

MAKING PARIS: A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE CAPITAL

Professor: **Andréa DELESTRADE**
Session: **June 2026**
Language of instruction: **English**
Number of hours of class: **24h**
Format: **On campus & Visits in the city**



Objective of the Course

The course combines philosophical and historical perspectives on Paris as the supposed capital of the world. Through a chronological journey through the constitution of Paris as a capital, the course actively engages students to think about what makes a city a capital, and why Paris has a special status as a sort of universal capital.

The course examines philosophical themes such as centrality, universalism, and power through historical and interactive visits of key sites of French (and Parisian) history, and a blend of documentaries and readings.

After the course, students should be able to not only understand the history of French universalism, but also to reflectively experience Paris as a city they shape through their very presence and perceptions.



Summary

Is Paris really the capital of the world? This elective course will explore how Paris has been progressively constructed, through time and space, as the place where politics, culture, and intellectual traditions are shaped, where things happen. If indeed Paris has been one of the central stages of universal history, as Hegel and Kant will have it, it has also made the centre what it is: power over people, cultures, and nature. The course will explore the constitution of Paris as a centre and the representation of French universalism through a historical perspective, while paying attention to how and what this centrality and universalism has excluded, dominated, and hidden, but also how this centrality always moves in space. The course will be as much about the city of lights as the shadows that it contains. To do so, the course is divided into four chronological themes. They start by class discussions and debates which nuance hegemonic

narratives around Paris as a 'centre'. They are followed by visits of central monuments in Parisian history. The first theme covers the constitution of Paris as the capital of France; the second theme looks into the consolidation of power in the state through the case of the Château de Versailles; the third theme explores the Louvre's central role in shaping revolutionary universalist ideas; and the fourth theme examines Paris as a contemporary capital.



Organization of the course

1. From Lutetia to Paris: How a Capital Comes to Be

The course will start by a 3-hour in-class session going over the chronology of Paris and how it interacts with European history. We will get to know each other, do a quiz on what the symbols of Paris are, and discuss what gives Paris this aura of centrality and universality. The second 3-hour session is dedicated to the visit of the Musée Carnavalet, following the chronology of the construction of Paris, from an amenable but humble antique city to the capital it is.

Reading: a short extract of Jacques Derrida's *L'Autre Cap / The Other Heading* (1992), which defines what a capital is in relation to questions of universalism.

Visit: Musée Carnavalet

2. From Paris to Versailles: The Political Capital of Europe?

From the uncertainty of the Middle Ages, we move to the consolidation of state power through Versailles. The class is structured around the relation between Paris as a capital and political power, and whether capitals always need to be political capitals in some way. Through an architectural analysis of Versailles, which we will start in class and continue in Versailles, we will work around the following research questions: how does political power entrench capitals, and where is political power: in Paris or Versailles? What was the construction of the château de Versailles about, how was it constructed, and why does it matter to think about Paris? How has the château de Versailles been used since its construction, and what makes it a political centre for Europe and the World?

Documentary: extracts from the documentary "Building Versailles", especially the section 'Promoting France' and 'War' and extracts of King Charles III's speech at the Château de Versailles on 21 September 2023.

Visit: Château de Versailles

3. From Versailles to le Louvre: Art, Power, and Revolution

This third theme explores the historical transformations of Le Louvre, first as a royal palace, then as a revolutionary project, and then as one of the universal projections of France onto the world. The class-based discussions will combine reflections on what French universalism is and how it still exercises influence today in French political thought and beyond; and will question how power comes to be projected onto artistic and political ‘stages of history’. We will put these reflections in a critical dialogue with post-colonial interventions on ‘universalism’ and how Paris has been a space which both represents universalism and undermines it. We will then go on to visit Le Louvre, by starting with the Galerie des Cinq Continents.

Reading: Françoise Vergès, "The Museum, a Battleground", in Decolonizing the Museum, 2024.

