

**CRITICAL THEORY: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND BEYOND**  
*(PRELIMINARY – SUBJECT TO CHANGE)*  
Fall 2018

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## **Course Description**

In the early twentieth century, a group of intellectuals known as the Frankfurt School sought to move beyond Marxist approaches to social analysis by investigating the new challenges posed by capitalism, modern bureaucracy, mass culture, and democratic politics. Against the backdrop of Nazism and Stalinism, the Frankfurt School strove to combine social and cultural analysis with philosophy, trying to critically grasp their reality in thought from the perspective of how it could be positively transformed. Their studies, which go under the general name “Critical Theory,” were among the first that can be truly called interdisciplinary, taking insights from numerous intellectual approaches.

In the first part of the course we will read works by key figures of the Frankfurt School, exploring their evolution through the 1930s-1950s. Our central questions will include: What is distinctive about this approach to critical theorizing? What difficulties does it face combining social and critical analysis with philosophical critique? How does it understand its contribution to radical politics? In the final weeks of the course, we will then ask the same questions with regard to important texts that have pursued the project of critical social-political theory outside the tradition of European Marxism. Students will then write a final paper on one of these books, exploring what it means to engage in critical political theorizing with a focus not on class, but on neoliberalism, empire, globalization, and the legacies of settler colonialism.

## **Course Objectives**

This course is designed to provide students with an in-depth exploration of a demanding tradition in modern political theory; to enhance students’ ability to read carefully and critically complex theoretical texts; to understand highly demanding texts while arriving at their own understanding of the nature and methods of social and political criticism; and to present as well as discuss complex ideas and arguments. The course’s written assignments pursue these aims by requiring students to draw on and critically synthesize a range of theoretical viewpoints while developing a distinct understanding of the tasks of critical theory, then applying that understanding to important theoretical treatments of topical social and political issues.

## **Required Materials and Texts**

The following books have been ordered and should be available at the bookstore:

- Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, tr. R. Livingstone (MIT, 1972)
- Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. H. Zohn (Schocken, 1969)
- Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. Schmid Noerr (Stanford, 2002)
- Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Beacon, 2001)

- Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Beacon, 1971)
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Vintage, 1995)

The bookstore sometimes has difficulty obtaining these titles, so you are welcome to obtain these or other editions from other sources.

You should also purchase at least *one* of the following, to be determined in consultation with the instructor:

- Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressives Have Missed* (Stanford, 2015)
- Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California, 2001)
- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota, 2017)

Other readings will be made available via Avenue or in class.

### **Class Format and Expectations**

This course is a seminar. Regular attendance, careful preparation, and active participation are essential. Students are expected to prepare for discussion by carefully reading the assigned material and by participating in the online forum in advance of classroom discussion. They are expected to post to the online forum consistently throughout the term, and to divide their posts between engaging directly with the readings and their fellows' interpretations, comments, and questions. Seminar discussion will thus take place on the basis not only of student presentations of the readings, but also the online discussions.

### **Course Evaluation – Overview**

1. Attendance and participation – 10%
2. Online discussion – 20%
3. Class presentations – 20%
4. First paper (due Nov. 4) – 15%
5. Second paper (due Dec. 12) – 35%

### **Course Evaluation – Details**

#### **Attendance and participation (10%)**

Every unexcused absence will result in an automatic 2% penalty on your overall grade, up to a maximum of 10%. This class is a seminar and active, constructive participation

is expected. Owing to the size of the class, not everyone will be able to contribute to every discussion, but you are expected to try to participate regularly.

### **Online discussion – Avenue to Learn posts (20%)**

TEN short response posts are required over the course of the semester, at least five of which must respond to other students' posts. Initial posts are due by 6pm the Sunday before class; responses will be accepted until 6pm on Tuesday. Each post should deal with a text from the week's reading, focusing on questions that relate to larger themes in the course. You should focus on trying to understand the authors' arguments. You are responsible for posting 10 responses over the 12 substantive sessions; late posts will not be counted. No more than one post and one reply from any week will count toward your grade, though of course you are welcome to post more often; your highest grades will count toward your final grade. Start early!

