

Poli 363: Contemporary Political Theory

Winter 2024 | ENGMD 279 | WF 11:35-12:55

Instructor: Jun-han Yon

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Office hours: **Thursday 14:00 - 15:00 (Leacock 518)**, or by appointment in person or on Zoom

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

L'Université McGill est sur un emplacement qui a longtemps servi de lieu de rencontre et d'échange entre les peuples autochtones, y compris les nations Haudenosaunee et Anishinabeg. Nous reconnaissons et remercions les divers peuples autochtones dont les pas ont marqué ce territoire sur lequel les peuples du monde entier se réunissent maintenant.

Course Description

This course introduces students to theories of radical democracy. Radical democratic theory understands modern democracy in terms of indeterminacy to offer a vision of democratic politics that is transgressive and transformative. This course will examine key concepts and notions in radical democracy, including pluralism, totalitarianism, and 'the political.' It will also consider central themes of radical democracy, such as identity politics, populism, and backlash. The goal is to give students an overview of radical democracy as a distinctive theoretical framework to make sense of contemporary social and political life in democracies.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to

- Analyze the nature of modern democracy and appreciate the meaning, scope, and potentiality of democratic politics from a radical democratic perspective.
- Understand, critically assess, and compare the unique contributions of different thinkers to developing the tradition of radical democracy.
- Identify enabling and disabling factors to carry out radical democratic projects in practice and envision practices of radical democracy based on those conditions.
- Articulate their opinions, positions, and interpretations both in writing and discussion.

Prerequisites

A 200 or 300 level course in political theory.

Course Materials

The following book is available for purchase from [Paragraphe Bookstore](#)

- Chantal Mouffe, For a Left Populism. London: Verso, 2018

All other readings will be made available via *myCourses* and McGill library e-book service.

Course Format

The class will generally consist of a 1-hour lecture and a 15 to 20-minute general or group discussion on the topic of each lecture based on the questions prepared by the lecturer and students. All lectures will be delivered in person. No recordings will be provided. PowerPoint slides used for the lectures will be posted on *myCourses* after each class. Readings for each class do not usually exceed 40 pages in total. Students are expected to read the assigned texts before the class and to ask questions during the lecture to follow lectures properly.

Course Requirements

| Assignment | Deadline | Weight |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| Weekly critical note (x3) | N/A | 10% |
| Mid-term exam (In-class) | On February 21st | 20% |
| Critical Analysis Paper | Due March 14th (outline) | 5% |
| | Due April 14th (paper) | 25% |
| Final online exam (3hr-timed-exam) | TBA | 40% |

- Weekly reading responses x 3 (10%)

Students must submit **three** 300-500 word (in French 400-600 word) critical notes on the weekly reading assignments of their choice throughout the term. The course schedule is divided into three parts (see 'Course Schedule' below). You are asked to write **one critical note for each part**. Submit your critical notes directly to my email (jun-han.yon@mcgill.ca) by 23:59 of

the day before the class (which would be either Tuesday at 23:59 or Thursday at 23:59). **No late submission will be accepted.** The point is to give myself time to read your notes and prepare to address them in the lecture if needed.

The goal of this assignment is to facilitate students' understanding of and engagement with the text. You may address a blindspot (e.g., a contradiction, tension, and disagreement) in a specific argument, concept, or assumption that an author makes in their writings. A critical note should consist of (1) a brief reconstruction of what you consider a 'problem' (e.g., an author's specific argument) and (2) your reasoning behind that consideration. If there is more than one reading, you may choose and engage with one out of the assigned readings. The grade for each critical note will be assessed based on (a) the accuracy of your representation of the 'problem,' (b) the plausibility of your critical reasoning, and (c) the importance/originality of your intervention.

Each submission will be graded on the standard letter grade scale (A to F), equivalent to the 4-point GPA scale. The final grade for this evaluation criterion will be an average of the grades you received for each submission.

- Mid-term exam (In-class) (20%)

The closed-book in-class mid-term exam will be held on **February 21** during the regular class hour. The exam consists of **five multiple choice questions (5 points each) and three short-answer questions (25 points each)**. Students are tested on their understanding of the course materials and ability to compare different thinkers' approaches. The goal is to help students understand the core aspects of radical democracy covered in the first two parts of the course and prepare for the Critical Analysis Paper and final exam. The duration of the exam is 80 minutes. Question and answer sheets will be distributed at the beginning of the class. You may write your exam in either English or French. The use of an electronic device is not allowed. Below is an example of a questionnaire (refer to the format only).

