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? In Africa? 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?” Modern Fantasy and Secular Science [W 9/8]
   Reading: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (1755), 1-50 (middle), 67 (middle)-71.
2. Dating the “State of Nature”: “Colonized Savages” and the Dive into Prehistory [M 9/13]
   Reading: Johann G. Herder, Another Philosophy of History (1774), 3-16, 18-27.
3. The Stages of Humanity & the Construction of Prehistory around 1800 [W 9/15]
   Reading: Johann G. Herder, Yet Another Philosophy of History (1774), 32-35, 109-117.
   Marquis de Condorcet, Outline of a Historical View of the Progress of Mankind (1795), 3-20.
   Reading: Tacitus, Germania, sections 1-8, 11-15, 19.
   Johann G. Herder, Myths of Origin (1833), preface, xvi (just skim the technical parts!)
   Edward Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776), 273-303.
5. The Language of Paradise: The Uses of the Ancients, I [W 9/22]
   Reading: J. J. Winckelmann, History of the Art of Antiquity (1764), 71-78, 111-123.
   William Jones, On the Hindus: The Third Anniversary Discourse (1785), brief selection
   Reading: Franz Bopp, Comparative Grammar (1833), preface, v-xvi (just skim the technical parts!)
   Hegel, Introduction to the Philosophy of History (1829), 12-23.
7. Geological and Evolutionary Perspectives: Populating the Worlds before Adam [W 9/29]
   [First Take-Home Paper Topics To Be Shared]
9. The Uses of the Ancients, II: Classicism and Modernity [W 10/6]
   Heinrich Schliemann, Mycenae (1878), 333-350.
   [First Take-Home Paper is Due, 10/8.]
Indigenous Peoples Day – No Class M 10/11 (or 10/12)
10. Evolutionary Humanity I: The Primitive as Category [W 10/13]
    Reading: E. B. Tylor, Primitive Culture (1871), 1-28, 418-429.
    L. H. Morgan, Ancient Society (1877): Table of Contents, v-viii, 343-357, 523-527.
    F. Max Müller, Lectures on the Science of Language Delivered at the Royal Institution (1861), 1-27
11. Matrilineal Society, Matriarchy, and Marxism [M 10/18]
12. Secularization and Prehistory: The Totem and the King [W 10/20]
    William Robertson-Smith, Religion of the Semites (1889), lecture 8.
13. **Freud, Part One**  
   **Reading:** Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), chapter 1  

14. **The Psyche, from Animism to Psychoanalysis (Freud, Part Two)**  
   **Reading:** Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, chapter 4.

15. **Colonial Motifs, Peace, Power, and War**  
   **Reading:** H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind*, selection TBD.  
   Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos* (1921), read the first chapter (& skim preface and table of contents).

16. **Nazism, Race, and the Ancients**  
   **Reading:** Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), short selection.  
   Alfred Bäumler, “Hellas and Germania” (1935).

17. **The Birth of UNESCO: The Singularity and Diversity of Humanity**  
   **Reading:** UNESCO Statement on Race (1950)  

18. **Catholicism meets the Future: Teilhard from China to Africa**  
   **Reading:** Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), 29-30; 174-191; 245-64; (264-72)  
   **Film:** *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1961), which you can watch here.

19. **The ‘Vanishing Native’ and the ‘End’ of Anthropology**  
   **Reading:** Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), chapters 1, 4, 8, 24-28, 38.  
   [Second Take-Home Paper Topics To Be Shared]

20. **Cave Paintings from Altamira through Lascaux to Chauvet**  
   **Reading:** Georges Bataille, “A Visit to Lascaux” and “The Passage from Animal to Man and the Birth of Art,” in *The Cradle of Humanity*, 47-81.  
   **Film:** *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2010), here.

