

THESEUS Interview with Visiting Professor Emiliano Grossman

THESEUS: Mr Grossman, your MA seminar at the UoC will deal with the topic "Democracy in times of crisis" – why did you choose this topic?

Grossman: Debates on the quality of democracy and the threats democracy is facing are not new. Yet, the recent crisis has highlighted the fragility of democratic politics. Voters are disappointed with the (in)capacity of their political leaders to cope with major problems of our times. This results in very short incumbency rates, increasing abstention from elections and the rise of populist parties on the political right and on the left – this course aims both at clarifying causal mechanisms and looking for potential solutions.

THESEUS: Which concrete questions do you want to address with your students?

Grossman: We will look at different challenges: globalization, debt, mediatisation, but also decreasing trust, changing values and polarization. For each of these issues we want to understand the origins and relating general trends. We want to see if and how countries have recognized and responded to those challenges and analyse, whether some countries are doing better than others and why this is the case.

THESEUS: How do you want to approach these questions?

Grossman: The structure of the course includes a couple of lectures, but also class readings and personal presentations and papers. I will provide analytical tools and strategies to students that I want them to test on a specific case or issue of their choice. They will pick a research topic and apply the acquired tools in their papers. A two-day presentation seminar should allow them to get feedback before writing the final papers.

THESEUS: What questions should students think about before coming to your seminar?

Grossman: It would be helpful if they had started making up their mind about what they consider to be major challenges to democracy and what ought to be done about it – I fundamentally believe confrontation with new ideas and contradiction can only improve critical and analytical thinking. In the best of all worlds students would arrive with a particular set of ideas and leave with a similar or different set of much more sophisticated ideas.

THESEUS: What set of ideas do you want students to take away from your course?

Grossman: My major goals concern research design: How do you phrase a good question and how do you turn it into a good research paper? I want students to explore and appreciate the whole palette of methods at their disposal to do this, ranging from political theory, to discourse analyses, statistics and other. Beyond these methodological goals, I want to convey an actual understanding for the fragility of contemporary democracy. They should be better equipped after the course to contribute positively to contemporary political debates and decision making.