Visit: Le Louvre

4. From Le Louvre to the World: Post-colonial Paris

This final theme opens up onto questions of what Paris is, as a capital today, in its juxtapositions and its contradictions. Following from Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s interventions, we will watch short extracts of the documentary Dahomey by Mati Diop, which explores the difficulties around the restitution of the royal treasures of Benin from the Musée Quai Branly. From there, this will allow us to explore questions around the state of universality today: what makes Paris still a universal city? Is universality simply the recognition of cultural differences, or is there a little supplement that Paris has in blending cultures? How have students, in their different cultures and backgrounds, experienced Paris as a city? We will then visit the exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac on “Africa Fashion”. This will enable us to ask questions around what ‘universalism’ is, how it manifests itself in different areas of life (such as fashion), and how students and young people more generally can help shape global cities.

Documentary: Extracts from Mati Diop, Dahomey (2024), 68 minutes.

Visit: Musée Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac



Requirements for validation

- **Midterm:** blog on an art piece, object, or aspect of the museum visited that the students found representative (and justifying why) of the image of Paris as the capital of the world, and discussing how such a claim can be nuanced, affirmed, or rejected.
- **Final assessment:** Second blog (that we will compile at the end of the course to make up a summer school journal) which comes in the form of a critical

reflection on students' experience of Paris. Students will be asked to reflect on how their background and interests have intersected with their experience of the city, and how this experience ties into broader historical, geographical, and political questions that we have explored throughout the course.

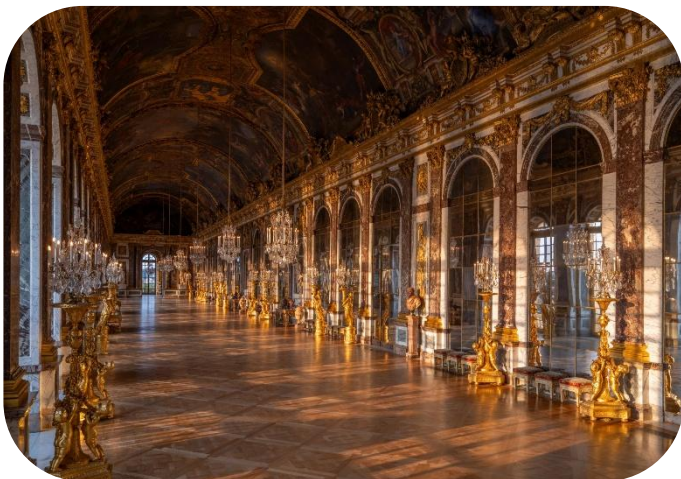


Professor's Biography

Andréa Delestrade is a final-year PhD candidate at the European Institute, London School of Economics (LSE). Her research explores the term 'Europe' as a critical yet contested concept in philosophy. In particular, she is interested in the question of philosophical Eurocentrism, of how Europe comes to understand as a universal culture, and the tensions that emerge from this self-understanding, especially through the colonial, racial, and sexual exclusions that they produce. She has taught extensively on political philosophy and the history of political thought, and her research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals.



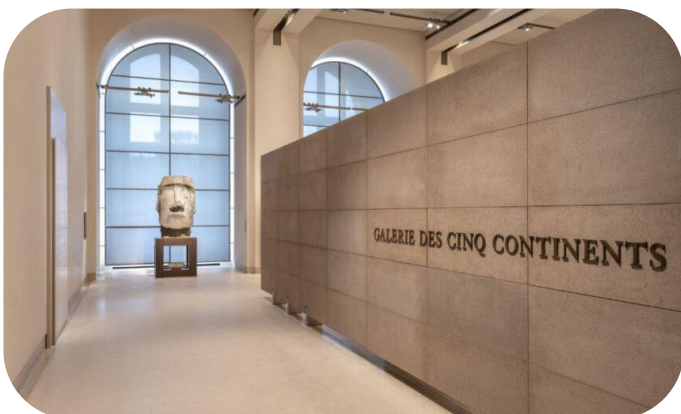
Visits



Château de Versailles



Musée Carnavalet



Le Louvre



Musée Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac