

**HR 245: HUMANISM AND ANTIHUMANISM IN 20TH CENTURY FRENCH
THOUGHT**
Eric Trudel

What is the legacy of humanism and its very long tradition in twentieth-century French thought? So strong was once the belief in its values that humanism came to be equated, in France, with republicanism and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. And yet, the humanists' affirmation of the centrality of man – the “measure of all things” –, their faith in the dignity of man, their commitment to reason, progress and universal truth came under severe attack throughout the century, under the influence of Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger, to be ultimately denounced as nothing more than a construct of “petit bourgeois” ideology. Althusser praised Marx for having reduced to ashes the “myth” of man, Foucault celebrated its disappearances “like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”, and Derrida painstakingly undermined the metaphysical foundation of subjectivity. What happens to ethics and politics when what appears to be its very foundation is withdrawn? Does antihumanism signal the end of responsibility? This course surveys the ongoing, contentious and often violent debate between humanism and antihumanism in France throughout the 20th century. Our goal will be to understand, for instance, how Sartre, who ferociously mocked humanism in the 1930s came to declare, after the war, that Existentialism is a Humanism; to grasp why Simone de Beauvoir could plead for an Ethics of Ambiguity while Camus condemned all form of revolutionary action, even when conducted in the name of justice. Along the way, we will examine how this debate is tied to the understanding of the role of the intellectual, and issues of colonialism, feminism, political activism and environmentalism. Texts include fictions and essays by Antelme, Bataille, de Beauvoir, Benda, Bergson, Camus, Deleuze, Derrida, Fanon, Ferry, Foucault, Irigaray, Lévinas, Malraux, Merleau-Ponty, Mounier, Nizan, Rancière, Ricœur, Sartre, Todorov, Weil and others.
Class size: 22