

ENGL 741, Seminar in American Studies: “American Enlightenment”

Spring 2013

Tim Sweet tsweet@wvu.edu

T 1600-1850 Colson G10

By the time Kant wrote “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784), the international recognition of the United States with the 1783 Treaty of Paris had apparently provided one kind of answer—the prospect of political liberation through self-determination. Problems of slavery and other inequalities could be regarded as signs of the incompleteness of the project rather than as fundamental flaws (and abolitionists and advocates of women’s rights would soon advance such claims). In retrospect, accounts framed in terms of the Kantian positive (“man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” by overcoming “the inability to use one’s own reason without the guidance of another”) have been in dialectic with critical assessments identifying the project of enlightenment as the technological domination of external nature and the repression of internal nature. This course will return to the American eighteenth century to examine the problems and prospects of enlightenment by investigating keywords such as nature, natural law, natural rights, liberty, and reason in a range of texts, to reassess these assessments. Ferguson will provide an analytical summary of the Revolutionary-era political discourse that contextualizes the primary texts on the syllabus. An initial theoretical framework (Kant et al.) will be elaborated through weekly student presentations.

Secondary texts:

Robert Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment 1750-1820* (Harvard UP, 1997)

Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” (1784)

Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment” from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947; Stanford UP, 2002)

Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” from *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon, 1984)

Bruno Latour, “Why has critique run out of steam?” *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225-48.

Primary texts:

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Oxford UP)

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Penguin)

William Bartram, *Travels* (Dover)

Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative* (Penguin)

Royall Tyler, *Algerine Captive* (Modern Library)

Hannah Foster, *The Coquette* (Oxford UP)

Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly* (Hackett)

Lenora Sansay, *Secret History* (Broadview)

Graded work:

- a presentation, in which you use at least one recent scholarly article or book chapter to frame an approach to the week’s reading in terms of the question(s) of enlightenment: prepare a handout with a summary of the article, notes on any relevant supplementary materials, and framing questions (20% of the final grade)
- a final project: prospectus and annotated bibliography (10% of the final grade), review draft, two presentations, and final article-length paper (70% of the final grade)

Schedule

1/15	Introduction
1/22	Ferguson, <i>The American Enlightenment</i>
1/29	Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (pdf on course eCampus site) Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment" from <i>The Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> (pdf on course eCampus site) Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" (http://foucault.info/documents/articles.html) Bruno Latour, "Why has critique run out of steam?" <i>Critical Inquiry</i> 30.2 (2004): 225-48.
2/5	Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, <i>Letters from an American Farmer</i> (1782)
2/12	Thomas Jefferson, <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i> (1785)
2/19	William Bartram, <i>Travels</i> (1791)
2/26	Individual conferences on projects
3/5	Oral presentations on projects; prospectus and annotated bibliography
3/12	Olaudah Equiano, <i>Interesting Narrative</i> (1789)
3/19	Royall Tyler, <i>Algerine Captive</i> (1797)
2/26	Spring break
4/2	Hannah Foster, <i>The Coquette</i> (1797)
4/9	Charles Brockden Brown, <i>Edgar Huntly</i> (1799)
4/16	Lenora Sansay, <i>Secret History</i> (1808)
4/23	Peer conferences on drafts of final paper
4/30	Oral presentations

Final paper due May 7