The Problem of *tabula rasa*:

Napoleon, Frankenstein, the Talented Mr. Ripley

Week 01 – Lecture 01
15 January 2009
What is the fundamental problem of the “modern individual”?

IN THEORY: “Modern” defined in opposition to “tradition”:

WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN --- tabula rasa ---

thoroughly rational --- thoroughly CLEAN.

What is the fundamental problem of the “modern individual”?

IN FACT: “Modern” comes about through

HYBRIDIZATION … “breeding” of “tradition” and novelty

NEVER CLEAN … ALWAYS MESSY
Key question for HS067:

What is the relationship between the individual and the community?

“Pre-modern” --- communitarian:
-- Understand the individual in terms of the whole

“Modern” --- individualist:
-- Understand the whole as a composite of individuals

Subjective Individualism: both gains and losses

• GAINS:
  – Gains: individual “human rights”;
  – You can “invent yourself”: not blood but merit
LOSSES:

Personal dislocation; personal identity

My bloodline/guild/command economy no longer tells me who I am

*Frankenstein*: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

http://www.geocities.com/mastown/links/mayberry_r.f.d.index.html
"I would rather be a fake somebody than a real nobody...."
“I would rather be a fake somebody than a real nobody....”

Americans: love the myth of the self-invented person

Here pictured: Jay Gatz from North Dakota
TABULA RASA: No blood dynasties, land inheritance, “natural” hierarchies or estages…

WHO AM I???: Need strategies of legitimation
Ambiguous character of "subjective individualism"

– Napoleon, Frankenstein, Ripley:

– UPSIDE: you can "invent yourself"—identity based not on blood but merit
– DOWNSIDE: enormous sense of loss: of a "cosmos"; an ancient world-order; categories; meaning systems all disrupted

– TRAUMA
Why willingly elect an absolutist dictator? [cf. 1933!]

Why return to semi-monarchy --- when you killed the last monarch in order to do away with monarchy? --- and put in its place a man with no royal bloodline?

Why return to a hybridized society --- partially “egalitarian” [revolutionary] but also partially based on inheritance / privilege / rank?

Why is hierarchy willingly chosen?

[Mary Douglas: body politic is written on the individual body.]
A NEED FOR ORDER
RE-ESTABLISHED
AFTER THE TRAUMA
OF CHAOS

Subjective Individualism:
both gains and losses
The French Revolution: Five Stages

I. 1789-1792:

Unlimited Faith in *tabula rasa*
Sacred Moment I:
20 June 1789 -- The Tennis Court Oath

“sacralization” === making sacred what is purely arbitrary / contingent
→ gives it a sense of seeming “necessary”

Sacred Moment II:
14 July 1789 -- Storming the Bastille
Sacred Moment III:
4 August 1789--- “A holocaust of privileges…”
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“A holocaust of privilege”;
“a delirium of sacrifice”

i.e.: a sacred sacrifice; a “burnt offering”

Abolition of the feudal regime → self-sacrifice of all the privileges which come from the feudal regime of Three Orders ---a sacred moment of sacrifice

Now what?
After the “holocaust,” wiping the slate clean [tabula rasa], getting rid of a society based on land and blood …

Who are “we”?
ANSWER: “We” are the human race starting all over again – from scratch.
A “regenerated” people of VIRTUE – interested only in the General Will.

Classical // Romantic:
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

• THREE KEY IDEAS:
• A) Original innocence
• B) Social Compact
• C) General Will
  • [la volonté générale]
“Original Innocence”

--- in the [mythical / classical?] “state of nature” we are innocent and transparent

--- “civilization” (society) corrupts us; we must wear masks and play roles

--- we need to “regenerate” ourselves – get back to primal innocence

Contrast with Biblical / Calvinist vision!

Rousseau: “Regenerated Man”

100% _virtuous_

Zero tolerance for _vice_

[Desires only the General Will; not one’s selfish individual will!]
Rousseau: “Regenerated Man”

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[Desires only the General Will; not one’s selfish individual will!]
LIGHTNING --- comes from the Supreme Being [i.e., “Nature”]

*Droits de l’Homme* = “Rights of Man” (i.e., Revolution of the Rights of Man)
[Wipes away tradition / particularities / history –
rather: what I am as a person. (Abstract/ Mathematical)]
• **Lightning** [FIRE!!!] strikes a crown and heraldry—symbol of noble prejudice / blood / genealogy

“Regenerated Man”: a hybrid of ancient and modern
“Regenerated Man”: hybridized ancient WITH MODERN Scientific - Political connections to electricity:

ability to re-vivify what was dead
1790s: Italian physician Luigi Galvani -- jolts frog muscles with spark from electrostatic machine.

Demonstrates electrical basis of nerve impulses.

By 1810s: word “galvanism” implied the release, through electricity, of mysterious life forces.

Mary Shelley recalled talks with Lord Byron and Percy Shelley” “Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things."
• Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*
  - Daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft [Vindication of Rights of Woman]
  - MW died giving birth to MS

• *Frankenstein*: birthing; giving birth --- but what is “natural”??

• ORPHANS: No one has two sets of parents: genealogy? Cultural identity? Cultural dislocation?

• Mary Shelley: 3 stillborn children; one dies later; enormous pain around childbirth
GAUGUIN, Paul: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* [1897]
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Frankenstein’s creature: “Who was I? Where did I come from?”
Orphan? Lost lineage??? A problem of identity….