

# Conversations of the West: Antiquity and the 19th Century

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Fall

2006

Lectures: Tue-Thu

Time: 0930-1045AM

Place: CANTOR 101

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RCT Sections:

039	F	0930AM-1045AM	SILV 820
040	F	1100AM-1215AM	WAVE 668
041	M	0800AM-0915AM	SILV 496
042	M	0930AM-1045AM	SILV 709
043	M	0330PM-0445PM	SILV 208
044	M	0455PM-0610PM	194 MERCER 208

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the course! A mixture of happenstance, compulsion, and curiosity, which I hope will become an exciting adventure for us all, gathers us here.

*Conversations of the West* is one of the opening courses to the *Foundations of Contemporary Culture* sequence. It is designed as an inquiry into the texts that shape conversations—formal and informal—in leading centers of civilization now identified as Western. We shall raise questions and provide you with analytical skills that may prove useful in many aspects of your intellectual life. You will acquire knowledge of specific authors and texts that have long been considered basic, or classic. You will develop the ability to analyze the arguments in those texts, to see how they are structured, and how in the course of time different authors have developed, corrected, or altogether changed the arguments. You will have the opportunity to hone your skills in presenting and criticizing arguments, thus joining in the conversations of the West. One goal is that you will develop the capacity to link the arguments in a practical way to your life.

In teaching the course, I stand on the shoulders of my colleagues who have planned it and taught it before, adding my own views. Like Western culture more generally, the course is marked by the cumulative effort of the faculty and the counterpoint of different positions and views.

On matters of fact and matters of judgement, I will present my position and my preferences explicitly. At the same time, I will remain open to your comments, suggestions, and challenges, all of which I welcome.

This is not a survey course. How could it cover thoroughly a range of fundamental issues that runs from Plato to NATO? One semester could not possibly do justice to all of them. Rather, this course is conceived as a guide to discovering some of the intellectual heritage that is distinctive to the West and that constitutes, arguably, its uniqueness. Instead of being *complete*, the course will be *intense*. What do I mean by “intense”? It means coping with some issues in all their burning actuality. Take the ancient world and consider what the “invention” of monotheism brought. The immensity of the event, the passage from the worship of many gods to the Mosaic concept of one God, under constraint and amid resistance, produced a new map of the mind and of the world, and reverberates still. In antiquity, monotheism at Sinai and then primitive Christianity; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, messianic social change: these were supreme moments in which Western culture was presented with the challenge of transcendence. The message remains: “Surmount yourself. Surpass the opaque barriers of the mind to attain pure

abstraction, and sacrifice everything else.” The insistence of that ideal injunction continues to this day, with a terrible force.

I shall introduce a map of concepts –truth, faith, honor, loyalty, choice, and the law, among others—drawn from the texts, and often in tension with each other. You will have to shuttle between exposition, inquiry, and dialogue –the same shuttle accomplished by leaders and conversants through the ages of the West.

The works we study are important because they are exemplary and influential. You will read texts that are “classic” in that they have not finished saying what they have to say. They will allow you to join in their conversations: understand them, disagree with them, or agree, or improve on what they have to say.

The works come from two historical periods, antiquity and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Antiquity is a relatively long period (though not as long as other non-Western antiquities), from about 500 BCE to 500 ACE. The texts that represent this period come from the Pentateuch (the first books of the Torah, or Jewish Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament), from ancient Greece, from the Roman Empire, and from the early years of Christianity (the Patristic era, or that of the founding fathers). To put it bluntly, and to whet your appetite, the story of antiquity in the West is a tale of two cities: Athens and Jerusalem (with Rome somewhere in between). It is the story of reason and faith.

To think, to do research, to feel the calling of science, is what Athens has bequeathed to us. Consider how most disciplines on campus carry in their very names a Greek root: philosophy, biology, anthropology, and so forth. From Jerusalem comes another heritage: the idea of transcendence, of a supreme Book, of historical time as meaningful, of the law as moral law.

We all grapple with these notions, whether we are believers or not. To be “Western” means to be compelled to negotiate morally, intellectually, and existentially the tension between the ideals of the city of Socrates and the ideals of the city of Isaiah. The humanistic tradition comes from Greece: the ideal of a harmonious society, democracy and lay culture. From Jerusalem comes the tradition that produced the mystics, the ideals of spirituality and sainthood, but also censorship and dogma,

fanaticism and holy war. You will find this tension throughout the cultural products of the West: in its music, in its mathematical sciences, in its poetry, and in its speculative thought. You will find that the West followed two main paths: one is a path of dominance and intolerance; the other is a path of respect for diversity and human rights, the concern for individual dignity, and the pursuit of happiness.

