Early Modern Europe from Renaissance to Enlightenment

This class will introduce students to the history of Europe from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. It will focus on the ways that institutions and individuals identified and addressed perceived ills, injustices or instabilities in their societies.

Most of the readings will be excerpts from primary sources, and students will be taught both how to interpret classic works from the period and how to make sense of other materials, such as letters and legal records. Students will also be pushed to examine the methods by which these sources can be used as evidence.

This class will be writing intensive. Students will be required to write three papers and will work with me on basic considerations of organization, editing, and use of evidence. For the final paper, students will submit a first draft by the beginning of Week 9 and will meet with me to discuss this draft. The re-write will be due at the end of the term.

The class will also be discussion intensive. While each week I will supplement textbook readings with brief expositions of the historical context and background for the primary sources, the majority of class time will be devoted to discussion. Attendance and participation are critical. One of the many virtues of seminar courses in the humanities is that they expose students not just to thinking of the professor, but also to that of their fellow students.

Below is a very tentative syllabus, to be revised over the summer. Each week’s assignment will consist of 100-120 pages of reading each week; the below listed works are simply those that will be extracted. Most, if not all, of the readings will be compiled in a course packet, posted online or distributed in class.


Week 1: The Medieval World and Its Discontents
Th: Petrarch, Letters, Secretum, Ascent of Mount Ventoux

Week 2: Humanism
T: Erasmus, Adages; Vespassiano da Bisticci, Lives of Illustrious Men
Th: Thomas More, Utopia
Week 3: The Renaissance State
First paper due Tuesday before class
  T: Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi; LuAnn Homza, ed. The Spanish Inquisition
  Th: Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince

Week 4: Reformation
  T: Martin Luther, The Freedom of a Christian
  Th: German Peasants’ War, ed. Scribner and Scott; The Chronicle of Jeanne de Jussie; John Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion

Week 5: Counter Reformation
  T: Ignatius of Loyola, Autobiography
  Th: St. Francis Xavier, Select Letters; Teresa of Avila, Autobiography

Second Paper due Friday

Week 6: Travel and Exploration
  T: Antonio Pigafetta, Magellan’s Voyage
  Th: Juan Gines de Sepulveda, Democrats Alter; Bartolomé de Las Casas, Apologetic History of the Indies

Week 7: The 16th century Crisis
  T: Michel Montaigne, Essais
  Th: Francis Bacon, New Atlantis and Advancement of Learning

Week 8: The New Learning
  T: Galileo Galilei, Letter to Madame Christina of Lorraine
  Th: Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method

Week 9: Absolutism and Liberty
First Draft of Third Paper Due Tuesday before class
  T: Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan
  Th: John Locke, Second Treatise on Government

Week 10: Enlightenment
  T: Denis Diderot, Encyclopedie; Carolus Linnaeus, Systema Naturae; Selected Letters of Madame de Sevigne
  Th: Voltaire, Candide and Philosophical Dictionary

Re-write of Final Papers due at end of week