First-Year Seminar 6010:

EXISTENTIALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY IN FRANCE

Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:50 am - 12:30 pm

Course Description

This course will investigate the uneasy relationship between existentialism and liberal democracy, by means of philosophic and historical inquiry. The seminar will begin with a general examination of two pillars of modern democracy, universal moral rights and the electoral marketplace. Then the course will trace the origins and development of existentialism in twentieth-century France, highlighting how existential thinkers responded to the weakness, collapse, and rebuilding of French democracy between approximately 1936 and 1955. Finally, the seminar will attempt to assess the moral and political implications of existentialism for liberal democratic thought and practice in general.

Course meetings will consist largely of discussion, supplemented by occasional short lectures introducing the readings. Students who enroll in this course should plan to read carefully; to attend class consistently and punctually; and to participate in the discussions regularly. As to the readings: most are seminal and provocative, some are long and difficult, and all will require work in order to ferret out their deeper meanings. Students will be expected to have read the assignments before class and to be prepared to take part in discussion in a civil manner. When possible, the readings themselves should be brought to class for use in the discussions. From time to time, students may be assigned a role in preparing or leading class discussion. Attendance will be noted, and participation graded. More than three absences, without a valid medical or other excuse, will result in a grade penalty. Please also note: this entire syllabus is subject to revision at the instructor's discretion.

Written Requirements

Course requirements include the following, in addition to the above. Students should plan to write two short papers, an in-class midterm, and a take-home final examination. There may also be a number of short, in-class writing assignments. Papers are to be typewritten, double-spaced, and annotated in accordance with accepted norms of scholarship. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Find out what plagiarism is and avoid it. Late work will be downgraded one step per day tardy. No papers will be accepted, without prior approval, if submitted more than one week late. For more information on the assignments, grading policy, and office hours, see the last page of this syllabus.

Required Readings

The following books contain most of the required readings, which are primary works almost exclusively. They are or will soon be available for purchase at Posman Books, 1 University Place. Please use the assigned edition if possible.


In addition, Posman will stock the following readings, which are suggested for purchase: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins* (Norton, 1991); and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard, 1992). One copy of each book above has been placed on reserve at Fogelman Library. Photocopies of additional readings marked by asterisks on the following schedule have also been placed on reserve at Fogelman.
SCHEDE OF COURSE MEETINGS, READINGS, AND ASSIGNMENTS

* Indicates photocopied readings on reserve at Fogelman Library

**Tues., 21 Jan.**

**Introduction: On Existentialism and Modern Democratic Order**


**1. ELEMENTS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

**Thurs., 23 Jan.**

**On Autonomy and Moral Right**

Alasdair MacIntyre, “Kant,” in *A Short History of Ethics*, pp. 190-98.


**Tues., 28 Jan.**

**Reason and Universal Law**

Kant, 2nd & 3rd Sections, pp. 19-62.

**Thurs., 30 Jan.**

**Democratic Doctrines**

Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, chs. 20-21, pp. 234-68.

**Tues., 4 Feb.**

**On Party Competition and Electoral Order**

Schumpeter, chs. 22-23, pp. 269-302.

FIRST PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED

**2. THE EMERGENCE OF EXISTENTIAL ACTION IN FRANCE**

**Thurs., 6 Feb.**

**Interwar France and Some Problems of Democracy** [lecture]

Recommended: Richard Vinen, *France: 1934-70*, pp. TBA.

**Tues., 11 Feb.**

**Self in Doubt?**

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 1-94

MEET WITH WRITING TUTOR DURING THIS WEEK

**Thurs., 13 Feb.**

**Beyond Reason: The "Order" of Phenomenology**


**Tues., 18 Feb.**

**Party Competition of a New Type**


FIRST PAPER DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS

**Thurs., 20 Feb.**

**Democracy in Doubt: The Rise of Totalitarian States**

Koestler, pp. 98-216.

**Tues., 25 Feb.**

**Why Did France Fall to Fascism?**

Vinen, *France*, pp. TBA.


**Thurs., 27 Feb.**

**Democracy in Defeat**

Bloch, pp. 25-88. Also review Schumpeter readings.

