

Citizens-Thinkers-Writers:
Reflecting on Civic Life
July 15-26, 2019

In this course we read reflections on civic life by philosophers, historians, poets and social theorists writing at different times and in different social circumstances. We read ethical advice from aristocrats and from former slaves, from the wealthy and from authors born into poverty, from individuals holding power and from individuals suffering persecution. We will read different genres of writing, from philosophical dialogues and tragic plays to social theory and poetry, with a good dose of public oratory too.

Our theme is "citizenship and the city": What important questions arise when human beings live together in cities? How have thinkers asked and answered these questions in different times and places? What can we find in these works that might help us understand our own roles and responsibilities today? How could we change our city for the better?

Please read each assignment completely the evening before it will be discussed in class. There are two seminar discussion topics each morning, labeled (a) and (b).

Schedule of class discussions and reading assignments

Week One

Monday, July 15: Cities and Human Flourishing

How does the design of a city influence the lives of its citizens? How might living in a city improve our chances to live full and happy lives? What special challenges come with living together in cities? What does it mean to be a citizen of a particular city or country?

- a) Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming our Lives through Urban Design* (New York, 2013), chapters 1-2

- b) Aristotle, *Politics*, selections on citizenship from book 3

Tuesday, July 16 The Common Good and Freedom

Today we compare two ancient Greek cities, Sparta and Athens. Sparta was famous for the discipline and public-spirit of its citizens, while Athens viewed itself as a standard-bearer for freedom. Consider how the Spartan emphasis on *the common good* that appears in Plutarch's description differs from the Athenian emphasis on *freedom* in Pericles's speech to the Athenians. How did the Spartans produce public-spiritedness in their children? Was the Spartan educational system compatible with freedom? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Athenian way of life? Which city would you rather live in?

a) Pericles's "Funeral Oration" in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

b) Plutarch, "Life of Lycurgus" in *Greek Lives*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, 1998), selections

Wednesday, July 17: Questioning the City's Norms

Socrates, the most famous philosopher of ancient Greece, was brought to trial as an old man on charges of failing to believe in the city's gods and of corrupting the youth. Plato offers us a version of the speech Socrates gave in his own defense at his trial - where he was sentenced to death for his crimes. Why did the Athenian jury convict Socrates? Can asking philosophical questions in the way that Socrates did really be dangerous to the city? Why or why not?

a-b) Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*

Thursday, July 18: Law and Justice (I)

If you were in jail on death row for violating a law that you knew to be unjust, and a friend offered to sneak you out - would you escape? Socrates refused to escape in that situation. Why?

Thousands of years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a famous letter from jail arguing that it was acceptable to break the law of the land if that law was unjust and if one was ready to

accept the punishment. King referred to Socrates three times in that letter. How was his position similar to Socrates's, and how was it different?

- a) Plato, *Crito*
- b) Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

Friday, July 29: _____ Law and Justice (II)

Sophocles's great tragic play explores what happens when a young woman insists on burying her brother's body, even after the king and law of the land forbid her to do so. Antigone claims she is obeying a higher law. Does she act justly? What would you have done in her place?

- a-b) Sophocles, *Antigone*

Week Two

Monday, July 22: _____ Leadership in a Republic

Shakespeare presents Julius Caesar as a demagogue who threatens Rome's constitutional order but who has significant support from the people. Caesar promises to address the people's needs better than the old-fashioned Republic could. His friend Brutus, who loves Rome and wants to be a good citizen, has to decide how to respond. What do you think drives Brutus to participate in the conspiracy that murders Caesar? Do you think Brutus is right to do so?

- a-b) William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, selections

Tuesday, July 23: Consent, Freedom and Equality

How can it be just for free individuals to come under the authority of a government? Locke famously proposed a standard of *consent*. His argument was then invoked by the authors of the Declaration of Independence. What assumptions about human nature and about political life lie beneath this argument? Have you consented to be governed by the government of the United States today?

- a) John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, chapters 2-4, 8-9, 18-19
- b) The Declaration of Independence

Wednesday, July 24: The Legacy of the Declaration

Obviously the Declaration's demand that governments respect individual rights did not apply to everyone at first. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal..." What's the impact of those words, penned by Elizabeth Cady Stanton for the 1848 Women's Rights Convention, on a reader today? Born a slave to slave parents in 1797, Sojourner Truth walked to her freedom, successfully sued her former owner for custody of her son, and despite never learning to read or write, became one of the most important 19th c voices for equal rights. Frederick Douglass's speech brilliantly joined a traditional Independence Day celebration only to then demonstrate how outside of it he, as a former slave, necessarily was. What makes these speeches work so well?

With a much shorter speech, Abraham Lincoln made the Declaration the centerpiece of the American experiment. Why do think he emphasized the Declaration instead of the Constitution?

- a) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments";
Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman";
Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?"
- b) Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" (cont'd);
Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address"

Thursday, July 25: The Color Line

When W.E.B. Du Bois juxtaposed social science and poetry to explain the situation of African-American civic life at the end of the nineteenth century, he claimed the problem of the twentieth century to be the "problem of the color line." What did he mean by "the veil"? What role did he think education should play in addressing these issues?

a-b) W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, selections

Friday, July 26: Poetry and Fiction: Representing City Life

How can words best capture the promise and the challenges of city life? How does Thoreau's mocking of gossipy social life compare with Whitman's reverential treatment of diversity and possibility? What truths does Brooks capture that the others miss? Which better captures the truth of city life, philosophy or poetry?

a) Thoreau, *Walden*, "The Village";

Walt Whitman, "Broadway," "Democratic Vistas" (selection), and "Mannahatta";

Gwendolyn Brooks, "Kitchenette Building"

b) Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"