

H-France Salon

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**Making the Enlightenment Relevant in the Twenty-First Century:  
The Enlightenment and Its Readers**

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The Enlightenment was my first love as an undergraduate historian. As a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania, I took an honors seminar with Alan C. Kors and fell in love with the contradictions of Rousseau, the wit of Voltaire, and the mischievousness of Diderot. Kors emphasized reading primary sources only, so that we would learn how to decode philosophical texts ourselves; he banned us from reading secondary sources. I loved the challenge of reading eighteenth-century texts; I also found that the issues the philosophes discussed (is there a God? what should be the goal of education? what were “proper” gender roles? must humans be monogamous?) were some of the same things my friends and I stayed up late debating in the dorms. I loved the Enlightenment that Kors presented to me; it seemed extremely relevant to my life at the time.

As I continued my career as a historian, I began to see what had been missing from the course I had taken. While I had received an excellent introduction to many aspects of the Enlightenment, others were absent. We never broached the subject of the Enlightenment and race; we had not read any female authors; we never considered anything negative about figures like Voltaire, whether their racist or anti-Jewish prejudices. As I finished graduate school at Stanford (studying with Keith Michael Baker) and planned future courses I could teach, one of the first syllabi I created was for a course called “The Enlightenment and Its Readers.” It would blend the best of the course I had taken with Kors with new ideas arising from my graduate studies as well as from my own research on Blacks, Jews and women in the eighteenth century. I was lucky to be able to introduce this course at California State University – San Marcos shortly after my arrival in 1999 and to present on it in a session on “New Approaches to Teaching the Enlightenment” at the Western Society for French History’s Annual Meeting in Los Angeles in 2000.

The class I created then combined these traditional and newer approaches to studying the Enlightenment. I took the contextualist intellectual history and the emphasis on primary sources I had gotten from Kors, and combined it with an idea from Baker, the Enlightenment as idiom. I brought into my course writers from marginalized groups who had not necessarily been invited to salons, but who had responded to canonical figures of the Enlightenment nonetheless. The course defined the Enlightenment not as a movement with fixed boundaries, but as an idiom or language created by canonical Enlightenment thinkers (based on words like *reason*, *nature*, *perfectibility*, *etc.*) which could be appropriated by others outside their circles. I also added several weeks on how Enlightenment ideas affected traditionally excluded groups in French and European

society, including Protestants, Jews, women, enslaved and free Blacks, and others. I wanted to make sure that students understood that, as important as the thinkers of the canonical Enlightenment have been in influencing the ideals of our time, they applied these ideas unevenly in theirs. I also wanted students to recognize that members of marginalized groups fought against their exclusion in the eighteenth century, as they have since then. They appropriated Enlightenment language strategically, as a means for pressing for rights denied to them; they tried to show inconsistencies in the philosophes' arguments.

The class has worked particularly well at my campus, particularly because since it is an HSI- and AANAPISI-designated institution where students might not be intrinsically engaged by studying what we light-heartedly call DWEEEMS ("Dead White Elite Educated European Males"). In recent years, I have enhanced the course's examination of racist strains of thinking within the Enlightenment, using some excerpts from Emmanuel Eze's reader *Race and the Enlightenment*. In 2021, in the wake of debates about what "American" values were, I added more Enlightenment political theory (on topics such as separation of powers and democracy v. tyranny) to enhance our understanding of the U.S.'s Enlightenment-influenced founding documents. During the pandemic, I have also had to transform the course into a half-synchronous remote version.

In the first half of this primary-source-based class, students read some of the canonical texts I read with Kors: Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* and *Candide*; Rousseau's *Emile*; and Diderot's *D'Alembert's Dream*. To supplement our texts, I give background lectures on concepts such as deism, materialism, eighteenth-century ideas on education and gender, and the French colonial system. In addition, students write a paper on entries from the *Encyclopédie*, which I adapted from an assignment Jeffrey Merrick developed at Barnard College; we use the wonderful online *Encyclopédie* collaborative translation project created by Dena Goodman. This assignment allows students to go deeper into areas of Enlightenment thinking that interest them, beyond what I have placed on the syllabus, for instance to write about entries on slavery, colonies or Blacks.<sup>1</sup> During the first half of class, I also call students' attention to the philosophes' comments on race/slavery in texts such as *Candide* and the *Philosophical Dictionary*, and on gender in *Emile* and *D'Alembert's Dream*.

