HISTORY 3404G
Montesquieu to Mill: Classic Texts and Debates in Western Culture
Fall 2021
Wednesdays, 9:30-11:20 am, Location TBA

In-person course delivery, with synchronous delivery as the backup mode

Instructor: Eli Nathans
Office Hours: Wednesday, 1:30-3:30 pm
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This is a draft syllabus. Please see your course OWL site for the final syllabus.

Course Description:

The class examines and compares the work of key Enlightenment thinkers, including Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, as well as later authors who responded to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and interpreted contemporary changes taking place in Europe, including Edmund Burke, Friedrich Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill.

Prerequisite(s):

1.0 History course at the 2200 level or above.

Unless you have either the prerequisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. The decision may not appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Course Syllabus:

This course is about a multi-generational conversation. The conversation began, or at least assumed new forms, in the first half of the eighteenth century, in part in response to the military, political, and commercial successes of Great Britain, whose government and society came to serve as a counter-model to the monarchical absolutism characteristic of continental Europe; in part as a result of the expansion of European commerce and contact with foreign lands and cultures, which created new forms of wealth and expanded the imagination about the forms taken by states and societies; in part because of the weakening of the power of purely religious templates for human affairs; in part as a consequence of the example of scientific progress, most notably connected with the name of Isaac Newton; and for numerous other reasons as well. This conversation assumed that humans, or at least some humans, had the power to make choices about the form and direction of societies and governments. The writers on this subject usually responded to ideas and claims of other writers, in a

complex process of inspiration, rejection, and reworking. These connections are what makes their writings a conversation.

It is necessary in a history class to find a beginning, and this class will begin in 1748, when a French nobleman, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, inspired in part by Isaac Newton's discovery of laws of attraction that explained the movements of the planets, undertook to explain the laws that moved human beings and societies. It was absurd to think, Montesquieu wrote in the first lines of *Of the Spirit of the Laws*, that "une fatalite aveugle a produits tous les effets que nous voyons dans le monde" ("that a blind fatalism produced all the effects that we see in the world"). Montesquieu concluded that political institutions were a product of, and also reinforced, distinctive social and cultural conditions, the distinctive forms of feeling and patterns of behavior to which people had become habituated. They also reflected distinctive climates and geographic conditions, which influenced economic practices and relationships. The treatise he produced proposed a range of categories that explained the various forms taken by political institutions and social practices, and the relationship between the two.

Montesquieu's treatise became one of the most influential works of political theory of the eighteenth century. The conversations it inspired have continued to the present day. We will discuss two very recent and very interesting interpretations of Montesquieu's argument.

We then examine, more briefly, two of Montesquieu's contemporary critics, Voltaire and Rousseau. While Montesquieu was – in the French context – a defender of the power of the aristocracy and also, in a more limited way, of religion, with an emphasis on its political function as well as on the content of its teaching, Voltaire was a scathing critic of both aristocracy and Christianity. Voltaire was more inclined than Montesquieu to judge societies based primarily on elite cultural achievements, especially the literary and scientific.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an outlier among the philosophes of eighteenth century France, rebelled against hierarchies of the kind that both Montesquieu and Voltaire considered natural and desirable. Rousseau argued that to achieve even a modicum of happiness required a return to a simpler and more egalitarian existence. Both the work of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault can be read as variations on the critique of modern society found in Rousseau.

Edmund Burke, a member of the British House of Commons for nearly thirty years, is best known for the defense of the political constitution of Britain found in his critique of the French Revolution, an extended essay published in 1790. Burke's essay can be read as a variation on the arguments of Montesquieu, since – like Montesquieu - he stressed the ways in which the tripartite division of power in Britain, between the monarch, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons, and the tensions between these parts, preserved the liberties of citizens and the stability of the larger structure. Furthermore, Burke's uneasiness with declarations of universal principles of individual rights echoed Montesquieu's emphasis on the need to examine the circumstances of each society before judging the character of the political regime proper to it. While Montesquieu was especially interested in defending the powers of the aristocracy against the encroachments of the French monarchy, Burke defended the power of the monarchy and, with much greater fervor than Montesquieu, the established church, against the secular republicanism of the French Revolution.

