



Nihilism, Apocalypse, and Disenchantment: Myths of Rupture, Ideologies of “The End”

Autumn, 2008

Mardi, 15:00 – 19:00

9, rue de la Chaise, Salle 901

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Course Description:

Is civilization obsessed with its own demise? The 20th century has produced a series of narratives that cast it as an age of rupture, turbulence, and the “falling away” from order; modernity is often described in terms theological, historical, and political disintegration. This course examines these narratives that consider the modern as the last stage in an apocalyptic eschatology or as a transitional moment of chaos which, if understood, could potentially lead to new social organization. Beginning with the psychology of Messianism, antinomianism, and “apocalypticism,” we then go on to examine the metaphysical and social repercussions of the so-called “death of god,” European nihilism, “decadence,” the destruction of symbolic orders and collective representations, disenchantment, anomie, and various “ends of history.” We will study a wide range of discourses emerging from philosophy, political theory, international relations, sociology, and the history of religions, in order to examine how we think “the end of the world,” the conditions that inform these narratives, and the traps of utopianism, the positing of a golden age in the past or distant future. Closely attached to the modern “apocalyptic” is also the withering of political and social institutions, the slackening of social ties, the relative nature of “truth” and the “law,” industrialization and technologization – the “end” is not simply a theological narrative but a socio-economic vision as well. Hence, we will take seriously the multitude of “deaths” produced by modern and post-modern pessimism: the “death of the social,” “the death of the subject,” the “death of the political,” the “death of the writer,” the “death of meaning,” the “death of Man,” and the “death of historical time.” How do such discourses frame our way of being in the world and orienting ourselves in time and space? What is the perennial appeal of apocalyptic narratives and why are they necessary in formulating a critique of the present? How is the present constructed as a space of lack, incompleteness, and loss and recovery? What is the status of “tradition” and the “traditional” in such a perceived climate? What is the relationship between the “return of religion,” “fundamentalism,” “globalism,” and the apocalyptic narrative? How are “depressive culture,” “victim culture,” melancholia, and bound in a somatic and psychic nexus of “the end?” Readings will include Durkheim, Nietzsche, Cioran, Kojève, Foucault, Eliade, Baudrillard, Virillio, as well as Zygmunt Bauman, Elisabeth Roudinesco, Norman Cohn, Marcel Gauchet, Stanley Rosen, Alain Joxe, and J.Z. Smith.

Class Requirements:

- Students are expected to **complete all the readings and be prepared to discuss the texts** in class. Students should come to class with various questions and comments on the texts.
- Each student must give an **exposé/presentation** on one of the readings. Presentations should be approximately 10 minutes long and offer critical perspectives and questions for class discussion.
- **Mid-term paper:** each student must write a 8-10 page mid-term paper (Questions and topics to be determined)
- **Final paper:** The final paper will be a 15-17 page “research paper” which examines a critical issue, paradox, or fundamental issue raised in a text or series of texts. Each student will be asked to submit a thesis/abstract and outline before beginning writing.

- **Class Attendance** is taken and absences will affect one's final grade. As we will be moving very quickly and developing a set of concepts and a certain critical vocabulary, it is strongly encouraged that you not miss class. Absences will only be tolerated for medical reasons and with a doctor's note.
- Punctuality is essential. **Please do not arrive late.**
- **Plagiarism**, i.e. the unmarked and unreferenced use of textual fragments written by anyone else than the student him-/herself, exposes the final grade for the course to be reduced to 0, as well as the student to be expelled from Sciences Po.

The Syllabus:

All readings (along with supplementary information and articles) **WILL BE AVAILABLE ON THE ENTG SYSTEM** in PDF Format. You are strongly advised to print the materials and bring them with you to each session. Moreover, it is important to maintain a file of the readings for future reference.

September 3th

Introduction: Eschatology, Telos, and Finitude, The question of "Being"

October 7th

Apocalypse Now: From the Heresy of the Free-Spirit to Jonestown

- Selections from Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in medieval and Reformation Europe and its bearing on modern totalitarian movements*
- Selections from Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*
- Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones"
- Transcript of "White Night," the last 45 minutes before the Jonestown Massacre

October 14th

Nihilism and the Death of God

- Selections from, Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science* and *The Will to Power*
- Dirk de Schutter, "Zarathustra's Yes and Woe: Nietzsche, Celan, and Eckhart on the Death of God"
- Selections from Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism*
- *Optional: selections from Georges Bataille, On Nietzsche*

October 21st,

Anomie: Morbidity, Solitude, and Suicide

- Selections from *The Theogony of Hesiod*
- Selections from Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*
- Selections from Marcel Fournier, *Marcel Mauss: A Biography*
- Marco Orru, "The Ethics of Anomie: Jean Marie Guyau and Émile Durkheim."

October 28th,

The "Crisis of Civilization:" *Laiser-aller*, Decadence and Devirilization

- Selections from Eugene Weber, *The Hollow Years*
- Roger Caillois, "Introduction," and "For A Militant Orthodoxy: The Immediate Tasks of Modern Thought"
- The College of Sociology, "Declaration of the College of Sociology on the International Crisis"
- Henry Winthrop, "Variety of Meaning in the Concept of Decadence"
- Robert Soucy, "French Fascist Intellectuals and the Revolt Against Decadence"

November 4th,

The End of History

- Selections from Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*
 - Alexandre Kojève, "Hegelian Concepts"
 - Selections from Shadia Drury, *Alexandre Kojève: The Roots of Postmodern Politics*
- Mid-Term Paper Topics Submitted**

November 11th: Férié

November 18th,

The Kali Yuga: Man in the Ruins

-Selections from the *Bhagavata Purana*

-Mircea Eliade, "Misfortune and History"

-Selections from Julius Evola, *Man in the Ruins* and *Ride the Tiger*

-*Hakim Bey*, "Instructions for the Kali Yuga" and "Against the Reproduction of Death"

November 25th,

My death, the death of the Other, The Death of Man: The Politics of Anti-humanism –

-Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man"

-Michel Foucault, from "The Order of Things"

December 2nd,

Cioran: "Life is an accident."

-Selections from Emile Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*, *On the Wings of Despair*, and *The Inconvenience of Being Born (Mid-Term Papers Due)*

December 9th,

Giddiness and Doom: The Death of the Social and the Illusion of the End

-Selections from Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or the End of the Social*, *Fatal Strategies*, and *The Illusion of the End*, and *America*

December 16th,

Disenchantment and Depressive Culture

-Selections from Marcel Guachet, *The Disenchantment of the World*

-Selections from Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*

-Sophia Heller, *The Absence of Myth*

-Georges Bataille, "The Absence of Myth"

-Peter Sloterdijk, "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness"

-Selections from Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Why Psychoanalysis?*

December 23rd, – January 6th: Winter Break

January 6th,

The Death of Knowledge: The End of "Value"

-Selections from Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Post-Modernism and After Theory*

-Selections from Alain Finkielkraut, *The Defeat of the Mind*

(Last Day to Submit Final Paper Abstracts)

January 13th,

Mass Violence, Massacre, Genocide

-Selections from Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy the Political Uses of Genocide*

-Selections from Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

January 19th

"Our culture has less than 50 years left:" Global War and Ecological Disaster

-Selections From, Paul Virilio, *Pure War and Crepuscular Dawn*

-Selections from Alain Joxe, *Empire of Disorder*

-Antonio Negri and Eric Alliez, "Peace and War"

Final Papers Due January 24th