

French Materialism

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PROFESSOR: GABRIEL ROCKHILL

Time: M 6-8:30

Location: Vasey 203

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“Ils élevaient les questions matérielles, les questions d’agriculture, d’industrie, de commerce, presque à la dignité d’une religion. Dans la civilisation telle qu’elle se fait, un peu par Dieu, beaucoup par l’homme, les intérêts se combinent, s’agrègent et s’amalgament de manière à former une véritable roche dure, selon une loi dynamique patiemment étudiée par les économistes, ces géologues de la politique”
- Victor Hugo

“Cet avenir sera matérialiste”
- Arthur Rimbaud

Overview

It has been claimed that at least two important revolutionary political projects occupied the French intellectual scene in the years leading up to May 1968. On the one hand, there was the anti-humanist version of Marxism elaborated by Louis Althusser. As a charismatic lecturer in the *haut lieu* of French academic life, the *Ecole normale supérieure*, Althusser occupied a prime position from which to influence a vast array of aspiring young thinkers, including Michel Foucault, Etienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. On the fringes of French academia, the second important group was formed around Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Jean-François Lyotard. In direct contrast to the Althusserians’ attempt to reread Marx against the grain of history, the group assembled around the journal *Socialisme ou barbarie* proposed a more or less radical break with Marxism in order to develop a new form of revolutionary politics.

The primary goal of this seminar will be to investigate these two political projects and the variegated forms they have taken over time. The use of the lens of “French materialism” for this investigation should not therefore suggest that all of the authors to be studied can easily be united under a single heading. As we will see, in fact, they are not all even self-declared materialists. However, they are interested in diverse ways in concrete political praxis and provide important insights into the themes that will guide the seminar: historical materialism, dialectical materialism, economic determinism, revolutionary praxis, radical democracy, political subjectivity, ideology (including representational, functionalist and materialist forms), the social imaginary, the relationship between art and science, and the logic of “differends” and “disagreements.” The authors to be studied include: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Althusser, Castoriadis, Lyotard and Rancière.

REQUIRED MATERIAL

1. Books available in the bookstore (you can use other editions, but the page references I will use in class are to the editions listed below):
 - a. Curtis, David Ames, Ed. *The Castoriadis Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997.
 - b. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.
 - c. Lyotard, Jean-François. *Political Writings*. Trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
 - d. Rancière, Jacques. *On the Shores of Politics*. Trans. Liz Heron. London and New York: Verso Books, 1995.
2. Essays and articles will be made available to you electronically via WebCT. **It is required that you print them so that you can bring them to every class.** It is highly recommended that you collect them all together in a binder so that you have all of the course readings in one place.

OPTIONAL MATERIAL

See the bibliography at the end of the syllabus.

REQUIREMENTS

1. **Attendance and Participation – 15%.** The class will be conducted as a seminar so it will be very important for you to come to class having engaged with the required material. This means taking notes on the readings, preparing informed questions and comments, and frequently re-reading the material. A cursory, passive overview of the material will prove insufficient. For those of you who have acquired (or are in the course of acquiring) the necessary language skills, it is also highly recommended that you consult the original texts, which I will frequently reference in our class discussions.
2. **Response Papers – 30%.** You will be required to write **one paper per class** (*no more than* 1 page, single spaced) that concisely presents and critically responds to the material. During the first half of the semester (prior to the recess on October 10th), you will be asked to write an *explication de texte*. This means that you will select a key passage (preferably 3 sentences or less) in any of the required readings that is relevant because of its synthetic nature, its argumentative concision, its complexity or its utter incompressibility. You will then unpack the various aspects and/or problems in the passage by defining its key terms, conceptually mapping out the relationships between them and then analyzing the core arguments operative in the passage through comparison and contrast with other important passages in the reading. The goal of this exercise is to hone your hermeneutic skills as careful and attentive readers of complex philosophic texts. After the semester recess, you will continue writing response papers up to and including the meeting on November 16th, but the focal point will change. Instead of doing minute textual analysis, you will be asked to respond to the text as a whole. For these response papers, you should spend approximately one paragraph outlining the core of the argument, one paragraph engaging in more detail with key issues and themes that relate to the seminar, and a final paragraph raising questions or highlighting problems for discussion. These response papers will act as the foundation for our class discussions. I will ask

you to **orally present two of them to the class, and you will receive a grade on your presentation (including your responses to questions)**. Since you will not know the date on which you are presenting, it is highly recommended that you prepare each response paper as if you were going to present it. Your overall grade for the response papers will be calculated as follows: 1st oral presentation (1/3rd) 2nd oral presentation (1/3rd) completion of the response papers that you do not present orally (1/3rd). For the response papers that you do not present, you will not receive a specific grade (A, B, C, etc.), but you will get full credit for each assignment completed. This means that if you complete 10 out of 10 response papers for the sessions when you do not present, you will receive an A for this portion of the grade. The grade will be proportionally determined for any number of responses less than 10: 9/10 = 90% (A-/B+), 8/10 = 80% (B-/C+), etc. You will not be required to prepare a response paper for the first day of class.

