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**State of Emergency, Plague, and White Gaze:  
What Existentialism Teaches Us About Crisis**

**Instructor: Dr. Carmen Lea Dege**

**Course Overview**

In this course, we will investigate existentialist responses to experiences of crisis such as states of emergency and high risk, periods of uncertainty and struggle, and situations of injustice and racism. The seminar begins with the existentialist movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany and France (Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir). It then moves to three influential developments of existentialist theory and practice: (1) anti-colonial and anti-racist thought (Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Frank Wilderson); (2) decisionism and political theology (Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben); (3) and the politics and ethics of non-violence (Simone Weil, Albert Camus). We explore how political crises involve questions of motivation and agency, examine the variations, tensions and contradictions within existentialist thought and probe its future potential.

**Course Objectives**

The first goal of the course is to teach students to be comfortable reading, interpreting and discussing texts in political philosophy. The second goal is to evaluate and become familiar with a range of existentialist questions such as: how do we respond to the loss of control; what is the role of crisis and uncertainty in our personal and social lives; how does individual freedom relate to collective freedom; which resources does existentialism offer to analyze and critique racism? Through weekly writing assignments and active participation, students should be able to answer key questions around which the course is structured, and use concrete evidence pulled from their own interpretations of the text. In engaging with existential perspectives in politics, students learn how to relate theory to practice and form a comprehensive view of the history of the existentialist tradition, its merits and pitfalls as well as relations to other intellectual and political movements such as Marxism, critical theory, and identity politics.

## Requirements and Evaluation:

- A) Regular attendance, preparation, and participation in seminar discussion. (20%)
- B) Students will be asked to write response papers to reading questions and lead discussion of them 3-4 times over the course of the semester. (30%)
- C) Two in-class essays (25% each):
  - 1) Students write a short article (600-1000 words) on a topic related to the course. It should be in the style of an op-ed or a blog post, intended for a broad audience.
  - 2) The second essay (2500 words) will be peer edited by students in class on the day the first draft of the paper is due. A revised draft of each of these papers will then be due within a few days of the first draft. All writing completed in the course will be shared with potentially any other member of the course as part of the peer editing process.

## Course Schedule

### ***Introductory Session: What Is Existentialism?***

- Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being & Apricot Cocktails*, Introduction, 2016.
- Carmen Lea Dege, “2020s Existentialist Turn,” in *Boston Review*, August 2020.

### ***Week 2 (March 22): Heidegger and Jaspers: An Odd Couple of German Existentialism***

- Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, 160-267.

#### *Additional Readings :*

- Karsten Harries, “Shame, Guilt, Responsibility,” in *Heidegger & Jaspers*, Allan Olson (ed.), 1994.
- Ingo Farin & Jeff Malpas (eds.), *Reading Heidegger’s Black Notebooks, 1931-1941*, 2016.
- Karl Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography,” in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), 1981, 71/1-75/16.

### ***Week 3 (April 5): Hannah Arendt Discusses the Past and Future of Existential Philosophy***

- Hannah Arendt, “What Is Existential Philosophy?,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerom Kohn (ed.), 1994.

#### *Additional Readings :*

- Lewis and Sandra Hinchman, “Existentialism Politicized: Arendt’s Debt to Jaspers,”

in *The Review of Politics*, 53(3), 1991, 435-468.

- Margaret Canovan, "Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt's Reflections on Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research*, 57(1), 1990, 135-165.
- Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin*, chapter 3.

**Week 4 (April 12): Agency Without Control: Freedom in the Face of Nothingness**

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 2007.

*Additional Readings :*

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit, The Flies, Dirty Hands*, 1989.
- Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, 213-166.

**Week 5 (April 19): The Politics and Ethics of Ambiguity**

- Kate Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 197-267.
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, section 1.

**Week 6 (April 26): White Gaze, Self-Determination and the Question of Violence**

- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 82-108, 174-181.
- Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," in Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, xliii-lxii.
- Frantz Fanon, "Why we use violence," in *Alienation and Freedom*, 653-659.

*Additional Readings :*

- Ziauddin Sardar, "Foreword to Black Skin, White Masks," vi-xx.
- Robyn Marasco, "Frantz Fanon - Critique with Knives," in *Highway of Despair*, 140-168.

**Week 7 (May 3): The (Im)Possibility of Non-Violence**

- Albert Camus, *The Plague*.

*Additional Readings :*

- Alain de Botton, "Camus on the Coronavirus," New York Times, 3/19/2020.
- Simone Weil, The "Iliad" or the Poem of Force – A Critical Edition, James P. Holoka (ed.)

**Week 8 (May 24): "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."**

- Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, sections 1-3 & "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations."
- Carl Schmitt, "Definition of Sovereignty," in *Political Theology - Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 5-15.

*Additional Readings :*

- Jan-Werner Mueller, *A Dangerous Mind - Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought*.
- Chantal Mouffe, "Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy."
- David Runciman in *Talking Politics – The History of Ideas* (Podcast): Schmitt on Friend vs Enemy.

***Week 9 (May 31): The Politics of Bare Life***

- Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, part I §1; 3; 6; part II §1; 2; 7.
- Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, chapter 1.

*Additional Readings :*

- Andrew Norris (ed.), *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*.
- Colin Dayan, "How Not to Talk about Gaza," *Boston Review*, 11/1/2012.

***Week 10 (June 7): Reading Week***

***Week 11 (June 14): The Consciousness and Soul of Blackness***

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, forethought & chapters 1-3; 11; 14.

*Additional Readings :*

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*.

***Week 12 (June 21): How to Dismantle the House of the Master?***

- Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Introduction.
- James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," "My Dungeon Shook," "The American Dream and the American Negro," in *Collected Essays*.

*Additional Readings :*

- Lewis R. Gordon, Annie Menzel, George Shulman and Jasmine Syedullah: "Critical Exchange on Afropessimism," *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17(1), 105-137.
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

***Final Session (June 28): What Is the Future of Existentialism?***