UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Transformations of Democracy: Rights, Conflicts and Differences

2627-1-F8804N006

Learning objectives

This course aims to contribute to the education of students in the field of sociology by deepening their understanding of political and social philosophy, with a focus on key concepts essential to democratic societies and public discourse—such as liberty, equality, and solidarity—in relation to “differences.” These pragmatically significant concepts are crucial for students pursuing qualitative and quantitative research, including fieldwork.
Special emphasis will be placed on understanding the meaning of politics and democracy in the contemporary era, marked by the increasing influence of digital and economic powers, and by the impact of the internet and communication platforms on public opinion formation, access to information, and citizen decision-making.

Contents

The course will focus on the analysis of the ideas of liberty, equality, and solidarity within the frameworks of justice, respect for differences, the formation of social movements, and contemporary public discourse—particularly in relation to the rise of the internet. It will explore the evolving meaning of democracy in the digital age, emphasizing the transformation of politics and civic participation under the influence of new economic, technological, and communicative powers that affect citizens' autonomy and decision-making.

Detailed program

The course is designed to equip students with essential conceptual tools for understanding societies in conflict and transition, and for critically interpreting contemporary political and cultural phenomena. It is structured into four main sections:
General Introduction: Origins and meanings of liberty, equality, and solidarity in theories of justice, citizenship, and social (in)equality.

Monographic Focus: Exploration of the debate on liberty, the public sphere, and political deception, with reference to the rise of the internet and populist movements. It will analyze the mechanisms through which major digital platforms, algorithmic logics, and global economic powers shape public consensus and democratic decision-making.
Laboratory Exercises: Critical case study analysis concerning fake news, hate speech, denialism, and conspiracy theories, with particular attention to new narratives and visions related to artificial intelligence (AI-generated content, deepfakes, algorithmic disinformation), using digital materials and multimedia sources.
Guided Visits: Students may take part in a guided visit to museums, such as MIC – Museo Interattivo del Cinema or the MUDEC – Museum of Cultures in Milan, as spaces for reflecting on communication, representation, and contemporary visual culture.
Conoscenza e capacità di comprensione (D1):
Gli/le studenti acquisiranno conoscenze teoriche e concettuali sui fondamenti delle società democratiche, con particolare attenzione al ruolo della libertà, dell'uguaglianza e della solidarietà nelle teorie della giustizia, della cittadinanza e delle differenze. Verranno inoltre introdotti all'analisi di testi fondamentali della filosofia politica e sociale contemporanea.

Prerequisites

Basic knowledge of political theory and the functioning of democratic institutions.
Interest in argumentation and participation in public debate.
Willingness to work in groups.
Ability to write and synthesize information on a chosen topic.

Teaching methods

The course comprises 56 total hours and awards 8 ECTS credits, divided approximately as follows:
60% traditional lectures (supported by slides and multimedia content);
40% interactive teaching (group work, guest seminars, case study analysis, oral and written exercises, public presentations, and a guided visit).
Classes may be conducted in English depending on the interests and composition of the student group. Specific guidelines will be provided for the preparation of the final written paper.

Knowledge and Understanding (D1)
Students will acquire theoretical and conceptual knowledge regarding the foundations of democratic societies, with particular attention to the roles of liberty, equality, and solidarity in theories of justice, citizenship, and difference. The course will also introduce key texts in contemporary political and social philosophy.

Applying Knowledge and Understanding (D2)
The knowledge acquired will be applied to the analysis of contemporary social phenomena such as the spread of fake news, hate speech, denialism, and populism. This will be achieved through laboratory activities, case studies, and the analysis of digital sources. Students will learn to link theoretical concepts to concrete contexts, developing skills applicable in professional, educational, and communication settings.

Critical Thinking and Independent Judgment (D3)
The course fosters the development of critical thinking and independent reflection on democratic transformations, the role of the internet, information manipulation, and public opinion formation. Students will be encouraged to formulate well-argued, informed personal evaluations, also through the analysis of real case studies.

Communication Skills (D4)

Students will enhance their communication skills through discussions, individual and group presentations. Seminars and in-class exercises will foster their ability to articulate ideas clearly, coherently, and critically, defend their arguments publicly, and interact effectively and respectfully with diverse interlocutors.

Learning Skills (D5)
The course encourages active and autonomous learning through guided study, seminar participation, group work, and the writing of a final paper. Students will be supported in developing a personal approach to study and research, aided by specific guidelines for the final written paper, with the aim of building transferable skills for other academic or professional contexts.

Assessment methods

Assessment will include:
A written paper on a topic agreed upon with the instructor (submitted according to e-learning platform guidelines);
An oral examination discussing the paper and assessing the student's knowledge based on the five D-level objectives.
International students may write and discuss their final paper in English or another agreed language.
The final evaluation will consider:
Clarity and argumentative strength in both written and oral formats (D4);
Relevance, coherence, and quality of the chosen topic;
Critical analysis of texts and phenomena (D1, D2, D3);
Logical structure and clarity of the written paper;
Completeness and adherence to time and space constraints;
Quality and completeness of the bibliography.
Ability to learn independently and develop a personal research path (D5).

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Arendt H., La menzogna in politica. Riflessioni sui Pentagon Papers, Torino, Marietti, 2018.
Calloni M., Sovranità, Dalla sovranità territoriale alla sovranità digitale. Trasformazioni e paradossi del corpo sovrano, Macerata, EUM – Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2026.
Crawford, K. , Né intelligente né artificiale. Il lato oscuro dell'IA, Bologna, il Mulino, 2021.
Giacomini G., Il trilemma della libertà. Stati, cittadini, compagnie digitali, Milano, La Nave di Teseo, 2025.
Gius C. , Cremonesini V., Toffanin A (a cura di), Genere e cyberviolenza. Media, politiche e narrazioni giovanili, Roma, Carocci, 2026.
Habermas J., Nuovo mutamento della sfera pubblica e democrazia deliberativa, a cura di M. Calloni, Milano, Cortina, 2023.
Petrucciani S., Democrazia, Torino, Einaudi, 2014.

Throughout the course, the instructor will provide additional learning materials to support students' learning, including supplementary readings, digital resources, background documents, and other relevant teaching materials. All resources will be made available on the course e-learning platform, together with guidance on the topics covered in class and recommendations for their use in individual study.

Sustainable Development Goals

NO POVERTY | QUALITY EDUCATION | GENDER EQUALITY | DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS