

## CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATION II: MODERNITY

Democracy, Liberalism, and their Discontents

Spring 2024

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Office Hours: Thursdays 12-1pm, [sign up](#)

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“The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.”

- John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*

“Man is a social animal. He cannot exist without a society. A society, in turn, depends on certain things which everyone within that society takes for granted. Now the crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society ... The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions ... But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it - at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.”

- James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers”

### **Course Description:**

Founded in the wake of World War I as a course on war and peace issues, Contemporary Civilization has evolved continuously while remaining a central element of the Columbia core curriculum. The course aims to investigate some of the enduring questions of social and political life: What is the good life for human beings? What would constitute a just form of political coexistence, and what are our chances of attaining such a form? Is there such a thing as human nature, and what are the implications of this question for political life? Are hierarchies among human beings ever defensible? What is the relationship between religion and politics? Is there such a thing as a “Western tradition,” and if so, should we view it as a vehicle for enlightenment or oppression? We will investigate these and other questions through a close examination of classic texts from antiquity to the present.

One of our central aims in the course is to learn about classic thinkers and debates from the past, as well as the sheer range of ways that human beings have thought about these questions over the past



Reflection Posts	15%
First paper	15%
Second paper	20%
Connection Assignment	15%
Final Exam	25%

**Participation (10%):** Contemporary Civilization is a discussion seminar. Your preparation, participation, and collaboration are thus essential. *Attendance is not participation.* You are expected to read the readings and come to class prepared to ask questions and actively participate in discussion and to listen to your peers.

As a means of engaging or posing questions outside of seminar, you will find an *Explorations* thread on the discussion boards. Here you are welcome to submit posts about your observations of CC themes and figures outside of the seminar, whether in literature, art, films, newspapers, or everyday life.

A few notes on participation: Attendance counts do not count as participation - you need to actively participate (whether asking a question, responding to a prompt, or offering a thought). If you are more than 10 minutes tardy, then your maximum participation grade for that class is 50%. Headphones are banned from the classroom.

If you do not have the text, then you are not prepared for class. “Having” the text does not mean that you *could* access it. It means that it is open and in front of you. Texts on a phone do not count. If you have a different edition of the text than the one assigned for class, then you are responsible for making it translatable. There should be no excuse for not having the proper text (if you have trouble getting it, contact the Core office).

**Reflection Posts (15%):**

You are required to complete TEN reflection posts throughout the semester. These should be posted on the corresponding discussion board for our class day on the ‘Discussion’ section of CourseWorks. In that section you will also find more detailed guidelines for what a reflection post might look like.

These can be as short as a few sentences or a paragraph. They might dig into the logic of a particular passage, examining its implications, or it may simply be a question. Do not be afraid to simply say “I don’t understand what Tocqueville is saying on page 74. What does he mean here?” That is much more useful for our discussion than ‘Is Hobbes’ argument about monarchy convincing?’ I will sometimes use your posts as jumping-off points for our class discussion, so please be prepared to discuss and elaborate upon them in class.

Requirements: (1) Posts must engage with a specific passage in the text and properly cite it. Posts that do not indicate any actual reading of the text will not get credit. (2) Posts are due the night before class. Nothing posted on the day of or after the class on the text will be given credit. As these papers serve the function of promoting class discussion, they cannot be submitted late nor can they be made up.

Resources: Each discussion thread will include some suggested resources, contexts, and reading questions. These are best looked at before you dive into the reading. These may include **videos, podcasts, articles, explainers**, and opportunities to go deeper. Each thread also includes **guiding questions**. These suggest themes that you might talk about in discussion posts, but you may talk about anything in the assigned reading.

Explorations: There is also an 'Explorations' section on the discussion board. This is a place to share all and any CC-related material or ideas you came across in your daily life.

### **Connection Assignment (15%):**

Choose a text or thinker that we've read and relate it to a contemporary news story, controversy, artwork, or anything else that interests you. You will write a 4-6 page (min. 1200 words) paper explaining how the CC text/thinker helps us better understand the contemporary object you're examining and/or vice versa. You may submit this assignment at any time during the semester prior to the end of classes on *April 29*.

### **Two Essays (15%, 20%):**

You are required to complete two essays ( $\approx$ 4-5 pages). The assignments will prompt you to reconstruct, compare and contrast, and/or evaluate arguments from readings.

The first is due *February 16* and the second due *April 12*. We will discuss the format and expectations for these papers in greater detail when they are distributed.

### **Final Exam (25%):**

We will have a final exam on *May 3*. This will be a written in-person exam, including passage identifications, short answers and short essay questions. I will discuss the format in more detail later in the semester.

### **Extra Credit:**

You have the opportunity to get extra credit *three times* this semester. Each EC opportunity is worth 5 points on one assignment (First paper, Second paper, or the Final exam). You may complete only **one EC opportunity per assignment**. Each opportunity has the same structure: you will write a short reflection on how something interacts with themes from our semester. It should be a minimum of 400 words, and show a thoughtful engagement with the text(s) in question as well as the exhibit or film you saw.

- Movie reflection: We will have 2 movie nights in the term. You can get extra credit for completing a reflection for ONE of them.
- Exhibit reflection: We have one planned visit to the Schomburg Center of the NYPL. You may complete a reflection for this visit.
- You may *also* complete one for a visit to exhibitions at any of the following museums in NYC: [the Museum of Modern Art](#), The Whitney, The Frick Collection, The NYC Museum of the American Indian, The Tenement Museum.