In the second half of the course, we move beyond the canonical Enlightenment; I call this half of class "the Enlightenment Remix" (in homage to Sean "P. Diddy" Combs). I give an overview of new scholarship that looks beyond the canonical Enlightenment to include women philosophes, the social history of ideas, enlightened religion, and of course

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<sup>1</sup> There are several such entries that have been translated; including "Colonist" and "Colony" (which I translated in 2003 and 2004), as well as two on slavery and several on "Negro(es)." Students can also choose articles on Africa or other regions to see how the *Encyclopédie* represented them. *Encyclopedia of Diderot & D'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/>.

Enlightenment and race, drawing on my own scholarship and that of others.<sup>2</sup> Students then read texts on the idea of “tolerance,” as well as responses to famous Enlightenment thinkers by members of marginalized groups. To illustrate that Enlightenment ideas were hardly hegemonic in the eighteenth century, I also give students translations of Catholic counter-Enlightenment texts (shared with me by the late Donald Bailey), as well as Enlightenment vulgarizations like *Thérèse philosophe*. This half of the class includes two weeks on race and gender, ranging from Olaudah Equiano’s narrative (deploying Enlightenment and Christian idioms to argue for the abolition of slavery) to Enlightenment texts espousing “scientific” racist ideas. For this section, I use excerpts from Enlightenment racial “science” as well as Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia.” Though examining the US and the UK takes the course beyond the boundaries of France, it helps illustrate the transatlantic nature of Enlightenment conversations as well as the fact that France did not only include the hexagon.

For Spring 2021, I also added an essay I wrote in Summer 2020 suggesting that those teaching the Enlightenment might call students’ attention to the #BLM activism of the National Basketball Association’s Summer Restart season. In that essay, “[Liberté, Equality, #ICantBreathe! Teaching the Age of Revolutions Using the NBA’s 2020 Summer Restart](#),” *Age of Revolutions* (Aug. 17, 2020), I pointed to the Enlightenment origins of some of the slogans players wore on their jerseys, such as *Freedom, Equality, and Justice*. I argued that “*The messages [players] are projecting on their backs can in fact help students understand the global legacies of the Atlantic Revolutions, the uneven application of their universalist ideals, and the limits of different kinds of primary sources.*” I recommended that “*Instructors might assign U.S., French, Haitian, or Venezuelan founding documents (or Enlightenment texts, or those by eighteenth-century intellectuals of African descent such as Julien Raimond) to read against the jerseys. Students can be asked to consider: what rights were promised in these documents? What failures to extend these rights do jerseys reveal?*”

Overall, I have sought to make the Enlightenment feel as relevant to my students as it did to me, decades earlier. Each time I teach the course it is a new experience, with a new cohort of personalities. But even in the remote world, I am committed to keeping Salon Day, the course’s best-loved feature. On this day, after we have devoted our time to reading and understanding Enlightenment thinkers, students are given space to put their texts aside and relax – to talk about how these texts relate to the present, and whether they like the philosophes at all. These conversations (about what *they* think, not the philosophes) can be awkward, given that my students come from wildly varying backgrounds in our polarized society. But it helps them understand how awkward or explosive it must have been at salons or in other public-sphere fora, as people introduced previously taboo ideas. Salon Day also empowers students to claim a place in this Enlightenment tradition of questioning authority and to know that they have as much right to respond or critique these texts as anyone. My students become new readers

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Bernard Gainot, Marcel Dorigny, Jean Ehrard and Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, “Lumières et esclavages” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 380 (juin 2015): 149 – 169.

responding to the Enlightenment, answering back in ways the philosophes could not have imagined, just like the authors in the second half of my course.

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**HISTORY 324**  
**ENLIGHTENMENT and EUROPEAN SOCIETY**  
SPRING 2021  
Synchronous/Asynchronous Blend

*Course Description:* This course focuses on the Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century intellectual movement which shook the foundations of European society. Enlightenment writers not only affected their own time, but deeply helped shape many of our own institutions and our way of seeing the world. You may find that the issues they debated are similar to those which concern you in your own lives.

The course's first section covers some of the most famous authors of the Enlightenment. We will examine the radical questions they posed about the world around them, and how they tried to change their contemporaries' understandings of subjects like religion, politics, sexuality, and knowledge. Our course focuses on the most famous thinkers of the French Enlightenment (Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot), to understand their views in greater depth, rather than trying to cover every Enlightenment thinker and every national variant of the Enlightenment. Though Enlightenment thinkers are often lumped together, we will look at some of the real differences dividing them.

