

DEBT AND DEMOCRACY
A First-Year Experience Course at Morehouse College

PSC 101 | CRN 48726 | Spring 2021
Tues/Thurs 9:25-10:40am
Blackboard / Zoom Synchronous Classes

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Office Hours by Appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Debt and democracy have been interconnected for millennia, ever since Solon cancelled the debts of the Athenian poor and paved the way for the famed period of democratic rule in ancient Greece. To this day, most of us take for granted the classical notion that properly self-governing citizens mustn't be under the sway of wealthy creditors.

And yet, in so many of the world's democracies, citizens and governments are saddled with more debt than ever before. How should we understand the relationship between debt and democracy? How has the evolution of the global economy, in particular the consolidation of financialized capitalism over the past forty years, affected ideas and practices of freedom and self-determination? What are the causes and implications of escalating sovereign debt crises? More generally, what do democratic citizens owe to one another and to society? What do democratic governments owe to their citizens? Why are poorer nations frequently indebted to wealthier ones? What do wealthy democracies owe to poorer countries, or perhaps to their former colonies or indigenous peoples whom they've displaced? How should we understand calls for debt cancellation and reparations for slavery? This first-year experience (FYE) course will introduce Men of Morehouse to these expansive and perennial questions and provide an entrée into the field of political science, in particular the subdisciplines of political theory and international political economy.

<p>And many a man whom fraud or law had sold For from his god-built land, an outcast slave, I brought again to Athens; yea, and some, Exiles from home through debt's oppressive load, Speaking no more the dear Athenian tongue, But wandering far and wide, I brought again; And those that here in vilest slavery Crouched 'neath a master's frown, I set them free.</p> <p style="text-align:right">—Solon (c. 638-558 B.C.)</p>
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The course includes a distinctive experiential-learning component. In 2019, when Robert F. Smith pledged to pay off the student loan debt of the College's entire graduating class, he thrust the Morehouse community into the national conversation about college affordability and the student debt crisis. This course will require students to partner with Morehouse alumni (from the 2019 class and other classes) and deliberate about the value of a liberal arts education, its place in a democratic society, its costs and accessibility, and its impact on career and other life choices. The idea is to build up deliberative communities that can wrestle with difficult questions about debt and democracy. All told, this course and its experiential-learning component are intended to establish an

intellectual and curricular basis from which members of the Morehouse community can work together to lead national conversations on some of the most urgent challenges facing our democracy today.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of the role that debt has played in the making of the modern world.
2. Use political science theories and methodologies to explain how societal and interpersonal obligations affect democratic politics.
3. Evaluate the relative merits of arguments for and against debt cancellation and/or reparations for slavery.
4. Show an appreciation of political scientific inquiry through collaborative reading and presentation.
5. Deliberate with Morehouse alumni about potential solutions to the student debt crisis.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- 1) **Midterm Exam (30%).** This is a take-home exam with three, short-answer essay questions (roughly 750 words each; 2250 altogether). **Due at 11:59pm on Sunday, March 14.** [This assignment will be used to assess LO1 and LO2]
- 2) **Blog Entry (15%). Due at 11:59pm on Sunday, March 21.** As preparation for our alumni engagement project, you'll be required to write a blog post on some aspect of the first half of this class. I may select one or more of these posts to publish to the Morehouse faculty blog, as a way of publicizing this class and building some web presence for our alumni engagement exercises, which will take place toward end of the semester.
- 3) **Alumni Engagement Project (15%).** You will also be required to participate in planning sessions for a series of deliberative forums with Morehouse alumni. More information will be provided in class. [This assignment will be used to assess LO5]
- 4) **Final Exam (30%).** This is a take-home exam with three, short-answer essay questions (roughly 750 words each; 2250 altogether). **Due at 11:59pm on Friday, May 7.** [This assignment will be used to assess LO3]
- 5) **Class Participation (10%).** You are required to complete each reading assignment (and the occasional homework assignment), come to class prepared to discuss the readings, and actively participate in class discussions. Participation points will be given according to the following criteria: Regular participation will earn you a score in the range of 80-100; sporadic participation in the range of 50-80; and poor or no participation in the range of 0-50.

OTHER IMPORTANT DATES

- Add/drop deadline: Monday, February 8.
- Withdrawal deadline: Wednesday, April 7.

GRADING

Each assignment will be graded on a scale of 0 to 100. These individual assignments will be weighted as indicated above such that your final course grade will also be determined on a scale of 0 to 100. The final letter grade will be based on the following scale: 93+ = A; 90+ = A-; 87+ = B+; 83+ = B; 80+ = B-; 77+ = C+; 73+ = C; 70+ = C-; 67+ = D+; 63+ = D; 60+ = D-; 59-0 = F

You should never wonder about your academic standing in this course. Regarding written assignments, you will receive your grade along with my comments within one week of the due date. You will receive an official midterm grade in March. When it comes to evaluation of your performance, my objectives are fairness, transparency, and punctuality. If you ever have any questions about your standing in the course, please let me know.

LATE WORK

Late work will not be accepted. It is your responsibility to complete your work on time, to submit your work to Blackboard by the assigned deadline, and to ensure that what you submit to Blackboard is properly formatted and uploaded. I am always happy to consider extensions. If you need an extension, please be sure to make the request at least 48 hours before the due date.

