

HISTORY 3923-401: TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPEAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Spring 2025

Mon/Wednesday 10:15-11:44

Location TBA

WARREN BRECKMAN

206E College Hall

215-898-8518

breckman@sas.upenn.edu

Office hours Monday 1:00-3:00, or by Appointment

The decades from roughly 1870 to 1950 were years of great upheaval and crisis, yet despite or perhaps because of that turmoil, they were also years of great innovation. The age witnessed a dizzying array of new technologies and consumer goods, a second ‘industrial revolution’, and explosive growth of cities. At the beginning of this period, contemporaries began to speak of ‘mass societies’ in acknowledgement of new scales of population, popular entertainments and sources of information but also in recognition that the masses exerted unprecedented influence on the course of modern society. Accordingly, it was also the first age of ‘mass politics’, marked by expanding circles of political involvement in societies that were haltingly and imperfectly moving toward fuller forms of democratic governance. For acute observers of the period, it was not clear whether the conditions of mass society produced greater conformity or deepening fragmentation of traditional forms of social solidarity. And for almost all Europeans of these years, there was a sense that the modern world was accelerating, accelerating in the tempo of change, the appearance of novelties, and even the speed of everyday life. Though the period had more than its share of cataclysmic events, there was a presiding sense that monumental change was no longer the preserve of moments of great rupture but was the very condition of modern life.

These social, political and emotional dimensions found expression – directly and indirectly – in the various currents of intellectual and cultural life that we will explore in this course. Sigmund Freud plumbed the depths of the human self in ways that reflected both the modern yearning for individual autonomy and the undertow of limits and constraints at the heart of the self; Friedrich Nietzsche struggled against the nihilism that he discerned at the heart of the modern world; existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus explored the full consequences of Nietzsche’s pronouncement, “God is dead,” and find a viable art of living in the face of that cosmic emptiness. Intellectuals registered the trauma of great catastrophes, such as World War One; they responded to and in some ways shaped the great political movements of the age, from socialism to fascism to communism. And they wrestled with the very role of the intellectual’s vocation, his or her commitment to reason in both the most intimate spheres of personal life and in the largest domains of our communal existence.

Relying mainly on primary readings as well as a limited number of scholarly works, we will explore some of the great figures and intellectual currents of modern Europe as well as the political ideologies that for better or worse emerged in what Eric Hobsbawm once called the ‘age of extremes’.

This course is open to all students. There are no prerequisites.

Structure of the Course:

In accordance with Penn’s current guidelines, this course will meet in person and have no regular virtual component. If the guidelines change, then we will make necessary adjustments. Masks are optional in the classroom.

Occasionally, I may post brief recorded elements to complement our regular classroom sessions.

We will use Canvas for class communication and distribution of assignment prompts and supplementary course readings.

Please use **Course Action Notices** to officially document absences.

Keeping on top of the reading material and engaging actively in your learning are essential to your success in the course. The same goes for attendance and participation in our sessions.

Needless to say, in this and every course, you should view your professor as a resource in both good times and bad. I’m committed to helping you have as successful and rich a semester as possible!

Appropriate Use of Recordings and Other Online Content:

Your use of any recordings generated in this course is limited to this class, meaning you should not share these recordings with anyone outside the class or otherwise reproduce their content. This policy exists to ensure the confidentiality of our classroom discussion and thereby facilitate the free exchange of ideas. It also honors the creativity and labor that I invested in creating course content.

For the same reasons, I ask that you not copy or distribute the content of any material from our Canvas site.

