**Key Concepts in French Political Thought: tensions among the state, social mores and the individual through Tocqueville, Weil and Foucault**

**Winter/Spring 2022**

**Lecture and discussion:** Thursdays 2-4 pm, online for January, tbd after that…UC D301?

**Instructor:** Rebecca Kingston, Professor of Political Science

**Office hours:** Please email to make an online appointment for Thursday or Friday afternoon. In the first part of the semester, I will be available to talk with students directly after class online. If we are able to make in person appointments in the latter part of the semester my office is 3117 Sid Smith Hall.

**Contact info:** [Rebecca.kingston@utoronto.ca](mailto:Rebecca.kingston@utoronto.ca)

---

**Course description:**

This course is designed to help students further develop an understanding of the interrelation among three key concepts in the history of French political thought through the study of three iconic texts. Having explored the emergence of conceptions of the state, social mores (or customs) and the individual through the writing of Bodin, Montesquieu and Rousseau in the fall, students in this course will follow the development of modern political reflection through attention to a growing awareness of the tensions among these three facets of social and political life, again through three iconic thinkers in the French tradition. Alexis de Tocqueville is a thinker who acknowledged how the nascent individualism of the modern era could serve as a potential threat to the mores and the state of a well functioning modern democracy. Simone Weil is a thinker who saw greater danger attached to the modern state, and who sought to fashion customs and the individual to confront this threat. Finally, Michel Foucault is a thinker who saw the disciplinary logic of modern customs or mores as the most prejudicial to individual liberty and governance. Through these three thinkers we can explore more deeply the complexities of the modern political landscape and try to reflect on how we might best articulate potential threats and thus be in a better situation to identify the possible goods of modern political life.

**Objectives:**

There are three main objectives for this course. The first is to work with students to improve their skills in close textual analysis. We will focus on the reading of the primary texts themselves and seek to uncover the nuances of meaning in each author’s depiction of the interrelation among the three key concepts of the course as illuminated by the text.

A second objective is to use these texts to come to a deeper understanding of the interconnections among the state sovereignty, customs and individuals, and to come to some idea of how to assess their relative normative importance in political reflection and theory. So, while the first step is to come to an understanding of how each of the thinkers studied understand the respective nature of the sovereignty, customs and the individual, the second step is to begin to
come to some independent assessment for our selves and thinking critically of their relative weight and priority for political theorising in general.

A third objective of the course is to begin to place this conceptual work in a larger perspective in political theory. What does this way of approaching the tradition leave out and what other sensibilities may be necessary to include? Are these concepts that need to be superseded and rejected or refined for suitable contemporary purposes? To what extent are sovereignty/custom/the individual relevant categories in political analysis and to what extent should they be?

**Course requirements:**

Short paper (3-4 pp. instructions below) due March 3\textsuperscript{rd} 15%

Seminar presentation on the week of your choice (10-15 minutes for undergraduates and 20-30 minutes for graduate students) 20%

Term paper (undergraduates 15 pp., graduate students 20-25 pp.) due April 7\textsuperscript{th} 50%

Participation 15%

**Short paper instructions:**

The purpose of this short paper is to broaden and deepen your understanding of the work of Tocqueville or Weil. Offer a close textual analysis of one or two of the chapters assigned from either of these two authors, with a focus on the concept of either the state, mores or the individual. What is their understanding of this concept? No secondary source material is required. Try to discern the meaning of the chosen term by assessing how it is understood in relation to both similar and contrasting concepts invoked in the same text.

The paper should be 3-4 pp. double-spaced and standard bibliographic and footnote notation is required. Penalties for late papers are 2\% a day including weekends.