Our focus on Western civilization to some extent dictates the selection of texts to study. We do not study texts from ancient Egypt or Northern Europe because no major philosophical works survive from those cultures in this time period, though they exerted their influence in Western civilization. We do not study texts from the Islamic, Chinese, Persian, or Indian civilizations, even though these flourished during the same time period and produced major philosophical and literary works, as well as magnificent art. One aspect of our inquiry, however, allows us to see that occasionally connections were made in early globalizations, as when Europeans learned higher mathematics from the Arabs, astronomy from the Egyptians, scientific inventions from China, and acquired a multitude of objects and practices from remote lands through the long Silk Road, linking the West to the East through Central Asia. Another MAP Foundations course, *World Cultures*, offers you the chance to explore at least one important non-Western cultural tradition.

The division is somewhat arbitrary, for the way Europeans defined “the West” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was partly by contrasting it to the rest of the world. They exaggerated the separateness of Western civilization, for example by paying scant attention to the development of Orthodox versions of Christianity, both in and especially after the Byzantine Empire. One reason why such emphasis was placed on the distinctiveness of the West was precisely that new processes of globalization had begun and Europeans (and later Americans) were trying to understand who they were within a larger context.

Europeans (and settlers of European descent in the Americas, Australia, and other settings) were also engaged in colonialism, trade, and warfare around the globe. An odd feature of Western civilization is the extent to which it celebrated the inheritance from classical Antiquity while ignoring or denying the borrowings from other civilizations.

This course deals mainly with texts written in Europe that ask questions about European society without seeing colonialism as an integral part of that society. Thus, most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century classics presume a separation between the internal progress of

European culture and society and the external relations of Europeans to the rest of the world. Only today, 21<sup>st</sup> century historians place more stress than most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors did on how overseas empires shaped what went inside European societies. The administration of the colonies shaped the development of public administration inside Europe. Trading companies and colonial ventures shaped the development of the business corporation. Colonial wars not only demanded soldiers but shaped discussions of manhood and virtue. But it was later critical examinations that revealed these connections, not the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans, and also other people around the world, came to see themselves as “modern” by contrast to a wide variety of what they called “traditional” cultures. This entailed a great change in thinking about the relationship between past and future. For many, the idea of evolution explained advancement in civilization as in biology. Darwin loomed large. At the same time, “modern” 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers were eager to place themselves in relation to the most “advanced” thinkers of the past. They consigned some parts of history to irrelevance as the “dark ages”. They identified with the “grandeur” of Greece and Rome. They saw the thinkers of antiquity as making progress, as they themselves were doing, rather than simply following traditions or even falling backwards. The theme of progress was basic to the 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of the modern, so much so that Brazil –then an outpost of Western civilization-- placed the motto “Order and Progress” on its flag.

It was the Western 19<sup>th</sup> century that embarked upon the adventure that today we call social and economic development. The economists of those days understood progress in two related but contrasting ways: either as the gradual improvement through the market and other capitalist institutions, or as a revolutionary leap into a socialist future. There were the followers of Adam Smith or Herbert Spencer and those of Karl Marx. In neither case did they separate economic development from moral progress.

But in the midst of all this “progress” the 19<sup>th</sup> century also had a strange foreboding: the sense of an ending, expressed in a feeling of boredom and alienation, in the experience of fear, and in an intuition of doom. You will read about such disquiet in the genial ravings of Nietzsche, in the stoicism of Weber, in a novel by Flaubert, in the philosophy of Kierkegaard, and in the parapsychology of Freud. The 19<sup>th</sup> century came

to a close with an echo of ancient themes: the counterpoint between reason and faith, between secular progress and eschatology, between the vistas of a radiant future and of the end of all things.