In the course's second section, we will examine how a variety of eighteenth-century readers read and reacted to the same Enlightenment works you read in the course's first

half. We will focus on responses to Enlightenment works by members of groups (particularly religious minorities, women, and people of color) which had been on the margins of European society and intellectual life, as well as by members of established churches. We will also consider the hotly debated question of the Enlightenment's impact on thinking about race. You will also have the option of reading one of the more vulgar popularizations of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.

#### *PLACE OF COURSE IN HISTORY MAJOR*

Upper-division history major elective; fulfills

--pre-1800 requirement

--world area Europe

#### **READINGS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES**

**Required Textbooks:** Please purchase the following texts, available from the University Store or online. You are strongly urged to buy **these inexpensive editions**.

*\*If you cannot buy these in paper, you can open a free account and borrow the books for one hour at a time from archive.org.* Students often find that **READING & WRITING** in a paper copy helps them retain material more. But in a pinch these editions have the correct page #s and will work fine!

1. Voltaire, *Candide* (Dover)
2. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew/D'Alembert's Dream* (Penguin)
3. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Dover)
4. Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* (Dover)
5. Rousseau, *Emile* (Everyman's Library)

**Course learning outcomes:** Students enrolled in 324 will:

1. Gain an understanding of the ideals and debates associated with the European Enlightenment.
2. Increase their understanding of the eighteenth-century historical context from which these ideas emerged.
3. Improve their close reading skills and become adept at reading, understanding and analyzing eighteenth-century primary sources.
4. Improve their ability to analyze and explain primary sources in writing.
5. Improve their skills in discussing controversial ideas civilly.
6. Consider how Enlightenment ideals relate to the twenty-first century.
7. Be able to explain why the Enlightenment had differential impacts on different populations in European society, including on enslaved populations in the Americas.

*COURSE ASSIGNMENTS/REQUIREMENTS*

**1) Class preparation and engagement (aka attendance & participation), 20%** of your grade. The course generally meets once a week live on Zoom, and a second day asynchronously on CC. Active participation and engagement (including speaking during our live class, making comments on our readings through Zoom chat and/or forum participation) are required. If you miss our synchronous time, you can watch the recording of our class and still comment.

**2) Regular Assignments (30% of your grade):** We will have regular assignments in which you will reflect on course materials. These will either be forums, blog posts, or Perusall tasks, as indicated on the syllabus. Because life happens, you get two “freebies” for missed assignments that won’t count against your course grade. Grades for these assignments are based on the following scale:

- √+ outstanding work, equiv. to an A
- √ acceptable work, equiv. to a B; feel free to come in if you want to improve your understanding of the material
- √- equiv. to a C; suggests that work is not being done carefully, or you are having difficulty understanding concepts; you are encouraged to come in for extra help
- NC work that was not done at all or which raises academic honesty concerns

**3) Close Reading Paper:** One paper is required, focusing on the *Encyclopédie* produced by Diderot and other Enlightenment thinkers. You will choose one entry (the definition of a particular word) from the on-line Encyclopedia translation project at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/>. The entry you analyze must be at least 2 pages long, or you can combine 2 or 3 shorter entries which you think have some thematic coherence. Write an essay (approx. 4-6 pages, 1200 - 1750 words) about (1) what the entry is trying to change; (2) what the entry tells us about life in pre-Enlightenment or Enlightenment Europe; and (3) how the entry fits in with other Enlightenment texts we have read. (20%)

**4) Group unmidterm exercise:** In lieu of a formal timed midterm, you will work in a group to review the first half of the class, and prepare a group representation (10%).

