

**PHL 656: THE SUBJECT OF POLITICS—JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU
WINTER AND SPRING QUARTERS, 2015
PEG BIRMINGHAM**

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“Rousseau...was perhaps the first thinker of community, or more exactly, the first to experience the question of society as an uneasiness directed toward the community, and as the consciousness of a (perhaps irreparable) rupture in this community.” (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperable Community*)

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course (which continues through spring quarter) will examine several works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's, including *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, *On the Origin of Languages*, *Emile*, and *The Social Contract*, in an attempt to grasp Rousseau's understanding of the subject of politics in the double sense of the nature of the political and the nature of political subjectivity.

Of particular concern will be Rousseau's account of the move from the *amour de soi* to the *amour proper* wherein the complex relations between nature and culture, the individual and the political, reason and desire, and morality and freedom come into play. Understanding this movement of desire is central to understanding Rousseau's political project insofar as he claims that the perversion of the *amour-propre* underlies all political and social disorder, leading to the corruption and violence of both the individual and society. In other words, it is the perversion of the play of recognition and desire that gives way to the most horrible states of violence. Against Hobbes, who Rousseau argues begins with a notion of perverted desire and then wrongly attributes it to the nature of human beings, Rousseau suggests that the proper education of the individual as well as the proper constitution of political institutions allows for a political subject and a political space that is not violent. In other words, he argues for the possibility of a non-perverse *amour-propre*—a recovery through political artifice of what was once by nature.

The seminar will also examine Rousseau's philosophy of history. Arguing against a progressive or teleological concept of history, Rousseau's concept of history is rooted in the twin notions of the aleatory and infancy. Indeed, the rupture or heteronomy at the heart of Rousseau's community, noted by Nancy, is in my view rooted in these two notions. As it goes forward, the seminar will seek to understand how or why Rousseau moves from a philosophy of history in which the aleatory, heteronomy, and infancy are the central concepts to a conception of the social contract that emphasizes a notion of democratic autonomy that goes so far as to annihilate dissident citizens in its midst.

Briefly, looking ahead to the spring quarter, we will continue to focus on the issues of nature, history, desire, subjectivity, citizenship, rights, equality and freedom. Supplementing our reading of *Emile* will be excursions into *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* wherein Rousseau offers further reflections on many of the issues he is grappling with in *Emile*, most notably on the sense of one's own existence and the call to duty over inclination. We will look at Derrida's reading of Rousseau in *On Grammatology*, specifically Derrida's analysis of pity. In the context of *Emile*, we will also read De Man's essay, "Promises" which addresses the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar. Our reading of *The Social Contract* will continue to focus on the concepts outlined above, but now in relation to Rousseau's understanding of the law, the general will, the role of the legislator, and nature of the political subjectivity that informs Rousseau's understanding of the social contract. Indeed, a central focus of our reading is to see how Rousseau's analysis of the *amour de soi* and the *amour proper* in his early writings develops into a notion of political subjectivity in *The Social Contract*. Alongside *The Social Contract*, we will read parts of Rousseau's *The Geneva Manuscript*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, and *Letters from the Mountain*. We will also read essays by several contemporary theorists, including Althusser, Balibar, de Man, and Sarah Kaufman, that directly or indirectly address Rousseau and the issues of our seminar.

REQUIRED TEXTS

English Editions

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Early Political Writings*, Victor Gourevitch, editor, Cambridge UP

— *Emile*, translated by Alan Bloom, Basic Books

— *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Penguin Edition

— *The Social Contract and other Later Political Writings*, ed. by V. Gourevitch, Cambridge UP

— *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, essays by Rousseau and Herder, trans. by H. Moran and A. Gode

— *Confessions*

— *Letters from the Mountain and Related Writings*, trans. by Christopher Kelly and Judith Bush (U. of New England Press, 2001)

French Editions

Rousseau, *Oeuvres politiques*, Edition de J. Roussel, Classiques Garnier, Bordas

— *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité*, GF Flammarion

— *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, GF Flammarion

— *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, folio essais

— *Emile ou de l'éducation*, GF Flammarion

— *Les rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, Bordas

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to attend and participate in the seminar. Each student will be responsible for either the weekly protocol given at the beginning of each class meeting or a seminar presentation. The protocol, 1-2 pages, should give an organized summary of the previous week's discussion, concluding with topics and questions that remain unaddressed or unresolved from the previous week. The seminar presentation, 3-4 pages typed double-spaced, should be a discussion of the assigned reading. How that discussion is presented is the presenter's prerogative. In addition, there will be a final exam on the material covered during the winter quarter. The final exam will consist of one essay question that will ask students to reflect on the material covered during the winter quarter.

OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

January 8: Introduction, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*

January 15: *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Part I)

January 22: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Part 1)
Miguel Vatter Seminar Lecture: On Political Theology

January 29: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Parts I and II)

February 5: *Essay on the Origin of Languages*
Presentation: Paul de Man, "Metaphor" in *Allegories of Reading* (handout)

February 12: Continued reading of *Essay on the Origin of Languages*
Presentation: Jean Starobinski, "Rousseau and the Origin of Languages," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Transparency and Obstruction* (handout)

February 19: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Part II)

February 26: *Emile*, Book One

March 5: *Emile*, Book One

March 12: *Emile*, Book Two

March 17: **Final Exam or Final Essay Due**

SPRING QUARTER

April 2: *Emile*, Book Three

April 9: *Emile*, Books Three and Four
Presentation: Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pages 165-194

April 16: *Emile*, Book Four
Presentation: *Letter to D'Alembert*

April 23: *Emile*, Books Four and Five
Reveries of a Solitary Walker, Walks Six and Eight
Presentation: De Man, “Allegories of Reading (*Profession de Foi*) in *Allegories of Reading*,

April 30: *Emile*, Book Five
Presentation: Kaufman, *Rousseau's Phallocratic Ends*

May 7: *The Social Contract*, Part I
Presentation: *Discourse on Political Economy*

May 14: *The Social Contract*, Parts I and II
Presentation: Althusser, *Politics and History, Part II: Rousseau*

May 21: *The Social Contract*, Parts II and III
The Geneva Manuscript
Presentation: De Man, “Promises (*The Social Contract*) in *Allegories of Reading*

May 28: *The Social Contract*, Parts III and IV
Presentation: Ranciere, *Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?*

Presentation: Balibar, “Rights of Man and “Rights of Citizen”: The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom” in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*

June 4: *The Social Contract*, Part IV
Presentation: *Letters from the Mountain*

June 9: **Final exam or Final Essay due**