Socrates and Alexis de Tocqueville see the same problem in a democracy. 1) What is this problem? (10 points) According to Tocqueville, what advantages does democracy have despite having such a problem? (15 points)

The mid-term (and final) exam will be graded initially on the 0-100 point scale, and then your grade will be converted to the 4-point GPA scale.

- Critical Analysis Paper (outline: 5%, paper: 25%)

Overview

Critical Analysis Paper (CAP) is a semester-long project that allows students to *understand, analyze, and evaluate the theories of radical democracy* through practice (Note that the focus is ultimately on theory). On the one hand, you are asked to demonstrate how particular theories of radical democracy of your choice help uniquely make sense of a specific (either historical or ongoing) case of your interest (e.g., its motivation, modality, contribution, or limit). At the same time, you need to illustrate how the theories you have employed to explain the practice (e.g.,

assumptions, modalities, or (the feasibility of) goals) can be critically evaluated and revised through the empirical case of your choice.

Specifics

- CAP must be between **10 and 12 pages (12 and 14 pages in French)**, double-spaced. It should be written in 12-point font with 1-inch margins and use proper citation format and style. You can use any reference style as long as it is consistent. The paper should be spell-checked and proofread for syntax, grammar, spelling, and punctuation before submission.
- You can choose and research only one empirical case and use a maximum of three thinkers as major references for practice explanation and theory evaluation. You may use one additional thinker to address the shortcomings of your initial reference. You must engage with assigned readings and course materials to explain a practice and evaluate a theory. No extra research beyond assigned readings is needed in making theoretical interventions (You can ask me for further reading recommendations based on your interest).
- CAP should be **thesis-driven**. The paper should have two theses regarding 1) the ‘radical democratic’ implication(s) of a certain political action and 2) the limitation(s) of the applied theory in the reflection of the practice under study. Each thesis must entail an argument, counterargument, and rebuttal.
- CAP should contain the following parts: introduction (a general case description), practice explanation, theory evaluation, and conclusion. A general case description should not exceed **three pages** since you will still need to address specific aspects of your case in the subsequent sections, which are more important for the purpose of this assignment.
- An outline for CAP (5%) is due **March 14, 23:59**, to be submitted in PDF format on myCourses. Make sure you write your name on the document. An outline should be no more than **two pages**. It should contain 1) a case description, 2) theses, and 3) the argument, counterargument, and rebuttal for each thesis, written succinctly and precisely. The same rules applied to CAP for late submission will be applied. I will provide feedback in 7 to 10 days (you should be working on your CAP before I provide you with my feedback anyway since you will not have much time left until the submission of CAP at the point when you submit your outline).
- CAP (25%) is due **April 14, 23:59**, to be submitted in PDF format on myCourses. Make sure you write your name on the document. Late papers will be docked one-third of a letter grade every 24 hours, including weekends. Papers that are more than a week late will receive zero grade. Extensions are available only for serious and documented reasons, and they must be requested ahead of time. No extensions will be granted on (or after) an assignment’s due date. Assignments sent to my email otherwise instructed will not be graded.

- Both the outline and CAP will be graded on the standard letter grade scale (A to F), equivalent to the 4-point GPA scale.
- CAP will be marked according to the following rubric (originally from Professor Yves Winter's Poli 364 syllabus):

| | A | B | C | D |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| Use of Course Material (Evidence and Analysis) | Applies course material in an especially thoughtful, skillful, or original manner. Fresh and cogent analysis. Demonstrates genuine depth of engagement with ideas from the course going beyond lectures. | Good, solid application of concepts from course. Demonstrates solid understanding of texts, ideas, and problems. Claims backed up by appropriate textual evidence. | Uses course material but inappropriately or in a cursory fashion. May have some factual, interpretive, or conceptual problems. | Paper shows inadequate engagement with course material, and/or demonstrates major errors in use of concepts. |
| Quality of Thesis | Strong argument. Original, clear, plausible, substantive, and contestable thesis. | Substantive and clear thesis. | Weak or vague/unclear thesis. | Thesis difficult to identify. |
| Quality of Reasoning (Execution) | Thorough, and insightful analysis. Skillful development of the argument. | Satisfactory and consistent analysis. Fulfills the assignment and deals with major issues in assignment. | Analysis and reasoning unclear; ideas undeveloped or underdeveloped. Addresses assignment, but not fully or not in an appropriate manner. | Doesn't address the assignment or otherwise fails to respond to the requirements of the analysis. Ideas undeveloped. Frequent recourse to narrative. |
| Writing Quality (Presentation, Organization, Style, Mechanics) | Eloquently written, in clear and concise prose. Fun to read. Well-organized. Free from errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage | Readable, concise, coherent, organized, and clear, but could be improved with a few minor changes. | Problems with presentation, coherence, organization, clarity, word choice, grammar or proofreading. | Not appropriate for college level writing; major problems with presentation, organization, clarity. |

