**The Frankfurt School: The “Origins” of Critical Theory**

SPIEGEL: Herr Professor, vor zwei Wochen schien die Welt noch in Ordnung ...

ADORNO: Mir nicht.¹

Office Hours: Monday 1-2:20.
Virtually by Appointment.

Fall 2023.
Theory & Criticism 9151.

**Course Description**

This course will chart the nebulous notion of “critical theory” as it relates to the Frankfurt School of Social Research (~1923-1970). Beginning as an interdisciplinary Marxist reading group (in 1923), the Institute metamorphosed in relation to the catastrophes of the 20th century, utilizing crisis and the experience of exile as a means to critically renew philosophy. Today, the School’s notion of critical theory has become ubiquitous, encompassing a vast assemblage of social theory. Focusing on the “first generation” of Frankfurt School thinkers (1923-1970), this course will explore the complex origins of critical social theory by way of an examination of the writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas. Harnessing the resources of the German philosophical tradition, these thinkers forward an expanded conception of enlightenment, creating interdisciplinary thought models which allow philosophy—and the humanities more broadly—to be theorized in productive directions. Responding to the crises of their historical moment, these theorists fractured traditional modes of thought by way of alterity, renewing philosophy by way of a conflictual dialogue with its margins. These thinkers contest the autarky of conceptual thought by way of interdisciplinary dialogues with domains such as: art (and aesthetics), technological media, modern life, sociology, historical materialism, language, and the natural world. Thinking the Frankfurt School in such a manner allows one to theorize the current actuality of philosophy (or theory) in interdisciplinary directions.

This course intends at once to provide a synoptic overview of main figures of the Frankfurt School, while simultaneously examining their ideas in constellation with contemporary concerns and theoretical developments. That is, this program of study does not treat critical

¹ Der Spiegel 04.05.1969.
theory as some traditional or static notion which must be recovered, but rather, as a historical “origin” that is reiterated in constellation with the concerns of one’s present moment. By positioning the main figures of the Frankfurt school in a mosaic with contemporary theoretical developments, this course aims to continue the critical self-reflection of theory upon itself inaugurated by the School, considering the foundational concepts of critical theory in relation to our current crises. By way of this historical genealogy, this course aims to conduct an interdisciplinary dialogue regarding the history and possibilities of Frankfurt School critical theory, analyzing “critical theory” in terms of both the spirit and the letter. This course will locate the Frankfurt School within broader philosophical debates in the continental tradition, while also practically exploring its central concepts in relation to contemporary concerns.

The Frankfurt School relates directly to the core aims of The Centre for Theory & Criticism. The very notion of an autonomous and interdisciplinary institute for theoretical social research first originated with the Frankfurt Institute. Hence the interdisciplinary nature of the Theory Centre provides an ideal site to study the Frankfurt School and to continue its project for a critical social theory. In addition to providing an important introduction to a formative theoretical movement of the 20th century, this course also takes up many texts and thinkers on the Theory Centre’s Ph.D. “Core Exam Reading list,” and, as such, can serve as a valuable resource for students in their comprehensive exam year (these texts are indicated by an *). This course will emphasize the efficacy of the Frankfurt School in relation to a wide array of contemporary theoretical debates, opening a dialogue between the School and the diversity of theoretical traditions examined at the Theory Centre. Throughout the course, the Frankfurt School will be explored in relation to the history of philosophy, historical materialism (Marxist theory), French theory (post-structuralism, deconstruction), aesthetics, ecology, media theory, and post/de-colonial theory. I further invite students to explore these thinkers in relation to their own (theoretical) concerns.

Textually, the course will proceed semi-chronologically (from Kant to Habermas), with each week considering textual selections organized around a central theme. We begin by locating the origins of critical social theory historically within the Kantian promise of enlightenment, a promise which is modified and continued by German Idealism and Hegelian Marxism (by Hegel, Marx, and Lukacs). We will also take up the “masters of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), examining their critiques of enlightenment narratives of progress. The course then moves to Walter Benjamin, whose philosophy of criticism will be located as central to the development of the school. Following a gloss of Benjamin’s seminal works, the course moves to examine the crises and atrophies wrought by Modernity—or “mechanical reproduction”—upon the human sensorium and tradition forms of life. Following this, Adorno’s (in)famous writings on mass culture and the “culture industry” will be considered. Continuing with Adorno, we will explore his core philosophical and aesthetic texts to elaborate the main contours of his “negative dialectic,” along with the unique promise he accords to the aesthetic domain. After Adorno, Marcuse’s theses regarding the leveling forces of modern capitalism will be analysed by way of a reading of One-Dimensional Man. In relation to both Marcuse and Adorno, psychoanalysis will be explored as an important site through which these thinkers critically expand the purview of philosophy. We will also examine these theorists’ theses regarding totalitarianism and the techniques of resistance they develop towards the “fascist life.” Finally, the “communicative turn” in social theory will be analyzed via a reading Habermas’ work. In the concluding weeks of
the course, we will stage a practical dialogue between critical theory and a contemporary constellation of issues: ecology, de-coloniality, and media/technology.

Assignment Structure

Final Essay. 50%.
- Due during the examination period. Exact date and rubric TBD.

Essay Outline. 10%. Due November 20.
- 1–2-page outline of the main arguments of your final essay. Annotated bibliography of at least 3 sources. You must get your topic approved by me and I will give you feedback which can be incorporated into your final essay.

Seminar Presentation. 25%. Sign up on the first 2 weeks of class.
- 20-minute presentation. Present the main ideas of a reading to the class in your own words. Imagine you are presenting the ideas to someone who has not read the text. Following this exegesis, I want you to locate the text in relation to broader themes of the course. In this case, that means thinking about the text in relation to our discussion of the Frankfurt School, and to the larger development of critical theory. And at the end of your presentation, I want you to pose discussion questions to the class, these should unfold the text further.

Participation. 15%.
- Attendance and participation in class discussion.

Reading Breakdown

Readings are divided into main and additional readings. I will be drawing from the additional readings in my lectures and will oftentimes provide excerpted quotes. You may present on either main or additional readings. All readings will be provided as digital editions, you may utilize copies of your choice, though the following list refers to the authoritative English translations of these works. Readings on the comprehensive examination list are indicated by a *

I have been deliberately broad in my reading selections, oftentimes indicating a whole essay or chapter, though I will provide more succinct reading directions in advance of each week. For example, I have provided the whole introduction to Negative Dialectics, though I will likely ask you to read only specific aphorisms. Likewise, we will discuss entire essays by Benjamin, though I will indicate more essential passages to streamline your reading.

Week 1: September 11, 2023) Introduction: Enlightenment, Philosophy, Social Theory

Kant, “What is Enlightenment” (1784) in Kant Political Writings. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1991. 54-60.*


**Additional:**


**Week 2: September 18, 2023) The Masters of Suspicion: Nietzsche, Marx, Freud**


**Week 3: September 25, 2023) Hegelian Marxism: Lukács, Reification, and the Emergence of “Theory”**


Dr. Jeremy Arnott Theory & Criticism 9151.


**Additional:**


**Week 4: October 2, 2023** Walter Benjamin: The Philosophical Origins of Critical Theory


**Additional texts:**


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**Week 5: October 9, 2023: TBD*) Technological Reproduction: Art in Modernity**


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**Additional:**


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*The University is closed Monday Oct 9 for Thanksgiving. I would like to virtually hold the class or reschedule it later in the term.*


**Additional:**


**Week 7: October 23, 2023) Adorno: The Impossible Possibility of Philosophy (and Art)**


Additional:


October 30: Reading Week.

Week 8: November 6, 2023) Marcuse: One Dimensional Society & Marxist Psychoanalysis


Additional:


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Theory & Criticism 9151.


Additional:


Max Horkheimer, “The Jews In Europe” available from: 
https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/03/20/the-jews-and-europe/


*Week 10: November 20, 2023) Habermas and the Public Sphere: The Communicative Turn in Social Theory*

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2 Possible discussion/lecture on David Foster Wallace’s short story, “Good Old Neon” in relation to fascist/conformist personality traits (understood in relation to Adorno’s “authoritarian personality”).

Dr. Jeremy Arnott
Theory & Criticism 9151.


Additional:


Additional:


Week 12: December 4, 2023) New Horizons, Imperial Messages: Contemporary Media


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Incompletes

Please note that incompletes are only granted on compassionate or medical grounds. Special permission must be granted by the instructor and the Centre’s Director no later than the last day of classes.

Following are INC rules:

1. No later than the last day of the course, the student must contact the Director providing both the reason for the Incomplete being requested, and indicating the date by which the remaining work will be completed. The instructor must also give consent to these arrangements. Permission from the instructor is not a guarantee that the Centre’s GSC will grant a request for an INC.
2. Unless there are medical or compassionate grounds, the student will not be allowed to carry more than one INC in a semester.

3. The INC work must be submitted within one semester of the termination of the course in question, and the student must notify the Centre that the work has been submitted. **Failure to comply will result in failure of the course.**

**Statement on Academic Offences**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: 
http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

Members of the University Community accept a commitment to maintain and uphold the purposes of the University and, in particular, its standards of scholarship. It follows, therefore, that acts of a nature that prejudice the academic standards of the University are offences subject to discipline. Any form of academic dishonesty that undermines the evaluation process, also undermines the integrity of the University’s degrees. **The University will take all appropriate measures to promote academic integrity and deal appropriately with scholastic offences.**

**DEFINITION** Scholastic Offences include, but are not limited to, the following examples:

• **Plagiarism** - the “**act or an instance of copying or stealing another’s words or ideas and attributing them as one’s own.**” (Excerpted from Black’s Law Dictionary, West Group, 1999, 7th ed., p. 1170). This concept applies with equal force to all academic work, including theses, assignments or projects of any kind, comprehensive examinations, laboratory reports, diagrams, and computer projects. Detailed information is available from instructors, Graduate Chairs, or the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Students also may consult style manuals held in the University’s libraries. See http://www.lib.uwo.ca/services/styleguides.html

• Cheating on an examination or falsifying material subject to academic evaluation. • Submitting false or fraudulent research, assignments or credentials; or falsifying records, transcripts or other academic documents.

• Submitting a false medical or other such certificate under false pretences. • Improperly obtaining, through theft, bribery, collusion or otherwise, an examination paper prior to the date and time for writing such an examination.

• Unauthorized possession of an examination paper, however obtained, prior to the date and time for writing such an examination, unless the student reports the matter to the instructor, the relevant program, or the Registrar as soon as possible after receiving the paper in question.

• Impersonating a candidate at an examination or availing oneself of the results of such an impersonation. • Intentionally interfering in any way with any person's scholastic work.

• Submitting for credit in any course or program of study, without the knowledge and written approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit
previously has been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere.

• Aiding or abetting any such offence. Evidence of wrongdoing may result in criminal prosecution in addition to any proceedings within the University.

PROCEDURES FOR SCHOLASTIC OFFENCES

If a student is suspected of cheating, plagiarism or other scholastic offence, the University will investigate and if it is satisfied that the student has committed a scholastic offence it may impose sanctions, up to and including expulsion from the University.