REVOLUTIONARY EUROPE, 1789-1989

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:00am-12:15pm, EDT
Zoom link: TBD

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Zoom office hours: TBD

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe were a revolutionary age, not only because of the development of industrial society and the rise and fall of global empires, but also because political revolutions themselves proved during that modern era to be history’s locomotives. Analyzing why revolutions occur, how to start them, how to end them, and sometimes how to prevent them became a chief pursuit of thinkers like Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, and Hannah Arendt. But their theories of revolution did not always coincide with revolutionary practice. This gap between theory and practice is our general theme as we survey the history of the French Revolution, the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the cultural revolutions of 1968, and finally the series of “velvet revolutions” that brought about the collapse of the Soviet bloc starting in 1989. Other themes include the construction of revolutionary narratives and catechisms; the formation of revolutionary subjects (e.g., the working class, oppressed minorities, dissidents); the writing of manifestos and programs; revolutionary tactics (e.g., conspiracy, propaganda, violence); and the relationship between vanguard parties and mass movements. Together we will read a graphic biography of the Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, look at radical avant-garde artwork, and listen to the militant songs that inspired past generations of Revolutionary Europe. When relevant, we will discuss comparative cases in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and North America.

Grading components:

– discussion participation – 15%
– short essay #1 – 25% (due in Week II)
– short essay #2 – 25% (due in Week IV)
– final essay – 35% (due after Week V)

You must complete all components in order to pass the course.

Zoom attendance and discussion participation guidelines:

The first half of each Zoom meeting will consist of an approximately 1.5-hour lecture. After a short break, the second half will consist of group discussions of the assigned reading. Any unexcused absence will result in a failing grade for the course, per Summer Session policy. In addition, you should participate actively during group discussion. If you are unable or reluctant to do this in front of the class, then as an alternative please visit my office hours via Zoom.

Essay guidelines:

Short essays should be formatted with 12pt. serif font, 2.0 spacing, and ≤1.25in. margins. Please include a unique title, page numbers, and citations in a consistent style. Essays should be uploaded as a DOC, DOCX, or PDF to the “Assignments” section of Canvas.

The final essay should be 6 pages long (ca. 1,800 words) with the same formatting as above.

Please use Wikipedia and other outside sources sparingly. All the information that you need to write these essays is contained in the lecture material, required reading, and Canvas resources.
Late essay and plagiarism policies:

The maximum penalty for lateness is ½ letter (or 5%) per day late. Extensions will be hard to come by, but if you need one, then please ask me well in advance of the due date.

Neither the university nor I tolerate plagiarism, but many instances of it are unintentional. Be sure you know how to properly cite other people’s words and ideas. Inform and protect yourself: http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/advice-students/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism

Required books:

– Kate Evans, Red Rosa: A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg (Verso, 2015)

As an alternative to paper editions, these titles are available for purchase as eBooks via Kobo, Kindle, et al. The remainder of the assigned readings will be available as PDFs on Canvas/Course Reserves.

WEEK I: The French Revolution as Model

The modern concept of revolution arose out of a political context, but we often attach it to non-political things: the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, cultural revolution, etc. What makes the concept of revolution so versatile? What makes it modern? Also, why start this course with 1789 instead of 1688, 1640, or even 1517? After defining revolution as a modern phenomenon, we begin with the foundational event of this course’s history: the French Revolution. What was the old regime in Europe? How did the French revolutionaries imagine a new regime to replace it? Our themes include the significance of writing a new constitution, the establishment of democratic legitimacy, and the Revolution’s problem of reconciling the general will of the people with the particular will of the state. As the Revolution progressed, it became increasingly radical and violent. Foreign wars and domestic civil war complicated the political goals of revolutionary leaders. Attempts to purify the Revolution through popular tribunals led to dictatorship and state terrorism, which in turn bolstered counter-revolutionaries’ moral cause. Did the Revolution have an inherent logic that led inevitably to the Terror? We will also discuss how the left-center-right spectrum of modern politics arose.

Meeting 1 (June 30)

required:  *Hannah Arendt, Ch. 4-5 of On Revolution (orig. 1963)

in class:  La Marseillaise (song, 1792)
Jacques-Louis David, revolutionary paintings (late C18)

Meeting 2 (July 2)

“Law of Suspects” (1793)

in class:  Ah! ça ira (song, 1790)
La Carmagnole (song & dance, 1792)
WEEK II: The Social Question & Revolutionary Traditions

While in 1789 the emphasis of the revolutionary motto liberté, égalité, fraternité lay on liberty, the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 turned increasingly toward the problem of social equality. These mid-19th-century upheavals served as the backdrop for Karl Marx’s theory of revolution, which combined German idealism, English economics, and French political savvy. How does Marx’s theory sound to us today? What lessons did he learn between writing The Communist Manifesto (1848) and The Eighteenth Brumaire (1852)? Marx was attentive to the phenomenon of revolutionary modeling. European militants explicitly drew on styles and traditions established by past revolutions. Fight songs, liberty caps, raised fists, red flags, barricades, banners, charging crowds: all of these popular symbols of revolution developed historically as concrete practices. How do such traditions survive in the collective unconscious even after the revolutionary event? Our chief case for examining this phenomenon of revolutionary modeling is the Paris Commune of 1871. We will also pay attention to the revolutionary transformation (and preservation) of gender roles.

