



Summer semester 2021: 12.04.2021 - 17.07.2021

Philosophy in Berlin: Academic Freedom in Theory and Practice

Instructor

Benjamin Wilck

Schedule

weekly

Time and place

Monday, 14:15 – 15:45

This course will be held in a digital format with synchronous meetings in Zoom. Excursions and in-class meetings might take place, depending on the circumstances and regulations.

Course Level & Target Group

Berlin Perspectives courses are designed for undergraduate students. Master students may participate if their home university agrees.

This course does not presuppose any previous knowledge of the topic, and it is of interest to anybody who wants to learn about the theory and history of the European university, especially in the German tradition. Students from all disciplines are welcome to participate. Also, this course does not presuppose any technical philosophical skills. Rather, by studying the impact of philosophical theories on the actual history of European universities and education policies, this course prepares students to critically assess philosophical texts in their historical, political, and cultural context.

Language requirements

English B2 and German A1: All required readings are available in the German original and in English translations. This course is taught in English, yet German contributions are welcome.

ECTS

5 ECTS

Course Description

This course explores philosophical reflections on the structure and purpose of the university. The idea of academic freedom is the primary concern of university reform writings put forward by German (and mostly Berlin-based) philosophers in the early 19th century, which eventually led to the establishing of the University of Berlin in 1809/10. Following Kant, philosophers such as Schelling, Fichte, von Humboldt, and Schleiermacher had the idea to create a new kind of university in which science would be independent of political and economic interests, and in which the faculty of philosophy plays a central role. The University of Berlin thus became the paradigm of a new era of teaching and research. By reading key texts by the aforementioned philosophers, as well as by Hegel, Marx, Heine, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger, we will trace how ideas relating to academic freedom and university reform changed and were implemented in the course of the last two centuries, also in light of the most recent European university reform: the Bologna Process in 1999. Apart from the impact of philosophy on the history of European universities and education policies, this course also considers its impact on literature, visual arts, and architecture in Berlin past and present.

All readings will be made available electronically in both the original German and English translation. A detailed bibliography will be distributed in the first seminar session.

Course Objective & Learning Outcomes

The objective of this Bachelor-level course is to equip students with an overview of major German theories of the university and of academic freedom in the 19th century, and in particular with an in-depth understanding of the philosophical ideas and arguments which led to the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1809/10. The course will enable its participants to analyze and interpret central philosophical texts about the idea and purpose of the university, as well as to critically reflect from a historical and philosophical perspective upon the institution of the university in which they study.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

Knowledge

- Understand, describe and identify the central positions and arguments concerning university reform by German philosophers such as Kant, von Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Marx, Heine, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger
- Direct independent research on topics discussed in the course

Academic/Transferable Skills

- Select relevant sources and methods for analyzing course-related questions
- Analyze and interpret texts about university reform and reform in general
- Communicate and discuss key concepts of the theory of education in the German tradition and the history of European universities

Competencies

- Assess primary philosophical texts in the context of history and literature
- Critically reflect about the structure and purpose of higher education institutions
- Apply relevant theories and concepts in independent work to analyze new problems

Course Schedule

Week 1: Opening session.

Content/topic: In the first session of the seminar, we will get an overview of the topics to be covered and the texts to be read in the course of this class. Also, we will discuss the definitional question as to what a university is, as well as the extent to which the notion of *academic freedom* is part of the definition of *university*.

Recommended readings: Elizabeth Harman (Princeton University): "Racist research must be named, but often allowed", *The Daily Princetonian*, July 27, 2020.

Group activity / assignment: Participants are asked to prepare a mind map on the question 'What is a university?'; informal class discussion.

Week 2: Kant's idea of the university

Content/topic: We will ascertain Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) view about the role of philosophy in a university, and thereby get an insight into the institutional status of academic philosophy in the late 18th century in Prussia. Kant's book *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (*The Conflict of the Faculties*) from 1798 can be regarded as the origin of the revolutionist calls for university reform by Berlin-based philosophers such as Fichte, von Humboldt, and Schleiermacher, which then led to the actual establishing of the University of Berlin. In this book, Kant argues that Law, Theology, and Medicine (the three so-called higher faculties) are nothing but instruments of the State, whereas Philosophy (the so-called lower faculty) has the function to examine and control the higher faculties.

Required readings: Immanuel Kant: *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), Part I.

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentation about the readings; class discussion.

Week 3: Schelling's idea of the university

Content/topic: We will discuss selected passages from Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's (1775–1854) *Lectures on the Method of Academic Study* (1803), which were written shortly after, and in reaction to, Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*. Schelling here argues that philosophy is in fact not a faculty among others, but rather a principle and foundation of the university as a whole.

Required readings: F.W.J. Schelling: *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums* (1803), Lectures 1, 5, 7.

