

Thursdays 3:30-6:30 PM

Instructor: Matt Stahl, mstahl@uwo.ca

Office hours: Fridays 10:00-11:00 AM

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, it seems that the social trajectories of enormous numbers of people have been irrevocably altered. Unfolding events seem to provide ever more evidence that “all bets are off,” and that a hellscape of conflict and instability looms in one way or another for most people. Automation *and* slave labour proliferate; users of social media provide rivers of surplus for fantastically powerful entities; incomes and standards of living are flat or in decline while numbers of people in debt and amounts owed ratchet ever upward. Fascist tendencies flourish in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, and nevertheless marginal and politicized identities gain voice and legitimacy, supported in part by new communication technologies and given impetus by courageous activists young and old.

This course starts from the position that economy, policy, and subjectivity are reciprocal, indissociable except in thought. How do course authors explain or frame:

- the constitution and reproduction of the political, the economic, and the individual
- the relationship between governance, economics, and subjectivity
- the roles of media in creating and sustaining state/nation/capital, as well as (racialized, gendered, and other) modes of subjectification and identification

“Social theory” is a broad, inclusive category—not to be confused with sociological theory—and contributions are often retrospectively designated in ways that bring together ideas that may have originally been published as philosophy, political economy, political or cultural theory, and so on.

We will develop facility with social-theoretic arguments and analyses useful in approaching “the economic,” “the political,” and “the subjective”—essential categories for understanding the affordances of austerity as a mode of governance, extraction, and subjectification.

Social theory helps us develop contextual (including historical) knowledge necessary to the analysis of specific cases, and helps us to clarify what may be new or distinctive about the aspects of subjectivity and social life we’re interested in.

Our readings, discussions, and writing will be guided by asking how the course authors answer the following questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?
3. Is it desirable?
4. What should be done?

Our aim is not to determine whether a course author’s arguments are “true,” but to grasp their answers to these questions, to understand their answers in relation to those of other course authors, and to allow them to help us figure out our own approaches.

Course requirements: Before each class, read and re-read all of the assigned readings, on paper, underlining and making notes with pen or pencil to make them your own. Do all the written assignments, thoughtfully participate in every class meeting, keeping focus on the texts. Turn off all electronic devices. Full attendance is expected.

Schedule of topics and readings:

1. Sept. 9: Intro to course
 - Wood, “The separation of the economic and the political in capitalism” (in class)
 - **(assignment 1 assigned – see below)**
2. Sept. 16: Critique of civil society & fetishism of the concrete
 - Marx, “On the Jewish Question”; Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism”, parts III & IV (pp. 104-113) (all readings for this week on Owl)
 - **Assignment 1 due.**
 - **Recommended reading:** Ingram, “Rights and Privileges: Marx and the Jewish Question”; Brown, “Rights and Losses”
3. Sept. 23: Critique of political economy; value theory (all readings for this week on Owl)
 - Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, excerpt TBA
 - **Recommended reading:** Murray, “Practically Abstract Labour”
4. Sept. 30: Genealogy of Morality
 - Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morality* (1887) intro, preface, essay I
 - **Recommended reading:** Goodrich & Valverde, “Nietzsche’s Half-Written Laws”
5. Oct. 7: The sovereign individual and the prerogative to make promises
 - Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morality* (1887) essays II & III
 - **Recommended reading:** Rukgaber, “The ‘Sovereign Individual’ and the ‘Ascetic Ideal’: On a Perennial Misreading of the Second Essay of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*”

OCTOBER 14 IS READING WEEK

6. Oct. 21: Capitalist subjectivity & rationality
 - Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904)
 - **Recommended reading:** Biernacki, “Cultural coherence in early modern England: The invention of contract”
7. Oct. 28: Using social theory
 - Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (2001)
 - **(assignment 3 assigned – see below)**

8. Nov. 4: Modes of exchange vs. modes of production I

- Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Mode of Production to Mode of Exchange* (2014)
- **Recommended reading:** Scott, “Population Control: Bondage and War”

9. Nov. 11: Modes of exchange vs. modes of production II

- Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Mode of Production to Mode of Exchange* (2014)
- **Assignment 3 due.**
- **Recommended reading:** Schor et al., “Dependence and precarity in the platform economy”

10. Nov. 18: Dispersion of sovereignty, excess of immanence

- Santner, *The Weight of All Flesh: The Subject-Matter of Political Economy* (2015)
- **(paper proposal assigned – see below)**
- **Recommended reading:** Steinberg, “Reconfiguring Sovereignty in Foucauldian Genealogies of Power: The Case of English Master and Servant Law and the Dispersion and the Exercise of Sovereignty in the Modern Age”

11. Nov. 25: Machine life & framing the dividual

- Schull, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (2012)
- **Recommended reading:** Janson & Pooley, “Blurring Genres and Violating Guild Norms: The Age of Surveillance Capitalism (A Review of Reviews)”

12. Dec. 2: Media, political economy, and affect I

- Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011)
- **Paper proposal due**

13. Dec. 9: Media, political economy, and affect II

- Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011)

Assignments & evaluation (details to be discussed in class):

Assignment 1: A political Marx? In 2-3 pages, double spaced (12 pt. Times New Roman font, standard margins, author, p# citation style, no title page) explain Wood's argument about Marx's political insights. Choose a theme, passage, or phrase from "On the Jewish Question" to illustrate your understanding of Wood's argument, and briefly explain whether (and how) Postone's discussion of capital's antinomy develops or undercuts Wood's argument. 10%.

Assignment 2: Ideas and Evidence. Introduce a reading at the start of a class meeting with a presentation not to exceed 20 minutes (there will be a timer involved). Identify and summarize the reading's main argument. What are the central ideas and evidence the reading brings to bear? Compose two or three questions directly concerning this core argument that will help classmates develop facility with the argument, drawing on or referring to previous course readings where appropriate. 2-3 pages double-spaced etc. text due at the start of class. 10%.

- Depending on quality/usefulness of questions we may spend much or a little time on them

Assignment 3: Context Matters. Drawing on Flyvbjerg's characterization of contextualization, identify and discuss a passage from any of the previous readings. Contextualize the passage by reference to the work's overall project, and explain how the passage shows whether and how the work (or a key aspect of the work) embraces or ignores or is indifferent to context, as Flyvbjerg defines it. Be concrete and specific—quote from each author (no citation without quotation marks) and don't skip explanatory steps: your comprehension and the plausibility of your reading/analysis of course texts is crucial to the success of your work. 4-6 pages, double spaced, due November 11 (20%).

Assignment 4: Proposal and paper. Proposal: 2-3 pages, due December 2 (10%). Bring two or three course authors into conversation on a specific problem implicitly or explicitly central to their arguments. If the problem is implicit the burden of demonstration is somewhat greater. Your comprehension and the plausibility of your reading/analysis of course texts are crucial to the success of your work here. Paper: 16-20 pages, due December 16 unless otherwise specified (40%).

Participation. Each week, be in class with, and having read, the books/readings for that week (and the week before), identify page numbers and lines when contributing to discussion, refrain from pontificating if you haven't done the reading (10%).

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

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