PLAGIARISM

This is a writing-intensive course and we will have occasion to discuss academic honesty in greater detail. But the gist of it is simple: academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. If you plagiarize any portion of any written assignment, you will receive no credit for the assignment and will not be given an opportunity to rewrite or revise it. A second act of plagiarism will result in immediate failure of the course. Here are some relevant passages from the College's Academic Integrity Policy:

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY

Morehouse is an academic community. All members of the community are expected to abide by ethical standards both in their conduct and in their exercise of responsibilities toward other members of the community. The Morehouse College Policy on Academic Integrity establishes the basis for academic standards at the College and the procedures for handling violations. The policy is based on an understanding that actions in this regard should serve both an educational and disciplinary function. The College expects students to understand and adhere to basic standards of honesty and academic integrity. These standards include, but are not limited, to:

PLAGIARISM

The term 'plagiarism' includes, but is not limited to, the use by paraphrase or direct quotation, from the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgment. It also includes the unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers and other academic materials.

In projects and assignments prepared independently, students must never represent the ideas or the language of others as their own...

USE OF WORK IN ONE COURSE FROM ANOTHER

Students must not take unfair advantage of fellow students by representing work completed for one course as original work for another or by deliberately disregarding course rules and regulations.

These are only excerpts from the larger policy; please review the full policy in the *Morehouse College Course Catalog 2016-2018* (pp. 285-288). In your written work you will be asked to document sources following either the Chicago style. Plagiarism is serious stuff! Please let me know if you have ANY questions about this.

EEO AND DISABILITY STATEMENT

Morehouse College is an equal opportunity employer and educational institution. The College makes reasonable accommodations for all qualified individuals with disabilities. Any student requesting academic accommodations based on his disability is required to register with our Student Counseling & Disability Center (the “Center”) at 104 Sale Hall Annex, Suite 100 every semester. A disability accommodation letter can be obtained from ODS. Students are required to provide a copy of the disability accommodation letter to each of their professors upon approval of their accommodations. Please contact our Coordinator of Disability and Counseling Services with any questions at (470) 639-0231.

SYLLABUS IS NOT A CONTRACT

A syllabus is not a contract between instructor and student, but rather a guide to course procedures. The instructor reserves the right to amend the syllabus when conflicts, emergencies or circumstances dictate. Students will be duly notified.

WRITING CENTER

The Writing Center will offer writing consultations for the Spring 2021 Semester. All writing appointments will be facilitated virtually on morehouse.mywconline.com.

CLASS FORMAT AND SCHEDULE

This class will meet synchronously on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:25am to 10:40am eastern time. Each week I will post an announcement in Blackboard with reminders about weekly reading assignments as well as Zoom links for that week’s class sessions. You are required to complete each reading assignment before the start of class and come to class prepared to participate in discussion. **All reading materials are available electronically via Blackboard or in e-book form via your Woodruff Library account.**

Weeks 1 and 2: Why Are We Here? The Purpose and Status of the Liberal Arts and Black Study

- William Deresciewicz, “The Neoliberal Arts,” *Harper’s Magazine* (2015)
- Joshua Myers, “The Historically Black College-University: Of Vision and Memory,” *The Liberator Magazine* (2014)

- Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Debt and Study,” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013)

Weeks 2 and 3: Debt: Past and Present

- David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012)
- Richard Dienst, *The Bonds of Debt: Borrowing Against the Common Good* (New York: Verso, 2017)

Weeks 4 and 5: Democracy: The Public and Its Problems

- John Dewey, “The Eclipse of the Public” and “Search for the Great Community” in *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927); “Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us” (1939)
- Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) (Introduction, “Democracy and Justice,” and “Inclusive Political Communication”)
- Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Zone, 2015)

Week 6: International Political Economy: The Debt State

- Wolfgang Streeck, “From the Tax State to the Debt State,” in *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2017)
- Jerome Roos, “The Sovereign Debt Puzzle,” in *Why Not Default: The Political Economy of Sovereign Debt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019)

Weeks 7 and 8: Reparations for Slavery

- Bernard Boxill, “Black Reparations,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (2014)
- Saidiya Hartman, “Fashioning Obligation: Indebted Servitude and the Fetters of Slavery,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Week 9: Dispatches from the Global South: The Case of Haiti

- Liliana Obregón, “Empire, Racial Capitalism and International Law: The Case of Manumitted Haiti and the Recognition Debt,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* (2018)
- Westenley Alcenat, “The Case for Haitian Reparations,” *Jacobin Magazine* (2017)
- Jonathan Holloway, “Caribbean Payback,” *Foreign Affairs* (2014)

Weeks 10 and 11: Debt Strikes and Other Democratic Responses

- Andrew Ross, *Creditocracy: The Case for Debt Refusal* (New York: OR Books, 2013) and “Confronting the Creditor Class” in Jeffrey De Lio et al., eds. *The Debt Age* (New York: Routledge, 2019)
- Annie McClanahan, “The Living Indebted (on Students and Sabotage),” in *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017)
- Debt Collective, *Can't Pay, Won't Pay: The Case for Economic Disobedience and Debt Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2020)

Week 12: Conclusions and Alumni Engagement Exercise