Course Requirements:

Dialogue	15%
Mid-Term Exam	30%
Final Exam	40%
Participation	15%

**PLEASE SUBMIT ALL ASSIGNMENTS TO CANVAS AND TO MY EMAIL ADDRESS.
PLEASE DO NOT SUBMIT ANY WORK IN PDF FORM!**

Mid-Term Exam

You will choose one from several questions and write a 5-page paper on it. These are really more prompts than questions. There is no single right answer, but rather numerous possible directions. Typically, such questions will ask you to consider a certain problem or theme from the perspective of two of the figures (or movements) we have discussed. Be sure to touch on all aspects of the question. The mid-term will be distributed on Wednesday, Feb 26. **The mid-term is due on Friday, Feb 28, by 5 PM.**

Dialogue

Since at least Plato, one of the most important genres of writing philosophy is the dialogue. Such dialogues are usually fictionalized. They may stage a pedagogical encounter between a teacher and a student (think Socrates) or they may imagine an encounter between different schools of thought (think David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*). Because such dialogues are almost always the product of a single author, they are rarely a true encounter; rather, they tend in one direction or another, depending on the author's preferences. In your dialogues, I want you to do some role-playing. Two of you (or three, if our numbers are odd) will pair off and each of you will channel a figure from our readings. Imagine Nietzsche drinking tea with Emile Zola; Sigmund Freud encountering Nietzsche; Lenin and Bernstein at the tavern together; Zola and Huysmans at the Philomathean Society. You get the idea. Unlike the mid-term and final exams, the writing can be informal, echoing the cadences and forms of real speech. The dialogue should be around 5 pages double-spaced (8 pages if there are three participants). Alternatively, you could deliver a **recording**. (NOTE: Script your ideas: 40-45 words fill 20 seconds of presentation (which translates into 120-135 words per minute.) **The Dialogue is due on Friday, April 18 by end of day.**

Final Exam

The final exam will have two parts. In the first part, you will choose one from several questions and write a 5-page paper on it. The format is the same as with the mid-term. Your paper should be 5 pages. The second part will involve somewhat more focused questions, from which you will choose one. The questions will ask you to compare and contrast two figures. This paper should be 3 pages. The final will be distributed on Friday, May 2, by 10 AM. **It is due on Monday May 5, no later than 5 pm.**

Participation

Physical attendance at each lecture is mandatory. There will be no hybrid format. If you cannot attend a *specific* session, please notify me with a reasonable explanation **in advance** of the class. Participation includes regular, active contributions to discussion. Good participation can include responding to questions I pose, asking questions yourself, and weighing in on discussions. Needless to say, a key to strong performance is staying on top of the reading. Try to engage the reading critically, making note of questions and, just as importantly, your insights into themes and connections.

Note: Most of the assigned reading in this course is primary. Lectures will provide information about the social and political context of these figures, as well as interpretations of the texts. You cannot do well in the exams if you do not attend lectures.

Course Materials:

The following books are available for purchase in paperback at the Penn Bookstore:

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*

Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Charles Guignon, ed. *Existentialism: Basic Writings*

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Albert Camus, *The Fall*

Most of the above books are easily available through used book websites

They are also available in the Van Pelt Reserve Library

* All other readings will be posted at the Canvas site *

Reading Assignments:

Jan 15 Introduction

Jan 20 Martin Luther King Day

Jan 22 Positivism, Materialism, Progress

This session will pursue two aims. First, we will discuss some of the broad currents of thought and society in the nineteenth century in order to ensure some common background knowledge as we move forward chronologically. Second, we will look at two brief texts that provide excellent examples of the positivist, naturalist outlook that had become quite prevalent by the 1860s. While naturalism predates Darwin, the naturalism on display in these two texts is shaped by a Darwinist view.

Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon, "Introduction," *Cambridge History of Modern European Thought, Vol I: The Nineteenth Century*, 1-16; T.H. Huxley, "On the Physical Basis of Life" 223-225; Rudolf Virchow, "The Task of the Natural Sciences," 80-89

Jan 27 Positivism in European Culture: Literary Naturalism

Naturalism, understood as the philosophical position that there is nothing beyond, outside, above or below nature (ie, no realm of mystery, transcendence or divinity), is not identical with literary naturalism but the two impulses share many deep affinities. This was never more true than in the manifesto written by the great French novelist Émile Zola, "The Experimental Novel." Fortunately, Zola's novels do *not* follow the strictures of this manifesto, but it nonetheless affords a great view of the intersections of positivism, naturalism, and cultural production. How does Zola weld natural science and

fiction writing together? What motivates this effort? Do you see contradictions and pitfalls?

