

## **History 600: Emerson, Nietzsche, and American Culture**

Professor Ratner-Rosenhagen

Fall 2006, W 9-11 a.m.

This course is designed for students interested in exploring the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American thought and culture from transnational and comparative perspectives. We will begin by carefully studying the central texts of two major nineteenth-century thinkers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. We will study Emerson's writings in the broader context of mid nineteenth-century American culture, and then shift our attention across the Atlantic to examine Nietzsche's works from the perspective of late nineteenth-century German culture. After situating these writers' philosophies each in their own time and place, we will examine how their ideas went on to shape American intellectual and cultural life in the twentieth century.

By pairing Emerson and Nietzsche, two iconic thinkers from two very different national contexts, and analyzing their intertwined receptions in twentieth-century American thought and culture, students will gain insights into a range of issues involved in interpreting the history of ideas and their diverse cultural meanings. Reading Emerson, often regarded as the innovator of a distinctly "American" democratic mode of thinking, and Nietzsche, long considered to be the author of a distinctly "German" romantic and anti-democratic philosophy of power, will enable students to investigate how philosophical ideas are products of culture, as well as agents in the formation of competing narratives of national identity.

In this course, students will employ a number of methods for studying the production and reception of texts in different intellectual and cultural contexts. During the first half of the course, we will do historicized, close readings of Emerson's and Nietzsche's writings, comparing and contrasting their ideas about individual freedom and self-sovereignty, democracy and its discontents, power, nature, the body, love and friendship, virtue ethics, and Christianity, among others. In the second half of the course, we will examine the manifold uses of Emerson's and Nietzsche's ideas in twentieth-century American culture. By investigating their presence in political theory, continental and analytic philosophy, and cultural and literary criticism, we will consider how a variety of twentieth-century interpreters utilized Emerson's and Nietzsche's thought to address political, moral, and social problems in twentieth-century American life.

Grading will be based on informed and engaged contribution to class discussions, weekly paragraph-length questions, an oral presentation, and several writing assignments.