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentation about the readings; class discussion.

Week 4: Fichte's idea of the university

Content/topic: The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) was the founder of German Idealism, as well as the first Rector of the University of Berlin. We will read Fichte's programmatic treatise *Deduced Scheme for a University to be established in Berlin*, in which Fichte proclaims to derive a theory of the university from one single philosophical principle. Fichte here argues that, just as all knowledge is ultimately grounded in one single philosophical principle, so all faculties of the university too are to

be grounded in the faculty of Philosophy. Moreover, Fichte argues that all teachings at the university should ideally be performed by one single philosophy professor.

Required readings: J.G. Fichte: *Deduzierter Plan einer zu Berlin zu errichtenden höhern Lehranstalt* (1807), §§ 1–26.

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentation about the readings; class discussion.

Week 5: Wilhelm von Humboldt's idea of the university

Content/topic: The philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was actively engaged in the institutional founding of the University of Berlin. We will discuss two of his programmatic texts with respect to (i) Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), and (ii) the prospective establishment of a new university in Berlin (1809/10). Von Humboldt argues for the establishing a new (kind of) university in which teaching and research would form a unity, in which science would be independent of political and economic interests, and in which students would receive a universal education.

Required readings: Wilhelm von Humboldt: "Antrag auf Errichtung der Universität Berlin" (1809); "Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin" (1809/10, fragment).

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentations about the readings; class discussion. Additional readings are to be jointly prepared by small groups of students.

Week 6: First excursion

Content/topic: We will visit the main building of Humboldt University (which accommodates the Rector's office, the Philosophy Department, and Hegel's original desk), as well as the Law Faculty and the Theological Faculty. In particular, we will discuss in detail Ceal Floyer's art installation "Vorsicht Stufe" ("Mind the step") from 2009 in the entrance hall of the main building of Humboldt-Universität (Unter den Linden 6). We will further explore and critically discuss artworks and memorials regarding Fichte's, Hegel's, Marx's, and Heine's lives and works.

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about Ceal Floyer's art installation in the main building of Humboldt-Universität) for every participant; individual or group presentation about that art installation or other aspects of the excursion; class discussion.

Week 7: Schleiermacher's idea of the university

Content/topic: The theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) also actively contributed to the establishment of the University of Berlin. We will study his treatise *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*, and compare it to von Humboldt's views of the university. Schleiermacher argues for the necessity of a new, third kind of institution of higher education mediating between mere teaching institutions (schools) and research institutions (academies), namely, the university. Moreover, Schleiermacher argues for the primacy of the philosophical faculty, and for the State's support of universities across national, but within mono-linguistic boundaries.

Required readings: F.D.E. Schleiermacher: *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten in deutschem Sinn. Nebst einem Anhang über eine neu zu errichtende* (1808), Sections 1–2.

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentation about the readings; class discussion.

Week 8: Hegel's view of philosophy

Content/topic: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) taught at the University of Berlin from 1816 until his death, and he is probably the most prominent and influential philosopher who ever lived and worked in Berlin. We will take a look at the preface to Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), which emerged from his lectures in Berlin, and in which Hegel determines the relationship between reason and reality, as well as the scope and limits of political philosophy. In addition, we will look at Hegel's inaugural lecture at the University of Berlin from 22nd October 1818, and a letter that Hegel wrote to the University of Berlin before he was appointed there, in which he expresses his views on teaching philosophy at a university.

Required readings: G.W.F. Hegel: *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1820), preface ("Vorrede").

Additional readings: G.W.F. Hegel: "Über den Vortrag der Philosophie auf Universitäten" (letter to Raumer, 1816); "Berliner Antrittsrede" (1818).

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentations about the readings; class discussion. Additional readings are to be jointly prepared by small groups of students.

Week 9: Marx's view of philosophy

Content/topic: Karl Marx (1818–1883) studied Law at the University of Berlin from 1836 till 1841, shortly after Hegel's death. We will read a famous essay by the young Marx, which presents itself as a criticism of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, and in which Marx expresses his own view of philosophy, especially with respect to its revolutionary potential: Marx characterizes philosophy as a political weapon. In addition, we will watch Episode 1 of the Chinese TV show *The Leader* (2019), in which Marx is depicted as a young, enthusiastic student of Hegel's philosophy at the University of Berlin.

Required readings: Karl Marx: "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie, Einleitung" (1843/44).

Additional readings: Episode 1 of the Chinese TV show *The Leader* (2019, available on YouTube).

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentations about the readings; class discussion. Additional readings are to be jointly prepared by small groups of students.

