



FREN 370GM: Equality and Difference Around the Enlightenment

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The French Revolution of 1789 famously brought about remarkable socio-political changes in Western societies by putting an end to absolutism, feudalism, and aristocratic privileges. Some of its most important achievements are clearly proclaimed in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, which stated unambiguously that ‘men are born and remain free’, and laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern democracies by recognising the existence of universal, unalienable rights and freedoms such as the right to self-determination, freedom of thought and of expression, freedom from unjust detention, the right to property, and the right to resist unjust authority. Crucially, the *Declaration* also put forward social equality as a fundamental principle of the newly-established political system and prescribed that ‘social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good’.

While undeniably important, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* is in fact the culmination of fascinating intellectual debates taking place across eighteenth-century France over several decades. In this course, we shall be looking at texts by Beaumarchais, Condorcet, d’Eon, de Gouges, d’Holbach, Diderot, Du Châtelet, Graffigny, Louverture, Marivaux, Meslier, Morelly, Rousseau, and Voltaire to understand how eighteenth-century authors envisioned social, gender, racial, religious, and political equality and how their views on the topic could still be combined with a recognition (even an exaltation) of human diversity. The course is designed to allow students to understand the impact of eighteenth-century debates on contemporary concepts of identity, citizenship, and social justice, and will reflect on the many ways in which eighteenth-century views continue to influence and even to define our modern ideas about the duties we owe to one another as humans and as citizens, the right of any given individual to have or pursue “the good life”, and the nature of justice in a diverse and globalized world.