

Summer 2008

English 503: Theories of History, Ideology and Politics

Section 32772

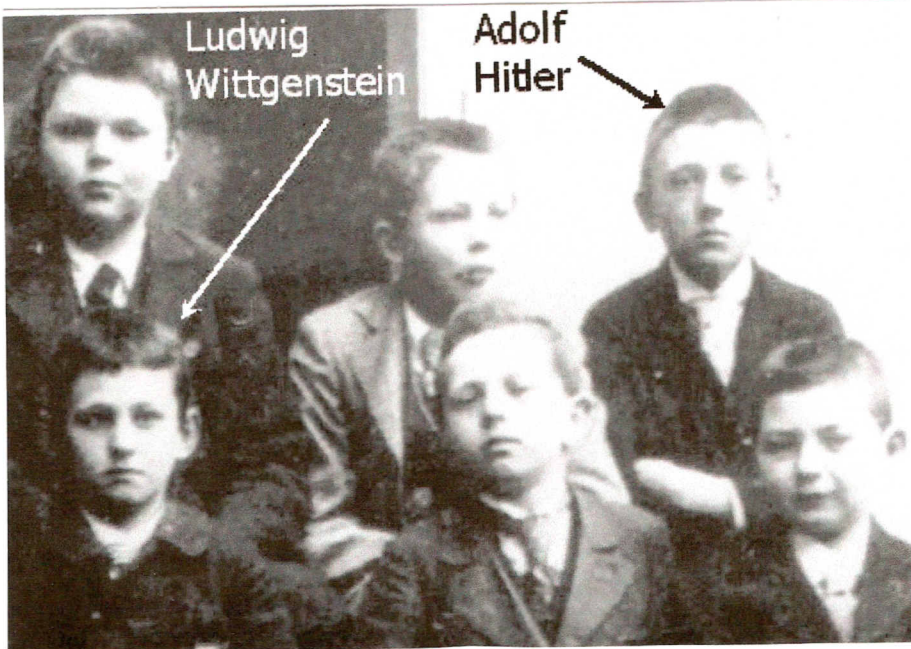
Session code: 054

1-4:35, TTh, THH 113

Begin: Thursday, May 22, 2008

End: Tuesday, July 8, 2008

A. M. Kemp



This is a course in the theories of human culture that have developed from the Enlightenment to the present. The last third of the course, approximately, will deal with what is usually thought of as postmodern theory; the first two thirds will analyze the foundational modern theories of the meaning of culture, without a knowledge of which, I believe, the postmodern is incomprehensible.

The modern is distinguished by the conjunction of three unprecedented modes of thought: the historicist, the ideological, and the utopian-political.

Historicism sees the world--biological and social--not as a system that is, but as an onward rush of becoming. No object can be known or described in its current state, but can only be understood through the historical conditions and process of its emergence. A sub-species of historicism is the genealogical method: the true meaning of an institution, idea or condition is found in its origin, its archae; the task of the genealogist is to retrace the process of becoming to its root, which, when known, will reveal a real meaning behind and beneath the apparent contemporary meaning. The ultimate aim of historicism is to arrive at a totalizing theory that comprehends the universal process of becoming, from which no particularity can escape, that can predict the necessary shape of the future.

Ideological thought posits that the conscious and semi-conscious idea-systems of a society are manifestations of false-consciousness. Commonly-accepted ideas are lies that provide a covering, concealing, mystifying, containing screen (the matrix) that conceals the

reality of social relations. Ideas exist in order to serve privileged, exploitative interests of material and economic power.



The utopian, in contrast to sporadic slave and peasant rebellions in the pre-modern world, brings into consciousness a profound suspicion of the existent social world, and a more-or-less constant theory and practice of revolution as the telos of history.

The conjunction of these three can be said to constitute the master-narrative of the modern; they form the categorical base of its philosophy, its psychology, its literary and artistic representations. They determine its demystifying hermeneutic dichotomies of surface and depth, manifest and latent. This convergence of historicism, ideology, and revolutionary politics is what the modern, in all its aspects, is fundamentally about.

We will begin with the project of the Enlightenment, and with Rousseau's genealogies of

the social and of inequality, and go on to look at their political materialization in the French Revolution. We will examine the development of the genealogical hermeneutic in Marx's attack on idealism and his naming of "ideology," in Nietzsche's attack on the ethics of pity, and in Freud's excavation of the unconscious. We will examine Structuralism (in both linguistics and ethnology), and Situationism. Finally, we will follow postmodernist ramifications of all these theories to the present situation. I would like to use student reports to bring in more peripheral areas—particularly modern occultism, and the rise of Nazism, to the central core of texts and discussion.

So, yes, there are a lot of abstract terms here, but I promise that it will all make sense, and be fun. If you've ever been baffled by "theory," then this is your guide for the perplexed.

Rousseau, Discourse on the Origins of Inequality

Schama, Citizens

Marx, The German Ideology

Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of German Philosophy

Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals; Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist; "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense"

Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents; Dora; Totem and Taboo

Levi Strauss, The Savage Mind

Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy

Lacan, Ecrits

Foucault, Discipline and Punish

Nicholson, ed., The Second Wave

Debord, The Society of the Spectacle

Said, Orientalism

Weil, Oppression and Liberty

Schedule:

May

Th 22: Introduction

T 27: Rousseau, Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Schama, Citizens

Th 29: Marx, The German Ideology, Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of German Philosophy

June

T 3: Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals; Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist; "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense"

Th 5: Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents; Dora; Totem and Taboo

T 10: Levi Strauss, The Savage Mind

Th 12: Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy

T 17: Lacan, Ecrits

Th 19: Foucault, Discipline and Punish

T 24: Debord, The Society of the Spectacle

Th 26: Nicholson, ed., The Second Wave

July

T 1: Said, Orientalism

Th 3: Catch up session. We'll be waaaaay behind by now.

T 8: Weil, Oppression and Liberty

