FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT AND THE RISE OF MATERIALISM

SYNOPSIS

*French Enlightenment Thought and the Rise of Materialism* explores how the Epicurean notion of matter as the fundamental substance in nature is transformed into modern-day materialism by the 18th century French Enlightenment thinkers La Mettrie, Helvétius, and D’Holbach. Using Cartesian rational doubt as their foundation, the French Enlightenment radically combines the following tendencies: (1) an Epicurean natural philosophy; (2) a Humean anthropology of human interests and desires; (3) a Hobbesian view of mechanistic utility; and (4) a Lockean notion of a mortal soul without spiritual substance or Providence.

In 19th century Germany, Marx’s “historical materialism” aligns French Enlightenment thought with Bauer’s anti-Christian polemics and Feuerbach’s promise of radical redemption through the elimination of all forms of oppressive religious or philosophical thought. In Marx’s hands, *materialism* becomes a conception of the world in its totality, that is, a totality in which relations between matter and spirit, and between thought and being, are manifested by the primacy of matter upon thought and consciousness.

While not a materialist in the Marxist sense of the term, even Nietzsche appears to belong to this same French/German lineage. His middle period writings of 1878-82 display a sense of Epicurean enlightenment and the aesthetic cultivation of philosophical serenity.

Finally, historical materialism returns to France in renewed form. Althusser calls for a distinction between a Marxist materialism of necessity and an existentialist materialism of the encounter, while Guy Debord also champions a materialism of the encounter, which he calls “détournement.” In both instances, the historical-materialist worldview originally designed to combat the hegemony of a political form of theology continues today to struggle against the hegemony of late-capitalist social formations.

WEEKLY MODULE BREAKDOWN

**MODULE 1: Early Atomists in Ancient Athens and Rome**

Anaxagoras, Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius

**MODULE 2: The New Science (Part 1)**

René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza

**MODULE 3: The New Science (Part 2)**

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume

**MODULE 4: French Enlightenment Thinkers – The Man-Machine**

Julien Offray de La Mettrie
MODULE 5: French Enlightenment Thinkers – Of Man and Spirit
   Claude-Adrien Helvétius

MODULE 6: French Enlightenment Thinkers – Anti-Christianity
   Paul Henri Thiry D’Holbach

MODULE 7: French Enlightenment Thinkers – On Sensuous Materialism
   Paul Henri Thiry D’Holbach

MODULE 8: From the French Enlightenment to Marxism (Bridge #1)
   G. W. F. Hegel, Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach

MODULE 9: Early Marxist Thought (1843-46)
   Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels

MODULE 10: Later Marxist Thought (1859-1867)
   Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels

MODULE 11: From Hegel to Nietzsche (Bridge # 2)
   G. W. F. Hegel, Max Stirner

MODULE 12: Nietzsche’s Epicurianism
   Friedrich Nietzsche

MODULE 13: Materialism in the late 20th Century
   Louis Althusser, Guy Debord