

The French Liberal Tradition

Professor Flagg Taylor
PL 341, Fall 2017
Ladd 306A, x 5244
ftaylor@skidmore.edu
Office Hours: M/W 10-12

Course Description:

After of the elaboration of the foundations of liberal democracy in the 17th century by thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke, there would seem to be two dominant paths in political philosophy. On the one hand, some appear committed to the furthering or radicalization of these principles. On the other, thinkers like Rousseau and Nietzsche undertake thorough-going critiques of liberal democratic life. Less noticed is a train of thinkers including Montesquieu, Benjamin Constant, and Tocqueville, who, while remaining sympathetic to ideas like constitutional democracy, also bring out some problematic elements of modern political life. This is a truly unique strain of thought in 19th century France, where the dominant intellectual forces were two: those promoting a more radical, proto-socialist agenda, and those seeking a restoration of the ancien regime. We will also read some prominent French voices from the 20th century including Bertrand de Jouvenel and Raymond Aron who sought to defend liberal democracy from its illiberal critics on the left and the right. Finally, we will conclude the course by reading a contemporary French political thinker, Pierre Manent, who is much influenced by the likes of Montesquieu and Tocqueville.

This course is designed to enable students:

- To engage thoughtfully and critically with an underappreciated tradition in French political philosophy, a tradition that encourages a rethinking of modernity;
- To grapple with these thinkers in a way which will enable the students to see what is gained as well as what is lost under the liberal democratic dispensation;
- To appreciate that, in a certain way, the questions to which these thinkers addressed themselves remain *our* questions.

The course will contribute to the broader goals of liberal arts education by:

- Encouraging an awareness of both the positive and negative potentialities of modern democratic life;
- Allowing the students to see these questions from an alien, particularly French perspective, one steeped in the turbulent and complex political history of France from 1750 to today.

Required Texts:

The Spirit of the Laws, Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu

The Old Regime and the Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville

A World Beyond Politics?, Pierre Manent

****Cheryl Glenn and Loretta Gray, *The Hodges Harbrace Handbook*, 17th edition (Wadsworth Cengage Learning)****

Course Outline:

Introduction to Course

- A. Introduction to course and themes
 - General introduction (9/7)
 - Pierre Manent, *A World Beyond Politics?*, Intro. & ch. 1 (9/12)
- B. Moderation
 - Harry Clor, *On Moderation*, ch. 1 (hand-out) (9/14)
 - Aurelian Craiutu, “In Search of a Lost Archipelago” (hand-out) (9/19)

I. The Emergence of Liberal Democracy: **Montesquieu**

- A. The Old: Ancient Republics, European Monarchies
 - *The Spirit of the Laws*, Books 1-2 (9/21)
 - TSL, Books 3-4 (9/26)
 - TSL, Books 5, 8 (9/28)
- B. The New: England, Modern Constitutionalism and Commerce
 - TSL Book 11 & Book 19, ch. 27 (10/3)
 - TSL Books 19-20 (10/5)

II. The Problem of Democracy and Revolution: **Constant** and **Tocqueville**

- A. **Constant** on Modern Liberty
 - *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns* (10/10)
- B. **Tocqueville** on Democracy, Equality, and Revolution
 - *Democracy in America*, Introduction & Vol. I, Pt. ii, ch. 9 (hand-out) (10/12)
 - *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Preface and Book I (entire) (10/17)
 - ORR, II, 1-6; *DA* I, I, 5 (pp.56-65) (hand-out) (10/19)
 - ORR, II, 7-12 (10/24)
 - ORR, III (entire) (10/26)

III. Democracy, Power, and Totalitarianism: **Jouvenel**, **Aron**, and **Manent**

- A. Bertrand de Jouvenel on Democracy and Power
 - *On Power*, chs. 13-14 (10/31)
 - *On Power*, ch. 15 (11/2)
- B. Raymond Aron and Pierre Manent on Democracy and Totalitarianism
 - Aron, “The Liberal Definition of Freedom” (hand-out) (11/7)

NO CLASS ON 11/9

- Aron, “The Future of Secular Religions” (hand-out) (11/14)
- Manent, *WBP*, 14-15 (11/16)

IV. The Meaning of the Triumph of Liberal Democracy: **Manent**

- A. *A World Beyond Politics?*

- WBP, chs. 2-3 (11/21)

NO CLASS ON 11/23 THANKSGIVING BREAK

- WBP, 4-6 (11/28)
- WBP, 9-11 (11/30)
- WBP, 16-18 (12/5)
- TBA (11/7)

Final Exam: Wednesday, DECEMBER 13, 6:00-9:00pm

Course Requirements:

Responses, 10%

Textual Explication, 25%

Thematic Essay, 30%

Final Exam, 35%

Textual Explication and Responses

Each student must complete a 4-5 page detailed analysis of a portion of the readings assigned for a particular class day. Students must demonstrate their command of the text (the key points at issue) and attempt to reveal the logic of the argument. This paper must be made available to me and to the entire class at least two days before the class meeting (Sunday for a Tuesday class and Tuesday for a Thursday class). All of the other students in the class must write a one to two page response to this paper, and give one copy to the author and one to me on the day when we will discuss these readings. This response can include informed criticism and/or praise, but should always be serious and respectful. This is designed to promote a mutual engagement with the text. The author of the paper for that day will be called upon to contribute to the discussion. Please see the attached schedule for the available dates and texts.

Essays

Paper topics will be distributed approximately two weeks before the due date. These topics will be designed to force you to take a broader view of an author's argument than the textual analysis, although your efforts in the latter should be of great use here.

Final Exam

This will be a comprehensive, in-class exam.

General Expectations:

You are expected to read the assignments carefully and reflectively, remaining open to the possibility that what you are reading is right. Your first duty as an attentive reader is to understand what is being said. This means grasping the argument of the author—identifying central claims and seeing how these claims are supported. When you encounter something you strongly disagree with, make sure you first understand the argument. You are expected to give reasons for your opinions.

You will be attentive in class and always display the demeanor of one who is interested in the material and respectful of others. You will take your share of responsibility for the quality of class time, coming prepared to discuss the assignments thoughtfully.

No laptops are permitted in class unless you have a medical problem that prevents you from taking notes by hand.

Attendance:

All absences must be cleared ahead of time. If you must miss class, you remain responsible for all the material covered that day. After 2 absences, each subsequent absence will bring your final grade down by one half of a letter grade.

Academic Honor:

I take violations of the honor code very seriously. At minimum, plagiarism will merit a "0" for that assignment, with failure for the course likely. In cases that I deem particularly egregious, I will seek to have you suspended or expelled from Skidmore College.