

## ENG 259A: Rhetoric and Democracy / TR 2:00-3:15

Dr. Ira Allen (Fisk 227; Weds 1:00-4:00 and most days by appointment)

This is an upper-division course about *rhetoric* and *democracy*, a pair of terms that emerged in ancient Greece and that have fallen out of and come back into favor many times around the world. Students will develop a strong understanding of the histories and meanings of both terms, including their relations with one another and their shared tendency to be used by political actors for a wide variety of purposes. Focusing especially on “the people,” democracy’s key concept, we will try to gauge the rhetorical prospects for democracy. We will examine the extent to which the term “democracy” remains useful, and the extent to which it remains persuasive, in a world that the people rarely rule.

**Democracy is at once a promise and a series of open questions.** The word “democracy” promises rule by the *demos*, rule by “the people,” and has inspired political action for centuries and around the world—from the revolutionary Jacobins to #YouStink. But the word also raises a question it can never quite answer, or cannot answer once and for all: *who are the people?* And who gets to decide? On what basis does “a people” come into political being? If the promise of democracy remains unfulfilled still today in both the countries that claim to export or conserve it (such as the U.S. and Germany) and the countries that have tried to transition toward it (such as Indonesia and Tunisia), is the promise even believable anymore? Can a “people” arise and rule itself? What would it take for this to happen? What are democracy’s rhetorical prospects in our troubled world?

**Answering these questions is the work of rhetoric.** First arising as an object of study in the flourishing (but also deeply limited!) democracy of ancient Athens, rhetoric works to discover what Aristotle called “the available means of persuasion in any given situation.” Rhetoric is all about understanding how people—both individual persons and “the people”—can, and perhaps ought to, be persuaded. How and why, rhetoric asks, do we change our minds? What is it possible for us to intentionally become, and under what conditions? How can we best live together in language?

**Rhetoric’s questions, in other words, are the very questions that democracy must answer, if its promise is ever to be fulfilled.**

In this course, we will explore both ancient and contemporary theories of rhetoric and democracy. The course is divided into three sections: Rhetorical and Political Foundations, Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric, and Contemporary Theories of Democracy. Each of the first two sections involves a 3-5 page essay (20 percent x 2 = 40 percent), and weekly reading responses to be shared with the class begin in these sections and run until the end of the course (20 percent total). The final section culminates in a term paper that comprises 40 percent of the course grade. In the final paper (10-15 pages), students will draw on particular cases to articulate their own, well-researched and carefully argued response to the course’s motivating question: **What are the rhetorical prospects**

for “democracy,” both today and looking forward, in a region of the world with/in which you are familiar/interested?

**Rhetorical and Political Foundations (Weeks 1-5):** We begin the semester in the ancient world, reading portions of first Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and then his *Politics* (Weeks 1 through 5), as well as Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen* and Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias* (Weeks 2 and 3). In looking at these older texts, we will (1) work to **understand the theories of rhetoric and democracy** being offered and (2) think about what **means of persuasion** these older texts—so influential for much of the world since—have made available or unavailable. What ways of thinking, in other words, have these foundational texts laid down (for good or for ill)?

**Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric (Weeks 6-10):** Jumping forward in time, we move to consider contemporary ways of thinking about rhetoric. These include especially selections from Kenneth Burke’s *Language as Symbolic Action* (Weeks 6-8). Our primary aim in this middle part of the semester—when we will also read essays by Ernesto Grassi, Susan Miller, and Gerard Hauser and Amy Grim (Weeks 9-10)—will be to **understand what it means to think rhetorically about democracy today**. How, at a time when many people claim to believe that “democracy” is what the whole world wants, can we understand the rhetorical forces that shape both the idea and the possibilities of democracy? In weeks 9 and 10, I will suggest different cultural artifacts for analysis through the rhetorical lenses offered in the readings.

**Contemporary Theories of Democracy (Weeks 10-14):** The semester will conclude with an exploration of some of democracy’s open questions, not least the question of whether this emotionally charged term even names something we should want in the first place. We will read most essays in the critical collection *Democracy in What State?* (pieces by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Wendy Brown, and Slavoj Žižek (Weeks 10-11), as well as book excerpts from Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Week 11-12); Sheldon Wolin (Week 12); Danielle Allen and Phillip Pettit (Week 13); and Anne Norton and Jason Maloy (Week 14). In weeks 10 through 14, students will take turns choosing and sharing cultural artifacts for shared analysis through the lenses on democracy offered in the reading. Ultimately, our goal will to be arrive at answers—collectively and each person for herself—about **the rhetorical possibility of democracy**. What, in short, are democracy’s prospects today? What is the word “democracy” likely to mean, motivate, and *do* in a region or country of your choosing? Week 15, the last of the semester, will be given over to workshopping **final papers, which are due in my office or by email on Thursday, December 10**.

By the end of the course, each student will arrive at his or her own view of both rhetoric and democracy. You will determine for yourself, in conversation with me and with one another, what relationships might yet be possible between “the power of persuasion” and “the power of the people.”

