PS 506
French political thought from Rousseau to Foucault

11:00 am-12:15pm
Birge B302

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Office hours: Wednesday 9:00-10:00 and by appointment

I. Synopsis
This course provides a survey of French political thought from Rousseau to Foucault. It focuses on a few questions central to French political philosophy: what does it mean to be free? Is it possible to be both free and equal, or is there a trade-off between freedom and equality? What does citizenship entail? Should we view society as a voluntary contract between isolated individuals or does society shape the individual? Is emancipation an individual or a collective process? Does the liberal and democratic society created by emancipatory movements hide new kinds of oppression and domination? We will analyze different theories responding to these questions in five different historical moments, from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. The course will thus give an overview of the evolution of French philosophy on the topics of freedom, equality and citizenship from the Enlightenment to post-modern theory.

II. Learning outcomes

Skills
Writing skills
Since this is an advanced undergraduate course, I expect you to already know the basics of writing papers in social sciences. We will therefore focus on perfecting this art. We will have a “paper writing workshop”, where we will discuss strategies to come up with exciting research questions and write rigorous essays.

Creativity, Research and Leadership
One important goal of this course is for you to develop the capacity to ask well-formulated and original questions that could form the beginning of a research agenda. We will pursue this goal both in papers and in daily class discussion. This course will therefore require you to take a very active part in shaping the discussion through your inquiries.
Interpretive and Argumentative skills
This course is based on class discussion, which means that you need to come ready to participate and engage with other students on the text and the questions that it triggers. You will develop your argumentative skills through suggesting interpretations, offering objections and nuances to other students and defending your claims by offering textual evidence and arguments.

Presentation skills
You will have the opportunity to give a presentation once this semester. I will provide you with guidelines as well as feedback on your performance. You will have to answer a Q&A after your presentation, which will entail defending your views (or maybe nuancing them).

Knowledge
The course aims to provide an overview of different and influential theories from the pre-revolutionary period to the end of the twentieth century. By the end of the course you are expected to know the basic claims of republicanism, liberalism, existentialism, etc. as well as the main structure of their arguments and the concepts they used. You will also become familiar with the specific works of influential philosophers and thinkers. The course will also give you the historical context of these theories and how they responded to specific political events of their time.

III. Requirements

Requirements: 2 papers (4-5 pages) (40%); participation (30 %); presentation (10 %); one longer paper (6-7 pages) or in-class paper (20 %).

The two short papers can be written as a response to any of the first four sets of prompts. It is possible for you to write a paper on a topic of your own design, as long as you get my approval ahead of time. Submission deadlines are the same for everyone, whether or not you choose to write on a prompt that I provided or on your own question.

The final paper is mandatory for everyone. You can choose to either write it in class (prompts will be provided on that day) or at home (with a question of your own design).

Late papers will be penalized by half a letter grade per day.

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.

Further guidelines for paper writing and presentation will be given in class. If you have any questions, send me an email or talk to me after class. We will discuss these issues at length during the “Paper Writing Workshop”.

Participation is crucial in this class. A high grade for participation is given for constant quality participation, which includes proposing textual interpretations, responding to other students’ questions and asking relevant questions.
Presence in class is a requirement. Absences need to be justified. Missing more than three classes will put your final grade in jeopardy.

III. Books

You are expected to bring the following books to class:

Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society*, The Free Press
Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage
Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Yale University Press
Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press
Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Vintage Books

The rest of the texts on the syllabus will be provided online.

IV. Syllabus

The course is organized around five moments in the history of French political thought. Each of these moments develops a new way of understanding the two concepts central to French political thought: freedom and equality. The course follows the historical arc of French political thought by wondering whether it is possible for a people to be free without developing a robust conception of social and political equality.

(1) Imagining a new society: from the Enlightenment to the French Revolution (weeks 1-3)

We will first explore the fertile pre-revolutionary period when thinkers such as Rousseau criticized absolute monarchy all the while imagining new possibilities for a legitimate political order. We will study Rousseau’s radical conception of republican democracy, which provided a blueprint for French republicanism that marked a sharp contrast with the American understanding of republicanism. We will also compare the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in France and the American Declaration of Indendence in order to track intellectual differences in these two revolutionary peoples. Finally we will read discourses by Robespierre to have a glimpse of the Terror, a historical event that still haunts French political thought today. More generally we will pause on the importance of the Revolution as a founding moment for French history, politics and philosophy.

