

Modern European Intellectual History: An Introduction

There are numerous historians who assert that what is truly "modern" consists of that period of time encompassing a few generations, or roughly 75-100 years. In other words, for these historians, what is modern is somehow related only to what is also considered the 20th century. Perhaps this is due to the birth of that cultural and artistic movement known as **modernism** which first made its appearance in the years surrounding the Great War.

Other historians, more traditionally I think, posit modern Europe as that period which followed the greatest social and political upheaval of the 18th century: the French Revolution of 1789-1794 and the Industrial Revolution of Great Britain. Only such a combination of events -- at once political, economic, social, intellectual and cultural -- could have produced such a watershed in the history of man. For this reason, 1789 is often seen as a major turning point in the creation of the modern world.

Continuing our story even further, still more historians, most of them trained in the historical profession during the inter-war years, suggest that the first initiative toward the modern age developed sometime between the publication of two of the most provocative books in the history of European thought. The years involved were 1543 and 1687. The books were *De Revolutionibus Orbium* and *Philosophie Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. Nicholas Copernicus and Isaac Newton. One, a Polish astronomer who delayed publication of his work because he feared it would cause anxiety among his Catholic fellow men. The other, a friendless Cambridge don who spent as much time and energy devoted to alchemy as he did to explicating the laws of gravity. I am of course referring to the Scientific Revolution, an event few would doubt had extraordinary potential for the future of the European mind. Our own century has witnessed generations of scientists, biologists, economists, historians and philosophers

who have been blinded by the intoxicating effects of science. It was fitting for them to "image" science as peculiarly modern and then trace its origins to that great event which pushed the word "revolution" into our vocabulary. Science manifested itself in heady optimism in the inter-war years but it was that great flash of light, actually two flashes of light, in August 1945 that really set their optimism aglow. How modern have we become? I suppose pretty modern since we could now destroy quickly and efficiently. On August 6, 1945, 75,000 men, women and children perished within 15 minutes after an atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima.



Still, there are more interpretations to consider. Thanks to a late 19th century Swiss art historian -- the friend of the madman Nietzsche -- the great age of modern man had been pushed back further in the historical record. Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), who published his two volume magnum opus, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. in 1860, gave us the classic interpretation of the Renaissance as the birth of modern man. Here's how Burckhardt put it:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness--that which turned within as that which was turned without--lay dreaming or held awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation--only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air: an objective treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis: man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such.



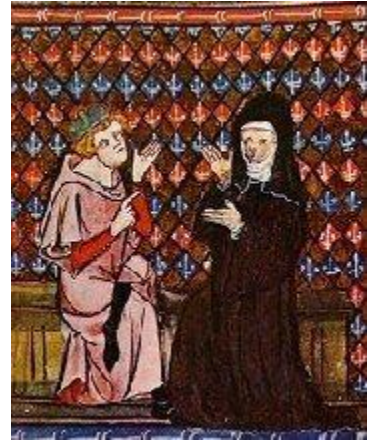
For Burckhardt, medieval man lay drugged, "held awake," under a veil of superstition, prejudice and Christian dogma until that moment when the great works of great men began to appear on the great stage of the great civilization of the West: Leonardo, Petrarch, Sir Thomas More, Erasmus, Gutenberg, Magellan, Titian, Raphael, Michelangelo and Machiavelli. This is proof of man's emergence into the modern world? Here, in Florence, Venice, Amsterdam, Paris and London, the world begins, a specifically modern world, our world.

Now, as part of my own intellectual development I can identify that at different points in time I have subscribed to all of these historical opinions. But, from the vantage point of the present, and after having taught European history for the past ten years, I admit that I have refined my appreciation and interpretation of "modern Europe." When the Parisian Scholastic philosopher Peter Abelard (1079-1142?) wrote: "by doubting we come to inquiry; and through inquiry we perceive truth," he was echoing that Hellenic spirit of Human Reason -- what we call humanism -- as well as foreshadowing the future life of the skeptical mind. Abelard is the transitional figure. Surprisingly, this French theologian, sensualist and monk lived, wrote and taught during a period of European history which, for the intellectual historian at least, has come to be known as the "12th Century Renaissance."

