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HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety
Summer 2012

This is a ...

BIG SUMMARY OF THE ENTIRE COURSE UP THUS FAR

It includes some online lecture summary material already provided.

- During the Enlightenment, nature is put at a distance so it can be rationally observed & classified (Peale museum painting).
- A corollary is that the “self”, rather than being deemed corrupted by sin or regenerated by Christ, can be secularly self-engineered, perfected without the need for God’s gracious intervention (Franklin virtue/habit chart).
- The erosion of the hierarchical Great Chain of Being plus the development of a science of government lead to egalitarianism and the theory of a natural right to equality and security of self and one’s body (Locke).
- Locke is the first ideologue for capitalism, although he himself of course had no concept of capitalism as it would emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Radical Enlightenment thinkers (Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance) embrace political egalitarianism (exemplified by the French Revolution, even at the cost of potential anarchy), gender emancipation, and the critique of all dogma.
- From Locke to Equiano: We see the emergence of a “possessive selfhood,” a self defined in terms of the delimitation (and protection) of property and a self, which by objectifying the world, gains rationalist mastery over it.
- An amazing intellectual/cultural shift occurs towards the end of the 18th century: the endorsement of individual reason and autonomy against dogma turns into an endorsement of pure psychological/spiritual interiority, and we enter into the Romantic Era. Blake, famous Romantic poet, loathes social oppression, but what he hates most is what he calls the “mind-forged manacles”!!! Paradoxically (almost) the drive towards individualism in the 18th century simultaneously fuels social critique *and* moves us towards a preoccupation with the interiorities of selfhood, detached from concerns about social oppression.
- Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley’s Frankenstein: The nineteenth century (in the West) by and large inherits the Enlightenment Era emphasis on property/inheritance (Locke) and stable selfhood. We believe that the family should be entrepreneurially free to pursue its self-interest, free from the tyranny of kings or religious enthusiasts (who would prescribe a particular theology). Bourgeois spaces, however, are critiqued in the Romantic Rebellion Era for a more profound metaphysical need (Wordsworth’s disgust with “getting and spending” and yearning for “something far more deeply interfused” or Keats’s longing to be out-of-time in his garden with the bird) or in recognition of inward/turmoiled psychology, i.e., Victor’s/the monster’s mix of love and hate, anticipating Freud.

- The next set of writers, after the Romantics, will add the new concept of evolutionary/geological “deep time” (Darwin) or a concept of social forces/relations changing over time (Marx) or layered-time/memories within (Freud). For Enlightenment writers, although there was a sense of possible perfectibility and progress, the latter was deemed less in evolutionary/dynamic terms than in the elimination of prejudice and partial perspectives, tyrannies of the mind and the social/political sphere (Paine’s loathing of all authority and dogma). Darwin and Marx and Freud all examine temporal forces that diminish what might be called human-centric pride.

- One way of seeing the development of cultural/intellectual ideas from the Enlightenment thru the end of the nineteenth century is that while theoretically our liberty seems to be increasing, in many ways we are more constrained.

--Enlightenment: gets rid of old feudal hierarchy, optimistically promotes liberty and rational knowledge.

Romanticism: continues to promote liberty, but worries that sublime/interior depth is lost in classification and encroaching industrialization (Wordsworth’s anxiety about “getting and spending”).

--Darwinianism: introduces vast time scale, shrinks humanity to a late player on the cosmic scene.

--Marxism: sees history as evolving thru vast stretches of class struggle, in which we individually have very little control; Marx frets profoundly about the alienation of workers.

--This tension between theoretical liberty and real constraint produces in the 19th Century a sequence of fictional figures of resentment: for example Romanticism’s embittered anti-heroes (Frankenstein and the monster); Dostoevsky’s anti-heroes; Thomas Hardy’s main character in Jude the Obscure (the title alone is suggestive; the novel is about an artisan whose intellectual ambitions lead to misery!). The tension also leads to philosophers who address class resentment (Marx) or the resentment, more generally, of any individual who refuses to succumb to the “herd” mentality (Nietzsche).