Dean, Faculty of Social Science

Prerequisites for this course (UWO Calendar) are: Political Science 237E and one additional course in political theory, or permission of the instructor.

“Let us look to America, not in order to make a servile copy of the institutions that she has established, but to gain a clearer view of the polity that will be the best for us; let us look there less to find examples than instruction; let us borrow from her the principles, rather than the details, of her laws.”

(Alexis de Tocqueville, ‘Author’s Preface’ to *Democracy in America*, 12th edition, 1848)

“We’ve all gone to look for America ...”

(Paul Simon & Art Garfunkel on *The David Letterman Show*, Fall 2009)

This course provides participants with an opportunity to explore the very special place of ‘America’ in Western political thought, from John Locke’s assertion (*Second Treatise of Government*, para.49) that **“in the beginning all the World was America”**, more specifically (para.48) “the in-land Parts of *America*, where [a person] had no hopes of Commerce with other Parts of the World”, to the era of American Empire and super-power status, in which the United States of America has become, in President Clinton’s phrase, the world’s ‘indispensible power’, a major player wherever in the world major problems arise. Like Truman in *The Truman Show*, the United States was born special, and born in a bubble. Just as in Truman’s case, every mood and every impulse of the U.S.A. has been examined under the proverbial microscope. The world has looked on with emotions ranging from awe to horror as the first and greatest of democratic capitalist republics has risen to unprecedented heights of economic and political achievement –

and encountered growing pains such as no other polity or economy in recorded human history has ever faced. Like Truman, the U.S.A. has irrepressibly sought freedom, sometimes perhaps even freedom from the burdens of its own special position in the world. Throughout its dramatic lifetime, 'Americans' (as citizens of the U.S.A. have taken to calling themselves) have again and again gone, like Simon and Garfunkle, in search of the essence of America, and in search of confirmation that the grand experiment in democratic capitalism has indeed been a success and a blessing to the world. In this seminar, within the context of politics broadly understood, we shall go with a few of them, and report on what they have found.

To connect the subject matter of this course to political theory as you have so far encountered it, I have selected for possible examination several key themes or features of American politics. In investigating them, American scholars have encountered and sometimes built upon the works of great thinkers from outside the U.S.A. In the headnotes to this outline, Simon & Garfunkle (admittedly not great scholars, but you can't have everything ...) encounter, so to speak, Alexis de Tocqueville, French Aristocrat, author of one of the great classic of American Political theory – *Democracy in America* (Vol. 1 1835; Vol. 2 1840). Tocqueville was 'looking to' the U.S.A., while our folk-singing friends and their ilk are 'looking for' it, and perhaps also 'looking out' from it. In this course we shall study both why so many thinkers over the years have looked to the U.S.A. as/for something special, and how/whether Americans have looked out at the world as inhabitants of and participants in something unique.

So ... We'll start with important works by and about Americans on three of the defining features of American politics: democracy, liberalism, and capitalism.

1. Democracy: from Tocqueville to Wolin:

The great American political theorist and radical democrat, Sheldon S. Wolin, for 50 years a student of Tocqueville's thought, has spent his illustrious career at Berkeley and Princeton searching for democracy in America. He has found what he calls *Democracy Incorporated* (2008), and it is not a pleasant discovery. His detailed study of Tocqueville's political theory, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds* (2001), argues that "[Tocqueville's] *Democracy in America* represents the moment when democracy first came into focus as the central subject of a political theory" (p. 8). For Wolin, then, the study of 'America' and the study of democracy as a complete and viable form of government and political life are inextricably intertwined. Wolin, an intense and passionate writer, is perhaps the most important of all critical theorists of democracy in the U.S.A., and his interpretation of Tocqueville is powerful and provocative. In Tocqueville's anxiety about the possibility of a 'tyranny of the majority' in the democratic U.S.A. Wolin finds the seed of his own diagnosis: that 21st century America is threatened with a kind of 'inverted totalitarianism'.

2. Liberalism: i) from Locke to Hartz; ii) from Montesquieu to Pangle

In the mid-20th century Professor **Louis Hartz** argued, in his controversial work *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), that the whole spectrum of political argument and action in the U.S.A. was liberal. The U.S.A. was a 'fragment', thrown off by the older, more ideologically complex polities of Europe. It possessed only a fragmentary portion of Europe's full left-to-right spectrum of contending political ideas. No true conservatism or socialism was to be found in America: only 'leftish' and 'rightish' modes of liberal thought. Yet only 50 years later, the recent death of Edward Kennedy is said to have removed from the Senate the last Senator willing openly to describe himself as a liberal. 'Liberal' is now, in the words of one Fox News commentator, a 'four-letter word' in American politics. How can this be? No other polity or society has had the relationship to liberalism that has existed – through marriage and apparent estrangement, now threatened with divorce – that exists in 'America'. To alter the metaphor: if liberalism, once the very life-blood of American politics, is now dead there, how might THAT remarkable development have come about? Have Locke and Montesquieu been rejected, or simply re-interpreted? We could, if you wish, look at **John Rawls's** *Political Liberalism* (1996) and/or **Richard Rorty's** *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) for clues ...

