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 sciences and humanities, particularly with respect to questions of subjectivity, political economy, 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 standard in their own disciplinary setting.

2. I taught a version of this course in Fall 2019 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 signed me up as second reader on his MA thesis; for another I wrote a reference letter in support of his application to doctoral programs.

3) The readings on the syllabus last time I taught the course (Fall 2019) and this time (Fall 2021—to week 6 as of this writing) have seemed appropriately challenging and useful to students in CSTC (and the FIMS Media Studies grad program in which the class has been cross-listed). However, in this proposal I swap in a couple of readings foregrounding race and indigeneity that resonate with the course’s theme, Charles Mills’ *The Racial Contract* (Cornell 1997), and Michelle Murphy’s *The Economization of Life* (Duke 2017).

**Course description:**

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the social trajectories of enormous numbers of people have been radically 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 settled, or at least stable, notably the liberal modern state. Among other things, the current pandemic further discloses the extraordinary flexibility and capacity of the state. In the wake of the financial crisis, North American and Commonwealth governments and the Eurozone demonstrated readiness to mobilize the state largely in order to preserve financial institutions, leading to unprecedented economic concentration; the pandemic reveals further state powers and weaknesses in
governments’ varying approaches to populations, discourses, and institutions. Rising hardship, rates of premature death and mass immiseration are as starkly as ever coincident with staggering growth in private wealth and opulence; in North America escalating homelessness is complemented, for example, by an unprecedented yacht shortage.

These persisting crises exemplify, reveal, intensify modern fault-lines in our societies and discourses, perhaps generating new ones. The aim of the course is to develop facility with a selection of analytical tools of social theory aimed to enable students 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 and adjacent 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, history, 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 cases of these phenomena, help us to identify and operationalize useful perspectives and cases from diverse disciplines, help us to clarify what may be new or distinctive about the aspects of subjectivity and social life we’re interested in, and help us communicate our insights across disciplinary boundaries.

Topics and Readings:

Berlant, Lauren *Cruel Optimism* (2011)


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)


Murphy, Michelle, *The Economization of Life* (2017)

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


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