Emile Zola, "The Experimental Novel"

Jan 29-Feb 3 Against Naturalism: Bohemians, Dandies, and Decadents

Even in his own time, the naturalism championed by Émile Zola was by no means accepted by everyone. Indeed, even though many acknowledged the prestige and achievements of science and technology, there was resistance to the effort to extend this view into the realm of art. On one side, bourgeois idealists insisted that art should be beautiful and morally elevating. On the other side were champions of an art that plumbed uncharted depths and explored the extremes of experience and desire. In the 1870s, this impulse coalesced in the Decadent movement centered in Paris. While the term 'decadence' began as an insult thrown by a hostile critic, the Decadents embraced it. Ultimately, for them, it was the epoch that was decadent and they were but the sensitive barometer registering this crisis. While decadent literature is full of provocations and sometimes histrionic excesses, it also signals a crisis in the value system of the bourgeois century.

Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life"; Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*

Feb 5-12 A Revaluation of Values: Nietzsche on Morality

In *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche asked, "Symptoms of decadence?" "I myself" was his conclusion to a long list of literary and cultural instances of decadence. Like the French Decadents, Nietzsche believed his culture had entered a phase of morbid crisis. Yet, in the end, Nietzsche pursued a different path. Where the Decadents chose to retreat into private domains of taste and experience, Nietzsche sought a way beyond the nihilism that he believed lay at the core of modern society. Attacking the shibboleths of nineteenth-century culture, Nietzsche asked provocative questions. What is the value of truth? What is the value of values? Do old answers to these questions aid or obstruct our efforts to find a new path?

Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*

Feb 17-24 The Birth of Psychoanalysis

While Nietzsche's influence on modern culture is enormous, arguably Freud's impact is even greater. Though Freud's standing has suffered blows over the decades, psychoanalysis as a clinical practice, a theory of human nature and a catalogue of terms, concepts and categories has indelibly shaped modern intellectual life and even popular culture. Freud's theories continued to evolve right up to his death in 1939, but by 1905 he had developed the core framework and terminology of psychoanalysis. Why was the model he advanced scandalous for so many of his (and our) contemporaries? Conversely, what might have been its appeal to many others? Is psychoanalysis a rupture or a continuation of the positivistic/naturalistic view? How does it stack up as a "science"? Insofar as "Dora" presents an early psychoanalytic case-study what do you make of it?

Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," 129-142; "On Dreams," 142-172; "Dora," 172-239

Feb 26 Catch Up and Review

The Mid-Term Exam will be posted on Wednesday, Feb 26, by 5 PM, and is due on Friday, Feb 28, by 5 PM

March 3 Crisis and Revisionism in Second International Socialism

Please note: This will be a Zoom session

The crisis in values that we have explored so far was mainly a 'bourgeois' crisis. Socialism in this period was going from strength to strength. Socialists could believe that history was on their side. This optimism was shaken when international socialism had to reckon with the question, "Are we revolutionaries or are we reformists?" Do we work to shatter the existing order to do we work within it? In a series of essays at the end of the 1890s, the German socialist Eduard Bernstein argued unequivocally for socialism as a reformist movement oriented toward incremental gains not a cataclysmic revolution. In turn, the so-called "revisionist controversy" brought new voices and ideas into the debate; and what might seem at first glance to be an arcane feud was in fact the beginning of the schism between democratic socialism and communism that was destined to have such a great impact upon global history in the twentieth century. What is Bernstein's criticism of 'orthodox' Marxism? How do Luxemburg and Sorel respond to Bernstein? And how do Sorel and Luxemburg differ from each other?

