This course examines the development of cultural and intellectual identities in the United States, in the context of a rapidly unfolding modernity. Though the overall focus is on the 20th century, we’ll begin with the aftermath of the Civil War and dwell for a fairly long time on the turn of the century, when the United States went through what I think of as its greatest transformations. Key topics and themes include: selfhood (most importantly); race, ethnicity, and civil rights; consumer culture; gender, sexuality, and feminism; war; philosophy and ethics; industrialism and capitalism; and the arts.

We’ll focus on both ideas and individuals, using mostly primary documents but contextualizing and cross-examining them as we go. Perhaps the overarching theme is the contestation of culture: we’ll explore the ways in which individuals both shape and are shaped by their society—the ways in which they both reinforce and resist its pressures.

What could we possibly mean by an American identity? What did modernization look and feel like to Americans? What cultural legacies of modernization are still shaping our lives? Is there a specifically American way of thinking, and, in particular, of conceptualizing selfhood?