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Course proposal: Social Theory in the Age of Austerity

Term: TBD

Rationale:

1. Among its many uses, social theory is an excellent medium for the development of multidisciplinary analytical approaches and projects because it facilitates comparisons of (and translation between) scholarship in the social science and humanities, particularly with respect to questions of subjectivity and social structure. It can provide very useful tools for students to communicate their work and their questions in ways that will be more legible and potentially valuable to scholars in other fields, and for students to discover and make use of analytical tools that may not be familiar or accepted in their own disciplinary setting. A couple of last year's readings have been swapped out in favor of a readings more directly relevant to current political conditions (Stanley; Hartouni).

2. I taught a version of this course last year and it seemed clear to me that the CSTC students found it challenging and useful. Most of them were able to bring readings and discussion topics fruitfully to bear on their own research questions. Three of the students joined me and a FIMS postdoc for an informal reading group in the following months, one of those asked me to be a second reader on his MA thesis, and another asked me for a letter of recommendation to PhD programs, noting that the course had been quite valuable to him.

Course description:

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, it seems that the social trajectories of enormous numbers of people have been irrevocably altered. In the last decade, accelerating events seem to provide more evidence that “all bets are off” and that a hellscape of increasingly violent conflict and instability looms in one way or the other for most people. Automation and slave labour proliferate; users of social media provide rivers of surplus for fantastically powerful entities; incomes are flat or in decline—yet while fascist tendencies flourish in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, marginal and politicized identities gain voice and legitimacy, supported in part by new communication technologies and given impetus by courageous activists young and old. The current pandemic exacerbates existing problems and further undermines structures and frameworks long treated as fixed, or at least stable.

The financial crisis of 2008 exemplifies, reveals, intensifies existing fault-lines in our societies and discourses, perhaps generating new ones. The aim of the course is to develop facility with analytical tools of social theory that enable us to follow these lines across social, subjective, cultural, political, economic, and other realms, and to learn how to identify and become handy with such tools as we encounter them in our research and as they arise in our fields. “Social theory” is a broad, inclusive category—not to be confused with sociological theory—and it is often retrospectively used to identify ideas

that may have originally been contributed as philosophy, political economy, political or cultural theory, and so on.

The affordances of social theory help us to see the phenomena we study in terms of subjectivity and social structure, help us develop contextual (including historical) knowledge necessary to the analysis of specific cases of these phenomena, and help us to clarify what may be new or distinctive about the aspects of subjectivity and social life we're interested in.

Topics and Readings:

Berlant, Lauren *Cruel Optimism* (2011)

Flyvbjerg, Bent *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (2001)

Hartouni, Valerie *Visualizing Atrocity: Arendt, Evil, and the Optics of Thoughtlessness* (2012)

Karatani, Kojin *Marx: Toward the Centre of Possibility* (1974; 2020 translation)

Lazzarato, Maurizio *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (2014)

Marx, Karl "On the Jewish Question" (1844)

Nietzsche, Friederich *Genealogy of Morality* (1887; 2017 translation)

Postone, Moishe *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (1993) (excerpts)

Schull, Natasha Dow *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (2012)

Stanley, Jason *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (2018)

Weber, Max *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920; 2011 translation)

Wood, Ellen Meiksins *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (1991)