SOSC 1700 What Is Democracy?

Fall Semester of 2023

Classroom: 1104

Time: Monday and Wednesday: 12-13.20

Instructor:
Wenkai He
Associate Professor, Division of Social Science
Room 3376, Academic Building
Email: hewenkai@ust.hk
Office hour: 1 am to 2 pm, Friday; or by appointment

Teaching Assistant: Muyao Xu
Email: muyao.xu@connect.ust.hk

Course Description:
Should China become a democracy? How to achieve a true democracy in Hong Kong? Is democracy the only good regime? These questions are being debated among the students not only in classrooms and dormitories, but in the street protests as well. Nonetheless, there is no course at HKUST that teaches basic theories of democracy. The students thus do not have a chance to systematically learn various viewpoints for or against democracy. Without a deeper understanding of democracy and training in critical reasoning, miscommunication and confusion result when students debate the merits and shortcomings of democracy. This is why I plan to offer “What Is Democracy?” as a common core course to undergraduate students of HKUST.

This course will cover the classic theories about democracy from ancient Greece to the contemporary world. The major topics introduced will include the relationship between individual rights and rule by majority; equality as the normative foundation of democracy; the tension between a procedural understanding of democracy and the substantive, participatory aspects of democracy; and how to conceptualize the common good or public interest in a democratic society. By teaching the students how to engage in reasoned discussions of various aspects of democracy with people holding different views, this course aims to enhance their capacity for critical reasoning as applied to social issues and help them become responsible, well-informed citizens.

Grading:
Participation: 10%

Three responses on assigned readings: 20 %
Starting from the second week, you are required to write three short responses to the weekly readings according to your interest and schedule. The response should be your question or argument in regard to the issues addressed in that week’s reading. The response should be
submitted before the class on Tuesday on that week. Each response is around 2 double-spaced pages.

One 8 page double-spaced essay at the end of semester: 40%
I will give the essay topic and you will have one week to work on the essay.

One group project (2 students as one group): 30%
What would happen to Hong Kong or China if Hong Kong or China becomes a democracy as defined by Schumpeter?

Assigned Readings:

**Week 1: Introduction and Plato’s Republic**


**Week 2: Excellence and the best state**


**Week 3: The state of the nature and the sovereignty**


**Week 4: The state of the nature and the popular sovereignty**


**Week 5: The state of the nature and the general will**

**Week 6: Natural Rights or Human Rights**


**Week 7: Equality, Association, and Democracy**


**Week 8: Parties, factions, and the common good**


**Week 9: Representation and Democracy**


**Week 10: Representative Democracy**


**Week 11: The minimal version of democracy**

**Week 12: Revolution and Democracy**


**Week 13: Questioning the liberal democracy**

Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with assistance of Frederick Lawrence, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998), pages to be decided.