

History 481.001/591.002

Judaic 417.004/517.002

Fall 2009

European Cultural History

Prof. Steven Aschheim

**Monday/Wed
10:00-11:30
G228 Angell Hall**

This course will analyse some of the major cultural and intellectual developments, the great, but also problematic, leaps in human creativity, that took place in Western and Central Europe between 1870 and 1914. This was a period in which no wars racked Europe and which was marked by significant advances in science and technology. On the surface the forces of positivism, the belief in a rational, progressive order, seemed to prevail. Yet the major manifestations of intellectual and cultural activity critically challenged these normative bourgeois assumptions. Historians have variously characterised these developments as the “rise of irrationalism”, the “rediscovery of the unconscious”, and “the revolt against positivism”.

The work and lives of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustave Jung and Marcel Proust incarnate these changes. We shall study various aspects of their work as well as the ambiguous legacies of both “positivism” and “anti-positivism”. For this was also a time marked by the rise of mass society and illiberal politics, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-feminism and proto-Fascism. What were the connections between these intellectual innovations and the new menacing politics? We will take Vienna as a case study for, in highly concentrated form, it combined the creative, liberating sides of the period with its darker, more threatening aspects. We will end the course with a consideration of the relations between these cultural impulses and the twentieth century as the age of total wars.