**4) Final Exam:** You will have a takehome final exam (20%).

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

(\*given the COVID situation and the fact that this is the first time I've ever taught this course half-synchronously, a few assignments are listed as TBA; I will see which type of informal assignments are working the best as the semester proceeds)

**I. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BACKGROUND**

WEEK 1)

T ZOOM) **Course Introduction**

Th ASYNCH) **Course Intro, pt. II: OLD REGIME EUROPE**

1. WATCH Lecture Video of the Day
2. POST to Blog
  - a. *What are the three most important things you got from this lecture?*
  - b. *What questions do you still have at the end?*
3. READ syllabus
4. DO **Syllabus Assignment**: write approx. ½ pp
  - a. *which unit or topic you are most excited about and why?*
  - b. *plus one question you have about the syllabus [not a content question]*
5. *Optional*: POST in Say hi to classmates forum! – no deadline

WEEK 2)

T ZOOM) **Old Regime France**

1. READ Popkin, *History of Modern France* (e-reserve)
2. Be ready to discuss in class what you learned from Thurs. lecture & this reading
 

→ *In class we will practice Perusall with an excerpt from Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws"*

Th ASYCH) **Voltaire/Deism Preview**

1. WATCH Voltaire/Deism Lecture
2. POST to Forum after watching the lecture
3. COMPLETE Student Questionnaire

**II. VOLTAIRE: CHALLENGING DESPOTISM/THE CRUSADING ENLIGHTENMENT**

Week 3)

T ZOOM) **From A to Z: Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary***

1. READ Voltaire, *Phil. Dict.*, Packet #1 (Abbé, Beauty, Cannibals, Country, David, Freedom of Thought, God, Theist)
2. READ Voltaire, *Phil. Dict.*, Packet #2 (Adultery, Books, Democracy, Faith, Glory, Kissing, Love, Marriage)
3. MARK UP on PERUSALL, *Phil. Dict.*

4. Optional: Browse other *Phil. Dict.* entries at <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/voltaire/volindex.html>

#### Th ASYNCH) **Candide + Encyclopédie Preview**

1. WATCH Candide preview video
2. WATCH *Encyclopédie* Preview video
3. READ Paper Guidelines
4. POST to Candide/*Encyclopédie* blog

#### Week 4

#### T ZOOM) **All is for the Best? Voltaire's *Candide***

1. READ Voltaire, *Candide*
2. Assignment TBA (possibly POST to a group google doc before class)

#### Th ASYNCH) **Rousseau Preview**

1. WATCH Rousseau Preview video
2. BLOG or FORUM (TBA)

### **III. ROUSSEAU: THE OUTSIDER'S ENLIGHTENMENT?**

#### Week 5

#### T ZOOM) **Rousseau on Education**

1. READ Rousseau, *Emile*, selections
2. PERUSALL assignment TBA

#### Th ASYNCH) **Preview on Creed and Gender**

1. WATCH Creed Preview video
2. BLOG or Forum, TBA
3. \*\*\**Encyclopédie* Paper due\*\*\*

#### Week 6

#### T ZOOM) **Rousseau on Religion**

1. READ Rousseau, *Creed of a Priest of Savoy* (pp. 274 - 332 in *Emile*)

#### Th ASYNCH) **Diderot/Materialism Preview**

1. WATCH Diderot/Materialism Preview video
2. *Optional*: READ *Encyclopedia of Enlightenment* "Materialism" entry
3. Blog entry on what you learned from the preview video

### **IV. DIDEROT: THE ATHEISTIC ENLIGHTENMENT**

#### Week 7

#### T ZOOM) **Diderot**

1. READ: "Conversation between Diderot and D'Alembert," "D'Alembert's Dream" and "Sequel to Conversation" (pp. 149 – 233 in Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*)
2. *Optional*: READ [Lespinasse primary source excerpts](#)

Th ASYNCH)

1. POST to Diderot wrapup forum
2. EMAIL me 3 suggested questions for Salon Day

*Week 8*

T ZOOM) \*Special Event\*: SALON DAY: no homework

→ 324 students often consider this a highlight of the semester & we'll try it via

Zoom!

→ feel free to bring pets and/or snacks with you

Th) UNMIDTERM GROUP EXERCISE! (w/your Salon Day group; group grade 8%)

*Small group meetings, SYNCH encouraged but optional*

**Preliminary group draft to be submitted as a Google Doc**

*Week 10*) **UNMIDTERM WRAPUP + TOLERANCE PREVIEW**

T ZOOM) → *Unmidterm Wrapup group presentations, IN CLASS*

## **V. FOCUS ON TOLERANCE**

Th ASYNCH) **What is Tolerance?**

1. WATCH lecture video: NEW APPROACHES TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT + TOLERANCE
2. READ "Tolerance Documents" (e-reserve)
  - a. Voltaire, "Tolerance" (from *Philosophical Dictionary*);
  - b. Voltaire, "Treatise on Tolerance" (excerpt);
  - c. "Edict of Toleration";
  - d. Rabaut St-Etienne, "Letter...on the Edict of Toleration"
3. POST in lecture forum
  - *What did you learn from the preview lecture video? Which part of the second half of the class are you most excited about?*
  - *What did you learn from the documents?*

