American Thought and Culture, 1900 to the Present

REQUIRED READING:
Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (Penguin)
F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (Scribner)
Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (Random)

FILMS:
Joseph Dorfman’s Arguing the World
Frank Capra’s Meet John Doe
Alfred Hitchcock’s Spellbound
Nicholas Ray’s Rebel without a Cause

AIMS AND THEMES: History 305 and 306 investigate the history of the ideas underlying religious, philosophical, scientific, artistic, political, social, and economic practice in the United States. The emphasis in both courses is on major thinkers and intellectual movements in their cultural contexts. Both also engage one methodological problem: How does the study of reflective and expressive thought illuminate the larger culture of the United States? They both address two historical questions as well: In light of America’s broad diversity of identity groups, how can we talk about a single American intellectual tradition? Considering the nation’s purportedly practical spirit and egalitarian ethos, how can we speak of an intellectual tradition at all?

In History 306 we will examine “modern” American thought, roughly from around the turn of the twentieth century to the present. As this period marks the rise of the United States as a world power, debates over changing conceptions of America’s international role will be one recurrent theme. Another will be the radical challenges posed by philosophical pragmatism and artistic modernism to America’s nineteenth-century inheritances of Protestant Christianity and philosophical idealism. A third theme will be the checkered fate of progressive liberalism as its adherents faced successive post-World War II shocks of ethical skepticism, New Left radicalism, and surging conservatism. In the last part of the class, we will explore how much postmodernist and poststructuralist theories in the humanities, transnationalist ideas of nationhood, and controversies over racial, ethnic, and gender identities have corroded or reconfigured the Founders’ universalist Enlightenment vision of reason, liberty, and American nationality. The required texts are all writings by thinkers at the time. They will include discursive
documents such as books and essays as well as a small sampling of twentieth-century novels and films.

READING: All required books are available at the BU Barnes and Noble bookstore or can be purchased online from various booksellers. For an overview of American intellectual history, students might find it useful to consult a standard survey such as Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America* (1989).

“FILMS OF AMERICAN IDEAS”: Viewing the films listed on the syllabus is required. Screenings will be scheduled at the Geddes Language Center at 685 Commonwealth Ave., 5th Floor at times to be announced. Films will also be available for individual viewing at the reserve desk of the Center.

DISCUSSIONS: In order to make lectures maximally comprehensible and discussions possible, reading assignments and film screenings must be done before the date for the topic and reading indicated on the syllabus. Discussions will be emphasized on certain dates, but questions and comments are encouraged throughout the term.

SHORT PAPERS: Each student will be required to write two 4-5 page papers analyzing the ideas addressed in all the required reading for a particular day. Remember that your object is not just to paraphrase the readings but to analyze them—i.e., pick out the main arguments or themes presented or inferred, evaluate how they are supported, and estimate how they fit or not into topics or movements we have discussed in the course so far. If you choose a day when multiple documents are assigned, you should be sure to compare them in your analysis. The first paper can be on any required reading assignment through Mar. 7 and should be turned in no later than the beginning of class on the day the assignment is scheduled to be discussed. The second short paper can be on any assignment from Mar. 17 through Apr. 25 and will likewise be due in class on the day the document(s) are discussed.

TERM PAPER: This paper is an essay of 10 pages on a single book by an American thinker. It should address the question, “What marks this book as a product of its intellectual time?” You may choose any book by an American author listed in the “Chronologies” sections of *AIT2* with four qualifications: 1.) The book must not include a selection from the required reading. (You may choose a different book by the author.) 2.) The first publication date of your book should be between about 1900 and 1980. 3.) Before selecting it, you should get my approval either in person or by email. 4.) If you want to write on a novel, you need to consult me about its suitability for the course.

In making a preliminary assessment of possible books, you might find it helpful to consult a dictionary of American thinkers and ideas, such as Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg’s *Companion to American Thought* (1995). The focus of your paper should not be on the author’s biography but on his or her ideas. You should not try to fit your book into the history of particular social and political events of its era, although you may allude to them. Rather you should select a central intellectual problem, question, theme, or movement alive at the time and position your book in relation to it.
To compare your author’s ideas on this question or theme to similar or different ones articulated by intellectuals roughly writing around the same time, you should use evidence drawn from relevant documents in *AIT2*. Papers will be due in class **Apr. 28**.

CITATIONS: Citation form should be consistent and generally follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*. If you frequently cite the same text, you can place a shortened version of author and title in parentheses at the end of a quotation or sentence and before the period and create a bibliography of full citations at the end of the paper.

EXAMS: There will be a quiz and a final.