- Final exam (40%)

The final exam will be online. Students will have 3 hours to write the exam, but they can start any time within a specified window, which will be announced later in the semester (scheduled by the exam office). Information on the specific exam format will also be provided by the end of the semester on myCourses.

The Fine Print

Disability and accessibility

The Student Accessibility & Achievement Office (formerly, the Office for Students with Disabilities) ([Link](#)) works with students who have documented disabilities, mental health issues, chronic health conditions, or other impairments. Students with any accessibility considerations are advised to communicate with the instructor and contact the Student Accessibility & Achievement Office for information regarding its services and resources. Students who need accommodations should contact me before the add/drop deadline or as soon as possible after the difficulty arises.

Communication policy

Announcements will be made on myCourses. Students are responsible for checking them regularly. I will usually respond to emails within 24 hours. Email response may take up to 48 hours on weekends and holidays.

Copyrights of course materials

Instructor-generated course materials are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. You are not permitted to disseminate or share these materials; doing so may violate the instructor's intellectual property rights. Recording lectures in whole or part is not permitted. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

Academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [here](#) for more information).

Downloading or purchasing whole papers is plagiarism. Any time you copy someone else's words and paste them into your paper without quotation marks, a full citation, and due credit, you have committed academic dishonesty; one sentence from Wikipedia is enough to count as plagiarism. Other people's ideas usually warrant a footnote, other people's words always demand quotation marks and a full citation. Suspected cases of plagiarism will be vigorously pursued.

Using AI language tools such as, but not limited to, ChatGPT to write your paper is academic dishonesty. Such actions include using these tools to draft, edit, or generate significant or all portions of your assignments. Any course requirements discovered to be written in whole or part by AI will fail, and they can lead you to fail the course, depending on the severity of the offense. Students may be asked to provide evidence (e.g., notes and drafts) and to explain the development of their thoughts to prove the originality of their work.

Language of submission

In accordance with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.

Conformément à la Charte des droits de l'étudiant de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue).

Course contents and classroom etiquette

This course directly or indirectly deals with ongoing, controversial social and political phenomena. The texts that we read tend to make their normative stance explicitly on those issues. Students are encouraged to express their disagreements since not everyone in this class will share the same political views or standpoints. Assignments will be graded on analysis and engagement with the course materials and not on their particular views or standpoints.

However, students are asked to be critical and not be disrespectful when learning and discussing the perspectives and approaches of the assigned readings. Being critical and being disrespectful designate different modes of expressing disagreement when receiving new knowledge and the experiences of others. A critical attitude entails rigorous engagement with the texts and careful (and generous) listening of others, which presuppose courage, willingness, and ability to question one's own values, beliefs, and assumptions. It ultimately leads to the enrichment and expansion of one's worldview and that of their interlocutors in the course of the intellectual exchange. A disrespectful attitude hinders one's and others' intellectual and personal development by assuming the superiority of one's values, beliefs, and assumptions. It fails students as a learner.

Grading

All work in this course will be graded on the standard letter grade scale (A to F), equivalent to the 4-point GPA scale. The grade points you earn on each course component will be multiplied by the relative weight of that component, and then the scores will be added to get your final grade-point average. That average will determine your final letter grade for the course. The table below sets out the official scheme used by McGill to convert letter grades to grade points. Do not rely on the calculator in MyCourses for computing your final grade, as that calculator by default aggregates grades according to the 0-100% scale and will not display the accurate final grade you have earned in this course.

| Grade | Grade Points | Grade Range |
|-------|--------------|-------------|
| A | 4.0 | 3.85-4.00 |
| A- | 3.7 | 3.50-3.84 |

[myCourses]

[Supplement] Claude Lefort, “Hannah Arendt and the Question of the Political” [myCourses]

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|---|--------|--|
| Week 3: Constitutional Democracy (or liberal modernity reconceived) | Jan 24 | Hannah Arendt, <i>On Revolution</i> , 141–178 [myCourses] Hannah Arendt, <i>The Human Condition</i> , 22–37 [myCourses] |
| | Jan 26 | Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy” [myCourses] |

