The Birth of the Human | The Modern Fantasy of Prehistory (1750-2010)
Professor Stefanos Geroulanos
Core Curriculum Course, Spring 2018. CORE-UA 400
TTh 3:30-4:45 – 19 West 4th Street, #101

When was “the human” born? Where do human beings come from? What was early humanity like? How has it changed or progressed since those times? What characteristics of human beings are particularly human, constitutive of our essence or our being? How long ago were those early times? What was language like at first? Did culture proper emerge in Greece? In India? At a historical fount of races and nations? In “primitive” culture? Which origin should be taken most seriously—that of the human species, or that of modern culture? Were the “early times” a kind of utopia that needs to be recaptured? Is the fact of our biological singularity and evolution to be identified with our cultural difference or proximity? And, given change and progress, where is mankind today, and where is it going? What would be the effect of seeking to reconceive and reconstitute a society based on the supposed purity of the origin?

This overview course in modern intellectual history does not seek to answer these questions—it seeks to explain how they came about, how they came to be asked in the ways we ask them, and how they came to matter. It takes on a complex and highly popular fantasy, namely the idea that humanity and modernity can be traced to a prehistoric moment when “the human” was born out of the animal. The course thus obsesses over the modern compulsion to re-divine and often re-live the supposed moment when humanity can be glimpsed at its most basic, most archaic, most “primitive” or “native” moment. Today we most often identify it with a movement of Homo sapiens “out of Africa,” but such a claim co-exists with theories of the origin of language, of the origin of Indo-European languages and myths, nationalist theories of a communal purity, theories of representation in cave art, technological theories concerning manmade tools and human posture, and so on. These are mixed systems, most often co-existing but sometimes conflicting. We will be concerned with both philosophical texts and scientific efforts to identify and clarify this origin, with the political implications of such origins, and not least with efforts to determine who (which discipline? which political party?) should have authority for determining and using “the origin.” Why does “prehistory” matter to us, and how has it mattered over the course of the last two centuries? What stories and accounts have replaced and complemented biblical narratives? We will read some of the crucial texts in the period from the 1750s to the 1960s, with some more contemporary references, tracking the answers offered by philosophers, anthropologists, biologists, linguists, poets, and politicians.

The obsession with reconstituting prehistory is closely tied to modern colonialism and racism, but also to universalism and at times even anti-colonialism. It concerns modern figures of sovereignty and power, but it also speaks to the ways in which European and American intellectuals and scientists produce and negotiate knowledge about humanity itself. Above all, because intellectuals have used their analytical tools and priorities to project this highly speculative moment of a “cradle of humanity” backwards in time, it has often been synonymous, even identical, with the way thinkers have defined humanity, and suffers from ideological and usually fantastical components.

Our purpose is to trace the principal currents and moments in the understanding of human prehistory, from the early 1800s to the present. It is also to learn to read closely and critique the ideological premises and consequences of political and humanistic ideas, ideas about ourselves, where we come from, what we aim for—not only in the racial theories of the 19th and early 20th-century but just as much in the often far more enticing 20th- and 21st-century versions.
Lectures

1. **What is “Prehistory?”** Introduction to a Modern Fantasy  
   [T 1/23]  
   In-class powerpoint. *Genesis* 1-2.
   In-class film: *The Ascent of Man* (Jacob Bronowski, BBC, 1973), 3-min. clip from ep.1, “Lower than the Angels.”

2. **The Entry into Prehistory: “State of Nature”, “Colonized Savages”**  
   [Th 1/25]  
   Reading: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), entire.
   First section – intros, partial screening of *Cannibal Tours* (Dennis O’Rourke, 1982) [F 1/26]

3. **The Stages of Humanity & the Construction of Prehistory around 1800**  
   [T 1/30]  
   Marquis de Condorcet, *Outline of a Historical View of the Progress of Mankind* (1795), 3-24.
   Johann G. Herder, *Yet Another Philosophy of History* (1774), 3-16, 21-26, 32-37.

4. **Anthropogenesis and Myths of Origin**  
   [Th 2/1]  
   Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), 273-303.

5. **Historical Design and Linguistic Discovery around 1800**  
   [T 2/6]  
   Bopp, *Comparative Grammar* (1833), preface, v-xvi.

6. **Geological and Evolutionary Perspectives: Populating the Worlds before Adam**  
   [Th 2/8]  

7. **The Border between Ape and Man as Reorganized by Darwin**  
   [T 2/13]  
   Reading: Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871): 17-87, 152-171, 621-651. [intro., chs 1,2,3,5,19]
   [First Take-Home Paper Topics To Be Shared]

8. **The Language of Paradise: Language and Nation in the Nineteenth Century**  
   [Th 2/15]  
   Reading: *Genesis* 6-9, 11-12.
   Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation?* (1882)
   One more text TBA.

9. **The Deployment of the Ancients, I: Classicism and Modernity after Winckelmann**  
   [T 2/20]  
   Reading: J. J. Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), 71-78, 111-123
   One more reading, TBA.

10. **The Deployment of the Ancients, II: Opera, Myth, and Biopower**  
    [Th 2/22]  
    Reading: Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future* (1849), Parts I, IV, V and follow the outlines of the rest.
    Wagner, “Judaism in Music,” (1850), selection
    [First Take-Home Paper is Due.]

11. **Evolutionary Humanity I: The Primitive as Category**  
    [T 2/27]  
12. Secularization and Prehistory [Th 3/1]
   William Robertson-Smith, Religion of the Semites (1889), lecture 8.

