

Agata Bielik-Robson

SEMINAR: Major Trends in Contemporary Humanities

Author:	Prof. dr hab. Agata Bielik-Robson	
	Major Trends in Contemporary Humanities	
	WINTER Semester Year 1	WINTER Semester Year 2
HOURS	30	30
FREQUENCY	4 x 45 every two weeks	4 x 45 every two weeks

THE COURSE CORRESPONDS TO TOPICS: Contemporary philosophy, history of ideas, social thought, political thought.

ASSESSMENT:

- The course is available to all students (General course open to all students)
- The course to be conducted in English
- Credit requirements: active participation in classes
- Time of classes: Tuesday
- Begins: 17:00
- Duration: 17:00-20:00 (4 x 45 minutes) every two weeks (for a total of 60 hours)
- Commencement date: November 6th

COURSE AIMS AND CONTENT:

The aim of the course is to offer a comprehensive panorama of contemporary humanities: its major trends, arguments, and polemics. The course is interdisciplinary and should be of interest to anybody pursuing the following disciplines: philosophy, theory of culture, social sciences, political theory, and literary criticism. Although focused on the most recent developments, the course offers also a genealogical approach, by pointing to the decisive influence of five major thinkers: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. It begins (and ends) with posing the question about modernity: do we still live in the modern era? If so, to what extent are we still influenced by its historiosophic ‘grand narrative’? And if not, what happens after the ‘end of History’? The first part of the course, dedicated to the 1 year students, discusses the legacies which formed the main theoretical positions of today’s humanities. The second part of the course, dedicated to the 2 year students, focuses on the inner polemics between various camps and schools.

KNOWLEDGE TO BE ACQUIRED:

Participants are expected to acquire: (1) a basic orientation in the current debates in humanities; (2) a knowledge of arguments used in the polemics between different contemporary social and political theories.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES:

Knowledge:

- Improved knowledge on the place and role of the humanities, the social, exact and natural sciences in early and contemporary culture;
- Comprehensive understanding of the terminology of the humanities and social sciences and knows how to use it;
- Knowing in depth the relationships among different humanities disciplines studying works of art in culture and the sociological context of cultural activity;
- Knowing and understanding the main methods of analysing and interpreting products of culture in conjunction with tradition;
- Having good organized knowledge on the main trends in philosophical and social thought in a historical and contemporary perspective.

Skills:

- Selecting and interpreting information from different textual, iconographic and electronic sources;
- Analysing artistic, philosophical and sociological texts using the appropriate research tools, and presenting the results of such work;
- Basic research skills enabling the formulation of research problems from the humanities, philosophy, literature, and arts;
- Basic skills in using interdisciplinary research methods and tools to analyse phenomena of contemporary culture;
- The capacity to take part in conferences, symposia and discussions on literary, artistic and philosophical topics.

Social Competence:

- Understanding the dynamics of scientific, cultural and social development and keeping up with new research methods and paradigms;
- Understanding the principles of tolerance and cultural differences;
- Understanding the importance of Europe's cultural diversity and heritage;
- Participating actively in cultural and social life taking advantage of all forms offered by media, the arts and science

TIME & VENUE:

IFiS PAN (Staszic Palace) – Tuesday: 16.00-17.00.

The Syllabus.**Part 1****Major Trends in Contemporary Humanities: Panorama
(Winter Semester Year 1: 8 sessions, 32 hours)**

1. **The Panorama of Contemporary Humanities and The Transformations of Modernity.**
The subjects to be discussed: What is modernity? Are we still-modern, late-modern or post-modern? Have we every been modern? *Readings:* Marshal Berman, *All That Is Solid*

Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity, London” Verso, 1983; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: The Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: The Manchester University Press, 1984.