Eduard Bernstein, "The Manifesto of Revisionism"; Rosa Luxemburg, "Ballot Box or Mass Strike?"; Luxemburg, "Requiem for Social Democracy"; Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* [selection]

March 5 No Class

Please read: Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon, "Introduction," *Cambridge History of Modern European Thought, Vol II: The Twentieth Century*, 1-17

Write a one page report on **one** aspect of this "Introduction". Please submit it to me by email.

March 10-12 Spring Break!!!

March 17 Crisis and Revisionism in Second International Socialism (contd)

Eduard Bernstein, "The Manifesto of Revisionism"; Rosa Luxemburg, "Ballot Box or Mass Strike?"; Luxemburg, "Requiem for Social Democracy"; Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* [selection]

March 19 Intellectuals and the First World War

For all who lived through it, the First World War was a colossal catastrophe, marking a 'before' and 'after' like few other events in modern history. Emerging during a period of expanding literacy and social mixing, it was one of the most literary of wars. Like everyone else, intellectuals could not avoid the experience or the meaning of the Great War. In the selection of writing, we encounter a range of responses, from the optimism and euphoria of Rupert Brooke at the War's outset, to the embittered irony of Wilfred Owen, to Ernst Jünger's celebration of sacrifice, heroism and camaraderie, to Lenin's

link between capitalism and war and his hope that revolutionary communism could exploit the crisis of the bourgeois world.

Rupert Brooke, "Peace," "The Soldier"; Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est"; Lenin, "The Collapse of the Second International"; Lenin, "War and Revolution"; Ernst Jünger, "Fire"

March 24 Cultural Pessimism and Fascist 'Regeneration'

Is Fascism a doctrine or merely a brutal form of opportunism? Yes! We will center our attention on Italian instead of German Fascism largely because the German case is usually more familiar to American students of history. In the Italian case, we find a doctrine emerging partly out of opportunism, but also partly out of the distortion of currents of politics and thought with quite deep roots in the nineteenth century. And like its great enemy, communism, we shall see that Fascism was directly spawned in the blood of the Great War. Arguably, Fascism is the one *new* ideology to emerge in Europe in the twentieth century; offensive as its ideas are, some understanding of Fascism is essential to an understanding of European history and the resonances of Fascism in the present.

Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism"; Giovanni Gentile, "The Origins and Doctrine of Fascism"

March 26 Feminism

Among the transformative effects of World War One was the introduction of women's suffrage across most of the western world. In her youth, Virginia Woolf participated in the suffrage movement and in the late 1920s she took stock of the situation of women in English society. This time, the issue was not women's formal participation in politics, but rather their presence (or non-presence) in the cultural and literary history of England. Asking why there is no female Shakespeare, Woolf went on to construct an account that proffered a theory of writing and language, the impact of tradition on our possibilities as creative agents, the *materiality* of artistic production, and the gendering of literary voice. *A Room of One's Own* thus created a classic that was destined to have a great impact on second wave feminism.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

March 31-April 7 Existentialism: Heidegger

Heidegger is surely one of the most important European thinkers of the twentieth century and probably the century's most controversial. The controversy stems in part from the seemingly willful obscurantism of his philosophical style; but it also grows from the discrepancy of his intellectual prowess and his political choice in the early years of the Nazi regime to join the Nazi party. While some historians insist on a deep link between the philosophy and the political choice, perhaps we can draw a meaningful line between them. Or more appropriately put, perhaps our reading of Heidegger need not be imprisoned by Heidegger's *own* reading of his work. Heidegger's account of 'Being-in-the-World' opens up a new style of thinking that for all its apparent esotericism actually gives an astonishingly concrete account of human being. In doing so, Heidegger also contributes to core existentialist concerns – the finitude of our existence in time, our concern for our own being, our yearning for meaning, and the imperative to pursue an

authentic existence. Shadowing these important contributions is, inevitably, Heidegger's decision to serve as the rector of Freiburg University in 1933. We cannot ignore this stain and we must try to understand what, if any, relation exists between Heidegger the thinker and Heidegger the political actor.