It has been argued that there are moments in history in which a civilization becomes lucidly conscious of itself. They are not easy moments. They are often terrible. They are moments of great conflict and death, in which everything that such civilization represents seems to be at stake. And there are sometimes people on whose shoulders weigh a great responsibility that are called upon to say what it all means, and they rise to the occasion. Among the texts that you will read in this course are two speeches delivered at two such moments, in antiquity and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century respectively: Pericles' Funeral Oration and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. They are terse and very intense. Between them they condense in red-hot simplicity the conversations of the West.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is a much shorter period than antiquity, even if we stretch it from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was a period of great intellectual productivity, and of momentous history making. Unlike the ancient world, we have not lost the documents of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century relied on the achievements of many ages past –including those of antiquity. It was a century of change, novelty, progress, evolution, great fears and great hopes. The modern university took shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the basis of older institutions. The “bourgeois” notion of the individual in all its depth and complexity was of paramount concern. Some of the biggest themes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century include the relationship of power, freedom, and morality; necessity, diversity, and progress; and identity, responsibility, and the meaning of human nature. Each of these takes on difference significance when individuals are understood as basic, and when social relations are judged according to the expectations of progress rather than tradition. Some of these themes join the themes of the ancient world. This connection is most evident in the Western notion of democracy and all its connotations. We will transit through many of those bridges between the ancient and the 19<sup>th</sup> century worlds.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

You are expected to read each of the assignments for all class meetings; you are to prepare a short paper (practicum or brief) on each of the six (6) reading assignments (3 from each half of the class), much as a lawyer might prepare for a courtroom. Each short paper should identify a key theme in the assigned reading, explain how it is addressed in the text, and develop an argument of your own related to that theme. Do not just give general background. Your argument may support the author to one we have already read, or pursue some other agenda. What is most important is that you do not simply state an opinion, but present an argument clearly related to the text under consideration and supported with logic and/or evidence. This must be your original work, your “value added” to classic texts.

In each discussion section, students will be divided into groups and assigned different texts. Members of each group will be responsible for helping to initiate discussion once every two to three weeks. Your written short papers should prepare you for oral discussion. Whenever you have completed your brief or practicum you should be able to present your argument orally (without reading it) if called on to do so. Briefs must be turned in at the class in which we discuss the work you address. You may discuss your briefs with others, but they should be individual products.

Briefs should be typed (double-spaced, wide-margined, with spelling and grammar checked) and you should pay attention to how you present your ideas. Briefs are to be about two (2) pages long (700 words, or the standard length of an Op-Ed column in *The New York Times*) and never exceed 1000 words). Make sure to use that limited space effectively. Your preceptor will respond in terms of intellectual content, logical presentation of an argument, focus, and quality of writing. S/he will grade you, but also try to help you develop your skills and knowledge.

**WEB PAGE AND ONLINE PARTICIPATION:** a web page has been created for this course, using the Blackboard system. You will be able to reach this from NYU Home as soon as you register.

The web page contains the syllabus and will have announcements, such as any possible changes of schedule. It will also give you private access to grade information. Most important, the web page includes access to an online message system that allows you to communicate with the course instructors and your fellow students. This is designed to enable you to carry on discussion outside of discussion sessions. You can pose a question; offer an answer to one posed by someone else, or simply comment. Indeed, as a requirement of the course, we ask that you offer a question or comment at least once each week starting with the second week. Of course, you can also communicate privately with your preceptor or Professor Corradi.

**ORAL PARTICIPATION:** Discussion sections are a vital part of this course. You must not only attend, but also participate. You are welcome to ask questions after lectures, but with 160 students in the class this will not be a real chance for exchange. This is why we have discussion sections. You can ask your preceptor for help in better understanding lectures or readings, but it is also important to discuss meanings and implications with your fellow students. Your preceptor may ask you to present interpretations and arguments. He or she may also pose questions to challenge your thinking. You will be graded on your participation in discussion sections –not on whether you are always right, but on whether you join in and make a real intellectual effort.

**EXAMINATIONS:** The midterm and final examinations are required. On the midterm, you will have to answer two (2) questions of your choice, from a set of four (4) of my choice, out of a list of at least eight (8), which I will circulate in advance. The final will have the same format, but you will be required to answer three (3) questions and the study list may be longer. The final will be cumulative, meaning that you can be asked to relate more recent work to readings discussed earlier in the class. We will take improvement in both briefs and exam results into consideration.