2. **The Hegelian Legacy: The End of History?** *The subjects to be discussed:* What is the status of modern historiography? Is contemporaneity the end/ fulfilment of the modern grand narrative? Does History exist? What are the eschatological roots of Hegel’s notion of the end of history? How does Alexandre Kojève and Francis Fukuyama revise the Hegelian thesis? *Readings:* Alexandre Kojève, “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel: Complete Text of the Last Two Lectures of the Academic Year 1933-1934,” trans. Joseph J. Carpino, in *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 3/ 2, 3 (Winter 1973); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, New York: Macmillan, 1992.
3. **The Heideggerian Legacy: The Post-Humanist Turn.** *The subjects to be discussed:* How does the Heideggerian ‘thinking on Being’ lead to the demise of the humanist paradigm? What is the new ‘task of man’ elucidated in Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism”? *Readings:* Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper, 1977; Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1972.
4. **The Freudian Legacy: The Death Drive.** *The subjects to be discussed:* To what extent does Freud’s discovery support Heidegger and Kojève in their understanding of man as ‘being-towards-death’? What are social, ethical, and political consequences of the ‘thanatic’ anthropology? What is thanatopolitics? *Readings:* Jean-Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar nr 7, trans. Dennis Potter, London: Routledge, 1992.
5. **The Marxian Legacy: The Spectre.** *The subjects to be discussed:* What is the significance of Marx’s marriage of philosophy and economy today? Are Marx’s diagnoses and prognostics still valid? What is the meaning of ‘revolution’? *Readings:* Jacques Derrida, and others: *Ghostly Demarcations. A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s ‘Specters of Marx,’* ed. Michael Sprinker, London: Verso, 1999.
6. **The Theological Legacy: Post-Secularism.** *The subjects to be discussed:* How does ‘death of God’ determine the shape of modernity? Is it atheistic, a-theistic, ant-theistic, para-theistic, or ana-theistic? What – if anything – is still valid and valuable in the Judeo-Christian tradition today? What are the religious sources of universalism? Why is universalism worth fighting for? *Readings:* Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute, Or Why is Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, London: Verso, 2000.
7. **The Vitalist Legacy: Biopolitics.** *The subjects to be discussed:* Is modernity a biopolitical paradigm? What is political sovereignty and why is it linked to death? What does it mean to ‘gover the living’? What are the current prospects of political theology? *Readings:* Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, ed. Francois Ewald, New

York: Picador, 2016; Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

8. **The Materialism Legacy: New Materialism.** *The subjects to be discussed:* What is the philosophy of immanence? What is new about the Deleuzian type of materialism? What are its consequences for such categories as subjectivity and human difference? In what way is it post-humanist? *Readings:* Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, London: Athlone Press, 1994.

Part 2

Major Trends in Contemporary Humanities: Polemics

(Winter Semester Year 2, 7 sessions, 28 hours)

1. **The Question of Enlightenment: Modernity Accused.** *The subjects to be discussed:* To what extent should we defend enlightenment today? Can we rescue it thanks to the ‘saving critique’? Does ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’ work? *Readings:* Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992; Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
2. **The Question of Emancipation: The Shifts between Left and Right.** *The subjects to be discussed:* Can the Left proceed without Enlightenment? Should the Neoconservatives be the only representatives of Enlightenment today? Why has modernity failed to deliver its emancipatory promise? *Readings:* Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
3. **The Question of Nihilism: Theological Genealogy.** *The subjects to be discussed:* Is modernity nihilistic? Why is there a need to press ‘beyond the secular reason’? *Readings:* Erich Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, New York: Wiley, 2005.
4. **The Question of Naturalism: The Nietzschean Legacy.** *The subjects to be discussed:* To what extent does the Nietzschean concept of ‘Last Men’ apply to us today? Is biopolitics a ‘return to nature’? *Readings:* Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adriano del Caro, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Peter Sloterdijk, *Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the ‘Letter on Humanism’*, trans. M. Rorty, in *Environment and Planning*, vol. 27/ 2009.
5. **The Question of Universalism: Difference and Identity.** *The subjects to be discussed:* What is the politics of difference versus the politics of identity? How can we save (if this is possible) a universal perspective of the rights of man in the condition of late-modern dissemination of race, class, and gender? *Readings:* Alain Badiou, *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, London: Verso, 2001; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990.

6. **The Question of Liberty: A Decline of the Liberal Tradition?** *The subjects to be discussed:* Is liberal theory in decline? Why is it under attack from both Right and Left? Is there anything within the liberal tradition still worth being defended? *Readings:* Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso, 2005; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

7. **The Question of Change: Revolution or Reform?** *The subjects to be discussed:* If change is inscribed into the nature of modernity, how should it be effected: through a violent revolution or through a moderate reform? *Readings:* Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing. Hegel and The Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London: Verso, 2014; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, 1994.