Heidegger, *Being and Time* [selection in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, pp. 211-54]; Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University"; Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us. *Der Spiegel's* Interview with Martin Heidegger"

April 9-14 Existentialism from Absurdism to Engagement: Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre once insisted that existentialism is "Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position." In fact, existentialism was a far broader current than that, with roots in religious thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard as well as phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Further, at the time Sartre made this pronouncement, his atheistic brand vied with an array of self-described Christian existentialists. All this complexity notwithstanding, it is Sartre who most readily comes to mind when we think of existentialism. His 1938 novel *Nausea* charts a distressing personal crisis of meaning in the face of the unmasterable and indifferent weight of being. Hope for redemption from this crisis seem slim and fragile in the novel's concluding pages. The Second World War reshaped Sartre's thinking, turning Existentialism into a doctrine of freedom, resoluteness, and responsibility gauged to the needs of a world in ruin. This doctrine is captured in Sartre's 1946 lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," which synthesized and dramatized the findings of his philosophical masterwork *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and launched him toward global intellectual celebrity.

Sartre, *Nausea*; Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 268-287

Assignment: Dialogue is due on Friday, April 18 by end of day

April 16-21 Domination and the Legacies of European Modernity

During and after the defeat of Nazi Germany, intellectuals struggled to make sense of the catastrophe that had befallen Europe. Political commentators and historians alike looked to short and long-term factors in both German and European history; sociologists analyzed the social context of Hitler's supporters; psychologists tried to get inside Hitler's head and understand what one called 'the psychopathic God'. Philosophers, too, entered the debate. In these sessions, we examine two highly influential philosophical assessments of the catastrophe. In 1944, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the leading figures in the so-called Frankfurt School, a group of unorthodox philosophically-inclined Marxists exiled in America, published *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Their book offered a sweeping criticism of western rationality that detected at its core a drive toward mastery and domination. Yet instead of rejecting reason as some on both the Left and the Right did, Horkheimer and Adorno sought to disentangle the instrumental, domineering tendency from reason's emancipatory potential. Hannah Arendt, also in American exile, also searched for longer term explanations in her classic work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt's book is a rare synthesis of sociological, historical and political analysis mixed with an acute philosophical penetration into the moral and existential dimensions of modern existence.

Max Horkheimer, "Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment," 359-367; Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," 49-56; Hannah Arendt, "Total Domination," 119-140 and "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," 146-155;

April 23-28 Reckoning with Catastrophe: Albert Camus and the Question of Guilt

Alongside Sartre, Albert Camus was the most famous existentialist in the world. While Camus wrote well-known philosophical works like *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, he was most celebrated for his fictional work. *The Fall* was published in 1956 and along with *The Plague*, it represents Camus' deepest effort to come to grips with the collapse of European civilization. Cast in the form of an encounter between a hapless visitor to Amsterdam and a disillusioned, cynical Frenchman, the novel explores questions of guilt and complicity. Though the novel seems to teach that we all share in this calamity, a different message emerges when we set *The Fall* into dialogue with Camus' philosophical musings about humanity's struggle for meaning within an absurd universe.

Camus, *The Fall*

April 30 Catch Up and Conclusion

The Final exam will be posted on Canvas on Friday May 2 10 AM. It is due on Monday May 5, no later than 5 pm.

Students may find the following surveys of modern European intellectual history useful [on reserve at Van Pelt]:

Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon, *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, 2 volumes
Roland Stromberg, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe*
F.L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought*
John W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*

For the general history of this period, there are innumerable textbooks. For a quite detailed survey:

Felix Gilbert and D. Large, *The End of the European Era, 1890 to the Present*