The course next examines selections from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft was both inspired by Rousseau's radical critique of modern society, which she adapted to the situation of women, and at the same time repelled by his chauvinism, for he reproduced in his treatment of gender the hierarchy he otherwise criticized. Wollstonecraft was deeply critical of Burke's conservatism. Wollstonecraft is considered a "founding figure in modern Anglo-American feminism," though she "was rarely even mentioned, let alone venerated, for most of the nineteenth century." Her influence was "powerful, haunting, and suggestive," but subterranean.[1]

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel attempted an ambitious and influential interpretation of the parallel ways in which both individuals (*Phenomenology of Mind (or Spirit)*(1806)) and societies (*Philosophy of Right)* (1821)) should fulfill their highest potential. Hegel postulated that by passing through a series of what one might call developmental stages both individuals and societies have the potential to achieve conditions that were more free, dignified, and creative. We examine the section of his work that attempts an explanation of the role of the state in his conception of human history.

While Hegel interpreted human history as a psychological and philosophical voyage, Alexis de Tocqueville sought to explain the choices confronting Europe, and especially France, as a result of what he considered an inevitable tendency towards democratization. Tocqueville feared that democratic conditions would lead to materialism, social isolation, and the political and intellectual tyranny of the majority. His famous study of the United States, published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840, examined whether the Americans had developed democratic institutions, practices, and forms of feeling that might hinder these negative features of democratic regimes.

Tocqueville analyzed the United States as a model of democratic conditions and devoted relatively little space to the institution of slavery, which then dominated the economy of the American South. The realities of this brutal crime are not an especially significant part of the conversation on which the class has heretofore focused. We read the autobiography of Frederick Douglas, in the version published in 1845. Douglas' principal goal was to acquaint contemporary American (U.S.) society, especially those parts not in direct contact with it, with the brutality of slavery and the necessary degradation and criminality of the society that sanctioned it.

John Stuart Mill carefully read Tocqueville's study of democracy in the United States, and was most disturbed by what Tocqueville had characterized as a tendency towards intellectual conformity. Mill's essay *On Liberty*, published in 1859, is a plea for permitting the greatest possible freedom for individual thought, speech, and action. While the essay outlines in a comprehensive way the dangers that arise from the restrictions Mill opposes, Mill struggles to define the limits societies might legitimately exercise with respect to individual freedoms.

The final text the class will examine is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, first published in 1929. Woolf's essay is a meditation on the various ways the second class status of women continued to hinder women's efforts to think and create freely, even after the achievement of formal legal equality with men. Our discussion will focus especially on the ways in which Woolf's essay further develops and also departs from the points of view expressed in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman.*

[1] Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)., 6-7.

Course Materials:

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford World's Classics: 2009)

Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics* (Cambridge: 2018).

Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Norton, 2017).

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women* (Penguin Classics:2007).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Oxford World's Classics: 2009).

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

The books required for the course may be purchased at the Western bookstore, or on-line. Other materials will be posted in the Resources section of the course OWL website; these materials are starred in the syllabus. The starred documents may also be purchased in the form of a coursepack available at the Western bookstore. In addition, the instructor will provide students with copies of Jerry Muller's *The Mind and the Market. Capitalism in Western Thought* (Anchor Books, 2002), from which several chapters are assigned.

Methods of Evaluation:

Participation in seminar discussions, as well as periodic response papers on the assigned readings: 30%

Two essays, each approximately eight to ten pages (2500-3000 words) in length, on the assigned readings, based on questions set by the instructor. Students will have a choice of topics. 70% (each essay is worth 35% of the class grade)

There is no mid-term or final examination in this class.

Participation in seminar discussions, as well as periodic response papers on the assigned readings:

Because I believe that it will promote the quality of class discussions, because some students are more reluctant than others to participate in these discussions, and because I want to be able to provide at least some credit to students who have carefully done the reading for a class but are unable to demonstrate this because of the size of the class limits the amount of time each student may speak, I will on a regular basis ask the class to respond in writing to questions about the reading that I will pose during the class. I plan to distribute only one response paper in each class, but it is conceivable that I would distribute two. I will ask students to write a response to the question posed on the page of paper I will distribute

(or, if the class is conducted via Zoom, to upload responses to questions to the Assignments section of the course OWL website). Students will usually have ten minutes for this exercise; if the question is complex, it might be a bit longer. The exercise is open book and open notes; students may consult any assigned course materials and any notes that they have prepared before class. I will post the grades on the response papers in the course OWL website gradebook.

