

Fall 2012  
English 503: Theories of History, Ideology and Politics  
Section 32772  
4:30-6:50 Monday, THH 121  
Anthony Kemp



This is a course in the theories of human culture that have developed from the enlightenment to the present. The last third of the course, approximately, will deal with what is usually thought of as postmodern theory; the first two thirds will analyze the foundational modern theories of the meaning of culture, without a knowledge of which, I believe, the postmodern is incomprehensible.

The modern is distinguished by the conjunction of three unprecedented modes of thought: the historicist, the ideological, and the revolutionary.

Historicism sees the world—biological and social—not as a system that is, but as an onward rush of becoming. No object can be known or described in its current state, but can only be understood through the historical conditions and process of its emergence. A sub-species of historicism is the genealogical method: the true meaning of an institution, idea or condition is found in its origin, its archae; the task of the genealogist is to retrace the process of becoming to its root, which, when known, will reveal a real meaning behind and beneath the apparent contemporary meaning. The ultimate aim of historicism is to arrive at a totalizing theory that comprehends the universal process of becoming, from which no particularity can escape, that can predict the

necessary shape of the future.

Ideological thought posits that the conscious and semi-conscious idea-systems of a society are manifestations of false-consciousness. Commonly-accepted ideas are lies that provide a covering, concealing, mystifying, containing screen (the matrix) that conceals the reality of social relations. Ideas exist in order to serve privileged, exploitative interests of material and economic power.

The revolutionary mode of political thought brings into consciousness a profound suspicion of the existent social world, and a more-or-less constant theory and practice of revolution as the necessary telos of history. The revolutions called for are either egalitarian (Marx) or elitist (Nietzsche).

The conjunction of these three can be said to constitute the master-narrative of the modern; they form the categorical base of its philosophy, its psychology, its literary and artistic representations. They determine its demystifying hermeneutic dichotomies of surface and depth, manifest and latent. This convergence of historicism, ideology, and revolutionary politics is what the modern, in all its aspects, is fundamentally about.

We will begin with the project of the Enlightenment, and with Rousseau's genealogies of the social and of inequality, and go on to look at their political materialization in the French Revolution. We will examine the development of the genealogical hermeneutic in Marx's attack on idealism, in Nietzsche's attack on the ethics of pity, and in Freud's excavation of the unconscious. We will examine structuralism (in both linguistics and ethnology), and situationism. Finally, we will follow postmodernist ramifications of all these theories to the present situation. I would like to use student reports to bring in more peripheral areas to the central core of texts and discussion.

So, yes, there are a lot of abstract terms here, but I promise that it will all make sense, and be fun. If you've ever been baffled by "theory," then this is your guide for the perplexed.

Texts:

Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*

Schama, *Citizens*

Marx, *The German Ideology, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*

Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals, The Twilight of the Idols, The Antichrist, "Truth and Falsity in an Ultra-Moral Sense"*

Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents, Dora*

Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*

Lacan, *Ecrits*

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Nicholson, *The Second Wave*

Jameson, *Postmodernism*

Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*



Schedule:

August

27: Introduction: Enlightenment, Bacon, Condillac, Holbach

September

10: Rousseau, Schama

17: Marx, Engels

24: Nietzsche

October

1: Freud

8: Levi-Strauss

15: Althusser

22: Lacan

29: Foucault

November

5: Debord

12: Nicholson

19: Jameson

26: Catch up session. We'll be way behind by now.

December

3: Weil



Photographs:

1. Class Photograph, Realschule, Linz, Austria, c. 1904.
2. Studio of Jules Bonnet, Lucerne, Switzerland, 1882: Nietzsche, Paul Ree, Lou Salome (with the whip). Nietzsche staged the photograph to show that he and Ree were both her slaves.
3. Mugshot, Simone Weil.