

University of Bucharest | Department of English
Elective, 3rd Year, First Term

Representations of Human Nature: An Intellectual Historical Approach

Dr. Sorana Corneanu

This course offers an introduction to the field of intellectual history and its relations to fields such as cultural history and cultural studies. As such, it introduces students to methodologies pertinent to the MA Programmes in Cultural Studies offered by our Faculty. The particular object of investigation is historical and contemporary representations of 'human nature': the course aims to unravel specific historical approaches to human nature in works of literature, philosophy, art and popular culture and invites reflection and discussions on issues such as:

- If 'anthropology' is, broadly speaking, the science of human nature, what are the differences between philosophical, theological and cultural anthropology? how is Aristotle different from Calvin and both from the ethnographic study of cultural identity?
- What to make of the current coexistence of radical relativism about human cultural identities (cultural studies) and universalist views of human nature (cognitive science)?
- How do cultural discourses explore the boundaries of human nature with reference to the fine line separating the human, the animal and the monstrous? what do bees tell us about us? what does Frankenstein?
- How are we to explain the polarity of discourses about human nature (seen as either fundamentally benevolent or fundamentally aggressive) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and the Romantic period? how are such ideas expressed in the literary works of the time, and how does our contemporary literature or cinematography revisit those works?

We will look at historical reflections on human nature, including selected chapters from Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Blaise Pascal, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Jonathan Swift and Mary Shelley, as well as at contemporary debates between philosophers, scientists and cultural anthropologists, including the philosophically rich science fiction stories of Ted Chiang.

Technical details: 50% mandatory attendance; debate-focused classes; end-of-term essay.