The response papers will determine part of the participation grade for the class. They will not count for more than half of the participation grade; the exact weight I assign will depend on the number of response papers distributed during the semester. I expect, however, to distribute these papers in most classes, and to assign them a weight of between a third and a half of the participation grade. Therefore, students still must participate regularly in class discussions to do well in the participation portion of the class.

I do not inform students before class of the question on the response papers. Part of the purpose of the response paper is to test student preparation of all of the assigned reading.

In determining the grade on class participation for the semester I will not count the lowest grade received on one response paper and for participation in one session of the class. This provides an unbureaucratic way of handling family emergencies, illnesses, and other challenges that may arise during the semester and prevent class attendance or careful preparation for a class.

My grading of class participation will reflect quality rather than quantity of participation, but I will never penalize a comment that I consider an error. Sometimes the meaning of an author is hard to decipher, and I am very appreciative when students attempt an explanation even if they are not entirely certain.

Essays:

Students should write one essay in response to one question from the list of questions under "First Essay" and one essay in response to one question from the list of questions under "Second Essay." Each essay should be 8-10 pages in length, roughly 2500 to 3000 words. The word count is a rough target. The instructor will read the entirety of any essay submitted. The essays should be based on all of the primary and secondary works assigned with respect to each author. Standard footnote form should be used (please see the *Guide to Researching and Writing a History Essay* in the Resources section of the course website for a summary of the rules, and also some advice on constructing paragraphs). Students may, if they wish, undertake additional research, but each question may be adequately answered based only on the assignments for the class.

Each essay is due shortly before the discussion of the texts on which they are based, or, if the essay is a comparison, before the discussion of the second of the two texts. Essays are not accepted after the class discussion to which they are keyed takes place. Students will have to select a different subject for the alternative essay. If the deadlines for both essay questions under the heading "First Essay" are missed, a ten point penalty will be assigned with respect to the make-up essay topic. Thus, a student who fails to write on one of the two questions assigned for the first essay cannot make up this failure by writing on both of the questions given for the second essay. One of the essays must focus on the material assigned in the first half of the class, and one on the material assigned in the second half. In the event of a failure

to write an essay based on one of the two questions given under "First Essay," the instructor will set an alternative essay question that focuses on one or more of the authors studied in the first half of the class, and will impose a ten point penalty, unless an accommodation request is received from an Academic Counseling Office with respect to the essay that was not submitted. The accommodation request will result in a waiving of the penalty, but will not change the rule that an essay may not be submitted after the class discussion of the subject of the essay. Essays submitted after the deadline given for each essay (in all instances essays are due on Monday morning at 8:30 with respect to the class that will take place on the following Wednesday) but before the class on Wednesday of the same week will be penalized one point for each 24 hour period the essay is late. The first one point penalty will be imposed starting at 8:31 am on Monday, the second starting on Tuesday at 8:31 am, and the third on Wednesday at 8:31 am. Essays will not be accepted after the start of class on Wednesday, at 9:30 am. Students who miss this deadline should contact the instructor to arrange an alternative subject.

First essay:

1. What aspects of Burke's political philosophy, as expressed in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, parallel the arguments made in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, and in what respects does Burke differ from Montesquieu? Essays should draw on the entirety of readings assigned with respect to both authors, including both the primary and the secondary sources.
   This essay should be uploaded to the Assignments section of the course OWL website by Monday morning, October 11th, at 8:30 am. If for some reason you are unable to upload the essay to the course OWL website, please send it as an attachment in Word to enathans@uwo.ca. I will promptly acknowledge receipt.

2. In what respects was Tocqueville's interpretation of American government and society in *Democracy in America* influenced by Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*? Consider both the substance of Tocqueville's argument and his method, the issues on which he focuses and the questions he asks, as well as the conclusions he reaches. Essays should draw on the entirety of the reading assigned with respect to both authors, including both the primary and the secondary sources.
   This essay should be uploaded to the Assignments section of the course OWL website by Monday morning, October 25th, at 8:30 am. If for some reason you are unable to upload the essay to the course OWL website, please send it as an attachment in Word to enathans@uwo.ca. I will promptly acknowledge receipt.

Second Essay:

1. Mill writes in *On Liberty* that "the object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." Mill, *On Liberty and The Subjection of*

Women (Penguin Classics, 2006), 15-16. What are the principal advantages, to the individual and to society, to be gained by following this principle, according to Mill? What difficulties does Mill encounter in defending his position?

