

# Charles University, Faculty of Arts East and Central European Studies

SPRING 2024

From Thoreau to Havel: Chapters in Czech and American Struggle for Social Justice

CUFA LIT/HIST/POL 317

Instructor: Ondřej Skovajsa, PhD

Office Hours: By Appointment

Email: oskovajsa@gmail.com

Class Days/Time: Thursday 9:10-12:20

Classroom: NP111

## Course Description

The course reacts to current polarization of political life both in the United States and the Czech Republic. It discusses important U.S. and Czech writers, artists, and activists who have believed in the indivisibility of freedom (“Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” – Thoreau) and entered in dialogue with the powerful as well as the powerless in face of dogmatism, fear, and indifference. These writers, artists, philosophers and activists have been broadening the notion of democracy and have been keeping the precious “fragile democratic experiment” alive – by fighting for ballot for women and African Americans, by fighting anti-Semitism in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, by fighting injustice and complacency in Socialist Czechoslovakia, by helping children “of the Enemy,” by confronting ongoing racial injustice in the United States and the Czech Republic, or by fighting the environmental destruction of our planet. The course will foster dialogue between American and Czech humanistic thinkers, artists, and activists. The course draws inspiration from African American philosopher Cornel West who understands truth “as a way of life” that “allows suffering to speak”.

## Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to understand the roots of democratic tradition as well as see the concrete parallels in thinking and taking-action between U.S. and Czech writers, artists, and activists. They will understand the actions of Czech and American civil rights writers, artists, and activists and view their involvement at the backdrop of their historical contexts. The students will be able to see the testimony of hope of the discussed courageous men and women. They will also understand how literature, philosophy, and the arts can incite people to political action and activism. They will understand the relation between climate change and social justice. Upon completion of the course, the students will be better oriented in current world and from recent history gain knowledge for possible more active involvement within our shared world.

## Assignments and Grading Policy

Grades based on letters A through F will be given.

Ten short reading responses 30%

Midterm test 15%

Final test 15 %

Final paper 40%

Students will be asked to write brief responses (150–300 words in total) based on assigned reading and send them to the teacher before the class when assigned readings are discussed (ten responses = ten points). Students are asked to submit 10 reading responses.

In midterm and final tests students will be asked to identify the authors of the previously discussed assigned texts, and to prove their familiarity with their key concepts.

Final paper should be written according to a recognized style of the student's choice (MLA, APA, Chicago...). It should be five pages long at minimum (without bibliography). It can be based on comparison of texts by the discussed thinkers, artists, activists; or a discussion of one or more of assigned / recommended texts from today's perspective. Other approaches are also welcome, but they need to be approved by the teacher beforehand. It is strongly recommended to discuss the paper topic with the teacher before Week 10.

NOTE: Assigned readings comprise of short texts and short excerpts from longer works. They will all be available on ECES website for download in .pdf format.

## Required Readings and Video Lectures

- Alexander, Michelle: "Ten Years After New Jim Crow"  
(<https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/ten-years-after-the-new-jim-crow>) (2020)
  - Alexander, Michelle: On The future of race in America: (Columbus, 2013)
  - Book of Jonah, Letter of James (New International Edition)
  - Clark, Kenneth. "Negro and the American Promise". Interview with James Baldwin.  
<https://www.pbs.org/video/american-experience-introduction-to-the-negro-and-the-americanpromise/>
  - Čapek, Karel: Talks with T.G. Masaryk. Trans. Michael Heim. USA, Catbird Press, 1995. (excerpts)
  - Charter 77 text. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/628>
  - Douglass, Frederick: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (Boston 1846). (excerpts)
  - Du Bois, W.E.B.: Souls of the Black Folk. Edited by B. H. Edwards. Oxford, OUP. (excerpt)
  - Feinberg, Melissa: "Masaryk, Feminism and Democracy in the Czech Lands". Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship and the Limits of Equality in Czechoslovakia. (University of Pittsburgh, 2006). Pp. 11-40.
  - Hughes, Langston: "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain> □
- hooks, bell: All About Love. New York, Harper 2001.

