

Short Course 5: Democracy and Its Critics: Re-Introducing Anti-Democratic Thought into the Syllabus

- Co-Sponsors: Sussex Centre for the Individual and Society (SCIS), www.scis-calibrate.org/; Imprint Academic, Exeter (UK) and Charlottesville, VA (USA); Annual conference "Workshops in Political Theory," Manchester (UK)
- Registration: No fee
Please register via email before August 20, 2008.
- Time: 9:30 AM – 5:00 PM
- Location: On the premises of the APSA Annual Meeting
- Instructors: Wendy C. Hamblet, North Carolina A&T State University

Clarification: Changes have been made to clarify that the Sussex Centre for the Individual and Society is not affiliated with the University of Sussex.

This short course will discuss major lines, themes and causes of anti-democratic thinking – past, present, and future – and introduce relevant literature that might be used in a classroom setting, including the most recent publication, “Anti-Democratic Thought” (Imprint Academic, 2008).

In a historical and cross-cultural perspective the fact cannot be denied that most democracies failed. Many formerly democratic countries do not have a democratic government now. Many countries have never known democracy. Only western democracies for a short while – maybe to be dated from the fall of Soviet communism to the rise of radical Islam – believed themselves invincible. It seems therefore expedient to think about political alternatives once more and to study threats to democracy from within and without as well as common modes of failure of democracy and democratization across times and cultures. Will people’s disillusion with democratic practices (such as the impact money has on campaigning), mass politics, and the equal inconsequence of everyone’s vote ultimately terminate democracy? Oswald Spengler, in *The Decline of the West*, said: “As then sceptre and crown, so now peoples’ rights are paraded for the multitude, and all the more punctiliously the less they really signify.” Still, all known political alternatives may have discredited themselves. The competing political systems of the twentieth century lost their struggle for world domination. Will we have to fall back, post democracy, into the abyss of authoritarian despotism, as envisaged by Plato and Aristotle?

Anti-democratic thought may be directed against a particular form of democracy only or against every form of democracy imaginable. Wherever a form of “democracy” arose or was proposed, it also found its critics and opponents. Historically, anti-democratic thought directed against abstract democratic principles and ideals most often originated from supporters of competing political systems such as guardianship, absolute monarchy, aristocratic government, collectivist anarchism, socialism, communism, fascism, or theocracy. Parliamentarism has thus been criticized by thinkers as diverse as Carl Schmitt (*Political Theology*), Vladimir Lenin (*The State and Revolution*) and H. G. Wells (*After Democracy*). Many anti-democratic individualists on the other hand have felt coerced by majority decisions regardless of democracy’s claim to be the political system least obstructive to individual liberty – as evidenced for example by the individualist anarchism of Max Stirner in *The Ego and Its Own*. Criticisms of democracy purporting to propose ways of improving democratic processes and performance and/or the political participation of the people over against liberal democracy have arisen chiefly within the context of particular countries and their singular experience with democracy. Recently proposed measures to address democratic disenchantment and what has been called the “post-democratic” condition include selection of office bearers by lot (sortition), re-localization of decision-making to the community level, as well as emergent forms of electronic direct democracy. All alternative (that is, non-liberal) forms of “democracy” that have been proposed – while professing to capture the true essence of democracy – seem virtually indistinguishable from both anti-democratic thought and non-democratic forms of government.

This short course will be of interest to anyone teaching, or otherwise willing to engage, the critics of democracy – from Plato and Nietzsche to radical Islam and anti- and alter-globalization activists. It does not require previous knowledge of the subject matter. Thus, it will be suitable to graduate students and academics at all levels alike. It will afford participants the rare opportunity to discuss the question: What is the place of anti-democratic thought today? And what may be its future?