Meeting 3 (July 7)

required:  
*Hannah Arendt, Ch. 2 of On Revolution (orig. 1963)

in class:  
Eugène Delacroix, revolutionary paintings (mid-C19) 
barricade scene from Les Misérables (BBC, 2018)

Meeting 4 (July 9)

required:  

in class:  
L’Internationale (song, 1871/88)

--- Short essay #1 due (essay prompts to be circulated one week in advance) ---

WEEK III: The Russian Revolution as a New Model

The Russian Revolution of 1905 proved to many Europeans that the 19th century’s authoritarian order was crumbling. World War I removed any doubts, and the October Revolution of 1917 replaced 1789 as the world’s revolutionary model par excellence. Furthermore, these events divided the international labor movement and unlocked (if not quite opened) the door to fascism in the 1920s and 30s. Did the revolutionary events of 1917 follow the model of the French Revolution 130 years before? Could the new Russian model in turn work for the rest of Europe? Our readings focus on the life of Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish-German intellectual who worked tirelessly for workers’ emancipation and world revolution. Her career involved underground resistance, disputes with Lenin and other leading communists, imprisonment, and a tragic death at the hands of reactionary vigilantes. As an indirect consequence of the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War in the mid-1930s seemed to confirm for European militants the sad necessity of “playing dirty” with violence, conspiracy, and deceit. But debate over proper behavior and tactics spanned the entire history of Revolutionary Europe. Are any means, including violence, justified in pursuit of revolutionary ends?

Meeting 5 (July 14)

required:  
Kate Evans, 1st half of Red Rosa (2015)

in class:  
scenes from Battleship Potemkin, dir. Sergei Eisenstein (1925)
scenes from Rosa Luxemburg, dir. Margarethe von Trotta (1986)
El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, et al., avant-garde artwork (1917-20s)

Meeting 6 (July 16)

required:  Kate Evans, 2nd half of Red Rosa (2015)
in class:  scenes from Earth, dir. Alexander Dovzhenko (1930)
          “A las barricadas,” “¡Ay Carmela!” and other songs of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39)
          Diego Rivera, revolutionary murals (1930s)

WEEK IV: The Global Sixties

In the 1960s, extra-parliamentary opposition groups in the West consolidated into a large movement that pushed for radical reforms. In May 1968, French students and workers took to the streets in the country’s largest general strike ever. Meanwhile, reformists in Prague around Alexander Dubček peacefully displaced the hardline communist government and tried to steer Czechoslovakia toward democratic socialism. Anti-authoritarian slogans, revolutionary hopes, and utopian dreams filled the air everywhere until tear gas and tanks brought an abrupt end to it all. What are we to make of the hopes (political, cultural, aesthetic) and profound disillusionment of 1968 and its aftermath? A major component of the 1960s in Western Europe was a fascination with anticolonial struggles in the Third World. Guerrilla movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia made Che and Mao into household names. What role did Third Worldism play in the revolutionary imagination of European militants in the late ’60s? How did conditions differ in the metropoles versus the former colonial periphery? We will also discuss the long-term legacy of Sixties counterculture.

Meeting 7 (July 21)

          Ulrike Meinhof, “From Protest to Resistance,” konkret (May 1968)
in class:  The Beatles, “Revolution” (song, 1968)
            The Rolling Stones, “Street Fighting Man” (song, 1968)
            scenes from The Legend of Rita, dir. Volker Schlöndorff (2000)

--- Short essay #2 due (essay prompts to be circulated one week in advance) ---

Meeting 8 (July 23)

required:  Frantz Fanon, “Concerning Violence,” The Wretched of the Earth (1961), plus preface by Jean-Paul Sartre

in class:  scenes from The Battle of Algiers, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo (1966)
            scenes from La Chinoise, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1968)

WEEK V: The Fall of Communism & the Future of Revolutionary Europe

As the West prospered, the Soviet Union tried to adjust to the new economic and geopolitical situation of the late 1980s. And then, suddenly, the people of Eastern Europe rose up in peaceful protest and open revolt against communism. The most symbolic image of 1989 was the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, which had divided the city for almost thirty years. Buried under that graffiti-stained concrete rubble, however, lay many unanswered questions. Could Soviet communism have reformed itself in the 1970s and 80s? What did the end of the communist experiment in Europe mean
for the future of Revolutionary Europe? We now revolve back to our discussion of definitions and chronologies of Revolutionary Europe during our first meeting. What does an examination of our own standpoint in the 21st century tell us about how we have understood revolution over the past two centuries? Do the Indignados, Occupy, Arab Spring, Euromaidan, and the Gilets Jaunes fit into the historical category of revolution? What is different? Might future “regime change” occur outside the framework of revolution?

Meeting 9 (July 28)


Tom Brokaw, NBC News report on fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)

Meeting 10 (July 30)


in class: news footage of Arab Spring, Indignados, Gilets Jaunes, etc.

--- Final essay due (essay prompts to be circulated one week in advance) ---