Democracy in Crisis?

Wednesday 5.30-6.30pm

Instructors
Professor Wendy Brown (Political Science)
Professor James Vernon (History)
Professor Michael Watts (Geography)

Reader
Adam Jadhav (Geography)

Course Description
Democracy was supposed to have triumphed at the end of the Cold War in 1989 but there is now a palpable sense that democracies around the world may be in crisis. Experts talk of democratic deficits and recessions, of widespread distrust in governments and electoral processes, of wholesale corruption and newly emergent forms of authoritarianism. How did we get here? What was the promise of democracy and what is thwarting and depleting it? Or, has democracy always featured exclusions and corruptions-- are democracies capable of featuring comprehensive inclusion, political equality and care for the common good? Is capitalism compatible with democracy? Is planetary viability? How can democracy shed its intellectual and political histories of colonialism, racial and gender supremacy? What are the challenges to democratic forms of rule and citizenship outside the orbit of Europe and North America? What are the alternatives to democracy?

Through a series of asynchronously posted interviews with selected scholars, writers and activists, this course will probe these and other questions by thinking about democracy globally and comparatively.

The class is P/NP, 1 unit, no prerequisites.

Assignment and Grading

- 80% of your final grade will be determined by responses to the readings or interviews for 10 out of the 14 weeks (your choice of weeks). Responses should be approximately 250 words (one double spaced page with standard font and margins) and uploaded to the Bcourse assignments page by Friday at noon on the week of the relevant assignment.

Your written responses to the weekly reading or speaker should address these two questions: 1) What is the author or speaker's understanding of democracy and its predicaments or challenges? 2) What is your considered view of this account? You will not be able answer these questions comprehensively in a single page. Simply let them orient your response.
• 20% of your final grade will be determined by a final 500 word. Your final reflection should reflect on any question that you found especially provocative in the course. For example, "Is democracy compatible with addressing the climate crisis effectively?" or "Is American democracy really plutocracy?" or "Can democracy be de-colonized?" The final reflections should also be uploaded to the Bcourse assignments page by 5pm on December 2nd. You cannot pass the course without completing this final assignment.

Course Goals
• Learning how to read, write, and think critically
• Promoting inter-disciplinary inquiry
• Encouraging engagement with a central issue of our times

Readings
Each week there will be one short reading. All the readings will be posted on Bcourses or hyperlinked from the syllabus. It is absolutely crucial that the core reading be read carefully and in advance of the scheduled session.

Class Structure
The seminar will entail both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Specifically, the seminar consists of two different activities. One will be synchronous roundtable discussions led by the three instructors. These sessions are indicated on the schedule. During these sessions please mute your microphone but please ask questions in chat and if possible leave your videos on. The other will be pre-recorded interviews and discussions with academics, from the Berkeley campus and from other institutions around the world, in which the instructors will be in discussion with the invited guest around a particular theme or topic related to democracy in crisis. These pre-recorded sessions will be posted and available beginning on the scheduled day of the class.

Zoom Etiquette
• Only use the chat feature to pose a question or comment to the entire class.
• Be respectful and inclusive of one another both verbally and in chat.
• Be aware of strong language, all caps, and exclamation points
• Don’t post or share (even privately) inappropriate material.
• Attend the presentation from a sitting position. Laying down is not acceptable.
• Find a professional location for your zoom classroom (i.e. desk, table, quiet room); if not possible consider using a green screen.
• Mute your microphone when you are not speaking. Unmuted microphones can cause disruptions to the lecture or the discussion.
• Have your camera on by default. Being present in the Zoom room visually encourages interaction and social presence.
Class schedule

9 September. What is democracy?
Roundtable with instructors
Reading: Jill Lepore, “The Last Time Democracy Almost Died” New Yorker, 3 February 2020
Frances Fox Piven and Deepak Bhargava, “What if Trump Won’t Leave?” The Intercept, 11 August 2020

16 September. Whose democracy?
Interview: Joan Scott (Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton)
Who Got to Vote When? A history of voting rights in America
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s response to Ted Yoho, July 2020
‘A rapist in your path’: Chilean feminist protest song, December 2019

23 September. Capitalism and Democracy….or Plutocracy?
Interview: Robert Reich (UCB)
Reading: Erik Wright, How to be an Anti-Capitalist in the Twenty-First Century, chs.1&2.

30 September. Racial democracy in Americas
Interview: Robin Kelley (UCLA)
Reading: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation”

7 October. Can democracy be decolonized?
Interview: Gillian Hart (UCB)
Reading: Mahmood Mamdani, Citizen and Subject, excerpt

14 October. Democracy and migration
Interview: Chris Zepeda-Millan (UCLA)
Reading: Roberto Gonzales, Lives in Limbo, ch.1

21 October. Can democracy save the planet?
Interview: Geoff Mann (Simon Fraser)
Reading: Battistoni and Britton-Purdy, “After Carbon Democracy” Dissent

28 October. Democracy and corruption
Interview: Tim Kuhner (University of Auckland, NZ)
Reading: Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos, ch.1

4 November. Democracy and authoritarianism
Interview: Achin Vanaik (Transnational Institute, Amsterdam)
Reading: Dylan Riley, “American Brumaire” New Left Review, 103, 2017
11 November: Democracy and populism
Interview: Paula Biglieri (University of Buenos Aires) and Alejandro Velasco (NYU)
Reading: Thomas Frank, The People, No, intro

18 November. Is social media killing or saving democracy?
Interview: TBA
Reading: Zack Beauchamp, ‘Social media is rotting democracy from within’ Vox, 22 Jan 2019

2 December. Review

University Honor Code
The student community at UC Berkeley has adopted the following Honor Code:
“As a member of the UC Berkeley community, I act with honesty, integrity, and respect for others.” For further information see: https://asuc.org/honorcode/.

University Writing Resources
“The SLC Writing Program supports Cal undergraduates in their journey to become more persuasive and purposeful writers. Via student-initiated conferences and peer-facilitated workshops, our services seek to embolden students to take ownership of their growth as writers and scholars.” More information at https://slc.berkeley.edu/writing/.

For Students with Disabilities
Students with disabilities that affect their ability to participate fully in class or to meet all course requirements are encouraged to bring this to the instructor’s attention so that appropriate accommodations can be arranged. Further information is available from the Disabled Students’ Program website at https://dsp.berkeley.edu/.

Democracy and its alternatives