LATE WORK: Make-ups will not be given nor will late papers be accepted except in the case of an extraordinary emergency, such as a severe illness or the death of a parent, spouse, or partner. I need to be informed in advance unless the event’s suddenness makes that impossible. Generally, a makeup date will be scheduled within a week.

PLAGIARISM: Plagiarism is arguably the most serious ethical violation that a scholar or student can commit in his/her writing. Read the Academic Conduct Code to understand the college policy on plagiarism. All cases of its suspected perpetration, as well as all other acts of suspected academic misconduct, will be referred to the Dean’s Office. If found guilty, a student will receive the maximum punishment allowed at the university.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION: Attendance at all classes is required and unexplained absences will lower a student’s final grade. Participation in the form of questions and comments in class may raise it by as much as a half grade.

ETIQUETTE: To preserve a classroom atmosphere conducive to collective learning, turn off cell phones and use laptop computers only for taking notes on the classroom lecture and discussion.

GRADE BREAKDOWN: 10% on the quiz, 30% on the two short papers, 30% on the term paper, and 30% on the final.

GRADUATE STUDENTS: HI 706 graduate students are required to do the recommended readings and to reference them where relevant in their papers and exams. In addition to the required exams and writing assignments, they will be asked to write a 10-page historiography paper due at the end of the semester.

TOPICS AND READING SCHEDULE:

Jan. 15  **Ideas and Intellectual Discourses in American History**

*Recommended:*
Jan. 17  **Progressive History and American Exceptionalism**

*Reading:*
Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *AIT2*, 60-68
Woodrow Wilson, “The Ideals of America,” *AIT2*, 147-54

Jan. 20  **Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday**

Jan. 22  **Snow Day**

Jan. 24  **W. E. B. Du Bois and the Critique of the Color Line**

*Reading:*
*AIT2*, 123-25
W. E. B. Du Bois, Selection from *The Souls of Black Folk*, *AIT2*, 155-60

*Recommended:*

Jan. 27  **Thorstein Veblen, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the Evolutionist Revolt against Formalism**

*Reading:*
Thorstein Veblen, Selection from *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, *AIT2*, 132-46
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., “Natural Law,” *AIT2*, 204-07

Jan. 29  **Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and the Naturalist Romance of Commodification**

*Reading:*
Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900)

Jan. 31  **George Santayana and the Naturalist Revolt against the “The Genteel Tradition”**

*Reading:*

Feb. 3  **William James and American Pragmatism**
Reading:
William James, “What Pragmatism Means,” *AIT*2, 161-71

Recommended:

Feb. 5  Snow Day

Feb. 7  John Dewey and Democratic Philosophy

Reading:
John Dewey, “Philosophy and Democracy,” *AIT*2, 208-16

Feb. 10  Varieties of Progressivism

Reading:
Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements,” *AIT*2, 126-31
Walter Lippmann, Selection from *Drift and Mastery*, *AIT*2, 172-76

Feb. 12  Ethnic Pluralism and American Cosmopolitanism

Reading:
Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *AIT*2, 177-87

Recommended:

Feb. 14  World War I and the Acceleration of Anti-Victorianism

Reading:
Randolph Bourne, “Twilight of the Idols,” *AIT*2, 188-94
H. L. Mencken, “Puritanism as a Literary Force,” *AIT*, 188-96

Recommended:

Feb. 17  Presidents’ Day Holiday

Feb. 19  Anthropology and the Concept of Cultural Relativism

Reading:
Margaret Mead, Selection from *Coming of Age in Samoa, AIT2*, 217-23

*Recommended:*

Feb. 21  **The Modern Temper in the 1920s**

*Reading:*
Joseph Wood Krutch, Selection from *The Modern Temper, AIT2*, 224-32

Feb. 24  **F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and “The American Dream”**

*Reading:*
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

Feb. 26  **Antimodernism and Southern Conservatism**

*Reading:*
John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” *AIT2*, 233-44

Feb. 28  **From Communism to Marxism**

*Reading:*
Sidney Hook, “Communism without Dogmas,” *AIT2*, 245-54

**QUIZ**

Mar/ 3  **Arguing the World and the New York Intellectuals**

*Discussion of Film:* Joseph Dorfman’s *Arguing the World* (1998)

Mar. 5  **1930s Liberalism and the Debate over “The American Century,”**

*Reading:*
*AIT2*, 257-59
David E. Lilienthal, Selection from *TVA: Democracy on the March, AIT2*, 270-75
Henry Luce, Selection from “The American Century” (1941), on reserve
Henry A. Wallace, Selection from *The Century of the Common Man* (1942), on reserve

