This course explores how the Epicurean notion of matter as the fundamental substance in nature was re-discovered in the eighteenth-century by the French Enlightenment thinkers La Mettrie, Helvétius, Diderot, D’Holbach, and Destutt de Tracy. The French interpretation of materialism – especially its anti-Christian and atheistic components – was further advanced in the early nineteenth century in Germany by Bauer and Feuerbach, before being critically transformed by Marx and Engels into what we know today as ‘materialist’ thought. Starting from Cartesian rational doubt, the French Enlightenment thinkers radically combined Epicurean natural philosophy with a Humean anthropology of human interests and desires, a Hobbesian view of mechanistic utility, and a Lockean notion of a mortal soul without spiritual substance or Providence. The second half of this course will discuss many French texts written by historians, philosophers, and even theologians on this subject, many of which have not yet been translated into English.

Reading List:


