What was the relationship between the rise of democracy and the institution of chattel slavery in the United States and the broader Atlantic world? Great Britain, France, and the United States all played central roles in the intellectual and political development of democracy; all maintained extensive systems of bonded slavery either in their colonies or at home. Historians have often struggled to explain the seemingly contradictory relationship between these facts: did democracy “need” slavery to develop? Or was it the development of democracy that finally ended the ancient institution of slavery?

The Somerset Decision that abolished slavery in Great Britain and the Golden Law that ended it in Brazil were separated by just a little more than one hundred years. In that time period, major revolutions and civil wars upended the political order in the United States, Haiti, British colonies, France, and Latin America. Contradictions abounded. In the new United States, in particular, a growing democratic ethos went hand in hand with a massive expansion of chattel slavery and popular and scientific racism. Then a Civil War understood, in part, as a war to defend democracy’s promise ended the institution. European powers—most notably Great Britain—sometimes justified imperialism in Africa and Asia under the banner of abolitionism.

This class will introduce students to questions about the relationship between the rise and fall of Atlantic slavery, the spread of liberalism and democracy, and the rise of capitalist production in the Atlantic economy during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. It will not be a comprehensive course on any of those topics, but will instead introduce these questions as problems of historical interpretation, leaving students an opportunity to craft their own arguments.

The class will provide students with the opportunity to write their own junior paper on a topic related to slavery, abolition, the rise of democracy, or any related theme. Students will be encouraged to look closely at how these questions played out in a specific location, in the thought of individual people, or during a given event.

Sample readings:
Robin Blackburn: *The American Crucible*
Laurent Dubois: *Colony of Citizens*
Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*
Seymour Drescher: *Abolition*
Manisha Sinha: *The Slave’s Cause*