GRADING: Your grades will be computed as follows:

Briefs:	30%
Midterm:	25%
Final:	40%
Oral and online Participation	5%

PRECEPTORS: Your preceptor is a full teacher in this course, not a teaching assistant. Each preceptor works closely with Professor Corradi to plan for discussion sections, grading, and other activities. S/he is your main contact if you need help or just want to discuss coursework further. S/he is also primarily responsible for grading your work.

READINGS: Books containing required readings are for sale at the NYU Bookstore. BUY FROM THE PLAN IN THIS SYLLABUS, NOT THE LIST AT THE BOOKSTORE. Many of these books are also widely available in used bookstores in the city. It is not crucial that you have any specific edition (but see suggestions in the plan). All readings are also available online. I have indicated web addresses in the Plan (you can have alternative versions with a search engine). In all cases there are also web-based discussions of the texts, links to essays about them, and sometimes summaries. Where translation is an issue, I shall indicate which translation I prefer. There is no rule against using any of these resources (or those in the library). BUT THE WRITTEN WORK YOU TURN IN MUST BE YOUR OWN CREATION. If you quote, use quotation marks and give sources.

## PLAN

WEEK 1	Introduction: On reading, interpreting, and analyzing texts.
<b>Part I:</b>	<b>Power, Freedom, and Morality in Antiquity</b>
WEEK 2	<i>Bible:</i> The Book of Genesis (Preferred version: the New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version; numerous versions online, e.g.:

<http://www.hti.umich.edu/r/rsv/>

More Genesis, begin *Bible*: The Book of Exodus

Supplementary reading: Jorge Luis Borges, "Everything and Nothing." [http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node\\_id=466420](http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=466420)

WEEK 3

More Exodus

Thucydides (c.460/455-c.399 BCE): Pericles' Funeral Oration from *The Peloponnesian War* (Book 2.34-46) (various versions online)

Sophocles: Oedipus the King

(<http://sophocles.thefreelibrary.com/Oedipus-The-King/3-1>)

Supplementary reading: Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1982.

WEEK 4

Plato: *Republic*, esp. Books 1,2,4,7,9

(<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>)

Continue Plato

WEEK 5

Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, esp. Books I-IV

(<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachean.html>)

Epictetus: *Enchiridion* (also called The Handbook; composed of selections from *Discourses*, Books I, II, and IV

(<http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epichench.html>)

WEEK 6

*Bible*: The Gospel According to Luke; (supplement: The Gospel According to John)

*Bible*: St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Supplementary reading: Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief. The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, New York: Random House, 2003.

WEEK 7

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

(<http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html>)

Augustine: *Confessions*, esp. Books I, IV, VII, and X

(<http://www.ccel.org/a/augustine/confessions/confessions.html>)

More on Augustine

Supplementary reading: Michel Serres, *Rome: The Book of Foundations*. Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1991.

MIDTERM EXAM

Part II:

**Individual, Society and Choice in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Modernity**

WEEK 8

R.W. Emerson: "Self Reliance"

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>)

Emerson, Continued

WEEK 9

J.S. Mill: On Liberty

[http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/MillJS0172/OnLibertyAndSubjecti  
on/HTMLs/0159\\_Pt01\\_OnLiberty.html](http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/MillJS0172/OnLibertyAndSubjecti<br/>on/HTMLs/0159_Pt01_OnLiberty.html))

More on Mill

WEEK 10

Darwin: *On The Origin of Species*

[http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-origin-of-  
species/](http://www.literature.org/authors/darwin-charles/the-origin-of-<br/>species/))

K. Marx and F. Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*

<http://marx.thefreelibrary.com/Communist-Manifesto>)

WEEK 11

K. Marx: selection on 'alienated labour' from *The Economic and  
Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844manuscripts/lab  
our.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844manuscripts/lab<br/>our.htm))

Supplement, *Capital*, Chapter I

[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-  
c1/cho1.htm#S1](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-<br/>c1/cho1.htm#S1))

WEEK 12

S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

<http://home.ddc.net/ygg/etext/fear.htm>)

More Kierkegaard

WEEK 13

F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, esp. First Essay and  
Second Essay, sections 1-4

<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/genealogytofc.htm>)

More Nietzsche

WEEK 14

A. Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address (online in any website  
verified against the version at the National Archives)

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (complete novel)

Conclusion: Whence and wither the West?

Supplementary reading: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and  
the Last Man*, New York: Penguin.1992.

FINAL EXAM

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