Approaches to Pierre Rosanvallon
Alhelí de María Alvarado-Díaz
Critical Theory and the Arts, School of Visual Arts
Approaches to Pierre Rosanvallon: Description

Approaches to Pierre Rosanvallon will present and examine the work of historian and political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon as well as the ongoing relevance of his lucid and polemical claims on the state of democracy. Focusing on his 2011 work La société des égaux (Seuil, 2011; Society of Equals, Harvard University Press, 2013), we will explore the recurrent dilemmas in the theory and practice of equality from the days of the French Revolution to the 21st century. The seminar will begin with a genealogical exposition of Pierre Rosanvallon’s intellectual trajectory, connecting his early studies with political philosopher Claude Lefort and his militancy in post 1968 French syndicalist milieu to the development of his theories on democracy. The following sessions will dissect and problematize the central arguments in Rosanvallon’s history of democracy. Students will have the opportunity to understand Rosanvallon’s greater intellectual agenda through careful reading of selected chapters from Society of Equals, as well as through close analysis of primary sources, relevant to his work. The seminar will conclude with students’ submission of a short critical response to one of the assigned readings, attempting to elucidate the importance of Rosanvallon’s reinterpretation of democracy for civilians today in both Western and non-Western cultures, as well as the shortcomings of his historical and politico-theoretical narrative.

Reading Program

December 1: Equality – Theory vs. Practice

December 8: Democracy & the Egalitarian Revolution - Utopia and Conflict
*Abbé Sièyes, “What is the Third Estate”
*1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man

December 15: Paradoxes of Democratic Life: Is Equality Real?
*Tocqueville, “How Equality Suggests to the Americans the Indefinite Perfectibility of Man”; “How Democracy Affects the Relationship of Masters and Servants”
*Pierre Rosanvallon, “From the Past to the Future of Democracy”, Democracy: Past and Future