Abelard's education was eclectic. If it is true that he studied under "radical" theologians, it is equally true that he also studied under the very orthodox William of Champaux (1070-1121). But Abelard was an odd man and nobody's fool. Instead of becoming either unorthodox or dogmatic, he worked out his own philosophy. Abelard was a restless, vain and contentious man who got into trouble with the medieval Church not so much for his views -- which by today's standards seem rather innocuous -- but for the way in which he stated his views. And if the way he stated his views caused uneasiness with the Church authorities at Paris, a cathedral city, his romance with Heloise, the niece of the canon Fulbert caused downright scandal.



Heloise (1101-1164), barely seventeen, and Abelard, then thirty-eight, met as intellectual equals in the home of Fulbert and fell passionately in love. They were secretly married, against the protests of Heloise, had a son whom they called Astrolabe, and were constantly hounded by the authorities of Notre Dame. Subsequently, Heloise was sent to a nunnery and Abelard to a monastery, but not before he was castrated for his sins against Fulbert's niece. Despite all of this and despite constant complaints from the Church authorities at Paris, Abelard attracted students from all over Europe. In an age when there were only a handful of universities across Europe, Abelard nearly acquired the title of "The Philosopher," a label medieval philosophers were to eventually ascribe to Aristotle. Abelard admired classical philosophy but lived at a time when the number of Latin translations were minimal and those translations that did exist were difficult to obtain, even for a professor of theology at Paris. However, in what Abelard did have of Greek thought he found all the essential doctrines of Christianity -- and here's where he really got into trouble.



Abelard had the audacity to declare that the distance between ancient paganism and the Scriptures was not that great. For this reason, he did not condemn the ancients -- as would Dante -- simply because they did not know Christ. Abelard was disgusted with those who hastily accepted any doctrine before seriously considering its merits. His most famous work, *SIC ET NON*, quoted the Church Fathers -- Origen, Augustine, Jerome and Eusebius -- on various issues and showed they were by no means in agreement when it came to interpreting the Scriptures. Abelard supplied 158 problems in the form of general statements. These statements were intended to be disputed by anyone who cared to enter the debate. The ultimate answer -- truth -- was left to the individual reader to surmise. This technique, of course, shocked Abelard's contemporaries. Scripture, for these men, was truth. There was no need to meddle in what was considered theologically absolute. But Abelard had something else in mind.



He wanted men to think for themselves. Reason and Logic were the answers for Abelard -- his faith in the power of Reason was perhaps exaggerated but important nonetheless. And as we shall soon see, Reason has taken different shapes at different times. It is worth repeating that Abelard is the transitional figure.

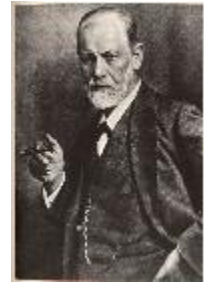
I began with a rather simple statement by Peter Abelard, a man perhaps none of you have ever heard of before. Doubt, inquire and perceive truth. This is an attitude of mind -- it is philosophical yet practical and, I suppose, open to numerous interpretations and challenges. But underlying this seemingly simple statement -- "by doubting we come to inquiry; and through inquiry we perceive truth" -- is an optimistic faith. This faith is secular and religious at one and the same time. Reason and faith, for a man like Abelard, are two roads which lead to the same truth. In Abelard's case, that truth is God.



By 1920, this faith had been shattered. The experience of total war -- the Great War -- forced the European mind to rethink its philosophical justifications. How could man remain optimistic when nine million men had died for a cause which was unknown to them. "The Old Lie: Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori," wrote the British poet Wilfred Owen in 1918. "The Old Lie: It is glorious to die for one's country." The optimistic faith -- a faith which had grown over the course of 800 years -- now succumbed to Dada and Surrealism, the will to power, unreason, irrationality and the knowledge, I suppose, that there are simply some things which either we will never know or, perhaps the same thing, we are not intended to know. And of course, then there was Nietzsche, the German poet-philosopher who cautioned us to condemn every past. Socrates lay condemned for teaching men to use their Reason. Quoting the oracle at Delphi, Socrates urged us to "Know thyself." And Nietzsche's response? "Socrates was a buffoon who got himself taken seriously." And then, the ultimate slam: "God is dead and we have killed him."