13. Prehistory and the Archaeological Imagination [T 3/6]
   Reading: Arthur Evans, The Palace of Minos (1921), read the first chapter (skim preface and table of contents)
   G. Elliot Smith, Bronislaw Malinowski, Culture: The Diffusion Controversy.
   V. Gordon Childe, The Prehistory of European Society (1958), selection

   Reading: Max Müller: “India: What Can It Teach Us?” (1883), short selection.
   V. Gordon Childe, The Aryans (1927), introduction.

Spring Break [3/10-3/18]

15. Freud, Part One [T 3/20]
   Reading: Sigmund Freud (1913), Totem and Taboo, chapter 1
   Ernst Haeckel, The Riddle of the Universe (1899), 58-71, 121-138.

16. The Psyche, from Animism to Psychoanalysis (Freud, Part Two) [Th 3/22]
   Reading: Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo, chapter 4.

17. Nazism, Race, and the Ancients [T 3/27]
   Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich, 50-71.
   Alfred Bäumler, “Hellas and Germania.”

   Reading: UNESCO Declaration on Race (1950)
   Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Race and History” (1953-54).

19. Catholicism and Human Origins in the Twentieth Century [T 4/3]
   Leopold Sédar Senghor, short selection on Teilhard

20. The ‘Extinction of the Native’ and the ‘End’ of Anthropology [Th 4/5]
   Reading: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (1955), chapters 1, 4, 9, 24-28, 38.

   [Second Take-Home Paper Topics To Be Shared]

21. Cave Paintings from Altamira through Lascaux to Chauvet [T 4/10]
   Film: Cave of Forgotten Dreams (Werner Herzog, 2010); clips to be shown during lecture and section.

22. Tools and Technology: Homo faber’s Prehistoric Diversity in a Cybernetic World [Th 4/12]
   Reading: André Leroi-Gourhan, Gesture and Speech (1965), 3-4; 18-24; 25-8; 51-5; 117-44; 145-54; 166-87; 313-25; 401-9.
   Film: 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)
   intro and concluding section (please watch the whole film on your own).

   Reading: Robert Ardrey, The Territorial Imperative, selection.
Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man* (1973), 15-45

[Second Take-Home Paper is Due.] [Final Paper Topics Shared]

24. **Decline and Temporal Reorganization of Progress: Anthropogenesis, State, War** [Th 4/19]
   Film [perhaps in full in section]: *Dead Birds* (Robert Gardner, 1963).

25. **Evolutionary Humanity II, The Neanderthal as “our” Double** [T 4/24]
   Reading: William Golding, *The Inheritors*, selection

26. **Meaning and Symbolism** [Th 4/26]
   Reading: Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man” (1966), in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 33-55.

27. **Prehistory Today** [T 5/1]

28. **Conclusion: Is a Birth of Humanity Necessary?** [Th 5/3]
   Reading: James C. Scott, *Against the Grain*, 1-36.
   [Final Paper Due]

Final Exam

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**Instructors**
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Assistant Instructors:
Devin Thomas  
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Friday 11-12:15 [sec. 025] and 12:30-1:45 [sec. 026]  
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**Organization**

The course is structured around two lectures and one recitation per week.

*Texts and Ideas* courses in the Core Curriculum are intended to foster your appreciation of humanistic learning, and provide a foundation of your liberal arts education through encounters with literary and philosophical works that have been influential in shaping the contemporary world and significant instances in which the ideas in these works have been debated, developed, appropriated, or rejected.

**Lecture:** Lectures consist of a mixture of general discussion of the subject of a particular lecture as noted in the outline and close readings of certain of the texts we are reading that week. Lectures intertwine with one another, through recurrent themes, and as a result some books or texts are approached more than once. You are expected to have read the texts before each lecture, and I may call on you. The use of computers and phones is not permitted. Reading amounts to about 35-55 pages per lecture.

**Participation:** Presence and participation is considered an absolute necessity: one absence is fine, but further absences will adversely affect student grades. *Every* absence from a recitation without a doctor’s note will count against the participation grade, and three absences from a recitation will simply zero the in-class participation grade. Please make a point of bringing the books with you to the sections; not doing so hampers you as to what points you can make, how you can engage discussion, what questions you can ask about the text itself. Again, you may not use computers, tablets, or phones in class. As importantly, your presence is not enough: this is about arguing and learning how to argue, how to read texts closely and capaciously, and vigorous participation and argument is expected of you. Your opinion and your position matter, and articulating them in the most effective manner comes with effort, contribution, and debate!

**Recitation prep:** Students are expected to write short response papers (about 1 page total) to aid in recitation discussions, and to bring them to the lecture on the Thursday evening before a recitation; each of these response papers should consist of a page discussing the texts of the week and should then include 2-3 questions on the texts to help prompt discussion.

**Take-home Midterm Essays, Final Essay, Final Exam:** Students are also expected to write two 3-page take-home midterm papers, due on February 22 and April 17 respectively. A 6-page final paper will be due before the last class, May 3. There will be a final exam, on the date assigned by the registrar. Questions for all three papers will be handed out ten days in advance by the instructors.

Plagiarism in any assignment will result in a failing grade for the class.

**Grade Breakdown.** The grade breakdown is organized around the Core Program’s requirements for papers and exams.

- **First Paper:** 10%
- **Second Paper:** 15%
- **Final Paper:** 20%
- **Final Exam:** 15%
- **Participation:** 40%  (13% response papers; 27% in-class participation)