Professor Thomas Pangle, searching for a key to the true character of the U.S.A., found a "**philosophy of liberalism**" (*Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*) deeply indebted to Montesquieu's *De L'Esprit des Loix*. This liberalism was closely connected to what Montesquieu and his contemporaries (like the Scotsman David Hume and, a little later, the English utilitarian Jeremy Bentham) called the spirit of commerce. It was thought that individuals and states that engaged in trading relations were unlikely to engage in wars (another classic doctrine echoed in the speeches of President Clinton). 'Le doux commerce' would induce even the bitterest competitors to focus their energies on production and profit, not on mutual destruction. From George Washington to William Jefferson Clinton, American leaders have explored the hypothesis that the world's greatest commercial republic must *by nature* be a force for peace in the world – with mixed results.

3. Commerce to Capitalism: from Smith and Tocqueville to Friedman and Galbraith

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was, among other things, an on-the-spot study of the culture and politics of commerce in the early decades of American history. Where John Locke's iconic *Second Treatise of Government* had only speculated imaginatively about the effect of money and 'expanded possessions' on the denizens of civil society, Tocqueville watched the actual process of economic development in the U.S.A. (in part in the vicinity of Saginaw, Michigan), and he was partly impressed

but partly alarmed by what he saw. The spirit of commerce in America was not as 'doux' as Montesquieu and his colleagues might have imagined or wished.

We must not fail to investigate the author of the first moral justification of commercial society, a figure who has become the most widely referenced and recognized inspiration of American capitalism: the father of the 'invisible hand' metaphor, **Adam Smith**. Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* was published in the crucial and symbolic year of 1776. We'll take the time to get a clear idea of his key concepts, but also to assess his political (as distinct from economic) thought and his impact in America (see S. Fleischacker, "Adam Smith's reception among the American Founders, 1776-1790" [2002]). Smith is an important and under-studied liberal political thinker, and his influence on Americans' self-image has been huge – but in its popular form it may have been based on caricatures of some of his actual positions.

Flash forward to the 1960s ... and we find two titans clashing as to the nature and political context of American capitalism and its relationship to democracy, one of them actually a Canadian by birth. These two were/are **Milton Friedman**, author of *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and proponent of the position that free market individualist capitalism and democracy are synonyms, and **John Kenneth Galbraith**, born in Iona Station, just southwest of London, Ontario, one of the many Canadians (most of them comedians) thought by most Americans to be citizens of the U.S.A.. In *American Capitalism: the theory of countervailing powers* (1952), *The New Industrial State* (1967), and numerous other works, Galbraith argued for an interventionist interpretation of the role of government in a capitalist democracy (he was actually a Roosevelt advisor during the 'New Deal period), mitigating the harshest effects of corporate capitalism on individuals in the name of democracy. He and Friedman disagreed publicly, though always with decency and humour, about the basic facts of the power structure of American capitalism, politically and economically. And, of course, the financial meltdown of 2008 was seen by some as a repudiation of the free market philosophy of Friedman and an invitation to Keynesian / Galbraithian intervention.

4. Exceptionalism, Isolationism, Imperialism:

The remainder of the term will be spent on investigating another cluster of '-isms', these ones more closely related to America's current image and 'presence' in a globalized world. **The first of these is "exceptionalism"**. This term expresses the idea that, largely because of the unique circumstances and principles embodied by America from birth, the USA is an exceptional – no, THE exceptional polity. In Washingtonian times this may well have expressed an American desire to wash their hands of the wasteful, exhausting and seemingly pointless wars that pre-occupied Europe for centuries up to and beyond 1783. It later served to express boundless American confidence in their polity's /economy's capacity for world leadership and problem-solving. The distinguished American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, one of the leading experts in the field of American – Canadian comparisons, published his *American exceptionalism* in 1997. Its sub-title, "a double-edged sword", nicely captures the controversial and problematic status of this conception. Whatever interpretation one makes of American "exceptionalism", however, there can be no doubt that this idea, most commonly traced back to Tocqueville's observations about the extraordinary character of early American life, has had an enormous influence on American political attitudes, and especially on attitudes toward foreign policy and America's role in international politics. Reflection on the implications of the doctrine of Exceptionalism seems a plausible 'soil' for the generation of distinct ideas about how an exceptional nation ought to inter-act with others, and indeed about whether it should so inter-act at all. Exceptionalism, then, is the seed-bed of the last cluster of '-isms' we shall study in this course: **isolationism** and **internationalism / imperialism**.