Week	Topic and Readings	Written Assignments
<b>Week 1</b> Thursday 9/3	Intro to rhetoric and democracy	None
<b>Week 2</b> Tuesday 9/8 Thursday 9/10	Aristotle's <i>Rhetoric</i> (Book 1)  Gorgias' <i>Encomium of Helen</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 3</b> Tuesday 9/15 Thursday 9/17	Aristotle's <i>Rhetoric</i> (Books 2 and 3)  Plato's <i>Gorgias</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 4</b> Tuesday 9/22 Thursday 9/24	Plato's <i>Gorgias</i>  NO CLASS: EID AL-ADHA	Reddit response
<b>Week 5</b> Tuesday 9/29 Thursday 10/1	Aristotle's <i>Politics</i>  Aristotle's <i>Politics</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 6</b> Tuesday 10/6 Thursday 10/8	Aristotle's <i>Politics</i>  Kenneth Burke's <i>Language as Symbolic Action</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 7</b> Tuesday 10/13 Thursday 10/15	Kenneth Burke's <i>Language as Symbolic Action</i>  NO CLASS: HIJRA NEW YEAR	<b>Essay 1</b>
<b>Week 8</b> Tuesday 10/20 Thursday 10/22	Kenneth Burke's "Definition of Man" ( <i>dissoi logoi</i> )  Kenneth Burke's "Terministic Screens" and <i>Rhetoric of Motives</i>	Reddit response

<b>Week 9</b> Tuesday 10/27 Thursday 10/29	Burke's <i>Rhetoric of Motives</i>  Susan Miller's <i>Trust in Texts</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 10</b> Tuesday 11/03 Thursday 11/05	Miller's <i>Trust in Texts</i>  Miller's <i>Trust in Texts</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 11</b> Tuesday 11/10 Thursday 11/12	Agamben et al.'s <i>Democracy in What State?</i> (Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou)  Agamben et al.'s <i>Democracy in What State?</i> (Wendy Brown)	Reddit response
<b>Week 12</b> Tuesday 11/17 Thursday 11/19	Chantal Mouffe's <i>The Democratic Paradox</i>  Sheldon Wolin's <i>Democracy, Inc.</i>	<b>Presentations (IK and MB)</b>  <b>Presentations (EG and JT)</b>
<b>Week 13</b> Tuesday 11/24 Thursday 11/26	Danielle Allen's <i>Talking to Strangers</i>  Philip Pettit's <i>Just Freedom</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 14</b> Tuesday 12/1 Thursday 12/3	Jodi Dean's <i>Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies</i>  Jason Maloy, <i>Democratic Statecraft</i>	Reddit response
<b>Week 15</b> Tuesday 12/8 Thursday 12/10	No reading: paper workshops  No class: reading week begins.	<b>Final Essay</b>

**There is no final exam in this course.**

## Course Assignments

**Reddit assignments:** These are short to medium-length, informal responses to shared readings, written as answers to questions that I'll pose each week on reddit. Weekly for thirteen weeks, for a total of 20% of the course grade.

**Short Essay:** In this essay, worth 20% of the course grade, you will distill your thoughts about the relations between rhetoric and democracy “in the ancient world” into a single cohesive, thesis-driven essay of 3-5 pages (double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font, etc.). Think of the essay as a short, textually supported, statement of your view—looking through the lenses offered by Aristotle, Gorgias, and Plato—so far of (a) what “rhetoric” and “democracy” each seem to be at their time of origin and (b) what relations seem to prevail between them. As the date approaches, I'll provide a fuller assignment sheet. (Due 10/13.)

**Presentation:** Here, much as in Essay 1, you will be distilling your thoughts in a brief position piece (also worth 20% of the course grade). Now, though, your aim is to articulate—by bringing together Burke and one other thinker we've read—your own vision of “a rhetorical lens.” Building on that, your job is to use your rhetorical lens to analyze a “site” of your choosing. You will, in other words, draw on Burke and one other of our shared readings in contemporary rhetorical theory to (a) explain the rhetorical point of view as you understand it and (b) analyze a site of your own choosing (preferably a site that puts you in motion toward your final paper). Though there is no specific formatting requirement for this assignment, you are expected to deliver a *rhetorically effective* presentation. Once more, as the date approaches, I'll provide a fuller assignment sheet. (Due 11/05 and 11/10.)

**Final Essay:** You will be unsurprised to learn that, as the date for the final essay approaches, I will provide a fairly comprehensive assignment sheet. You'll also be unsurprised to learn that we'll discuss the assignment, which is worth 40% of the course grade and is expected to run in the 10-15 page range, extensively in class. Broadly speaking, this essay will be your argument—drawing on original research and analysis, as well as on various of the course readings—about what the rhetorical prospects for “democracy” are in a given region of the world (geocultural region, nation-state, or even a smaller geopolitical entity like a city or a territory). In other words, you will be using a rhetorical lens to examine contemporary cultural artifacts from your chosen region in order to make a case for what the term “democracy” is likely to mean in that region in the near future, as well as what sorts of behavior, worldviews, and linguistic performances it is likely to motivate. About all which, more later.