

Pols 4643/Pols5343 - Critical Political Theory (Winter 2009)

Prof. Andrew Biro

Course Description:

“The old order is dying, but the new one cannot be born” – Antonio Gramsci

**“The task to be accomplished is... the redemption of the hopes of the past”
– Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno**

In a letter written in 1843, Karl Marx defines critical theory as “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” A list of major issues/problems of our time is relatively easy to construct: the War on Terror, staggering North-South inequalities, persistent hierarchies of gender, race, and class, ecological unsustainability, and so on. But who exactly is struggling against whom, and how? And how do our professed wishes for the future fit with our current actions? What exactly are the “struggles and wishes” of an age when a female vice-Presidential candidate claims to be breaking the “glass ceiling” but holds few recognizably feminist values? When “organic” foods are trucked thousands of kilometers to reach “green” consumers? When films trading in anti-consumerist sentiment reap massive profits for multinational corporations? When clothing chains mock up window displays to resemble the aftermath of anti-globalization protests? When a state of emergency has become thoroughly normalized? Perhaps the struggles and wishes of our age are not so clear after all.

One political science reference text, in its entry for “Critical theory” says simply: “See Frankfurt School.” The Frankfurt School is the name given to a group of German Jewish intellectuals associated with the Institute for Social Research, which was founded in Frankfurt in 1923. The institute researchers covered a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, aesthetics, social psychology, and political economy. Their work can be seen as an attempt to integrate the insights of psychoanalysis and the domain of culture into a class-based (Marxist) analysis of twentieth century societies. But they were certainly not orthodox Marxists in any sense – they were highly critical of the Soviet system, and they refused to enforce or toe any particular “party line.” They saw themselves as undertaking politically engaged intellectual activity, but at a time when the mass base for progressive political change – something assumed by 19th century thinkers like Marx – was largely absent. One member of the Frankfurt School characterized their work as being like a “message in a bottle”: sent out to future generations, for their use when political conditions have changed.

In this course we will examine a number of works of critical political theory – by both the original Frankfurt School and more contemporary practitioners. The task of critical theorists today (i.e. us) is to clarify the struggles and wishes of our age, and also to assess how we are faring. The first step in redeeming the hopes of the past will be to decode critical theory’s messages, to find a use for them in our time or send them back out to sea....

Course procedures:

This course will be run as a seminar, which means that all of us collectively are responsible for making discussion happen in each class session; I will do very little lecturing. I will also not come to class with a set agenda for discussion: it is up to you to decide what we will talk about. This means that it is imperative that you come to class prepared to discuss the readings. “Prepared to discuss” means not only carefully doing the assigned readings (see below), but also bringing them to class, as well as some notes and/or questions for discussion. Bringing your laptop is not necessary, and will be actively discouraged if it hinders class discussion.

Class participation is worth a significant portion of your grade for this course; more than two unexcused absences will have a significant adverse effect on your participation mark. Compared to other 4000/5000-level courses, the volume of reading may be relatively light (rarely more than 100 pages per week); however, the readings are at times difficult – sometimes very difficult. You will have to read them closely, and often twice (or more). I don’t expect that you will come to class always having understood the readings, but I do expect that you will at least have grappled with them, and are able to at least begin to articulate what it is (if anything) that you don’t understand.

Class Meetings

Mondays 1:30-4:30pm
BAC 235

My Office Hours

Wednesdays 9-11am or by appointment
BAC 216 585-1925
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Readings:

Two books are required for this course: Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, and Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. Of the rest of the required readings, some are collected in a coursepack, while the rest are available online via links in the weekly blocks on the course Acorn page. The books and the coursepack are all available for purchase at the Campus Bookstore.

There is also a fairly extensive (but by no means comprehensive) set of supplementary readings available on these authors and themes on the course Acorn page.

Schedule:

Jan 5 – Introduction to the course; introductory lecture on intellectual foundations of Critical Theory

(no readings)

Jan 12 – Critical Theory: Introduction and Overview

Paul Piccone, “General Introduction” (from *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*) [kit]

Wendy Brown, “Feminist Theory and the Frankfurt School: Introduction” [Acorn]

Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory” [kit]

Jan 19 – Marcuse, or Advanced Capitalism: Promise and Peril (I)

Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (to end of chapter 2)

Jan 26 – Marcuse, or Advanced Capitalism: Promise and Peril (II)

Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (chapter 3 to end)

Feb 2 – Horkheimer and Adorno, or Modernity, Reason, and Culture

Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” [kit]

Feb 9 – Benjamin, or Art and Politics

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction” [Acorn]

Feb 16 – study week: no class

Feb 23 – Jameson, or Postmodern Culture

Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” [Acorn]

Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” [Acorn]

Mar 2 – Baudrillard, or Postmodernism and Reality

Jean Baudrillard, “Towards a Theory of Consumption” [kit]

Jean Baudrillard, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” [kit]

Mar 9 – Foucault, or Power and Knowledge

Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” [kit]

Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” [kit]

Mar 16 – Feminism and Gender

Herbert Marcuse, “Marxism and Feminism” [Acorn]

Elisabeth Bronfen, “Reality Check: Image Affects and Cultural Memory” [Acorn]

Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse” [kit]

Mar 23 – Nature and Human Nature

William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” [Acorn]

Lenny Moss, “Detachment, Genomics, and the Nature of Being Human” [Acorn]

Donna Haraway, “The Cyborg Manifesto” [Acorn]

Mar 30 - Law and Justice

Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” [kit]

Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law” [kit]

Apr 6 – The State

Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*

Grading and Assignments

Seminar Presentation

An oral presentation (about 15-20 minutes) discussing one of the assigned readings. Presentations should cover the key themes of the reading, and raise issues or questions for discussion. Please remember that everyone else will have done the reading, as well, so while a brief summary may be in order, the presentation must do more than merely restate the author's points. Any reading scheduled on or after Feb. 23 may be chosen, however, only one student may present on any given reading. Presentation topics will be chosen in class on January 19.

Written Assignments

There are a total of five potential short written assignments in this course – each one corresponding to a 2-3 week section of the course. Each of these assignments should be 5-6 double-spaced pages (1200-1500 words), and is due on the Thursday after that section of the course is completed. **Undergraduate students must complete any three short written assignments; MA students must complete all five written assignments.** Students may choose to substitute a longer research paper (3-4000 words) for two short written assignments. Students who wish to write a research paper must let me know about their choice (and discuss the paper topic) no later than Friday, Feb. 13th.

Note that each of the paper topics offers a choice of authors/ course readings to discuss. **You may not write a short paper that covers the same reading as your seminar presentation.**

Each short essay, the seminar presentation, and participation in class discussions, will be equally weighted in calculating final grades (i.e. each is worth 20% for undergraduate students and about 14% for MA students). Research papers will count for the equivalent of two other assignments.

Paper	Due Date*
Marcuse exegesis	Jan. 29
Reading culture	Feb. 26
Postmodern subjectivity	Mar. 12
“What is nature?”	Mar. 26
Mobilizing theory	April 9
Research paper	April 9

* All papers should be posted to the course Acorn page, no later than midnight on the due date. Late papers will be assessed a penalty of 2% per weekday late.