In his interesting book *As Others See Us: the causes and consequences of foreign perceptions of America* (2006) Professor Stephen Brooks of Windsor argues that the '**cognitive isolationism**' of Americans is rooted in "the three 'I's': ignorance, insularity and indifference". It "lives on" in the minds of many Americans (and, as you might imagine, at some pretty zany web sites!), some of them influential, despite Brooks's conviction that "Today it is apparent that isolationism is not an option." (p. 17). In his new (2010) volume on *The irony of Manifest destiny: the tragedy of America's foreign policy*, **William Pfaff** traces what he sees as a tragic movement from "American isolationism to utopian interventionism". Certainly today's debates over American foreign policy seem to comprise arguments for multilateralism on one hand and unilateralism on the other, not differences over the feasibility of isolationism. But electorally it is generally agreed that isolationist rhetoric, appealing to isolationist sentiment, is very powerful. Conservative candidate / pundit Pat Buchanan sought to rally right wing opinion in 1999 around the idea that America is "a republic, not an empire". He hoped this view would 'take back' control of America's foreign policy. This has not happened.

So we come, in conclusion, to the most familiar and perhaps predictable element in this course – the vexed subject of **American imperialism / internationalism**. Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri's controversial work *Empire* (2000) is only partly a study of the American Empire in the 21st century: it is also an ambitious theoretical work attempting to place the generic conception of "Empire" in a radically new context. **Jeffrey Legro's *Rethinking the World: great power strategies and international order* (2005)** has a chapter on "the ebb and flow of American internationalism". Earl F. Fry's new book (2010) *Lament for America: decline of the superpower, plan for renewal*, consistently adopts the idea of America's 'super power status', which enable it to avoid confronting the question of whether the U.S.A.'s role globally is in fact 'internationalist' or 'imperialist'. If no one vocabulary has succeeded in capturing the 'reality' of America's image or role on today's rapidly changing global political and economic environment, that fact is perhaps the surest confirmation of the validity of the **exceptionalist** approach – America can still say to the world what the ghost of Christmas yet to come said to Scrooge: "You've never seen the likes of me before!"

5. The politics of Fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism in religion is uniquely American. The term originated with a book published (at their own expense) by two wealthy brothers in the American west who were alarmed by the influx of (oh, no!) Catholics, with their obscure and complex beliefs, into America. The interpretive **thesis I suggest** is something new: it is that America has produced the first powerful, 'mainstream' fundamentalist **political discourse: that fundamentalist thinking has 'leaked; into politics, with extraordinary- and sometimes frightening – results.**

A Hypothetical Timetable of Meetings (we'll draw up the real one after I meet with each of you to establish your interests and define your projects for the term):

1. Sep. 12th: Student Info / Outlines: discussion of course goals and themes.

2. Sep. 19th & 3. Sep. 26th:

Tocqueville and Wolin: 'America' and democracy / American democracy – 'Inverted Totalitarianism'?

4. Oct. 3rd: Locke and Montesquieu on liberalism and commerce (excerpts)

[Commentaries are due Oct. 4th]

5. Oct. 10th: Thanksgiving Monday

6. Oct. 17th: Hartz: Locke-ian liberalism in America – is that all there is?

7. Oct. 24th: Pangle's Montesquieu – 'le doux commerce' and the American Republic

8. Oct. 31st: The greatness of Adam Smith: justice, the 'invisible hand', the 'impartial spectator' and the politics of moderation

9. Nov. 7th: Adam Smith's influence on 'America'. From Madison to Milton Friedman

10. Nov. 14th: The Friedman / Galbraith debate – the power structure of American capitalism

11. Nov. 21st: Lipset and the 'two-edged sword' of exceptionalism

12. Nov. 28th: The new fundamentalist politics: is the 'religious right' absolutely right?

13. Dec. 7th: 'Empire' and 'America'

All of the above would make interesting and useful presentation topics. But **please note:** The seminar will only succeed if each seminar member works 1) with the source material, 2) with the other members, and 3) with me to pursue lines of investigation which really interest her/him. I will act as a resource person. One-to-one interviews with each seminar member will be used to establish the member's background and areas of interest. Only after I have talked (one-to-one) with each of you will the actual schedule of presentations for the term be finalized. I want the final timetable to reflect primarily your interests, not mine.

Finally: Where do our grades come from?

Summary: Each seminar member will write a short **commentary** on a **single self-selected reading** at the start of term, make one **seminar presentation** during the term, act as **commentator** on another student's presentation, and hand in a **major paper** at the end of (or in the course of) the term.

