This course examines a deceptively simple question: “Is feminism a modern problematic?” At one level, the answer is obviously yes. But more critically, construing “the modern” itself as central to the question, we might ask: to what extent does what we now call “feminism” lean upon a series of “modern” antinomies, paradoxes, and contradictions that not only radically transformed, but indeed may have actually created “Europe,” simultaneously in relation to itself and to the rest of the world? Moreover, does this particular geo-political legacy inform the domain “contemporary feminist theory”? And, if so, how? In order to meditate upon these questions, we will consider an archive of mostly European texts, written over the last three hundred years, which actively inform “modern personhood.” Our readings of these texts will try to glean how “gender,” “sex,” and “sexuality” emerge throughout this period as salient “differences” that cut across and inflect these powerful new incarnations of “the human.”

The project of this class is at once historical and philosophical; or, to be more precise, it is “genealogical.” Genealogy refers to an interpretive process inaugurated by Friedrich Nietzsche and adapted by Michel Foucault, which Foucault famously described as a “history of the present.” For Foucault, genealogy considers the past as an immediacy whose immanence in the present derives neither from its inevitability nor its determinacy. Rather genealogy understands that the presentation of the past, i.e., the actualization of “past-ness” in and as “present-ness,” emerges from fragmentary and often random convergences whose accreted effects nonetheless confront us as “true,” if not “real.” Such genealogical endeavors seek to uncover the chance combinations and conjunctions, intersections and collisions, productive coalescings and violent rendings that give rise to the ways we live now. Genealogy’s basic premise holds that the world is much more virtual and much more mutable than it often (re)presents itself. In genealogy we seek to disclose contingencies secreted within phenomena which offer themselves to us as essential dimensions of our world. Through this disclosure, genealogy hopes that we might glimpse instabilities where we all too often see inevitabilities, that we might imagine possibilities where we resign ourselves to necessities, and thus that we might learn to think and live otherwise than we imagined possible heretofore. This course’s genealogical undertaking, then, will attempt to divulge some of the contingent ways of thinking and knowing embedded both in “feminism” and “feminist theory.”