Mar. 7  **Frank Capra’s *Meet John Doe*, Cultural Populism, and the Specter of Fascism**
Discussion of Film: Frank Capra’s *Meet John Doe* (1941)

Mar. 8-16 **Spring Recess**

Mar. 17 **Universalist Liberalism and America’s Racial Dilemma**

*Reading:*
- Gunnar Myrdal, Selection from *An American Dilemma*, *AIT*, 276-84

*Recommended:*

**LAST DAY TO TURN IN FIRST SHORT PAPER**

Mar. 19 **Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the Problematics of Race**

*Reading:*
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Mar. 21 **Realist Diplomacy and the Promise of Science in the Atomic Age**

*Reading:*
- George F. Kennan, Selection from *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*, *AIT2*, 320-24
- J. Robert Oppenheimer, “The Sciences and Man’s Community,” *AIT2*, 349-56

Mar. 24 **Cold-War Anti-Communism and Liberal Anti-Totalitarianism**

*Reading:*

Mar. 26 **The Reassertion of Neo-Orthodox Christianity**

*Reading:*
- Reinhold Niebuhr, Selection from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, *AIT2*, 285-91
- John Courtney Murray, Selection from *We Hold These Truths*, *AIT2*, 364-71

*Recommended:*

Mar. 28 Alfred Hitchcock’s Spellbound and Dark Psycho-Cinema

Discussion of Film: Alfred Hitchcock’s Spellbound

Mar. 31 Ego Psychoanalysis and the Idea of Personal Identity

Reading:
Erik H. Erikson, Selection from Childhood and Society, AIT2, 292-308

Apr. 2 Postwar Modernism and Its Discontents

Reading:
Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” AIT2, 260-69
Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” AIT2, 483-89

Apr. 4 Modernization Theory and Post-War Social Science

Reading:
W. W. Rostow, Selection from The Stages of Economic Growth, AIT2, 379-86

Apr. 7 The End of Ideology” Debate and 1950s Cultural Criticism

Reading:
Daniel Bell, “The End of Ideology,” AIT2, 372-78

Apr. 9 The Debate over the African-American Future

Reading:
AIT2, 419-20
Harold Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American” AIT2, 444-57
Martin Luther King, Selection from “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” AIT2, 475-82
Malcolm X, Selection from “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964), online

Apr. 11 No Class

Apr. 14 New Left Political Theory and the War in Vietnam

Reading:
Herbert Marcuse, Selection from *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), 490-99
Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibilities of Intellectuals,” *AIT2*, 500-509

**Apr. 16**  
**The Reconceptualization of Gender**

*Reading:*
- Betty Friedan, Selection from *The Feminine Mystique, AIT2*, 467-74
- Nancy Chodorow, “Gender, Relations, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective,” in *AIT2*, 521-32
- Catharine MacKinnon, Selection from *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law, AIT2*, 562-71

**Apr. 18**  
**Postmodernism and Science**

*Reading:*
- Thomas S. Kuhn, Selection from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, AIT2*, 4458-66
- Richard Rorty, “Science as Solidarity,” *AIT2*, 533-43

**Apr. 21**  
**Patriot’s Day Holiday**

**Apr. 23**  
**(Re)surgent Intellectual Conservatism**

*Reading:*
- Peter F. Drucker, “Innovation—The New Conservatism?” *AIT2*, 357-63
- Milton Friedman, Selection from *Capitalism and Freedom, AIT2*, 401-10
- Ayn Rand, “Man’s Rights,” *AIT2*, 411-16

**Apr. 24**  
**The Revival of Liberal Political Theory**

*Reading:*

**Apr. 25**  
**The Idea of America and Constructions of the Non-West**

*Reading:*
- Edward Said, Selection from *Orientalism, AIT2*, 510-20
- Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *AIT2*, 597-603

**LAST DAY TO TURN IN SECOND SHORT PAPER**

**Apr. 28**  
**The End of Faith?**
Reading:
Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Christianity’s Third Great Challenge,” *AIT2*, 421-27
Harold John Ockenga, “Resurgent Evangelical Leadership,” *AIT2*, 428-34
Sam Harris, Selection from *The End of Faith, AIT2*, 604-20

Recommended:

Apr. 30 Ecology and Futurology

Reading:
Stewart Brand, Selection from *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto, AIT2*, 621-36

TERM PAPERS DUE: At beginning of class

May 7 FINAL: 9-11 AM in class

May 9 GRADUATE HISTORIOGRAPHY PAPERS DUE: By 4:30 PM in my box in the History Department office