



Understanding the Crisis of Meaning in Western Thought

Seminar Series

Venue: RHB 350, Goldsmiths, University of London

Conveners: Michail Theodosiadis, Ville Takala and

Selena Gray

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?
- Friedrich Nietzsche

Man cannot stand a meaningless life
- Carl Jung

What next after postmodernism? What could or should follow the current period of nihilism in the west? Can a sense of meaning, not simply at the level of individuals, but entire societies, be rediscovered once it has been lost? What social and political forces emerge when shared notions of right and wrong, high and low, can no longer be agreed upon?

More than a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche famously proclaimed that God was dead and it was us who had killed him. 'How can we live with ourselves after this deed?', he further prompted. Following the traumatic events of the twentieth century, few in Europe had the energy left to disagree. A period of widespread nihilism and hedonistic materialism, cynically exploited by an economic system built around mass production and consumption, followed. This era is with us still.

Building on the work of some of the greatest thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries, this seminar series unpacks the crisis of meaning in contemporary western thought. By reviving notions of common purpose and collective and individual responsibility, the series explores the possibilities for transcending the current impasse.

The seminar series convenes six times in the 2020 spring term. The sessions start with an introduction to the author's key ideas by one of the participants, followed by an open discussion. The series is open to all, but participants are asked to sign up to group updates by emailing enli.reading@gmail.com prior to attending.

Timetable

Session 1: 16.1.2020, 6 - 7 pm

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe - Faust (First Part, 1321-1529) (1808), presented by Michail Theodosiadis

Following Nietzsche's idea that life is endless suffering, on which humans must ascribe a particular meaning in order to ease affliction, we elaborate on Goethe's Faust. In this work the character of Mephistopheles, a devil, the serpent behind the Garden of Eden, presents himself to Faust as the spirit of ultimate negation. If life is endless suffering, the only meaning that can be ascribed to life is its non existence, says Mephistopheles. Here Goethe offers a primary definition of nihilism that we will explore in upcoming sessions.

Session 2: 30.1.2020, 6 - 7 pm

Carl Jung - The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man (1928), presented by Ville Takala

Carl Jung noticed that many people in his day were afflicted by feelings of insignificance, inadequacy, and hopelessness. Jung's emphasis on the positive aspects of religion—most notably Christianity—on society, highlights the importance of acknowledging the need for a spiritual revival, for rediscovering the meaning behind transcendent archetypes deeply incorporated in lore and popular tradition. In preparation for the seminar, participants are encouraged to watch the following short interview with Jung conducted by the BBC in 1959.

Session 3: 13.2.2020, 6 - 7 pm

Simone Weil - The Need for Roots (pp. 2 - 9 and pp. 41 - 41) (1949), presented by Selena Gray

The French philosopher Simone Weil sees uprootedness, namely, the destruction of the past, the loss of historical continuance and the dissolution of community, as one of the greatest threats facing humanity. In the Need for Roots, Weil attributes the rise of National Socialism to this phenomenon. Weil's approach not only alerts us to the potentially detrimental effects of nihilism, but offers modes of constructing collective identities that shield against the perpetual threats of violent tribalism and racism.

Session 4: 27.2.2020, 6 - 7 pm

Martin Luther King Jr - I Have a Dream (1969), presented by TBC

Should a person be judged by the colour of their skin, their actions, or the content of their character? In his powerful speech against the evil of racial segregation, Martin Luther King Jr argues for individual responsibility as the antidote to racism and group chauvinism. Bemused by the contemporary identitarian tendency to replace racism with racialism, we reflect on King's text in order to discover alternative paths forward.

Session 5: 12.3.2020, 6 - 7 pm

Hannah Arendt - The Origins of Totalitarianism (pp. 565 - 592) (1951), presented by Helene Guldberg

In her seminal work, The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt writes of an era of calamity that has produced rootlessness to an unprecedented depth. The loneliness of the socially uprooted, 'superfluous' human beings, their loss of common sense, relieved them of any responsibility for the course of the world and unwittingly, prepared them for totalitarian organisation and, ultimately, domination. What does Arendt have to say about the loss of community, about the social disintegration the past decades caused? Arendt's analysis comes to us as a warning about the possible outcomes of rootlessness and the loss of shared values.

Session 6: 2.4.2020, 6 - 7 pm

Christopher Lasch - The Culture of Narcissism (Preface) (1979), presented by Susana Diaz Reixa

In the The Culture of Narcissism, Christopher Lasch explores the roots of the normalising of pathological narcissism in 20th-century American culture. Lasch identifies the roots of the rise of the contemporary narcissus in several countercultural movements of the sixties, which accelerated the loss of historical continuance and the decline of the family, initially eroded by the practical implementation of the eighteenth century ideology of unlimited economic growth. Lasch's position in favour of family, religion and tradition, simplicity of manners and open dialogue allows us to trace alternative routes against this highly erosive culture.