This essay should be uploaded to the Assignments section of the course OWL website by Monday morning, November 29th, at 8:30 am. If for some reason you are unable to upload the essay to the course OWL website, please send it as an attachment in Word to enathans@uwo.ca. I will promptly acknowledge receipt.

2. To what extent are the arguments and claims of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* similar to those found in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and to what extent are her arguments and claims different, or perhaps even contrary, to those of Wollstonecraft? Please consider – although you need not limit your argument to these points - the claims each author makes about: the forms taken by women's dependence on, and subordination to, men; the effects of this subordination and dependence on women, and on men; the means each proposes to end this subordination; and the ultimate goals each has for women. **This essay should be uploaded to the Assignments section of the course OWL website by Monday morning, December 6th, at 8:30 am. If for some reason you are unable to upload the essay to the course OWL website, please send it as an attachment in Word to enathans@uwo.ca. I will promptly acknowledge receipt.**

Accommodation for missed assignment deadlines with a Self Reported Absence:

If a student reports a SRA for an assignment (i.e. an essay) the new due date will be 48 hours after the SRA was submitted.

Course Schedule and Readings (may be adjusted as semester proceeds):

September 8

*Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*: Author's Forward; Preface; Book one; Book two, chapters 1,3,4,5, Book three. Book four, Book five, chapters 1-4, 8-11, 14. (pp. xli-xlv, 3-9, 10-44. 51-63)

Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics* (Cambridge University Press: 2018), 1-30.

September 15

*Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*: Book 11, chapters 1-6 (pp. 154-166)

Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics* (Cambridge University Press: 2018), 102-74.

September 22

*Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, Book nineteen, chapters 1-9, twenty-seven (pp. 308-313, 325-333)

Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics*, 175-258.
*Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville. Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge University Press, 20-32.
*Annelien de Dijn, "Was Montesquieu a Liberal Republican?," *Review of Politics* 76 (2014): 21-41.

*Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics. The Poet as Realist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988; first edition, 1959), 273-308.
*Lentin, *Voltaire and Catherine the Great. Selected Correspondence* (Cambridge: Oriental Research Partners, 1974), 4-32.
Jerry Muller, *The Mind and the Market. Capitalism in Western Thought* (Voltaire: "A Merchant of a Noble Kind"), 20-50.

October 6

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Oxford World's Classics), 3-127.

*Paul Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift. Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville & The Modern Prospect* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), 75-95.

October 13

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford World's Classics), 3-117.

Jerry Muller, *The Mind and the Market. Capitalism in Western Thought* (Edmund Burke: Commerce, Conservatism, and the Intellectuals), 104-138.

October 20

*Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (Colonial Press, 1900), 3-16, 191-199, 258-273.

*Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2 (Colonial Press, 1900), 36-41, 99-159, 202-27.

*Francois Furet, "The Intellectual Origins of Tocqueville's Thought," *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 7 (1985/86): 117-29.

I suggest that you read the Furet piece before reading the assigned selections from Tocqueville.

October 27

Continuation of the discussion of Tocqueville, and a comparison of Tocqueville and Montesquieu.

*Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville. Liberty in a Levelled Society* (Cambridge University Press), 129-54.

Week of November 1st: No Classes – Fall Reading Week.

November 10

*Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Everyman's Library, 1929), 3-13, 23-35, 58-63, 154-164, 203-215.

*Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 1-9, 23-45.

November 17

*G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox (Clarendon Press, 1942), 10-13, 155-174.

Jerry Muller, *The Mind and the Market. Capitalism in Western Thought* (Hegel: A Life Worth Choosing), 139-165.

November 24

Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Norton), 13-84, 114-125.

*David Blight, *Frederick Douglas. Prophet of Freedom* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), xiii-xx, 1-18, 94-115.

December 1

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women* (Penguin Classics:2007). Please read the entirety of *On Liberty*.

*John Rees, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (Clarendon Press, 1985), 78-105.

December 8

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Additional Statements:

Please review the Department of History Course Must-Knows document, https://www.history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/Docs/Department%20of%20History%20Course%20Must-Knows.pdf, for additional information regarding:

- Academic Offences
- Accessibility Options
- Medical Issues
- Plagiarism
- Scholastic Offences
- Copyright
- Health and Wellness