21. **Evolutionary Humanity II, The Neanderthal as “our” Double**  
   **Reading:** forthcoming.  
   [Second Take-Home Paper is Due in class]

**Thanksgiving Recess: no class 11/24, no recitations**

22. **“Out of Africa”**  
   **Film:** *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968). Please watch the whole film on your own.
23. **Tools and Technology: Prehistory in a Cybernetic World** [W 12/1]

André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (1965), 18-21; 117-44; 183-85; 401-408

Optional: Ben James “A Sneaky Theory of Where Language Came From,” *The Atlantic* (June 10, 2018) [link](#)

[Final Paper Topics Shared]

24. **“Primitive Warfare:” the State, Nonstate Peoples, and War** [M 12/6]


*Film clips:* *Dead Birds* (Robert Gardner, 1963), which you can watch [here](#).


25. **Feminism and Prehistory** [W 12/8]


One more text, TBD.

26. **Prehistory Today**

27. **Prehistory Today: Is a Birth of Humanity Necessary?** [M 12/13]

Overview of the Course and Exam Prep


[Final Paper Due in class]

**Final Exam:** to be scheduled

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**Instructors**

Professor Stefanos Geroulanos  
Office Hours: MW 12:30-1:30  
Zoom link: [https://nyu.zoom.us/j/2326390671](https://nyu.zoom.us/j/2326390671)  
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Alex Langstaff  
Office Hours: W 1:30-2:45, F 10-12& by appointment  
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al5348@nyu.edu  
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Alec Shea  
Office Hours: TTh 4:00-5:30, and by appointment.  
Zoom link: [https://nyu.zoom.us/j/9099123581](https://nyu.zoom.us/j/9099123581)  
ads845@nyu.edu  
Zoom Meeting ID: 909 912 3581
**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 phones is not permitted.** Reading varies but averages to about 50-60 pages per lecture.

**Participation:** Presence and participation is an absolute necessity; one absence is fine, but further absences will adversely affect student grades. Consistent absences from a recitation without a doctor’s note will count heavily against the participation grade. Please make a point of bringing the readings 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 only use computers and other devices for bringing up the readings; use of extraneous apps, social media, etc, will lead to a solid decline in your grade. As importantly, **your presence is not enough:** this is about arguing and learning how to argue, how to read texts closely and capaciously, and **vigoruous 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 papers (a long paragraph) answering a question set by the instructors, and to bring them to the lecture on the Wednesday afternoon before a recitation. Each of these response papers discuss the texts of the week and may include 2-3 questions afterward to help prompt discussion.

**Take-home Midterm Essays, Final Essay, Final Exam:** Students are expected to write two 3-page take-home papers, due on October 8 and November 22 respectively. A 6-page final paper will be due in the last class, December 13. Per the rules of the Core Program, there will be a final exam on an appointed date. Questions for all 3 papers will be handed out ten days in advance by the instructors. Delayed submissions will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade per day.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism in any assignment will result in a failing grade for the assignment and will be referred to the Dean's Office for further sanction. A failing grade in an assignment makes passing the class **very** hard. Repeat: do not plagiarize or you will almost certainly fail the course.

**CoVID-19:** We will strictly adhere to all COVID regulations specified by the university.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper Type</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Final Paper</th>
<th>Second Paper</th>
<th>Participation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Paper</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
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The Core Program has a pretty detailed description of grades, and it goes as follows (we have no choice but to follow it).

- A: Clearly Superior Work. Maximum 10% of the class.
- A-: Clearly superior but with an obvious shortcoming. No more than 10-15% of the class.
- B+: Very good work. 10-15% of the class.
- B: Good
- B-: Good but with some obvious deficits in logic or execution.
- C+: More than satisfactory but not adequate to grade as “good.”
- C: Satisfactory
- C-: Less than satisfactory.
- D+: Poor but with some characteristics of effort, logic, execution.
- D: Poor.
- F: Fails to rise to the level of creditable achievement.

Students may contest the grade awarded to a midterm, final paper, or final exam assignment, by lodging a detailed appeal with the professor that explains why the grade awarded does not represent the argument, logic, detail, and execution involved in the student’s paper or exam. There is no guarantee that the professor is a more lenient grader than your AI!