Spring 2010
History 314: Existentialism in European History

Tuesday, 7-9pm
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Course Description

Existentialism as a philosophical movement asks basic questions about the relationship between everyday life and larger issues of death, authenticity, freedom and the relationship between the individual and community. In this course, we shall examine the major themes of existentialism (freedom, anguish, absurdity, authenticity, etc.). For the most part, we will be reading and analyzing the work of major existentialist figures. We will be looking both at the development of existentialism as a philosophical trend, and at the ways that existentialist philosophers anticipate, inspire and respond to political events.

This class will be taught in a seminar format. We will be holding an intense conversation with and about the philosophers whom we are reading and working together to understand their historical contexts. Your informed and engaged participation is crucial to the success of this class.

Texts Available for Purchase


All of these books are available for purchase at the Oberlin College bookstore.
Several additional required readings have been placed on reserve and ERes (All texts on ERes are marked with an asterisk).

Additionally, all required books have been placed on reserve.

Prerequisites and Requirements

This course assumes that you have a basic knowledge of European history. Although I do not require that you have a background in philosophy, it would probably be helpful if you have at least a basic acquaintance with philosophical trends of the past two hundred years. If this is not the case, let me know and I can suggest additional background reading as necessary.

You must attend every class during this semester. If you miss one meeting of the seminar, you can make this up by writing a five-page response paper on the readings for the class that you missed. Any additional absences will lead to a 1/3rd reduction in the final grade for the course. If you need to miss a class due to a medical or other emergency, you must provide adequate documentation (such as a doctor’s note) to avoid the absence penalty.

Once during the semester, you will be called upon to do a brief introduction at the start of class. This introduction should last 5-10 minutes and should discuss the historical events to which the texts for that week refer. I have assigned the topic for each introduction. You should also offer some preliminary thoughts about how the texts could relate to these events. **You must send me a 2 page handout specifically on your assigned historical events by noon the day of your reading intro.** I will print out, copy this handout and distribute to the class. Your introduction grade will be based both on your hand-out and on your presentation to the class.

Over the course of the semester, you will be writing response papers for 9 class sessions of your choosing (this means that you can skip two weeks). These response papers should be 2 pages long, and engage with the author whom we have read for that week. In addition to your response to the reading, you should also provide a list of several questions for discussion (at least 3). You are required to turn in your response paper **before 9am on Tuesday.** These papers should be sent as an email attachment. You may also leave a hard copy in my mailbox in the history department office (Rice 316), if you prefer. Response papers will be graded on a √-, √, √+ system and will be returned to you at the start of each class.

You will write a 5 page paper that is worth 15% of your grade on some of the early readings for the course. I will give a choice of topics for this paper in the fourth week of the semester and the paper itself will be due right before Spring Break.

35% of your grade is based on an 8-10 page paper on one of several assigned topics related to the later section of the course. This paper will not require any outside research beyond the course readings.
It is possible for you to combine the two papers and write one longer (15-20pp.) paper worth 50% of your grade. It may be useful for those of you who are considering graduate work to think about taking this option. If you do so, this paper must involve a significant amount of primary source research beyond the course readings. If you choose this option, you must write a three page prospectus with an attached annotated bibliography and submit it by March 16th. Based on the quality of the prospectus and the viability of your project, I will decide whether you may continue to write this paper.

If you turn in either the short or long papers late, it will be marked down 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late (this goes for both the draft and final version, so if you turn each in one day late, you will be marked down 2/3 of a grade, etc.). If there is a genuine emergency (you know what a genuine emergency is…), let me know as soon as possible and we can try to work something out. Be aware, however, that I do not grant very many extensions and it is absolutely up to my discretion whether or not your excuse is worthy of an extension. You have the option to turn one response paper in late (by late, I mean in class on the day of discussion). These papers are crucial means for you to prepare for class discussion; thus, after this one “late” paper, no other late response papers will be accepted.

All work for this class is governed by the honor code. You must write and sign the honor code pledge at the end of each assignment. We will talk briefly about the honor code in class, but if you have further questions, please go to: http://www.oberlin.edu/students/student_pages/honor_code.html.

Your grade will roughly be determined according to the following formula:

30% Participation
5% Historical Presentation
15% Response Papers
15% First Paper
35% Final Paper

All written work must be turned in to receive credit for this course.

Schedule of Readings and Lectures

February 9: Introduction—What is Existentialism? The Roots and Major Issues of Existentialist Thought

February 16: Kierkegaard
Presentation: European Industrialization and Urbanization Before 1848
Readings: Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling

February 23: Nietzsche I
Presentation: 1848 and German Unification

March 2: Nietzsche II
Presentation: Socialism
Readings: Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990*

March 9: Kafka
Presentation: The European City, pre-1914
Readings: Kafka, *The Trial*

March 16: Heidegger I
Presentation: WWI, Revolutions & Postwar Settlements
Readings: Heidegger, *Being & Time*, Sections 9, 27, 38, 46-60

March 23: Heidegger II
Presentation: Nazism
Readings: *Wolin, The Heidegger Controversy*, selections
* Faye, *The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-193, 113-150*
*Jean-Francois Lyotard, Heidegger and the Jews* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), selections

March 24: Short Paper Due (5pp.), 5pm in my office

SPRING BREAK

April 6: Heidegger & Sartre
Presentation: Stunde Null & the early Cold War
*Sartre, Existentialism is Humanism:*
http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm

April 13: Sartre
Presentation: France during WWII
Readings: *Sartre, Being and Nothingness*, selections
*Sartre, No Exit and Other Plays* (read: “No Exit” and “Dirty Hands”)

April 20: De Beauvoir
Presentation: Western Europe in the 1950s
Readings: De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

April 27: Camus
Presentation: WWII Occupation in Eastern Europe
Readings: Camus, *The Plague*

May 4: Camus & Sartre on Algeria
Presentation:  France in Algeria

May 11: Final Discussion

Final Paper is due Sunday, May 23rd, 9am