- King, Martin Luther. “The Other America” [1968]. *Radical King* (ed. Cornel West), Beacon Press, Boston 2015.
- King, Martin Luther: “Non-Violence and Racial Justice” [1957], *Christian Century* 74 (6 February 1957): 165-167.
- Tolokonnikova, Nadia: “Spot an Abuse of Power”. *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*. Coronet, 2020.
- Latour, Bruno : *Down to Earth, Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. 2018.
- McDougald, E.J.: “The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation” A. Locke (ed.) *The New Negro* (1925). N.Y., Touchstone 1997. Pp. 369-384.
- Plato: *Apology* (excerpts, trans. Thomas G. West).  
<http://www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Phil70A/s3/apology.pdf>
- “Seneca Falls Convention” (1848). *From American Culture* (ed. A. Breidlid et al.). Routledge 2008.
- Soelle, Dorothee: *Beyond Mere Obedience* (Washington, Thriftbooks 1982) (excerpts)
- Thoreau, H.D.: “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849), *Norton Anthology of American Literature I*. Baym et al. (eds.). N.Y., Norton 1989.
- Plamínková, Františka: “Open Letter to Adolf Hitler”( Instructor’s Translation).
- Havel, Václav: “Letter to dr. Gustáv Husák” (1975)  
[http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=1\\_aj\\_eseje.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=1_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML)
- Horáková, Milada: “Last Letter to Daughter”. (1950)  
<http://www.lettersofnote.com/2012/09/ishall-always-be-with-you.html>
- Tolstoy, Leo: *What Men Live By*. Trans. Nathan Haskell Dole. Boston, T. Crowell 1888.
- A selection of poems by Langston Hughes and Weldon Johnson. Alain Locke (ed.) *The New Negro* (1925). N.Y., Touchstone 1997. Pp. 141-145.
- Fabianová, Tera: “How I Went to School”. *Short Stories by Czech Women*. Nancy Hawker (ed.). Telegram Books, 2006.
- Kriegel, František: “Explanation for not signing Moscow Protocol” (Instructor’s translation.)
- Patočka, Jan: *Body, Community, Language, World*. Trans. Erazim Kohák. Open Court Publishing (1998, excerpt)
- Vacková, Růžena: “On Socrates” (excerpt, instructor’s translation).
- Vaculík, Ludvík: “Two Thousand Words” (1968)  
[http://www.pwf.cz/rubriky/projects/1968/ludvik-vaculik-two-thousand-words\\_849.html](http://www.pwf.cz/rubriky/projects/1968/ludvik-vaculik-two-thousand-words_849.html)
- Woolf, Virginia: “Room of My Own” (1929, excerpts). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature II*, ed. M. Abrams, vol. 2. N.Y., Norton 1986.
- Vaughn, David: “Přemysl Pitter, The Good Fundamentalist” (2011).  
<https://www.radio.cz/en/section/books/premysl-pitter-the-good-fundamentalist>
- West, Cornel: “Examined Life” (excerpt from Astra Taylor’s 2008 documentary)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w)
- Whitman, Walt from “I Celebrate Myself” (later “Song of Myself”, N.Y., 1855).  
[www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org) (excerpt)

## Attendance

Students are responsible for completing all course requirements as set forth by the instructor. Students are permitted only 180 minutes of absences per class (either one 180-minute class, or

two 90-minute classes). Any subsequent 90-minute unexcused absence after this allotment will lower the student's final grade by 1/3 letter (eg. A to A-).

Students are accountable for all course assignments, whether or not the assignments were announced during an absence. In order to receive a passing grade for each course, all students must attend at least 70% of the meetings for each course; failure to do so will result in a failing grade, or „F“, on the final transcript.

#### Excused Absences:

Observance of a major religious holy day: any student absent from class in observance of a religious holy day shall not be penalized in any way for an examination or assignment missed during the period of absence. Absence in observance of a religious holy day does not relieve students from responsibility for any part of the course work required during the period of absence. Students who are absent on days of examinations or class assignments shall be offered a reasonable opportunity to make up the work without penalty, only if the student PREVIOUSLY arranged to be absent. Please be aware that this policy only allows students to be absent in observance of a holiday; days surrounding the particular holiday will not be included in excused absences. If a student plans to miss a class due to a religious holiday, he or she should discuss this with the instructor and should notify the Director of International Programs by e-mail at least 7 days in advance.

Absence due to medical illness: any student absent from class due to a medical illness shall not be penalized in any way for an examination or assignment missed during the period of absence. In order for a medical illness to be excused, the student must submit a doctor's note to ECES staff which must include the dates for which the doctor recommends the student be absent. Medical notes which do not explicitly say the dates for which absence is recommended cannot be accepted as an excuse. ECES staff will notify each of the student's professors should a medical excuse be given. Students must see a physician in person to be excused, and have an original note to be excused.

Other cases should be approved by the Director of International Programs in advance. Unforeseen absences should be reported to the Director of International Programs as soon as possible.

Presentation Policy: Missing the presentation will result in an F (when applicable). If the student wants to switch the date, he/she must find someone to do it and both students must confirm the change in e-mails to the professor at least 10 days in advance. If the student is sick and has a medical note, then the professor must agree with the student on how the work will be made up for.

Final Test or Paper Policy: Completing the final test or paper is required. Failure to submit the final test or paper according to the deadline will result in a letter grade F for the entire course. For further details, please read the Attendance Policy at the ECES website under "Academic Policies and Procedures" : <http://eces.ff.cuni.cz/>

## Student Responsibility and Code of Conduct

Standards of study and conduct in the ECES Program are set and maintained. You are subject to the general standards and requirements of Charles University in regard to attendance, examinations, and conduct, as well as to specific requirements of the program. The student is expected to assume the initiative in completing all requirements at the time specified. It is the responsibility of the student to be informed concerning all regulations and procedures required. In no case will a regulation be waived or an exception granted because a student pleads ignorance of the regulation or asserts that he/she was not informed by an advisor or other authority.

Charles University expects all students to adhere to the highest standards of ethics and academic integrity. Students certify that all work (whether an examination, research paper, research project, form of creative expression, or any other academic undertaking) submitted for evaluation, presentation, or publication meets these standards.

