

PSCI 295W-1 THE GOOD SOCIETY  
Dr. Mary Schwab Seligman and Joel Seligman  
Fall 2020: Thursday 2:00 – 4:40 pm  
This course will be taught remotely

What is the Good Society, one that is fair and just and best satisfies the aspiration of its people?

The question has been a fundamental quest of philosophy, religion, law and political theory for millennia. In this seminar, we will focus on six alternative versions of a Good Society and conclude by asking each student to write a paper describing her, his or their version of the Good Society.

Specifically, we will consider:

Plato's Republic

Exodus

The Gospel According to Luke and Paul's Two Corinthian Letters

The Koran

Marx and Communism

Constitutional Democracy

Of the World's population of approximately 7 billion today:

2.4 billion are Christian or Jewish

1.9 billion are Muslim

1.5 billion live in Communist States

3.4 billion live in full or flawed Democracies

These six articulations of a Good Society represent the vast majority of the World's population, but there are many other articulations of the Good Society such as Hinduism or Buddhism. No one seminar can articulate all versions.

By Good Society we do not mean a utopia or perfect society. We use the term society to describe the governance, faith and relations among people. We will study the six Good Societies within the context of the specific culture where the Good Society was originated.

There should be no delusions that a Good Society has ever been fully achieved or ever will be fully achieved. But we believe that by comparing earlier attempts to envision a Good Society we can progress closer to envisioning the best articulation of a Good Society today.

We will place each set of required readings on Reserve or in an easily available Office.

Each student will be graded 25 percent on the basis of class participation and 75 percent on the basis of the written and oral presentation of a final paper. The final papers should have text no longer than 25 double spaced pages with font of 12 or larger. End notes can be included in addition. A first draft of the final paper is due no later than the beginning of Class on November 18. The final draft is due no later than 9 am on Tuesday, December 1. We encourage creativity. Papers can be speculative and use devices such as the Foundation Myths in the assigned readings. The papers alternatively can be factual and in any event draw on sources in addition to those assigned in the course. The papers should present each student's view of what a Good Society should be.

## SYLLABUS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

August 27: Building Blocks and Human Nature: Read First Class Memorandum, Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (Little, Brown Spark 2019), pages 1-18, 240-261, 269-280 and 365-385 and Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*.

September 3: Plato's Republic. Read Allan Bloom, *The Republic* (Basic Books 2016) and *The Second Class Memorandum*, which delineates the specific text in *The Republic* you should read for September 3 and 10.

September 10: Plato's Republic.

September 17: Exodus: Read any translation of Exodus, *Third Class Memorandum* which specifies reading assignment for September 17 and 24, and Joel Baden, *The Book of Exodus* (Princeton Univ. Press 2019), pages specified in *Third Class Memorandum*.

September 24: Exodus

October 1: The Gospel According to Luke and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Read *Fourth Class Memorandum* and any version of *The New Testament*.

October 8: Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

October 15: The Koran: Read *Fifth Class Memorandum* and any version of the assignments from the Koran.

October 22: Marx and Communism: Read *Sixth Class Memorandum* and any version of *The Communist Manifesto*.

October 29: Marx and Communism.

November 5: Constitutional Democracy: Read *Seventh Class Memorandum* and assigned readings.

November 12: Constitutional Democracy

November 19: Oral Presentations

November 26: Thanksgiving

December 3: Feedback to each student on Final Paper

FIRST CLASS DISCUSSION MEMORANDUM  
AUGUST 27, 2020

BUILDING BLOCKS AND HUMAN NATURE

READING ASSIGNMENT: Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (Little Brown Spark 2019) Chapter 1 The Society within Us pages 1-18, Chapter 8 Friends and Networks pages 240-261 and 269-280 and Chapter 11 Genes and Culture pages 365-385 and Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*.

Christakis's book includes an integration of decades of cultural anthropological research and the impact of genetics on how societies are viewed. His normative theory is summarized at pages 13-16 in the *Social Suite*. You may find all or much of Christakis book including his notes helpful in preparing Final Papers. Note The Robber's Cave Demonstration at pages 269-280 would not be permitted today but may provide important lessons in considering a Good Society.

In the first class we distinguish a Good Society from Human Nature.

There are common elements in most or all of the six Good Societies we will study in this course. We will consider these in many class discussions, but here let us introduce several of the building blocks. As the Christakis book illustrates there are many other ways to articulate these types of building blocks.

A. SUFFICIENT POPULATION: The population need not be as large as a nation; anthropologists have studied many cultures with as few as a few hundred individuals. But no Good Society can be as small as a family.

The population of a Good Society has profound implications. A small society has advantages in achieving support for a common ideology, faith or religion, but it also has disadvantages in surviving if it has predatory neighbors or in developing a sustainable economic base.

A large society such as a Nation or City State historically has been difficult to achieve without social tensions caused by status, race, gender or ideology, faith or religion and often has been dependent upon populations of slaves or workers who are harshly disadvantaged. Large societies have advantages in terms of survival and economic sustainability, but size alone does not determine whether a particular Good Society will endure.

**B. LIBERATION OR REVOLUTION AGAINST AN ESTABLISHED ORDER.** Each Good Society includes an account of liberation or revolution against an earlier society. Whether you consider these accounts to be Foundational Myths or not, these accounts at certain historical times have helped bind a people to the Good Society and provide a basis for the common ideology, faith or religion.

**C. A CHARISMATIC LEADER AND SYSTEM OF ENDURING LEADERSHIP.** Each Good Society either articulates a system of leadership (Plato's Republic, Marx, Constitutional Democracy) or is initiated by a charismatic leader (Exodus, The New Testament, the Koran). The leader can precede a system of leadership, but without a charismatic leader and system of leadership a Good Society usually does not come into existence.

**D. A COMMON IDEOLOGY, FAITH OR RELIGION:** A leader or system of leadership is invariably associated with an ideology, faith or religion (Plato's Republic, Exodus, the New Testament, the Koran) or ideology (Marx, Constitutional Democracy) that provides a basis to bind the population to the Good Society. The ideology, faith or religion or

ideology is not necessarily true (for example, Plato bases *The Republic* on a Noble Lie), but will not succeed unless it is believed or accepted.

E. A MEANS TO ENFORCE THE COMMON IDEOLOGY, FAITH OR RELIGION: Not all in a Good Society will accept the common ideology, faith or religion. Each Good Society articulates means to address faction or disbelief including appeals to love, community, dictatorship of the proletariat, democratic process including the rule of law and majority rule, banishment, imprisonment, enslavement, or execution. A common ideology, faith or religion may be more accepted in the initial post-revolution or liberation period and acceptance may fade over time.

F. A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC BASIS: No Good Society can endure without a sustainable economy. In many early Good Societies the economy is based on slave labor and large classes of workers. In more recent societies, the question of whether class differences are necessary for a Good Society to be achieved or survive coexists with the question of whether political reform can ameliorate the tendency for a governing class to exploit the poor.

Implicit in each version of the Good Society is a fundamental consideration. What is human nature? Is it hard wired into each of us and largely determined by genetics or largely the consequence of cultural variations among societies or some combination of both? Consider the classic novella by Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, which focuses not on a society, but on the internal struggle within the protagonist Gustave von Aschenbach. Is this a narrative that describes humans generally or is human nature as variable as the cultures that anthropologists have studied?