Great Books and Modernity

This is a one-semester version of the UHC course in Great Books.

This course has the same aims as the regular two semester Great Books.

Aims:

This course is for all students who have an intellectual interest in the complex resources of some of our shared traditions as well as a healthy curiosity about the history of our present. In other words, this seminar will make available a demanding, but still selective encounter with works of high aesthetic, intellectual, and indeed even political importance. It is the assumption behind all humanistic education that citizens, leaders, and intellectuals require for proper civic formation, a thorough study of the most valuable resources that previous generations have left us. While no two-semester seminar can be exhaustive, we feel that a careful engagement with the materials on these reading lists provides far more than a good beginning.

In the one-semester version of this course, we will focus our reading on those authors and books that show us the history of modernization and transformation in the Western tradition. For example, we will begin our reading with Homer’s Odyssey rather than reading both of his epics. We will select from the Great Books canon the books that help us best to trace and understand the unique modernization processes of the West.

Format:

We will conduct this course as a seminar using the Socratic Method. This means that each student will be importantly responsible for her or his own education. Each class, one or two students will introduce that day’s reading in order to enable conversation and debate. We will not rely on secondary materials in class, except in so far as they are essential to placing our authors and texts in their contexts. In order to enrich this course as much as possible, we will arrange related events outside of class time. These events might include showing films, arranging for expert visitors from our campus and other universities, and holding reading or discussion groups in the honors college facilities.

Devices:

We need to talk with each other about the materials we read in order to develop a shared experience. I will create an online site for this course so we can easily post information and exchange comments and ideas. Ideally, we should end the course with a small public conference in which we invite our friends and colleagues and peers to hear what we have learned about the materials we have read and discussed. We could
also schedule visits by scholars who are expert teachers in the materials we are reading. We should collectively decide on any extracurricular activities we think would help us.

Requirements:

Since this is a seminar, attendance is mandatory. Class discussion will constitute 20% of the final grade. Critical writing is essential to any humanistic education. So you will be required to produce at least 25 pages of completed writing following revisions. In addition, since it is important to learn how to discriminate what is important and what is of interest, students will be responsible for developing their own topics and theses. Normally, students must write about the seminar readings.

This course will also stress an important quality that is a mark of a UHC education. Students from different disciplines must express their thinking and research in terms available to all others in the seminar. Furthermore, we will each and all struggle to explain the cui bono, that is, the value inherent in the work we do. We will struggle to evaluate our various projects as well as those of the authors we read. We will call this “critical judgment,” which is essential to all education in any field.