### **Class presentations (20%)**

You are required to make TWO short presentations on texts we have read, not to exceed 10 minutes each. You should prepare a one-page (maximum) handout for your classmates. The aim of these presentations should be to summarize the main points of the reading as clearly and succinctly as possible, and to raise question and issues for discussion.

### **First paper (15%), due Nov. 4**

The first paper will be a short essay (4-5 pages) on the defining characteristics of a critical theory of society in the style of the early Frankfurt School.

### **Second paper (35%), due Dec. 12**

The second paper will be a medium-length essay (10-15 pages) exploring how one of the books studied in the last weeks of the course (to be determined in consultation with the instructor) reflects as well as how it innovates beyond the notion of critical theory pioneered by the Frankfurt School.

## **Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings**

### **Week 1 (September 5)**

Introduction

### **Week 2 (September 12)**

Sources and Precursors

Readings:

Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" *Immanuel Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Hackett), pt. 1.

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (excerpts)

**Week 3 (September 19)**

**Recasting Marxism**

Readings:

Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," *History and Class Consciousness*, 83-222.

**Week 4 (September 26)**

**The Original Program**

Readings:

Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory."

Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory."

**Week 5 (October 3)**

**Culture and History**

Readings:

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 83-109, 219-66.

**Week 6 (October 10)**

**MID-TERM RECESS – No Classes**

**Week 7 (October 17)**

**Dialectic of Enlightenment I**

Readings:

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi-93.

**Week 8 (October 24)**

**Dialectic of Enlightenment II**

Readings:

Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94-172.

**Week 9 (October 31)**

**Capitalism as Regime**

Readings:

Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (excerpts).

**SUNDAY, NOV. 4 – FIRST PAPER DUE IN COURSE DROPBOX**

**Week 10 (November 7)**

**Rethinking Revolution**

Readings:

Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (entire).

**Week 11 (November 14)**

**Disciplinary Society**

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (excerpts).

**Week 12 (November 21)**

**Capitalism and Affect (with visiting guest professor)**

Readings:

Martijn Konings, *Emotional Logics of Capitalism* (excerpts).

**Week 13 (November 28)**

**Empire and Postcolonialism**

Readings:

Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (excerpts).

**Week 14 (December 5)**

**Settler Colonialism**

Readings:

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (excerpts).

**WEDNESDAY, DEC. 12 – SECOND PAPER DUE IN COURSE DROPBOX**

## **Course Policies**

### **Submission of Assignments**

The final exam is to be submitted as a single .doc, .docx, or .pdf file to the appropriate dropbox on the course Avenue site.

### **Grades**

Grades will be based on the McMaster University grading scale:

| <b>MARK</b> | <b>GRADE</b> |
|-------------|--------------|
| 90-100      | A+           |
| 85-90       | A            |
| 80-84       | A-           |
| 77-79       | B+           |
| 73-76       | B            |
| 70-72       | B-           |
| 67-69       | C+           |
| 63-66       | C            |
| 60-62       | C-           |
| 57-59       | D+           |
| 53-56       | D            |
| 50-52       | D-           |
| 0-49        | F            |

### **Late Assignments**

Late Avenue posts for the online discussion activity will not be considered. Late papers will be penalized at a rate of 3.3% off the paper grade per day.

### **Absences, Missed Work, Illness**

Unexcused absences will result in a 1% penalty on your overall grade, up to a maximum of 10% (the entire Attendance & Participation grade).

### **Avenue to Learn**

In this course we will be using Avenue to Learn. Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

### **Turnitin.com**

In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal plagiarism. Students will be expected to submit their work electronically to Turnitin.com and in hard copy so that it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to



submit their work to Turnitin.com must still submit a copy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, etc.). For more information please refer to the [Turnitin.com Policy](#).

## **University Policies**

### **Academic Integrity Statement**

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behavior in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity.

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behavior can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

### **Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities**

Students who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or e-mail [sas@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sas@mcmaster.ca). For further information, consult McMaster University's Policy for [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#).

### **Faculty of Social Sciences E-mail Communication Policy**

Effective September 1, 2010, it is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all e-mail communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster

account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion.

### **Course Modification**

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check his/her McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.