And then there was Freud, the Austrian physician who perfected consciousness-raising, cocaine and the leather couch. Not reason, but unreason is man's primary attribute -- not only man's but all western civilization as well. The picture was not pretty, nor was it intended to be. For the generation just emerging from the ravages of WWI, perhaps it was Oswald Spengler who summed up the mental baggage of the age.



When Spengler sat down to write his two volume of philosophy of history during the war years, the only title which sprang into his very German mind was *The Decline of the West*. And in 1930, T. S. Eliot capped the dismal decade in his poem *Ash Wednesday*.
Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory
Power Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is
nothing again. Or, as one modern historian of the period has put it: Europe after WWI was like a broken watch. One looked at the watch and all was as it ought to be. But, hold the watch to the ear, and one heard nothing.

So, what I have established so far are the parameters of this course. We will begin with an examination of the Christian Matrix, a synthesis of ideas provided by thinkers like Abelard, Dante and St. Thomas Aquinas. We will end with the Age of Anxiety, the 20th century, a century pervaded by a sense of meaninglessness, anxiety, *anomie* and absurdity.

For those of you who have kept up with the conversation so far, it should be obvious that I have been discussing ideas and concepts. Ideas -- their origin and genesis -- is the subject of this course. So, we now turn, briefly, to our first question: what is intellectual history? To "trace the history of the human mind," wrote the 18th century gasbag philosopher David Hume, "is the task of the historian." And the French cynic Voltaire added that "it is better to know how men thought in former times than how they acted." Much to the consternation of the purveyors of the new, new social history, a



great deal of intellectual history has crept into history. In my own classes in European history, my students are urged to read Homer, Virgil, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Abelard, Dante, Hobbes, Newton, Descartes, Locke, Voltaire, Marx, and Wittgenstein, to name just a few. Heavy reading to say the least -- as most of you will discover on your own.

At a rather dull seminar I once attended, a great intellectual historian stood at the lectern and bemoaned the fact that few undergraduates, if any, had the patience or the intelligence to grapple with ideas. Although I heard this remark with disbelief, I hadn't the courage to say anything. But in my mind I heard myself screaming, "then learn how to teach ideas!" In other words, the failure of a professor to teach ideas is not the failure of the students but rather, the failure of the professor. The problem with teaching ideas is that they are often taught out of their historical context, as if these ideas have a life of their own independent of the specific historical context in which they first appeared. Some serious historians have demanded that Plato or Locke or Freud be taught without paying any attention to 5th century Athens, 17th century England or late 19th century Vienna. I disagree. The interaction of ideas and concepts with the social environment from which they emerge and which they influence -- this is the domain of intellectual history. It is the task of the intellectual historian to show how the ideas inherent in science, literature, religion, art, philosophy, political theory or a thousand other things **interact with social realities**, in other words, with real, living and breathing men. A simple example will suffice.



Consider Friedrich Nietzsche -- a philosopher who, by 1890, had gone completely insane and was institutionalized until his death in 1900. Nietzsche, as most of you know, uttered the strangely prophetic statement, "God is dead." He also said something about the "herd instinct," "the will to power," and the "*Übermensch*." From here, Hitler took his idea of the



master race -- and until very recently, Nietzsche has been considered a supporter of the Nazis. Of course, Nietzsche dies in 1900, around the same time that the young Hitler was told he had absolutely no artistic talent. But, to understand Nietzsche and Nietzsche's ideas, we have to go back to another generation of thinkers who influenced him. In the ancient past, we'd have to know Greek philosophy -- which in turn would mean that we would also have to know Greek history. Perhaps even more significant, we would also have to know how Nietzsche interpreted Greek philosophy and history. And, in the more recent past, we would have to be able to explain the philosophical system of Arthur Schopenhauer. And this, of course, would tell us something about Schopenhauer and then about Hegel and then about Schelling and then about Kant and then about, well, you get the picture . . . so on and so on into the past. So, intellectual historians -- good ones -- must be able to move backward by ever increasing degrees. In this way, an answer to the question, "where did he get this idea?" might be found. It must be added, however, that the intellectual historian must move in two directions -- backward and forward.

But, there's more. The intellectual historian, going back to the Nietzsche example, must also know some real history. For instance, our intellectual historian would have to be familiar with:

- late 19th century German culture
- European bourgeois society
- the Franco-Prussian War
- Bismarckian supremacy
- German university life and standards
- French Positivism
- Darwinian evolutionary theory
- socialism and communism
- Nietzsche's childhood, family, sexuality, education, career and insanity



We could easily include a hundred other things -- the stuff of history -- which would all bear on the intellectual and philosophical development of our man Nietzsche.

