Critical Theory: Space, Society and Change

GEOG329 - Graduate School of Geography, Clark University
Professor Mark Davidson

Course Description
Nearly 75 years ago Max Horkheimer, echoing Marx, defined critical theory as distinguished by its attempt to critique and change society. It is therefore not simply a tool for understanding, but also a method for overcoming injustice, domination and oppression. Over the past 50 years, geographers have found inspiration in this transformative mode of theorizing in research fields as diverse as housing, resource management, race relations and climatology. But in what state do we find critical theory today? For some geographers, critical theory has transformed into a pluralist venture that is symbolized by a politics of disagreement and a modest normativity. However, others fervently disagree with this project, arguing that we now face unprecedented challenges that cannot be dealt with by this brand of modest theory or, paradoxically, those more assertive types of theory which preceded it. Simply, it is thought that previous critical theory is unable to produce change in an era of reflexive cynicism, sophism and post-political politics. The seminar follows these debates by tracing the ways in which geographers have historically engaged with critical theory and evaluating where this engagement stands today. In order to achieve the latter, the seminar will examine a range of contemporary critical social theory, including an exploration of Slavoj Zizek’s claim that we need a new theory of everything(!), Alain Badiou’s interpretation of politics as event and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s arguments about critical theory’s kernel concern.
Politics after post-structuralism: *A new New Left or new Old Left?*

The purpose of this seminar is to think through the geographical implications of a strand of contemporary critical theory that has sort to rethink progressive politics in response to the devastating critiques of post-structuralists and the decline of actually-existing socialisms. The seminar is a chance for you to explore recent political philosophy and trace out what associations it might have to geographical theory and your own research interests. It is also a forum for you to debate. Much of the literature we will read is provocative and polemic; it will therefore provide substantial opportunity for debate, particularly given the political implications of contemporary critical theory are confronting.

You should be reminded that we read we will read political philosophy texts very much from the outside-looking-in. This is not a political philosophy seminar, nor is this a definite course on critical theory. Rather it is a geography seminar reading some recent political philosophy. Consequently, we will encounter new ideas and theories which are not easily comprehended. The seminars are certainly a space for you to work through these ideas and gaps in understanding. However, all knowledges are partial and we are all differently situated with regards to our personal and academic backgrounds. We are therefore not striving for a complete knowledge of the literatures we encounter, but rather we will develop productive dialogues between ourselves and the different texts.

The seminar’s exploration of contemporary critical theory therefore carries on in the recent tradition in geography of questioning foundational ideas, moving away from universalizing theoretical narratives and searching for methodological transparency. However, it does so with reference to a literature that has not completely expelled many of these goals/ideas. Indeed, perhaps what defines the critical theory we will examine is an attempt to engage with ontological and epistemological critique, but without retreating to – in any sense – a political relativism. What unites the critical theory we will explore is therefore a concern for the political and, more specifically, how a leftist politics might be (re)constructed. All the authors therefore assume that our current mode of politics does not, or might not, contain the solutions necessary for the societal problems we face.

Given the critical theorists we will read are not geographers, we will need to be cognizant of how their work is (or is not) related to our theoretical and empirical concerns. To aid us in this, we will at times combine a set of complementary readings drawn from the geographical literature that have engaged with some of the theoretical texts we are interested in. Our attention will therefore have to be focused on both how they interpret the theoretical texts we read directly as well the substantive content of these papers.

Please be sure to give feedback as the seminar goes along.Whilst the basic structure of the readings will not change, we have the opportunity to incorporate and/or substitute various readings. Whether this be references to philosophical texts that you want to follow up on, or readings from other fields that you think might be productive to read within the context of the class, be sure to let me know.
Your responsibilities
It might be a cliché, but you will only get out of the seminar what you put in. We are diving straight into some fairly difficult texts and undoubtedly confronting new terrain. Yet, if you complete the following steps we can use the seminars as a place to explore the texts and debate their relative merits:
- You must complete all the readings; even those not assigned to you
- You must select one reading each week that you will summarize for the group
- Your summary should be delivered to me (email or hardcopy) at the end of each seminar
- For each assigned reading, you should come to class with a number of related discussion questions

