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 ideas underlying religious, philosophical, scientific, artistic, political, social, and economic practice in the United States. Both courses emphasize major thinkers and intellectual movements in their cultural contexts. Both address two challenging questions: How does the study of reflective and expressive thought illuminate the larger culture of the United States? How in light of America’s broad diversity of identity groups and the nation’s purportedly practical and egalitarian ethos, can we speak of an “American intellectual tradition”?

History 306 examines American thought from roughly the turn of the twentieth century to the present when intellectuals in the United States determinedly anointed themselves and their times as “modern.” But what was distinctively “modern” about it and what were the stakes in thinkers conceptualizing it that way?

To get at answers we’ll pay primary attention to four sets of ideas and the controversies they helped generate: transnationalism and debates over America’s role in the world, philosophical pragmatism and the revolt against ethical formalism, social science and the discovery of cultural pluralism, and modernist art and the lure of “unreason.” As thinkers in the United States often linked these ideas to progressive liberalism, challenges to that ideology after World War II over questions of “power,” intellectual authority, and racial and gender identities created for modernism a crisis of legitimacy. Whether succeeding conservative thinkers and postmodernist theorists overcame or only exacerbated this crisis remains to be seen. Finally, returning to the anxiety over “unbelief” initially sparking the modernist turn, we conclude by considering the search for meaning animating contemporary religion, ecology, and the “new atheism.”
The required texts are all writings by thinkers at the time. They 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. They can be obtained from providers such as You Tube and Netflix. One copy of each film will also be available for individual viewing at the reserve desk of the Geddes Language Center at 685 Commonwealth Ave., 5th Floor, for one week before they are discussed in class.

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 write two 4-5 page papers analyzing the ideas addressed in all or most of the required documents 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 developed, 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. 6 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. 16 through Apr. 24 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 life 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 to similar or different ones articulated by intellectuals roughly writing around the same time, you should use evidence drawn from relevant documents in *AIT2* or other assigned reading. Papers will be due in class **Apr. 29**.

**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. 21**  
**Ideas and Intellectual Discourses in American History**

*Recommended:*

Jan. 23 **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. 26 **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. 28 **Snow Day**

Jan. 30 **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

Feb. 2 **Snow Day**

Feb. 4 **Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and the Naturalist Romance of Commodification**

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

Feb. 6 **William James and American Pragmatism**

*Reading:*

*Recommended:*
Feb. 9  **John Dewey and Democratic Philosophy**

*Reading:*
John Dewey, “Philosophy and Democracy,” *AIT2*, 208-16

Feb. 11  **Varieties of Progressivism**

*Reading:*
Jane Addams, “The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements,” *AIT2*, 126-31
Walter Lippmann, Selection from *Drift and Mastery, AIT2*, 172-76

Feb. 13  **World War I and the Acceleration of Anti-Victorianism**

*Reading:*
H. L. Mencken, “Puritanism as a Literary Force,” *AIT2*, 188-96

*Recommended:*

Feb. 16  **Presidents’ Day Holiday**

Feb. 17  **Ethnic Pluralism and the Concept of Cultural Relativism**

*Reading:*
Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *AIT2*, 177-87
Margaret Mead, Selection from *Coming of Age in Samoa, AIT2*, 217-23

*Recommended:*

Feb. 18  **The Modern Temper in the 1920s**

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

Feb. 20  **F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and “The American Dream”**

*Reading:*

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

Feb. 23  **Antimodernism and Southern Conservatism**

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

**QUIZ**

Feb. 25  **From Communism to Marxism**

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

Feb. 27  **Arguing the World and the New York Intellectuals**

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

Mar. 2  **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. 4  **Frank Capra’s Meet John Doe, Cultural Populism, and the Specter of Fascism**

*Discussion of Film: Frank Capra’s Meet John Doe* (1941)

Mar. 6  **Universalist Liberalism and America’s Racial Dilemma**

*Reading:*
Gunnar Myrdal, Selection from *An American Dilemma*, *AIT*, 276-84
James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” *AIT*, 309-19

*Recommended:*

**LAST DAY TO TURN IN FIRST SHORT PAPER**
Mar. 7-15  **Spring Recess**

Mar. 16  **Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the Problematics of Race**

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

Mar. 18  **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. 20  **Cold-War Anti-Communism and Liberal Anti-Totalitarianism**

*Reading:*
Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror,” *AIT2*, 328-48

Mar. 23  **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. 25  **Ego Psychoanalysis and the “Identity” Concept**

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

Mar. 27  **Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* and Postwar Psycho-Cinema**

*Discussion of Film: Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound***

Mar. 30  **Modernization Theory and the American World**
Reading:  
W. W. Rostow, Selection from *The Stages of Economic Growth, AIT2*, 379-86

Apr. 1 Postwar Social Science, Cultural Criticism, and “The End of Ideology” Debate

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

Apr. 3 Postwar Modernism and Its Discontents

Reading:  
Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” *AIT2*, 483-89

Apr. 6 Nicholas Ray’s Rebel without a Cause and the Modern Problem of Youth Identity

Discussion of Film: Nicholas Ray’s Spellbound

Apr. 8 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. 10 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. 13 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. 15  **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. 17  **(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. 20  **Patriot’s Day Holiday**

Apr. 22  **The Revival of Liberal Political Theory**

*Reading:*
John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *AIT2, 544-61*

Apr. 24  **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. 27  **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:*
David A. Hollinger, “The Accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment: An Old Drama Still Being Enacted,” in
Hollinger’s *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, 2013), 1-17

**TERM PAPERS DUE:** At beginning of class

**Apr. 29**  
**Ecology and Futurology**

*Reading:*

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

**May 5**  
**FINAL: 9-11 AM in class**

**May 8**  
**GRADUATE HISTORIOGRAPHY PAPERS DUE:** By 4:30 PM in my box in the History Department office