

The French Liberal Tradition: Rereading Modernity

Professor Flagg Taylor
GO 351
Fall 2008
Ladd 306A, x 5244
ftaylor@skidmore.edu

Course Description:

After 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 one hand, thinkers like Voltaire or Adam Smith appear committed to the furthering 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 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
Democracy in America, Tocqueville
An Intellectual History of Liberalism, Pierre Manent
A World Beyond Politics?, Pierre Manent

Course Outline:

Introduction to course: **9/4**

The birth of liberalism: Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, Preface and chs. 1-3 (**9/9**)

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

A. The Old: Ancient Republics, European Monarchies

- *The Spirit of the Laws*, Books 1-2 (**9/11**)
- TSL, 3-4 (**9/16**)
- TSL, 5, 8 (**9/18**)

B. The New: England, Modern Constitutionalism, and Commerce

- TSL 11.1-6 & 19.27 (**9/23**)
- TSL 19-20 (**9/25**)

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* (**9/30**)

B. **Tocqueville** on Democracy, Equality, and Revolution

- *Democracy in America*, Introduction & Vol. I, Pt. ii, ch. 9 (**10/2**)
- *DA*, II, i, 1-4, 20 (**10/7**)

NO CLASS 10/9 YOM KIPPUR

- *DA*, II, i, 5-8 (**10/14**)
- *DA*, II, ii, 1-7 (**10/16**)
- *DA*, II, ii, 8-16 (**10/21**)
- *DA*, II, iii, 1-5 (**10/23**)
- *DA* II, iii, 17-19 (**10/28**)
- *DA* II, iv, 1-3, 6-8 (**10/30**)
- *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Preface and Book I (entire) (**11/4**)
- ORR, II, 1-6; *DA* I, I, 5 (pp.56-65) (**11/6**)
- ORR, II, 7-12 (**11/11**)
- ORR, III (entire) (**11/13**)

III. The Meaning of the Triumph of Liberal Democracy: **Pierre Manent**

C. **Manent**, *A World Beyond Politics?*

- Introduction and chapters 1-3 (**11/18**)
- *WBP*, 4-6 (**11/20**)
- *WBP*, 7-8 (**11/25**)

NO CLASS 11/27 THANKSGIVING BREAK

- *WBP*, 9-11 (**12/2**)
- *WBP*, 12-13 (**12/4**)

- *WBP*, 16-18 (12/9)

Final Exam: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1:30-4:30

Course Requirements:

Textual Explication and Responses, 20%

Essay #1, 25%

Essay #2, 25%

Final Exam, 30%

Textual Explication

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 (Saturday for a Monday class and Monday for a Wednesday class). All the other students in the class must write a one 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 exam.

Other requirements and expectations:

Attendance is mandatory. There is no such thing as an unexcused absence. All absences must therefore be cleared ahead of time. If you must miss class, you remain responsible for all the material covered that day. After 1 absence, each subsequent absence will bring your final grade down by one half of a letter grade. After 4 absences, I will require you to withdraw from the course.

You are expected to come to class having read the assigned texts with care. These books are difficult. You should be prepared to reread things that confuse you, and to take notes as you read. Ideally, you will learn more from these books than from me. This should make you well equipped to comprehend the lecture as well as to contribute to the discussion.

