

Barbarians – Modern Renegotiations of an Ancient Concept

Seminar in Literature and Literary Culture

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German 8200
3 credit units | Spring 2014

Block seminar ~ middle of March through the middle of April.
Time and dates to be arranged at the first class session.

The notion of 'barbarism' and the figure of the 'barbarian' have played an important role in Western thought and been a constant part of our vocabulary since Greek antiquity. Within the age-old history of their usage, the terms 'barbarian' and 'barbarism' have always been regarded as being part of a dichotomous structure. 'Barbarism' is defined in opposition to 'civilization' or its equivalents. In this opposition, the 'barbarian' supports the superiority of those who assume the status of the 'civilized'. 'Barbarism' reinforces the discourse of 'civilization' by functioning as its negative offshoot and antipode. As Reinhart Koselleck argues, this binary structure is characterized by an inbuilt asymmetry. It seems to draw a clear line between a 'good inside' and a 'bad outside', between a 'we' that assures itself of its superior value by pitting itself against an 'other' who is denied the achievements of civilization. The notion of 'barbarism' figures as one of the most steadfast and semantically saturated concepts in Western discourse, and it seems to be rooted in one of the most rigid hierarchial oppositions this discourse has ever produced.

In the eighteenth century, however, the semantics of barbarism undergoes a significant transformation, which destabilizes the hierarchical opposition. The spatial concept of barbarism (inside vs. outside) is temporalized. Attempts are made to differentiate between 'savage' and 'barbarian' people. Barbarism is conceived of as a transitory phase that mediates between the savage state of nature and the state of civilization. Barbarism thus acquires the value of a third term that irritates the binary opposition between the savage and the civilized, between nature and culture. These attempts are undertaken within different discursive contexts: social theory and cultural history, philosophy, ethnography, aesthetic theory and literature.

The aim of the seminar is to analyze how the shift in the semantics of barbarity manifests itself in modern culture. It proceeds from the hypothesis that the destabilization of the dichotomy between barbarism and civilization opens up new possibilities of recasting the 'barbarian' in ambiguous, experimental or even positive terms, as it can be found in the writings of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, as well as in the works of literary modernism and the avantgarde.

