

HCOL 185E: Individualism and Its Dangers

M 4:05-7:05pm, U-Heights North 034F

Syllabus

Professor Alex Zakaras

Office: 525 Old Mill

Office Hours: Mon. 9-10:30am and Fri. 3:15-4:45pm

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This is a course about individualism in America today. It is framed around two clusters of questions. The first cluster is sociological: in what ways is American society individualistic? What are the different forms of individualism that manifest themselves in our lives, our politics, and our culture? The second cluster is ethical: is individualism something we should embrace or reject? What does individualism have to recommend it and what are its dangers? Which forms of individualism, if any, are valuable, and which are dangerous—and why? To explore these questions, we work with many different kinds of texts: works of sociology, philosophy, and political science, but also novels, personal essays, and films. We read some of the most famous American individualists—Thoreau, Emerson, Kerouac—as well as some sharp critics of this tendency in American life.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance and Participation

I expect you to attend each class, to have done the assigned reading in advance, and to come prepared to discuss the readings. Always bring the assigned readings with you, along with the reading notes you've taken. More than one unexcused absence from class will lower your participation grade.

Since this course is a seminar, class participation forms an important part of your grade (20%). You will get high marks if you attend every class and participate *every week* in the class discussions in a way that shows that you've read and thought about all of the readings.

2. Weekly Response Papers

Every week, you must submit a short, one-page response paper (300-400 words). The paper is due by midnight on the Sunday prior to class. Submit it by posting it to the Blackboard page under "Weekly Response Papers." Click "Create Journal Entry" and then cut and paste the text of your response paper into the main text field. The paper should be about one of the readings assigned for class the following day. Response papers should do one of the following:

- (a) Identify a tension or unresolved problem in the assigned reading and explore it.

- (b) Identify a claim you disagree with, explain the claim clearly, and explain why you disagree.
- (c) Identify a claim or passage you find interesting or provocative. Explain the claim or passage, and then explain why you find it interesting or provocative. You can, for instance, connect it to something in your own experience; you can also compare or contrast it to something else we've read in the class.

Response papers will be graded check, check-plus, check-minus, or zero. At the end of the term, I will drop your lowest grade.

3. *Papers*

There will be three required papers, due Sunday, Sept. 30th, Friday, Nov. 16th, and Friday, Dec. 14th. The first two will be 7-9 page papers based entirely on the reading we've done for class. The final paper will be an 8-10 page research paper requiring that you do some additional, independent research. I will discuss the expectations with you before I hand out the first paper assignment.

Late Paper Policy (except for final paper): if you submit your paper within 24 hours of the initial deadline, you lose a third of a grade. If you submit your paper within one week of the initial deadline, you lose two-thirds of a grade. If you submit your paper more than a week late but by the last day of class, you lose a full grade.

Here's how each of these elements adds up to a final grade:

Class participation	20%
Response papers	15%
First paper	20%
Second paper	20%
Final paper	25%

Required Books

The following books are available for purchase at the UVM bookstore. *Please use these editions so that we're all able to stay on the same page. I recommend that you purchase hard copies, not e-copies (see the electronics policy below).*

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels* (HarperCollins)

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (Penguin Classics, 2000)

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Beacon Press, 2004)

Blackboard

I have created a webpage for this class through Blackboard, and posted course materials there. All reading assignments that are not in the required books can be found on this page (each of these readings is marked [Bb] on the list below. To access the page, go to <https://bb.uvm.edu/webapps/login/> and enter your UVM netid and password. Then find this course on the course list on the right hand side of the page, and click on it. You'll find the reading assignments by clicking the "course materials" link at the top left of the page. Please print these readings and bring them to class with you.

Non-Electronic Classroom

No electronic devices are allowed in the classroom. This includes laptop computers—they cannot be used in class. Please try and remember to silence your cell phones, etc. before class begins.

Weekly Reading Assignments

Week 1 (Aug. 27)

Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor" [Bb]

Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," pp. 34-7 [Bb]

Week 2 (Sept. 10)

Robert Bellah, "Individualism and Commitment in American Life" [Bb]

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, Part II, Ch. 2, 4, and 13. [Bb]

Claude Fischer, "Paradoxes of American Individualism" [Bb]

Georg Simmel, "Freedom and the Individual" [Bb]

Week 3 (Sept. 17)

Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, pp. 46-8, 98-103, 114-6, 1-6, 52-61, 106-110, 125-8 [Bb]

Bauman, "Privacy, Secrecy, Intimacy, Human Bonds—and Other Collateral Casualties of Liquid Modernity" [Bb]

David Leonhardt (*New York Times*), “In One America, Guns and Diet. In the Other, Cameras and ‘Zoolander.’” [Bb]

Week 4 (Sept. 24)

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, pp. 1-9, 98-104, 113-134, 149-158, 185-220, 238-244, 248-251 [Bb]

Extra Credit: Sam Mendes, “American Beauty” [film] + *Nation of Rebels*, pp. 52-56

Week 5 (Oct. 1)

Wendell Berry, “Rugged Individualism,” “The Work of Local Culture,” “Men and Women in Search of Common Ground,” “Money Versus Goods,” “The Pleasures of Eating” [Bb]

*Wendell Berry, “A Native Hill” [Bb]

Sunday, Sept. 30th, 5pm: first paper due

Week 6 (Oct. 15)

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, Ch 1 of originally published edition [Bb]

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, pp. 109-280

Week 7 (Oct. 22)

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, pp. 280-408

Week 8 (Oct. 29)

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 1-73

Monday, Oct. 29th: short presentations (see final paper guidelines)

Friday, Nov. 2nd, 5pm: research question due

Week 9 (Nov. 5)

Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 76-188

Week 10 (Nov. 12)

Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 189-209, 280-312

Stuart Rosenberg, “Cool Hand Luke” [film]

*Kathryn Schultz, “Pond Scum” [Bb]

*Jedediah Purdy, “In Defense of Thoreau” [Bb]

Friday, Nov. 16th, 5pm: second paper due

Week 11 (Nov. 26)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” “Experience” [Bb]

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, pp. 127-130 [Bb]

*Anastas, “The Foul Reign of Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance’”

Friday, Nov. 30th, 5pm: annotated bibliography due

Week 12 (Dec. 3)

Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, pp. 1-36, 133-136, 161-202 [Bb]

Fri., Dec. 14th: Final Paper Due, 5pm

Classroom Protocol

The Department of Political Science requires that the following classroom protocol be included in all syllabi:

1. Students are expected to attend and be prepared for ALL regularly scheduled classes.
2. Students are expected to arrive on time and stay in class until the class period ends. If a student knows in advance that he/she will need to leave early, he/she should notify the instructor before the class period begins.
3. Students are expected to treat faculty and fellow students with respect. For example, students must not disrupt class by leaving and reentering during class, must not distract class by making noise, and must be attentive to comments being made by the instructors and by peers.

Religious Holidays

If you wish to be excused from class or work because of a religious holiday, please email me about the holiday(s) by the end of the second week of class, and we'll work something out.

Students with Disabilities

In keeping with University policy, any student with a documented disability interested in utilizing accommodations should contact ACCESS, the office of Disability Services on campus. ACCESS works with students and faculty to create reasonable and appropriate accommodations via an accommodation letter to professors with suggested accommodations as early as possible each semester. Contact ACCESS: A170 Living/Learning Center; 802-656-7753; access@uvm.edu; or www.uvm.edu/access.