HIS 201: Modernity and its Discontents:
European Thought and Culture from Fin de Siècle to World War II

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Spring 2020

Course description:

How do we come to grips with ourselves in a world where the pace of change erodes the ground beneath our feet, where value systems corrode, and, as Marx observed, “all that is solid melts into air?” This course explores how modernity has been a source of both dread and inspiration for European artists and intellectuals in the last two centuries. We will investigate how they confronted a secular world defined by capitalism, mass politics, and a sense of looming catastrophe—and in doing so, managed to create some of the most brilliant and enduring works of philosophy, literature, and art.

We will proceed chronologically and thematically, starting with Marx’s diagnosis of alienation under capitalism and following the echoes of his socialist critique in William Morris and Oscar Wilde. We then move on to Nietzsche and his project of the revaluation of values, which inspired twentieth-century cries for the overcoming of decadence and the creation of a ‘new man.’ We’ll track these themes in Andre Gide’s aestheticist novel *The Immoralist* as well as in the manifestos of the artistic Avant-Garde and the proliferation of movements like Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. Having crossed the trenches of WWI, we’ll confront two grim diagnoses in Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* and José Ortega y Gasset’s *Revolt of the Masses*. Finally, we’ll see how three interwar novelists responded to different aspects of the changing face of European modernity: Virginia Woolf’s breathtaking attempt to capture the truth of subjective experience in *To the Lighthouse*, Joseph Roth’s elegy for the vanished world of Old Europe in *The Radetzsky March*, and Arthur Koestler’s unflinching portrayal of the logic of the modern totalitarian state in *Darkness at Noon*.

Join us for the flowering of European thought, literature, and art amid the discontents of modernity, and plan to come away feeling more at home in your alienation, with a greater sense of solidarity in your despair!
Seminar Schedule and Readings:

Week 1: Work and Capitalism
-Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor”
-William Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil”
-Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism”

Week 2: Nietzsche and the Revaluation of Values
-Friedrich Nietzsche, selections from Genealogy of Morals, Birth of Tragedy, Gay Science

Week 3: Decadence and Aestheticism
-J.K. Huysmans, Against Nature (excerpt)
-André Gide, The Immoralist
+ Moreau paintings and Beardsley drawings,

Week 4: World War I and the Artistic Avant-Garde
-Art Manifestos: Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism

Week 5: Sex, Death, and the Future of Civilization
-Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

Week 6: Modern Consciousness and the Modern Novel [with guest lecturer Jeremy Sabol]
-Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Week 7: Identity and the Burden of the Past
-Ortega y Gasset, Revolt of the Masses
-Aime Cesaire, Notebook of a Return to a Native Land (excerpt)

Week 8: Old World Nostalgia
Joseph Roth, The Radetzky March
(+ one article from What I Saw: Reports from Berlin)

--MEMORIAL DAY: NO CLASS--

Week 9: Totalitarianism
-Koestler, Darkness at Noon

ASSIGNMENTS:
At the end of the quarter, students will be required to write a 5-6 pg analytical paper comparing two texts from the course readings, according to a topic of their own choosing.