Your final grade will be arrived at as follows:

1. **Commentary:** a short (8 - 10 page) commentary on a single source text, chosen from among a list identified at the start of the term, to be submitted by **Wednesday, October 3rd 2012**. In the past this has proved a very valuable way to 1) get you focussed and engaged with the course, 2) help you pick out themes and authors for presentations and major papers, and 3) give me an early idea of your writing styles, interests and abilities. We'll discuss some of the texts you have chosen in subsequent seminars. **Value: 20%.**

I call this the 'thin book' assignment. I want to see how well you write and analyze texts on a small scale, with not too much at stake, before you do a major paper. Here are my top picks for a 'thin book' you might discuss this year:

Wolin's *Democracy Incorporated*. Don't be fooled – it has a lot of thought behind it. An exciting read. **But not very thin.**

E. H. Fry's *Lament for America*. Yes – the title IS an echo of George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*. Fry, of Brigham Young University, has a serious on-going interest in Canadian-American comparisons.

Stephen Brooks's *As Others See Us: the causes and consequences of foreign perceptions of America*. Interesting opinion samples and empirical research on Americans' self-images as well others' views of Americans.

And for something completely different but entirely within the scope of this course: Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1998). Words and pictures from a major postmodern theorist. 'Theoria', as S. Wolin says, refers to a journey. Tocqueville made one to America once. Now Baudrillard makes his ...

Other candidates for the 'thin book' assignment will be willingly considered – so long as you have NOT written about them before!

Late penalties for this assignment: late commentaries will lose 3% per working day. Week-ends will be counted as just one day. So the penalty is 15% per working week. After two weeks I reserve the right to refuse to accept a late commentary. Documented evidence of the need for a special accommodation on medical or compassionate grounds must be submitted to the Academic Counsellors of your home Faculty if you want to have late penalties waived.

2. **Instructor's assessment of seminar presentation** (including preparation and distribution in advance of a package of readings and an outline of topics/problems for discussion, as well as actual delivery of presentation): **Value: 20%**

3. **Instructor's assessment of performance as commentator:** as a commentator you play **three roles in the week leading up to the presentation** on which you are to comment: 1) you are the 'model student' who reads carefully and completely everything the presenter asks us all to read and consider; 2) you are the presenter's primary supporter and critic, offering criticisms and appreciation appropriate to the quality of the work done; and 3) you are the presenter's link to the other students, helping them to 'get' what the presenter is 'getting at'. You do NOT have to hand in written comments to me, though you may if you wish to. You DO have to communicate with and really work to help the presenter, and make the class session a better one in any way that you can that has the presenter's support. **Value: 10%**

4. **Major term paper - due at last class of term (December 5th 2012)** or before that at your convenience: **Value: 40%**

Late penalties: I have to hand your final grades in to the Department one week after the last meeting of the course. To do this, **I really MUST have all essays in my hands by Friday December 9th**. Between the 7th and the 9th, late essays will be penalized at the rate of 3% per day. If you cannot submit your essay by 4 p.m. on December 9th, you will need to provide **documented evidence to the Academic Counsellors of your home Faculty** that you qualify for an Academic Accommodation on medical or compassionate grounds. **You must also notify me at the earliest possible moment that your essay will be late.**

5. Instructor's assessment of member's **seminar participation:** **Value: 10%**

Notice that 60% of your grade will be determined on the basis of your written assignments, while the other 40% will be based on various aspects of your participation in actual classroom sessions. A seminar is only worthy of the name if the whole group shows a commitment to it. I expect all members to attend, to do their best to prepare each week, and to contribute consistently to constructive, rational and mutually supportive critical discussion. **A seminar is not a "zero-sum" game. The grades you earn are not earned at the expense of other students. Be generous and supportive with one another – you will only gain by it.**

N.B.: UWO Policy re. late assignments etc.

UWO recently introduced a strict new policy on 'academic accommodation'.

It is very detailed. **A full description can be seen at the Academic Counsellors' Web Site given in the Appendix attached to this course outline.**

"Academic Accommodation" means (among other things) "extension of deadlines, waver of attendance requirements ..., arranging Special exams or incompletes ... or granting late withdrawals without academic penalty".

For any assignment worth less than 10% of your final grade in the course: contact your instructor (me) *immediately* if the need arises for an academic accommodation on either medical or compassionate grounds. All requests to me for accommodations must be in writing, giving specific and documented grounds for the special arrangement. Medical documentation must show that the student was unable for medical reasons to complete the assignment(s) in question on time and in full. Make-up tests, extensions of deadlines etc. will only be arranged when these steps are followed and these standards are met.

For any assignment worth 10% or more of your final grade in the course: you must take your documentation (in the case of medical grounds a UWO "Student Medical Certificate", obtained online or from Academic Counselling and filled in by a doctor at the time of your initial consultation) **not to me but to the Academic Counsellors of your home Faculty.** They will decide on your eligibility for an accommodation, and then get in touch with me about specific steps to be taken.

(Graduate) Statement of Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf