

CRITICAL THEORY: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Fall 2019 – Preliminary

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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 racism, imperialism, patriarchy, settler colonialism, and environmental crisis.

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)
- Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Vintage, 1984)

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:

- Sina Kramer, *Excluded Within: The (Un)Intelligibility of Radical Political Actors* (Oxford, 2019)
- Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke, 2017)
- Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minnesota, 2011)
- Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (Verso, 2015)

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

Class Format

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. 3) – 15%
5. Second paper (due Dec. 13) – 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 (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. 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!

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.

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. 3

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 13

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 3)

Introduction

Week 2 (September 10)

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), entire (esp. pt. 1). ()

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge), Author's Intro, chs. 2 and 5. ()

Week 3 (September 17)

Recasting Marxism

Readings:

Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," *History and Class Consciousness*, 83-222. (3)

Week 4 (September 24)

The Original Program

Readings:

Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory." ()

Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory." ()

Week 5 (October 1)

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. (3)

Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," in *ibid.*, ()

Week 6 (October 8)

Dialectic of Enlightenment I

Readings:

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi-93. (3)

suppl.: Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, "Editor's Afterword," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 217-246. ()

suppl.: Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," *New German Critique* 26 (1982): 13-30. ()

Week 7 (October 15)

MID-TERM RECESS – No Classes

Week 8 (October 22)

Dialectic of Enlightenment II

Readings:

Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94-172. (2)

suppl.: Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates on Social Criticism," *Constellations* 7, no 1 (2000): 116-27. ()

suppl.: Amy Allen, "Reason, Power and History: Re-Reading the Dialectic of Enlightenment," *Thesis Eleven* 120 (2014): 10–25. ()

Week 9 (October 29)

The Later Frankfurt School

Readings:

Marcuse, "Cultural Revolution," *Towards a Critical Theory of Society* (Routledge, 2001), 123-62. ()

Adorno, "Critique" and "Resignation," *Critical Models* (Columbia, 1998), 281-93. (2)

Jürgen Habermas, "The Normative Content of Modernity," *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (MIT, 1987), 336-67. ()

Axel Honneth, "A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory," *Pathologies of Reason* (Columbia, 2013), 336-60. ()

SUNDAY, NOV. 3 – FIRST PAPER DUE IN COURSE DROPBOX

Week 10 (November 5)

Foucault

Readings:

Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" (), "The Great Confinement" (), "Panopticism" (), "Right of Death and Power over Life" () in *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon, 1984), 51-75, 124-140, 206-213, 258-273.

Week 11 (November 12)

Racism and Imperialism

Readings:

Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (3).

Week 12 (November 19)

Settler and Colonialism

Readings:

Byrd, *Transit of Empire* (3).

Week 13 (November 26)

Identity and Exclusion

Readings:

Kramer, *Excluded Within* (3).

Week 14 (December 3)

Nature and Capitalism

Readings:

Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (3).

FRIDAY, DEC. 13 – 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:

MARK	GRADE
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

In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work”.

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 authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. Students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via Avenue to Learn (A2L) plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to submit their work through A2L and/or Turnitin.com must still submit an electronic and/or hardcopy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com or A2L. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity

have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more information please refer to the [Turnitin.com Policy](#).

Academic Accommodation for Religious, Indigenous or Spiritual Observances (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students requiring a RISO accommodation should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests

University Policies

Academic Integrity Statement

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour 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 behaviour 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

- Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- Improper collaboration in group work.
- 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. 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.