## **VI. THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE DISENFRANCHISED/ READERS RESPOND TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT ("The Remix!!")**

*Week 11*)

T ZOOM) **Enlightenment and the Jews**

1. READ "Enlightenment/Jews Readings" (e-reserve) =
  - a. Voltaire-Isaac de Pinto exchange;
  - b. Sulamith, "Call for Religious Enlightenment";

- c. Zalkind Hourwitz, "Vindication of the Jews";
  - d. Petition by Jews in France to French Revolutionary National Assembly
2. PERUSALL assignment

Th ASYNCH) **Wollstonecraft Preview**

1. WATCH Wollstonecraft lecture video
2. POST in Forum

Week 12

T ZOOM) **Enlightenment and Women**

1. READ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, selections

Th ASYNCH) **Race and Enlightenment Preview**

1. WATCH race & Enl. lecture preview video
2. POST wrapup thoughts on Wollstonecraft reading

Week 13

T ZOOM) **Race, Gender and the Enlightenment**

1. READ Race & Enlightenment excerpts (e-reserve)
  - a. Linnaeus, "The God-Given Order of Nature"
  - b. Entry from the Encyclopédie: "Nègre"
2. READ Thomas [Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," excerpts](#)
3. READ Meghan Roberts excerpt on Diderot's family (e-reserve)
4. *Optional*: READ F. Véron de Forbonnais, "[Colony,](#)" in the *Encyclopédie*
5. *Optional*: READ Julie Hardwick, "[Working, Flirting and Sex: Courtship in 18th-Century France](#)," *Aeon* (Dec. 2020).
6. *Optional*: Bernard Gainot, Marcel Dorigny, Jean Ehrard and A. G. Sepinwall, "Enlightenment and Slavery" (translation), *AHRF* no. 380 (2015)
7. *Optional*: A. G. Sepinwall, "[Robespierre, Old Regime Feminist? Gender, the Late Eighteenth Century, and the French Revolution Revisited](#)," *Journal of Modern History* (2010)

*\*Guest Lecturer: Dr. Meghan Roberts\**

*\*NOTE: In the past, I have also used Spanish Enlightenment documents on women, from Jon Cowans, *Early Modern Spain: A Documentary History*. I sometimes also include documents by free Blacks in the French colonies employing the Enlightenment idiom, such as Julien Raimond. However, this spring I have many students coming from my Revolutionary Europe or Haitian history classes and do not want to duplicate readings.*

Th ASYNCH) **Equiano and Slavery Preview Video**

1. WATCH Equiano and Slavery lecture preview video
2. POST to forum wrapping up Tues. readings & visit

## Week 14

T ZOOM) **An Enslaved Person's Perspective/Enlightened Religion I?**

1. READ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, selections

Th ASYNCH) **Equiano Wrapup + Preview**

1. WATCH preview video
2. POST in Equiano wrapup forum

## Week 15

T ZOOM) **Enlightened Religion II: Catholic Counter-Enlightenment AND/OR Enlightenment Vulgarized: *Therèse Philosophe***

1. READ **Everyone**: Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment* (38 – 47, go through library catalog)
2. **THEN READ** \*either\*
  - a. Counter-Enlightenment excerpts or
  - b. *Therèse Philosophe* excerpt (e-reserve; warning, graphic content)
3. **EMAIL** me 3 suggested questions for Salon Day

Th *Optional* ZOOM or alternate ASYNCH assignment)

→\*Special Event\*: **SALON DAY, Part II**, live on Zoom

→if you cannot come live to a Salon Day gathering; do writeup assignment on the material from Tues.

## Week 16

T ZOOM) **Enlightenment Political Ideals/Course Wrap-up/Exam review**

1. READ [Constitution of the United States](#)
2. READ [Bill of Rights of the United States](#)
3. *Optional*: READ A. G. Sepinwall, "[Liberté, Equality, #ICantBreathe! Teaching the Age of Revolutions Using the NBA's 2020 Summer Restart](#)," *Age of Revolutions* (Aug. 17, 2020)

Th ASYNCH) **Work on Takehome final**