A few recommended exhibitions this Spring are:

- At the Whitney: [Trust Me](#) | [Inheritance](#) | [Natalie Ball: bilwi naats Ga'niipci](#)
- At the Museum of the American Indian: [Native New York](#)
- Any tour at the [Tenement Museum](#)

### **Extensions:**

All students have 5 'flex' days to extend any essay deadline as they see fit. No questions asked. You may not use these for discussion posts. For example, you may use all five to extend one paper by five days, or two for one and three for another. Papers submitted late after all flex days have been redeemed will result in half a letter grade penalty per day (A to A-, B+ to B, etc.).

### **Core Policy on Student Attendance:**

Students are expected to attend every session of their Core classes. Whenever possible (in the case of religious holidays, for instance) students should provide advance notification of absence. Repeated unexcused absences will result in grade penalties and a withdrawal from the course.

## SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Readings marked with an asterisk (\*) can be found in the Files section of CourseWorks. All other readings should be drawn from our required texts.

### Week 1

T 1/16 Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?'\*  
Benjamin Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients versus those of the Moderns'\*

Th 1/18 Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals*\* Preface, Ch. 1, 3-5, 7, 17

### Week 2

T 1/23 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*  
Preface: 4:389-4:390 (pp. 2-4)  
Section I, 4:393-4:403 (pp. 7-16).  
Section II, 4:412 - 4:437 (pp. 24-44).

Th 1/25 Rights & Revolutions  
US: Jefferson, Declaration of Independence (1776), Bill of Rights (1791)\*  
US: Constitution  
French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen\*  
Haitian Declaration of Independence\*

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay  
*The Federalist* (1788), nos. 1, 9, 10, 47, 51, 68, 69

### Week 3

T 1/30 Emmanuel Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?\**  
Olympe de Gouges, 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman'\*  
Maximilien Robespierre,  
    'On the Moral and Political Principles of Domestic Policy'  
Haitian Constitution of 1805\*

Th 2/1 Mary Wollstonecraft  
*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Author's introduction, Dedication, Ch 1-4, 9

### Week 4

T 2/6 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*\*

3-22, 32-38, 47-53, 58-63, 75-79, 87-97, 121-128, 135-142, 172-179

Th 2/8 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*,  
Volume One: Introduction (pp. 11-26); Part I, ch. 3-5 (58-80); Part II, ch. 6 (269-80);  
Volume Two: Part III, ch. 1-2 (649-656);

#### Week 5

T 2/13 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*  
Volume One, Part II: Ch. 7 (pp. 287-305), ch. 10 (370-76, 398-405 only)  
Volume Two, Part I: Ch. 5 (510-18);  
Part II, chs. 1-2 (583-89), ch. 20 (645-48)  
Part IV, ch. 3 (780-783), 6 (803-809).

Th 2/15 Abolitionists  
David Walker, 'Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World'\*  
Frederick Douglass, 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?'

**Fri 2/16 First paper due**

#### Week 6

**M 2/19 Visit to the The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture**  
**[Tentative]**  
[Exhibition 'The Ways of Langston Hughes: Griff Davis & Black Artists in the Making'](#)

T 2/20 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chs. 1-2

Th 2/22 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chs. 3-4

#### Week 7

T 2/27 Karl Marx  
'On the Jewish Question' (44-46)  
'Theses on Feuerbach' (143-45)  
'Estranged Labor' (70-81)  
'The German Ideology' (150-155, 172-174)

Th 2/29 Marx and Engels, 'The Communist Manifesto' (473-491, 499-500 only)  
Marx, selections from *Capital, Vol I* (pp. 302-329)

Week 8

T 3/5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche's Preface, Essay 1

Th 3/7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 2

**3/11-15 Spring Recess**

Week 9

T 3/19 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The Forethought," chs. 1-4, 6, 9

Th 3/21 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, chs. 11, 14  
*The Souls of White Folk*\*  
Selections from *Black Reconstruction in America*\*

Week 10

T 3/26 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (selection)

Th 3/28 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism* (selection)

Week 11

T 4/2 Mahatma Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule," Ch. 4-8, 13-14, 16-17, 20 \*

Th 4/4 Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1-52\*  
Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (selections)

**Fri 4/5: Film screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (Italy, 1966)**

Week 12

T 4/9 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer,  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment* - 'The Concept of Enlightenment'

Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. Vii-xxii, 3-28, 123-57

Th 4/11 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. Xxiii-xxviii, 267-302, 437-59, 474-79

**F 4/12 Second Paper Due**



Week 13

- T 4/16 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (selection)\*
- Th 4/18 Claudia Jones, 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Women!'  
The Combahee River Collective Statement\*  
bell hooks, 'Sisterhood: solidarity between women'\*

Week 14

- T 4/23 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 3-32, 73-103, 179-194
- Th 4/25 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 195-230, 293-308

Week 15: Exam Period

**M 4/29 Last day of Classes**  
**Deadline for submitting connection assignment**

- T 4/30 Optional Final Review Session  
Aldo Leopold, 'The Land Ethic'\*

**W 5/1 Film Screening: *Bacurau* (Brazil, 2019)**

**Fr 5/3 Final Exam**