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/eragon/links/mayberry_1o.d/index.html
"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

catch me if you can

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.]

Subjective Individualism: both gains and losses

A NEED FOR ORDER
RE-ESTABLISHED
AFTER THE TRAUMA
OF CHAOS

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...”
Sacred Moment III:
4 August 1789—“A holocaust of privileges…”

“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

Rousseau:
“Regenerated Man”
100% virtuous
Zero tolerance for vice
[Desires only the General Will; not one’s selfish individual will]
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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

Galvani: De Viribus Electricitatis in Motu Musculari (1792)
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…. 