

SELF-RELIANCE, COMMUNITY, AND THE STATE

What is distinctive about American politics and the position of the state in American society? This question has been asked at least since Tocqueville's Democracy in America, as analysts have attempted to explain American exceptionalism. To be certain, there are distinctive features of American political thought that have persisted throughout U.S. history. There has been an ongoing and seemingly unshakable faith in the individual and a great value placed on individual self-reliance. Likewise, the community (whether defined in terms of geography, ethnicity, or shared religious or political beliefs) has often received far greater emphasis than the state. Indeed, often the state has been feared as a negative force that must be guarded against if individual liberty and community self-governance are to be preserved. The seeming permanence of these views is striking: the concerns voiced at the founding seem fresh and relevant today, despite the monumental changes in American society.

While there is a certain consistency in American political thought, there have been significant shifts as well. Citizens have adjusted their understanding of individualism, the community, and the state in response to changes in the economy and the organization of society. As citizens have survived wars and depressions, encountered the growing power of large economic and political organizations, and sought greater equality of opportunity, they have placed new demands on the state. The expansion of the national government and the transfer of power from the community are consequences of these demands.

This seminar is designed to be an examination of how American political thought has changed over the course of the past century and a half. Although the limited number of sessions restricts the number of topics we will be able to address, we shall cover quite a variety of readings drawn from key periods in U.S. history. We will critically read and discuss political essays,

novels, and treatises from various periods in U.S. history. In each case, we will attempt to reconstruct the understanding of the relationship between the individual, the community and the state, and assess the relevance of the readings to current political debates.

The following books are available at Broad Street Books, in a library, or through an online bookseller. I have selected Dover Thrift editions wherever available to minimize course costs.

1. Alger, Ragged Dick. (Digireads). ISBN 1420930435
2. Bellamy, Looking Backward. (Dover) ISBN 0486290387
3. Emerson, Self-Reliance and Other Essays (Dover) ISBN 0486277909
4. Gilman, Herland. (Dover) ISBN 0486404293
5. Hamilton, Jay, and Madison, Selected Federalist Papers (Dover) ISBN 0486415988
6. King, Why We Can't Wait (Signet) ISBN 0451527534
7. Paine, Common Sense. (Dover) ISBN 0486296024
8. Schaeffer, A Christian Manifesto (Crossways)
9. Thoreau, Civil Disobedience and Other Essays (Dover) ISBN 0486275639
10. West, A Cool Million and The Dream Life of Balso Snell. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) ISBN 0374530270

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

All participants in the seminar are expected to complete the readings in a timely fashion and attend class prepared to take part in the discussions. All readings are required and the success of the seminar will depend almost entirely on the commitment of course participants.

Each member of the seminar will be expected to fulfill the following expectations:

Initial Essay	10 percent
Final Essay	30 percent
Critical Summaries	30 percent (15 percent apiece)
Seminar Presentation	20 percent (10 percent apiece)
Participation	10 percent

All papers must be submitted by email as attachments (Microsoft Word) to meisner@wesleyan.edu.

1. Essay on Individualism, the Community, and the State

A. The First Essay

On February 10th, you will be required to turn in an essay presenting an argument concerning the proper role of the individual, the community, and the state in American society. The following questions should be addressed in some fashion within your paper:

- How important are self-reliance and individual responsibility?
- What role should the community play in meeting the needs of its members?
- What role should the state play in compensating for the failure of individuals and communities?
- Should the state be given responsibility for individual welfare and community standards?

These questions are at the heart of the course and are examined directly or indirectly by most of the readings in the class. However, this draft you must develop your argument free of footnotes and references to the works of others. This will require you to reflect on how you understand the role of the individual, the community and the state. It is expected that all papers will present solid, original argumentation rather than a list of disjointed opinions. Maximum length: 10 pages, double-spaced.

B. The Final Essay

You will receive comments on the original essay as soon as possible. Over the remainder of the semester, you will be expected to rewrite the essay in light of the professor's comments, the course readings, and further reflection on the core questions presented above. The rewrite must draw on the course readings although you are free to consult additional sources. It is expected that these sources will be used to develop and reinforce your position rather than serving as a substitute for it. However, it is also expected that you will make full use of these sources, engaging the arguments of the works read in the course where appropriate. The grade will be determined on the basis of your success in developing your argument and engaging the arguments made by authors encountered in the course. The final essay is due on May 6th.

Participants are urged to submit for comments at least one draft prior to this date.

Maximum length: 20 pages, double-spaced.

2. Critical Summaries

On two occasions during the semester, each participant will be required to turn in a brief critical review of the readings assigned for the session. On each occasion, your paper (under 5 pages typed) should present and challenge the author's view of the role of, and relationships among, the individual, the community and the state. Remember that this is not intended to be a book report but a critical essay. You will be responsible for determining which readings to address (e.g., whether to write a paper on Horatio Alger or Martin Luther King). The only strict requirement is that the critical summary must be submitted on or before the date of the session for which it was written.

3. Seminar Presentation

On two occasions during the semester, each participant will be required to introduce the readings by presenting a brief (i.e., 5 or 10 minute) critical review of the reading, emphasizing the most interesting features, significant problems, and questions to be addressed during the discussion. At this time, each participant is required to provide members of the class with a one-page summary of the critique. Given the preparation required for this presentation, it might be prudent to write your critical summaries (see above) on the same set of readings.

4. Participation

It is expected that members of the seminar will arrive at class with a mastery of the assigned reading and that this preparation will find an expression in the seminar discussions. A failure to attend class or to prepare will impact negatively on the participation component of the grade.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Readings (TBA):

27 January

Course Introduction: The Individual, Community, and State

3 February

At the Founding

10 February

Transcendentalism and the Philosophy of Individualism

17 February

The Discipline of Capitalist Individualism

24 February

Social Engineering and the Progressive Ideal

3 March

Toward the Activist State: the New Deal

24 March

Postwar Conservatism and Objectivism

31 March

Feminism

7 April

Civil Rights and Liberation Movements

14 April

Religion in the Public Square

21 April

The Contemporary Left

28 April

Course Conclusion