(2) Liberalism (Weeks 4-6)

Only recently has scholarship acknowledged the existence of a liberal tradition in France. Liberalism emerged after the Revolution and became seminal to the nineteenth-century quest to settle a stable political order in the context of a very instable society. We will reflect on the diversity of the liberal tradition in France, always intermingled with the republican one. We will spend some time reading Tocqueville, whose writings on American democracy are largely echoing and displacing his concern for the political situation in France. With Tocqueville we will have an example of the French tradition of
comparing France to other countries in order to find inspiration for political and social reform.

(3) From socialism to social theory (weeks 7-9)
The second half of the nineteenth century is marked by social and political instability together with the rise of socialism. While there were several and diverse trends of socialism in France, we will focus on the original work of Proudhon, an anarchist whose work on property reveals a long-standing concern in French political thought for the status of property, echoing the work of Rousseau. We will also attend to one of the great events of the nineteenth century, which is the birth of sociology in France. We will wonder about the connection between the birth of sociology and the rise of socialism.

(4) Existentialism and Feminism (weeks 11-13)
The twentieth century saw the rise of what has been called “French theory”. As this course cannot attend to the diversity of French theory from structuralism to deconstruction, we will focus on existentialism by reading Sartre and Beauvoir. This will be a way for us to continue the discussion on the nature of freedom and strategies of emancipation. With Beauvoir we will be able to discuss the place of women in the modern liberal society that France claimed to be in the twentieth century.

(5) Resistance (weeks 13-16)
The twentieth century also saw the formidable process of decolonization, which showed the contradictions of French liberalism between an ideal of equal freedom and a practice of colonization and oppression. We will read Fanon’s take on the process of emancipation for the colonized. Finally we will read Foucault’s analysis and criticism of the punitive society that France had become. In both works we will track possible strategies of resistance and reflect on the transformation of agency and freedom in modern societies.

I. Imagining a New Society: From the Enlightenment to the French Revolution
Week 1
Jan. 19 Introduction

Week 2
Jan. 26 Rousseau, Second Discourse, Part II, pp. 161-188 [notes included]

Week 3
Feb. 2 Rousseau, Social Contract, Book III, pp. 82-116, Book IV, pp. 138-152
Feb. 4 The French Revolution and the Terror:
  - Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen
  - Olympe de Gouges, “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen”
  - Robespierre, Discourses (selections)
II. Liberalism

Week 4
Feb. 9 Paper Writing Workshop
Feb. 11 Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients as Compared with That of the Moderns”

* Paper 1 (Rousseau, Constant) is due on Saturday, Feb. 13 @ 8 pm*

Week 5
Feb. 16 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 3-15, 19-55
Feb. 18 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 56-65, 172-180, 240-258

Week 6
Feb. 23 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 417-424, 479-484, 489-492, 500-517, 546-557
Feb. 25 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, pp. 639-676

* Paper 2 (Tocqueville) is due on Saturday, Feb. 27 @ 8 pm *

III. From Socialism to Social Theory

Week 7
March. 1 Proudhon, What is Property, pp. 13-34; 67-99
March. 3 Proudhon, What is Property, pp. 170-217

Week 8
March 10 Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, 57-104.

Week 9
March 15 Durkheim, Division of Labor in Society 116-123; 131-157; 183-222.
March 17 Durkheim, Division of Labor in Society 277-319. [+ 2nd preface]

Week 10
Break

*Paper 3 (Proudhon, Durkheim) is due on Saturday, March 26 @ 8 pm*

III. Existentialism and Feminism

Week 11
March 29 Sartre, Existentialism is a humanism
March 31 Sartre, Existentialism is a humanism

Week 12
April 5 Beauvoir, Second Sex, pp. 3-68
April 7 Beauvoir, Second Sex, pp. 279; 341-416
IV. Resistance

Week 13
April 12 Beauvoir, Second Sex, pp. 638-664; 721-766
April 14 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, pp. 1-62

* Paper 4 (Sartre, Beauvoir) is due on Saturday, April 16 @ 8 pm*

Week 14
April 19 Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, pp. 63-96, pp. 235-239 + Introduction by Sartre, pp. xliii-lxii
April 21 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, part I, pp. 1-69

Week 15
April 26 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, part II, pp. 73-131
April 28 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, part III, pp. 135-228

Week 16
May 3 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, part IV, pp. 231-308
May 5 Optional in-class paper in lieu of final paper (Fanon, Foucault)

* Final paper is due on Saturday, May 7 @ 8 am*