- 3. Research Presentation – 20%.** You will prepare a 5-8-minute presentation of your final research project during the last four weeks of class. You should outline your argument and explain what sources you will use to support your thesis. The research presentations will provide us with an opportunity to critically reflect on one another's ongoing projects.
- 4. Final Take-Home Exam – 35%.** You will be required to write one 12-page double-spaced research paper. I will discuss the topic in class and provide you with guidelines.

POLICY ON PLAGIARISM

Any form of plagiarism is unacceptable. This includes, but is not limited to, referencing or paraphrasing someone else's ideas without proper citation as well as handing in someone else's work as your own. This also includes using any part of an Internet resource without proper citation. Any assignment that is at all plagiarized will automatically receive an F and, depending on the circumstances, may constitute grounds for failing the course.

POLICY ON E-MAILS AND COMPUTER USE

1. I will try to respond to all e-mails in a reasonable time-frame. As a general rule of thumb, this means that you will get a response within 24 to 48 hours. If you send an e-mail over the weekend or late at night, do not expect to receive a response back immediately, even if you deem it to be an emergency.
2. In general, I will not provide my lecture notes or other material that you could have obtained in class. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain this material.
3. No computers will be allowed in the classroom unless you obtain explicit consent.

POLICY ON GRADE CHANGES, LATE WORK AND ABSENCES

1. I will not change grades based on oral negotiation. If you feel that I have overlooked something in my grading policy, please submit a detailed written explanation of what has been overlooked along with the graded copy of your work.
2. **No late work will be accepted.** You will only be able to make up for late work in the most extreme cases, and preferably when you have let me know ahead of time that you have a serious extra-curricular problem.

PROGRAM (subject to change)

**INTRODUCTION
MATERIALISM**

August 24 David McLellan, Ed. *Marxism: Essential Writings* (chapters 1, 2 and 7).[°]

**SECTION I
HISTORICAL AND DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM**

August 31 Louis Althusser. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Introduction, Foreword, “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon,” “Lenin and Philosophy” and “Lenin before Hegel”).

September 7 *Labor Day – No Class*

September 14 Louis Althusser. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus”).

September 21 Louis Althusser. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (“A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre” and “Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract”).

Jean-Luc Godard, *La chinoise*, 1967 (film available on reserve in the library).

Jacques Rancière. *Film Fables* (selection).[°]

Optional Reading: Gabriel Rockhill. “Modernism as a Misnomer: Godard’s Archeology of the Image”[°]

**SECTION II
MATERIALISM OR REVOLUTIONARY PRAXIS?**

September 28 Cornelius Castoriadis. *The Castoriadis Reader* (chapters 1, 2 and 3).*

October 5 Cornelius Castoriadis. *The Castoriadis Reader* (chapters 5 and 12).

Chris Marker, *A Grin Without a Cat*, 1977 (film available on reserve in the library).

October 10-18 *Semester Recess*

October 19 Cornelius Castoriadis. *The Castoriadis Reader* (chapter 15).

Cornelius Castoriadis. “No God, No Caesar, No Tribunal...”[°]

**SECTION III
FROM SOCIALISME OU BARBARIE TO POLITICS WITHOUT END**

October 26 Jean-François Lyotard. *Political Writings* (Foreword and chapters 24-34).

November 2 Jean-François Lyotard. *Political Writings* (chapters 8-15 and 21).

Jean-Luc Godard, *Tout va bien*, 1972 (film available on reserve in the library).

November 9 Jean-François Lyotard. *Political Writings* (chapters 1-7).

Jean-François Lyotard. *The differend* (selection).[°]

[°] Available on WebCT.

**SECTION IV
FROM MATERIALISM TO SUBJECTIVIZATION**

- November 16** Gabriel Rockhill. “The Silent Revolution.”°
 Jacques Rancière. “On the Theory of Ideology (the Politics of Althusser).”°
- November 23** Jacques Rancière. *On the Shores of Politics*.
- November 30** Jacques Rancière. *On the Shores of Politics*.
- December 7** Jacques Rancière. *Disagreement* (Preface and Chapter 2).°
- January 8 at 5 p.m.** **Final Paper Deadline**
This is a strict deadline. If you do not complete your work by this time and you have not made prior arrangements with me due to extenuating circumstances, your paper will not be accepted after this date.