I like intellectual history. I prefer it to all other branches of the historical discipline. I must stress, however, that I have no intention of urging you to become intellectual historians yourselves. Nor do I think that intellectual history is the best variety of history. I simply prefer it. I believe intellectual history equips me to live a better life. It is almost a truism to admit that to understand the past is to be able to live fully in the present. To be acquainted with the intellectual heritage of western civilization is important -- it prepares one to think constructively. As Samuel Johnson once confided to Boswell:

There is no part of history so generally useful as that which relates to the progress of the human mind, the successive advances of science, the vicissitudes of learning and ignorance, the extension and resuscitation of arts and the revolution of the intellectual world.

These lectures focus on one theme as it has become manifest in the history of European civilization. That theme or leitmotiv is the *Weltanschauung*. I remain convinced that scholars, artists, poets, philosophers and other thinkers of every age, including a few historians, have fashioned a world view for themselves. This world view is what is meant by the German expression *Weltanschauung*. In place of the word *Weltanschauung* or world view we may also use the following expressions: "prevailing spirit," "mirror of the age," "climate of opinion," or another German word, borrowed from Hegel, the *Zeitgeist* or "spirit of the times." These metaphors, although immensely useful for the intellectual historian, have also provoked a sense of constant abuse. The reasoning behind this abuse is this: if there is a "spirit of the times," it is nearly always the creation of a relatively small segment of society. For example, there is little doubt that there was a Scientific Revolution of the 17th century. But for whom? Easy. Men like Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Bacon, Leibnitz, Locke and Newton. We might also add



to the list, the immediate audience which, in the 17th century, was composed of amateur scientists, royal governments, monarchs, priests and societies like the Royal Society of England. However, new ideas or adaptations of older ideas are not constructed in a vacuum. We must understand that these ideas -- whether scientific, moral, religious, economic, artistic or whatever -- spring or are fashioned out of real historical circumstances. In the case of the Scientific Revolution, for instance, we would also have to consider things like: intense religious conflict, papal abuses, economic depression, royal instability, plague and famine, new discoveries and, of course, war.

The point is this -- we cannot abstract ideas from the historical epoch in which they appeared. Ideas are not balloons floating in space: one is marked "freedom" another "heliocentricity" and yet another "liberalism" or "fascism." The ideas must be understood as grounded in the historical epoch in which they first or later appear. A world view is the product of an age which thinks -- but this thinking is of a high order. When the inhabitants of ancient Sumer invented the wheel or cuneiform writing around 2500 B.C. -- they had taken an idea and executed it. But, this does not suggest that they also had formulated a world view. We have to move forward nearly two millennia to discover man's thinking raised to a new level. When the Ionian philosophers inhabiting the islands off the coast of the eastern Mediterranean migrated to the west, they brought with them new ideas -- ideas of the mind. They came to Athens, on the Attic peninsula and it was at Athens in the 5th century BC that men discovered Reason. With the Persian Wars at an end and a direct democracy in place, Athens was certainly fertile ground for thought. Protagoras, Parmenides, Democritus and Socrates looked inward to the human mind and there discovered *logos*, Human Reason. With this discovery, the Athenian philosophers bequeathed to the centuries which followed a series of profound, important and perhaps unanswerable questions:

- what is the nature of reality?



- what is the nature of illusion?
- what is knowledge?
- what is the good life?
- what is justice?
- what is virtue?
- why am I here?
- what does it all mean?
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When the Greeks proposed these questions they at the same time fashioned a world view, that is, a tool with which to understand man and man's place in the cosmos. There is little doubt that subsequent generations of thinkers have elaborated on these same questions. The result of their labors was the world view -- a view which changes over time and reflects or mirrors the ever-changing reality of history itself. The intellectual historian analyzes the world view -- it is necessary to know what forces produce different world views. It is important to know just how the world view changes over time. An examination of the world view will enable us to do two things. The first is historical, the second, personal. The investigation of past world views will show us what forces have been utilized to give the world meaning or purpose. On the other hand, and with some luck, such an investigation will also reveal your own world view. This second, more personal idea, is perhaps even more important than the first.