All forms of academic fraud are strictly prohibited. An automatic grade of F will result for the entire course if a student is found guilty of academic misconduct. These include, but are not limited to:

- Plagiarism
- Cheating
- Falsification
- Violation of professional ethics
- Misrepresentation or research data

## Weekly Schedule

### WEEK 1

#### INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS EXAMINED LIFE?

---

In-class screening:

Cornel West: "Examined Life" (excerpt from Astra Taylor's 2008 documentary)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w)

In-class discussion over the transcript of the interview.

### WEEK 2

#### GREEK AND HEBREW ROOTS OF DEMOCRATIC TRADITION.

---

Assigned readings:

Plato: Apology (excerpts, trans. Thomas G. West).

Book of Jonah (New International Edition)

Letter of James (New International Edition)

WEEK 3  
H.D. THOREAU AND ROOTS OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE IN USA.

---

Assigned readings:

H.D. Thoreau: "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849). Walt Whitman "I Celebrate Myself" (1855). (excerpts)  
Dorothee Soelle: Beyond Mere Obedience. (excerpts)

Frederick Douglass: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (Boston 1846). (excerpts).  
W.E.B. du Bois: "Of Our Spiritual Strivings". From The Souls of Black Folk (1903). (excerpt)

WEEK 4  
MASARYK'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY: HIS FIGHT AGAINST ANTI-SEMITISM. MASARYK'S FEMINIST VIEWS.

---

Assigned readings:

Karel Čapek: from Talks with T.G. Masaryk (excerpts).

Feinberg, Melissa: "Masaryk, Feminism and Democracy in the Czech Lands".

In-class screening:

In-class commented film footage from historical films on Masaryk.

WEEK 5  
WOMEN INTELLECTUAL FIGHTERS.

---

Assigned readings:

Virginia Woolf: "Room of My Own" (1929, excerpts).  
Františka Plamínková: "On Women", "Open Letter to Adolf Hitler." Instructor's Translation. (excerpts)  
Milada Horáková: "Letter from Prison" (1950).  
Hélène Cixous: "The Laugh of the Medusa", 1978 Dorothee Soelle: From „Beyond Mere Obedience“.

WEEK 6  
HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND ITS LEGACY. MIDTERM TEST.

---

Assigned readings:

A selection of poems by Langston Hughes and Paul Dunbar. Alain Locke (ed.) *The New Negro* (1925).  
Langston Hughes: "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)

#### MIDTERM TEST.

In-class screening after midterm:

Kenneth Clarke's interviews with James Baldwin, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King (1963).

#### WEEK 7

#### FROM AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TO BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT.

---

Assigned readings / video lectures:

Martin Luther King: "Non-Violence and Racial Justice" (1957) Martin

Luther King: "The Other America" (1968).

Watch Michelle Alexander's short lecture "[New Jim Crow](#)" (2013)

Watch Carol Anderson's lecture "[On White Rage](#)" (2018)

Michelle Alexander: "Ten Years After New Jim Crow" (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorkerinterview/ten-years-after-the-new-jim-crow>) (2020)

#### WEEK 8

#### THE STORY OF CZECHOSLOVAK ROMA.

---

Assigned reading:

Tera Fabianová: "How I Went to School".

Guest debate and concert: Roma Guest singers

#### WEEK 9

#### THE HUMANIST PŘEMYSL PITTER AND TESTIMONY OF HOPE OF MILÍČ HOUSE, LEO TOLSTOY AS A LITERARY INFLUENCE ON PŘEMYSL PITTER.

---

In-class screening:

Přemysl Pitter: *Milujte své nepřátele* (Love Your Enemies). Dir. Tomáš Škrlant.

Assigned readings:

David Vaughn: "Přemysl Pitter, The Good Fundamentalist" (2011).

Leo Tolstoy: *From What Men Live By*. Trans. Nathan Haskell Dole. Boston, T. Crowell 1888.

Visit of Milíčův dům in Prague

WEEK 10  
THE COURAGEOUS OF PRAGUE SPRING 1968.

---

Assigned reading:

Ludvík Vaculík: “Two Thousand Words” (1968)

František Kriegel: explanation for not signing Moscow Protocol.

In-class screening:

A selection of lyrics from late 1960 Essay consultations.

WEEK 11  
CHARTER 77: ROOTS AND LEGACY.

---

Assigned readings:

Jan Patočka: Body, Community, Language, World. Trans. Erazim Kohák. Open Court Publishing (1998, excerpt)

Declaration of Charter 77

Václav Havel: The Power of the Powerless (1978)

WEEK 12  
STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CURRENT WORLD. CLIMATE JUSTICE.

---

Limits of Work (dir. Apolena Rychlíková. 2018). Work conditions in Czech Republic.

Guest Lecture.

Nadia Tolokonnikova: “Spot an Abuse of Power”. Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism. Coronet, 2020.

Bruno Latour: Down to Earth, Politics in the New Climatic Regime. 2018. (excerpt)

WEEK 13  
WRAP UP. FINAL ESSAY CONFERENCE. FIELD TRIP.

Updated November 30, 2023