**Seminar presentation:**

Students will do a presentation on the week of their choice (undergraduates 10 minutes, graduate students 20 minutes) related to the reading assigned for that week. The presentation is meant to serve as an opportunity for you to try out some of the ideas that will inform your final paper. Do not just summarise the reading but offer an analysis with a thematic focus and assessment of various strengths and weaknesses as well as raising questions for discussion in relation to the theme of the seminar.
**Term paper:**

Please consult with me about your topic before starting to write your term paper. Your seminar presentation also can serve as an opportunity for feedback on your choice of a topic. Here are a few options for your paper but you are welcome to follow other themes or approaches as long as you consult with me about it ahead of time.

e.g. What does Tocqueville prescribe to address the dangers of narrow individualism in democratic society? How successful is his prescription?/ Comment on the modes of self-interest discussed by Tocqueville?/ How does the threat of authoritarianism come to democratic societies and is there anything that can be done to prevent it?/ Assess Weil’s depiction of the pathologies of the modern era. How convincing is her solution to them?/ Compare and contrast the nature of Montesquieuian norms or moeurs and Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power./ Is Foucauldian individualism the type of stance that Tocqueville saw as noxious to democratic society?

Of course, standard bibliographic and footnote citations are required. To help guard against plagiarism, students are required to hand in their papers through Quercus. Late papers are 2% a day, including weekends.

As required by the university, here are the terms of use for the new plagiarism detection tool Ouriginal: “Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University’s plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool’s reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of this tool are described on the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation web site (https://uoft.me/pdt-faq).”

**Accessibility:**

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations for a disability, or have any accessibility concerns about the course, the classroom or course materials, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca or http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca .

**First month of classes on Zoom:**

In conjunction with the Faculty of Arts and Sciences guidelines, I will be offering the class via Zoom for the first month. This will only be available synchronously with no recording to be posted. This will be done through January with further assessment for the rest of the term. I will provide a link to the class through the course website on Quercus.

**Required texts (via the library, University of Toronto Bookstore or to order online):**

1) Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America, 2 vols.* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004). I would prefer that you obtain this edition/translation of the text so that we are all reading it in the same version. It is translated well and offers a clear rendering of the text. It should be available at the bookstore (as well as for purchase online for c. $48) and there are also a few copies in the library system on campus.


**Course Outline and Weekly Readings (subject to possible revision over the course of the semester):**

**Week 1 (January 13th)** - *Introduction*. I will discuss the syllabus, offer a brief introduction to the texts to be studied this semester, summarise some of the findings from the previous semester as well as answer any questions you may have about the course.

**Week 2 (January 20th)**

Individualism vs. the state and healthy democratic mores via Alexis de Tocqueville: the background of equality of condition in modernity


**Week 3 (January 27th)**

Individualism vs. the state and healthy democratic mores via Alexis de Tocqueville: protection for individuals in democratic government

- Read: *Democracy in America*. Volume One, Part II, chaps. 4, 6-8, pp. 215-223 and 264-318.

**Week 4 (February 3rd)**

Individualism vs. the state and healthy democratic mores via Alexis de Tocqueville: noxious individualism

-Read: *Democracy in America*. Volume Two, Part II, chaps. 1-9, pp. 581-616,

**Week 5 (February 10th)**

Individualism vs. the state and healthy democratic mores via Alexis de Tocqueville: individualism and the power of the state

Read: *Democracy in America*. Volume Two, Part IV, chaps. 1-8, pp. 787-835,
Week 6 (February 17th) - The State vs. the needs of the soul via Simone Weil: the needs of the soul

Week 7 (February 24th) - Reading Week (no class)!

Week 8 (March 3rd) - ***Short paper due today! See Short Paper Instructions above for further information***
- The State vs. the needs of the soul via Simone Weil: uprootedness
-Read: *The Need for Roots*, Part II. Uprootedness, pp. 40-98

Week 9 (March 10th) - The State vs. the needs of the soul via Simone Weil: the state as the culmination of uprootedness

Week 10 (March 17th) - The State vs. the needs of the soul via Simone Weil: the remedy for the evils of the state

Week 11 (March 24th) - Mores as corrosive of individualism via Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power: the origins of punishing power in the state
-Read: *Discipline and Punish*, Part One and Two. Torture and Punishment

Week 12 (March 31st) - Mores as corrosive of individualism via Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power: the shifting face of power

Week 13 (April 7th) - Mores as corrosive of individualism via Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power: the rise of discipline

Final Paper Due April 7th!