Part II: Radicalizing (liberal/constitutional) democracy

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| Week 4: From politics to politicization | Jan 31 | Sheldon Wolin, “Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy” [Link] [Supplement] Sheldon Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political” [Link] |
| | Feb 2 | Chantal Mouffe, “Introduction: The Democratic Paradox” [myCourses] Chantal Mouffe, “For an Agonistic Model of Democracy” [myCourses] |
| Week 5: From identity to (dis-)identification | Feb 7 | Ernesto Laclau, <i>On Populist Reason</i> , 164–171 [myCourses] Ernesto Laclau, “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics,” 40–46 [myCourses] [Supplement] James Martin, <i>Hegemony</i> , “What Is Hegemony?” [myCourses] |
| | Feb 9 | Chantal Mouffe, <i>For a Left Populism</i> , Chapter 1 and 4 |

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| Week 6: From pluralism to pluralization | Feb 14 | Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, <i>Assembly</i> , 32–37, 63–69 [<i>myCourses</i>] Isabell Lorey, “Constituent Power of the Multitude,” 121–130 [Link] |
| | Feb 16 | William Connolly, “Pluralization,” 37–47 William Connolly, “Fundamentalism in America” [Link]* |
| | | (*Two texts share the same link) |
| | | [Supplement] Dianna Taylor, “Normativity and Normalization” [Link] |

Part III: Radical democratic practices (and their pushbacks)

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| Week 7: Modern Citizenship | Feb 21 | MID-TERM EXAM |
| | Feb 23 | Étienne Balibar, “Citizenship and Exclusion” [<i>myCourses</i>] |
| Week 8: Modern Citizenship (cont.) | Feb 28 | Étienne Balibar, “The Aporia of Conflictual Democracy,” 87–101 [<i>myCourses</i>] |
| | Mar 1 | Joseph Jay Sosa, “Backlash,” 1–6 [Link] Mark Orbe, “#AllLivesMatter as Post-Racial Rhetorical Strategy,” 1–9 [<i>myCourses</i>] Ashley Atkins, “Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice.” [Link] |
| Week 9 | Mar 6 | Reading week (no class) |
| | Mar 8 | |

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| Week 10: Deliberative politics | Mar 13 | Iris Marion Young, “The Ideal of Impartiality and the Civic Public” [Link] |
| | Mar 15 | Iris Marion Young, “Inclusive Political Communication” [Link] Michael Flood, Molly Dragiewicz, and Bob Pease, “Resistance and Backlash to Gender Equality” [Link] |
| CRITICAL ANALYSIS PAPER OUTLINE DUE MARCH 14, 23:59 VIA MYCOURSES | | |
| Week 11: Populism | Mar 20 | Jan-Werner Müller, <i>What Is Populism?</i> 1–6, 19–24, 49–60, 68–74, 101–103 [Link] [Supplement] Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, “Populism versus Democracy” [Link] |
| | Mar 22 | Camila Vergara, “Populism as Plebeian Politics” [Link] Chantal Mouffe, <i>For a Left Populism</i> , Chapter 3 [Supplement] Ernesto Laclau, <i>On Populist Reason</i> , 77–83 |
| | Mar 27 | Carlos de la Torre, “Is Left Populism the Radical Democratic Answer?” [Link] Angélica Maria Bernal, <i>Beyond Origins</i> , Chapter 5 [Link] |
| Week 12: Populism (cont.) | Mar 29 | Good Friday (no class) |
| Week 13: Politics of aesthetics | Apr 3 | Jacques Rancière, <i>Dis-agreement</i> , 28–42 [myCourses] Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics” [Link] [Supplement] Davide Panagia, “‘Partage du sensible’: The Distribution of the Sensible” [Link] |

Jacques Rancière, “The Thinking of Dissensus:
Politics and Aesthetics” [[Link](#)]

Apr 5

TBA

Week 14: Necropolitics
& Wrap-up

Apr 10

Judith Butler, *Frames of War*, “Introduction:
Precarious Life, Grievable Life” [[myCourses](#)]
Tony Sandset, “The Necropolitics of COVID-19”
[[Link](#)]

Apr 12

Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and
Resistance” [[Link](#)]

Review

**CRITICAL ANALYSIS PAPER
DUE APRIL 14, 23:59 VIA MYCOURSES**