**Tues., 4 Mar.**

**Conscience of a Liberal Democrat Reconsidered**

Bloch, pp. 88-178.

REWITRES OF FIRST PAPER DUE
Thurs., 6 Mar.  
**Philosophical Reflections in the Dark**  
*Jean-Paul Sartre, selections from *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 47-70, 553-56.

Tues., 11 Mar.  
**Facing Up to Existential Freedom?**  

Thurs., 13 Mar.  
**Midterm Examination in Class**  
No reading. Suggested reading over the break: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*.

SPRING BREAK!

### 3. THE EXISTENTIAL OFFENSIVE IN FRANCE

Tues., 25 Mar.  
**Existentialism: Moral Response or Amoral Rationalization?**  
*Sartre, "The Republic of Silence" and "The Liberation of Paris."  

Thurs., 27 Mar.  
**NO COURSE MEETING**

Tues., 1 Apr.  
**Facing the Other**  
Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, pp. 3-47.

Thurs., 3 Apr.  
**Restating the Problem of Being**  
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 7-78.

Tues., 8 Apr.  
**The Existential Project**  

Thurs., 10 Apr.  
**The Problem of Violence**  
Sartre, *Dirty Hands*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, pp. 131-182.

Tues., 15 Apr.  
**Political Responsibility?**  
SECOND PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED

Thurs., 17 Apr.  
**The Problem of Nihilism**  

Tues., 22 Apr.  
**True or False Rebellion?**  
SECOND PAPER OUTLINES DUE THIS WEEK

### 4. ASSESSING EXISTENTIALISM: GENERAL CRITIQUES

Thurs., 24 Apr.  
**Is Existentialism Morally Bankrupt?**  
SECOND PAPER OUTLINES DUE THIS WEEK
Tues., 29 Apr.  Has Social and Political Collapse Already Begun?
*MacIntyre, pp. 23-35.
SECOND PAPER DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS

Thurs., 1 May  A Defense of Expression

Tues., 6 May  Political Mess, or the Moral Challenge of Politics?
*Taylor, pp. 71-121.
TAKE-HOME FINAL DISTRIBUTED
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Written Assignments**

Course requirements will include two formal, typewritten essays on assigned topics. Students will be required both to submit a draft or detailed outline of the first paper to a writing tutor and to meet with that tutor during the week of 10-14 February. That first paper may be rewritten and resubmitted for an additional credit of up to 10 points. Outlines or abstracts of the second paper are to be submitted to me during the week of 21-25 April.

- **Discuss first paper with tutor:** during week of 10-14 February.
- **First paper (3-4 pages):** due Tues., 18 February.
- **First paper rewrite:** due Tues., 4 March.
- **Second paper abstracts:** due during week of 21-25 April.
- **Second paper (4-5 pages):** due Tues., 29 April.

In addition, there will be an in-class midterm and a take-home final examination. For the midterm and final examinations, students will be given essay questions to prepare beforehand.

- **Midterm examination:** Thurs., 13 March.
- **Take-home final exam:** due date TBA

Short, in-class writing exercises may also be administered from time to time, without warning, to insure that students keep up with the readings.

**Participation**

Students will be expected to participate in class discussions regularly. Grades for participation will be based upon my evaluation of students' comments. What I will look for is whether students have a basic understanding of the readings, whether they are able to follow and contribute to class discussion, how intelligent and informed their questions and comments are, and how much effort they are putting into the class. Attendance and in-class assignments will be a significant portion of the participation grade.

**Grading Policy**

Grades will be assigned on an 100-point scale, and weighted in the following manner:

- **First paper:** 15%
- **Midterm:** 20%
- **Second paper:** 25%
- **Final exam:** 30%
- **Participation:** 10%

**Office Hours**

I will hold regular office hours on Tuesdays in my office, Lang 455. The exact time of those office hours will be announced during the first week of class. I can also be available before or after class by appointment in my office. Notes can be left for me in my mailbox in the Lang Dean's Office, 350 Lang. If necessary, phone messages can be left for me at my home number, (914) 591-6931, between 10 am and 9:30 pm. I can also be contacted by email, although I am likely to have access to my email account only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so don't expect me to read and respond to email messages on other days of the week.