“And all again in the name of freedom! I tell you that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born...Did you forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.”

- Ivan Karamazov to Alyosha Karamazov

*The Brothers Karamazov* (Part II, Book V, Chapter IV – *The Grand Inquisitor*)
SLAV 1370
Deep Thoughts Versus Big Data: Dostoevsky’s Underground Man in the 21st Century

Class Meetings:
Daily from Wednesday, January 2, 2019 through Friday, January 18, 2019, including weekends. Daily schedule TBA, but we will meet in the late afternoon into early evening during the week and late morning into early afternoon on the weekends.

Instructor:
Christopher Carr, PhD
christopher_carr@brown.edu

Course Description:
A response to the influx of both European rationalist and utopian tendencies into Russia, Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky examines the plight of the underground man, an overly-conscious individual who struggles to understand his identity and to maintain free will in the midst of his confrontation with a society that rewards conformity and adherence to the maxim that “twice two always equals four.” Notes is a seminal text for Dostoevsky’s thought from which his more famous novels, such as Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, were spawned.

We will begin our seminar-style Wintersession course by discussing the philosophy of the underground man in the context of Russian society in the mid-nineteenth century (no prior knowledge of Russian literature, history, culture, or language is required). Themes such as the nature of freedom, disobedience, technology, utopia, and love will emerge from our personal readings, class discussions, student presentations, writing workshops, and creative as well as analytical assignments. We will also read Dostoevsky’s short story “Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” his famous chapter from The Brothers Karamazov entitled “The Grand Inquisitor,” and excerpts from Russian dystopian texts of the 1920s as possible, yet still-problematic solutions to the underground man’s plight. We will then turn to a collection of twentieth- and twenty-first century texts to further investigate the nature of freedom and aforementioned themes, especially as our social interactions increasingly occur on computer screens rather than in person. Various twentieth-century responses to the problem of freedom—including Martin Luther King, Jr., Albert Camus, James Baldwin, Carl Jung, and more recent articles on the effects of technology on humans and society—will also be considered, as students will apply the themes of Notes to their lives today.

All readings will be done in English. There are no prerequisites, and no prior knowledge of Russian literature or culture is required. Because of the intensive nature and short time period of our courses, we will meet on weekends for longer sessions that we will spend partially in discussion, screening films, participating in writing workshops, and developing individual projects through writing, of which there will be a fair amount in this WRIT-designated course. I like to consider this course a type of “Freedom Lab” in which students will absorb the philosophical and intellectual underpinnings of the course and then use this foundation to shed new light on our contemporary lives. This is not a lecture course, so your full and active
participation is required as we deepen our individual and collective inquiries into arguably the most pressing existential question that we face.

**Course Goals and Objectives:**
Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:
- Analyze *Notes from Underground* as a critique of the age of criticism and of Russia’s penchant for adopting Western philosophies and institutions.
- Interpret Dostoevsky’s characters as expressions of his views on how life should be lived in light of what tormented him most “the fact that the existence of God cannot be proven rationally.”
- Develop oral and written skills in analyzing literary works through class discussion, oral presentations, short response papers, and a final assignment that will consist of two parts (an academic essay and a creative work of the student’s choosing).
- Better understand the historical foundations of Russia’s complicated answer to its East-West question, which still guide Russia’s actions in today’s geopolitical arena.
- Utilize themes from the novella to investigate social, political, and technological trends and movements in our lives today.

**Students will reach 180 total hours of work as follows:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact hours</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-Course Assignments</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection Papers</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily Journal</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>In-Class Presentation</td>
<td>5 prep</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Project</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Meetings</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Film Screenings</td>
<td>10</td>
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**Required Texts:**
Additional reading assignments TBA

**Assignments and Grading:**
Weekly response papers: 25%
Participation: 30%
Presentation: 10%
Creative Project: 10%
Final Paper (5-7 pages): 25%

**Daily Schedule of Readings and Assignments:** TBA
Assignments and Grading, Explained:
This is a WRIT-designated course, so we will write a lot during our time together.

Weekly response papers: Each week, you will compose 2-3 pages responding (not summarizing) to the readings and class discussion of that week. These will essentially involve close readings of the text and will focus on a topic of interest to you. The goal of the weekly response paper is to get you thinking and writing about possible topics that you may want to develop for your final paper and project.

Daily Journal: In order to better understand the Underground Man, I will ask that you become one yourself! (At least temporarily.) You will keep a separate notebook exclusively for this, and you will write a daily entry in your journal. This will occur at the beginning of each class period and will often be prompted by a quote or an idea from the text. It is important to our experiment that this be written by hand.

Participation: Includes two components: attendance and participation in class discussions. Due to the intensive nature of this course, please be sure to attend all sessions. Our meetings will be run like a seminar, so frequent, active participation is crucial to your ability to achieve the expectations set for this course. This is not a lecture course. The topics we will be discussing are very complex, so engagement with your fellow classmates and with me will help you to attain a more comprehensive view of the art of one of the world’s greatest thinkers, as well as a richer perspective on our lives today.

If you must miss class, please inform me prior to that class. More than one unexcused absence will result in your receiving an “NC.” Please arrive on time to class. If you are late three times, it will count as one absence. The use of cell phones and laptops will not be allowed during class.

Presentation: When we will begin the presentations and how many there will be each day will be determined by the number of students in the class. Presentations will be approximately 10 minutes long.

Final Paper (5-7 pages): This will be an analytical paper on a topic of your choice. It must be in some way grounded in one aspect of Notes from Underground. You will compose a well-organized, thesis-centered essay that is thoroughly supported with evidence. Your formal paper topics should be connected to one aspect of Dostoevsky’s thought that you have encountered during the course. You should choose topics in which you are interested and should look to your weekly response papers and/or class presentation as possible foundations for your formal writing. Grading rubrics for each paper will be provided at a later date, and aspects of the writing process will be covered in class or by appointment as needed. First drafts will be workshoped in small groups, and I will meet with you individually to provide feedback on your writing.

Creative Project: Aligned with the idea of this course as “Freedom Lab,” students will produce a more informal, creative piece responding to Notes from Underground. It can be a work of the student’s choice and can involve any medium. Essentially, students will have the opportunity to create an artistic representation of the Underground Man in today’s world. We will work on this assignment during the first weekend of the course.