Social Theory for (Post-Crisis)

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Office hours: 

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.

This course starts from the position that economy, policy, and subjectivity are mutually constitutive and indissociable. We will explore ways to address the following questions, in our research and in our thinking:

• What is neoliberalism? From where and when do the principles we identify with this neologism come?
• How do political and economic forces create human (and non-human) subjects?
• What is the relationship between governance, economics, and subjectivity in the 21st century?
• What roles do media play in creating and sustaining the debtor/creditor relationship, as well as racialized, gendered, and other relations of domination?

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, regional, 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 analytical tools we engage in this course are selected from a range of traditions for their capacity to extend and deepen our intellectual resources for contemporary media studies scholarship, but will be of use to students in other programs and faculties. The special 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 media, subjectivity and social life we’re interested in.

Our readings, discussions, and writing will be guided by the following questions:

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

Course requirements: Read all of the assigned readings. Thoughtfully prepare for and participate actively in every class. Turn off all electronic devices. Full attendance is expected.
Social Theory for (Post-Crisis) Schedule of topics and readings:
Sept. 11: Intro to course.
Sept. 18 & 25: Theorizing the crisis: debt, governmentality, subjectivation/subjection.
  • Maurizio Lazzarato, Governing by Debt (2013)
  • Sept 25 assignment 1 due.
Oct. 2: Critique of political economy; value theory (all readings for this week on Owl)
  • John Locke, Second Treatise on Government
  • Karl Marx, excerpts from 1844 Manuscripts and Capital
  • Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination, excerpt TBA
Oct. 16: no class – prof away.
Oct. 23 & 30: Bad conscience; sovereign individual; the right to make promises
  • Friederich Nietzsche, A Genealogy of Morality (1887)
Nov. 6: Capitalist subjectivity & rationality
  • Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904)
Nov. 13: Phronesis; the use of social theory
  • Bent Flyvbjerg, Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again (2001)
Nov. 20: Social theory of emotion
  • Lisa Feldman Barrett, How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain (2017)
Nov. 27: Machine life
  • Natasha Dow Schull, Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas (2012)
  • Assignment 3 due.
Dec. 4 & 11: Media, political economy, and affect
  • Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (2011)

Assignments (details to be discussed in class):
1. Ideas and Evidence: Focusing on a specific example, explain how a research project of your choice incorporates ideas and evidence and generates analytic frames and images in its representation of social life. 2-3 pages, double spaced, due September 25 (15%).
2. Invitation to Discussion: Introduce a reading at the start of class with a presentation not to exceed 15 minutes. The overall approach is up to you, but it must include a statement of the reading’s main argument and 2-3 questions for the class (drawing on and/or referring to previous readings where appropriate). 2-3 pages of double-spaced text due at the start of class (15%). Schedule of introductions to be set out weeks 1-2.
3. Context Matters: Drawing on Flyvbjerg’s characterization of contextualization as a requirement of phronetic research, research concerned with the development of practical wisdom, identify and discuss a theme or passage from any of the previous readings. Explain how the theme or passage embraces or ignores or is indifferent to context, as Flyvbjerg defines it. 4-6 pages, double spaced, due week November 27 (20%).

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