Week 10: Heine's review of German philosophy

Content/topic: We will read the entire (but relatively short) book *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* by Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), in which the Berlin-based poet and philosopher draws an amusing and polemic, but insightful picture of German philosophy from Luther to Hegel. In particular, Heine draws analogies between the development of classical German philosophy and the French Revolution. We will further compare Heine's view on philosophical revolution to that of Marx.

Required readings: Heinrich Heine: *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1834). (Note: This text should be presented by at least two students.)

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentation about the assigned readings; class discussion.

(Note: Presentations about the women in the background of Heine's book – namely, Madame de Stael, Madame du Devant, and Rahel Varnhagen, are very welcome, too.)

Week 11: Second excursion.

Content/topic: Our second sightseeing tour through Berlin will feature a visit to the Medical Campus of Humboldt-Universität, as well as to the Dorotheenstadt Cemetery, where Berlin-based philosophers such as J.G. Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel, Herbert Marcuse, and Friedrich A. Kittler, and various Berlin-based artists in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, such as Bertolt Brecht, Helene Weigel-Brecht, Hanns Eisler, Heiner Mueller, and Gisela May, have their graves.

Group activity / assignment: All participants are asked to prepare a (very brief) presentation about one person of their own choice buried on Dorotheenstadt Cemetery.

Week 12: Schopenhauer's criticism of university philosophy.

Content/topic: We will read Schopenhauer's (1788–1860) late essay "On Philosophy at the Universities", which he wrote after he had dropped out of his teaching position at the University of Berlin. Schopenhauer's text can be read as a reversal of Kant's view of the university. While Kant had presented Philosophy as an independent, autonomous faculty to examine the State-controlled faculties of Law, Theology, and Medicine, Schopenhauer argues that philosophy is itself a State-controlled instrument when taught at universities.

Required readings: Arthur Schopenhauer: "Über Universitäts-Philosophie" (1851).

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentation about the readings; class discussion.

Week 13: Heidegger's idea of the university.

Content/topic: We will discuss the philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) inaugural address as the Rector of Freiburg University, which is entitled "The Self-Assertion of the German University". While Heidegger here expressly addresses the definition of the university and critically challenges the idea of academic freedom, this speech also paradigmatically documents Heidegger's entanglement with Nazism.

Required readings: Martin Heidegger: "Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität" (1933).

Additional readings: *Spiegel* interview with Martin Heidegger (1976).

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentations about the readings; class discussion. Additional readings can be jointly prepared by small groups of students.

Week 14: The Bologna Process (1999)

In this session, we will reflect on our previous readings and discussion results by drawing a critical comparison between the received philosophical views on the university on the one hand and the aims and decisions of the Bologna Process (1999) on the other. Specifically, the Bologna Process university reform requirement to separate teaching

from research seems to conflict with traditional philosophical views and academic practice. The course concludes with a class discussion in which participants are asked to reflect on the texts and topics discussed in this course with reference to their respective home universities and their own experiences with studying at different universities.

Required readings: "Magna Charta Universitatum" (1988); "Sorbonne declaration" (1998); "Bologna Declaration" (1999).

Group activity / assignment: Written assignment (questions about the readings) for every participant; individual or group presentations about the readings; class discussion about personal perspectives on the impact of the Bologna Process on the participants' studies.

Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 5 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 75% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- prepare and revise the classroom/online sessions
- hand in the following **assignments**:
 - written assignments on a weekly basis (answer at least 7 sets of questions about the course readings)
 - one set of minutes documenting a class meeting
 - a presentation on one of the course readings (including a short handout)
 - a final research essay ('Hausarbeit': c. 2.000 words, double-spaced, Times New Roman ft.12)

Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

Assessment Components

The final grade will be composed of

- the partial grade for the individual presentation (25 % of the entire grade), and
- the partial grade for the final research essay (75 % of the entire grade).

(Neither written assignments nor sets of minutes contribute to the grade, but they are required to receive course credit.)

Expectations & Policies

Preparation for lively discussions in the classroom: Be on time, have at least the required readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: Complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on schedule including handing over to the lecturer.

Commitment in class: Pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions (classmates', lecturers, locals engaged with on the visits).

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies (such as no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).

Attendance policy: 75% class attendance are required. Students must contact their class teachers to catch up on missed work.

Field trips: If classes involve a field trip or other external visits, these require attendance as well as appearance in time.

Your Instructor

Benjamin Wilck is a Doctoral Researcher and Adjunct Lecturer in Philosophy at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. His research specializes in History of Philosophy, Philosophy and History of Science, Philosophy of Mathematics, and Philosophy of Medicine. His teaching interests comprise Ethics, Moral Psychology, and Theory of Education. He holds an M.A. in Philosophy and Cultural Studies / Aesthetics from Humboldt-Universität. In 2017, he was a visiting research fellow at the Philosophy Department at Princeton University.

Please note that the syllabus may be subject to change.
Last update: 26th March 2021