In each seminar the group dynamics are different. However, there are some general features you should be aware of:
- There is always a tendency for some people to speak more than others. This is perfectly fine, but everyone should always make a contribution to debate.
- People have read different things, but your familiarity with materials is not a barrier to participation. If you are not confident about the materials, you are feeling the right things. No one is an expert in all the materials we will cover; no matter how much some people try to appear that they are.
- A simple contribution and/or discussion question is usually the best. Don’t be afraid to ask what the author means when they say x, y or z.

Class Meetings
We meet every Wednesday at 9am, and our seminar will last until 11:50am. As such, we will intersperse our discussions with one or two breaks.

Website
The syllabus, grades, readings, and other assignments will be posted on the course website (Cicada: https://cicada.clarku.edu), and/or distributed in hardcopy.

Honor Code
Clark University’s policies of academic integrity apply to every aspect of this course. Please see www.clarku.edu/offices/aac/integrity.cfm if you have any questions about what this entails.

Special Needs
Persons with disabilities or in need of special accommodations to meet the expectations of this course and take full advantage of learning opportunities are encouraged to contact the office of Disability Services as soon as possible to request such accommodations. Disability Services is located in the Academic Advising Center, 142 Woodland Street, second floor, 508-793-7468. In addition, it would be helpful to bring this to the instructor’s attention as early as possible.
Assessment

The course uses a variety of assessment methods. These are:

- **Reading preparation** (20%): At the end of each seminar, you will be asked to provide (i) a short summary (200 words) of each assigned reading and (ii) a list of questions/discussion topics for your particular assigned reading. This submission can be annotated during the seminar discussion, but it should demonstrate evidence of your preparation, comprehension of the readings and intellectual engagement.

- **Class participation** (25%): In-class discussions are pivotal to the learning outcomes of this course. It is intended to both introduce you the subject matter and begin your intellectual engagement. As such, discussing the readings during class is a learning priority. You will be graded on your participation, listening and engagement with others.

- **Reaction paper** (15%): You will be required to write a short (2000 words) reaction paper midway through the course. You will be asked to respond to a statement. This statement will relate to one aspect of the first part of the course.

- **Final paper** (40%): In the latter half of the semester, you will be required to write an extend paper (4000 words) that debates/discusses various aspects of the class literature. This paper will give you the opportunity to explore elements of the course that have particularly interested you.
**Week 1**

**Introduction – Zizek!**

This film pays homage to Slavoj Zizek, the “Elvis of cultural theory”. It features Zizek playing up to the cameras and has some awful depictions of the philosopher cum joker. However, it does serve as an introduction to Zizek’s revolutionary mode of thought, offering a sprinkling of exerts from this extensive critique of contemporary capitalism.

“I couldn’t help noticing how all the best Marxist analyses are always analyses of a failure ... Like, why did Paris Commune go wrong? Trotskyites. Why did the October Revolution go wrong? And so on ... OK, we screwed it up, but we can give the best theory why it had to happen.” (Zizek)
Part One – INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL THEORY

WEEK 2
[What was/is critical theory?]

Commentary


Source

Max Horkheimer 1937. Traditional and Critical Theory (first statement from the Frankfurt School using the term “critical theory”) [pdf]
- Chapter 4: Philosophy and Critical Theory, pp.99-118 [pdf]  
- Chapter 5: One-Dimensional Thought: Negative Thinking: The Defeated Logic of Protest, pp.123-143 [book]  
- Political Preface, xi-xxv [book]  
- Chapter 1: The Hidden Trend of Psychoanalysis, pp.11-20 [pdf]

**Week 3**

**[Enlightenment tradition]**

Emmanuel Kant. 1784. *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* [pdf]


- “A Note on Dialectic” pp.63-71


**[Reinterpreting Marx’s critical position]**


- “Sartre’s Existentialism” pp.128-158

**Week 4**

**[Althusser]**


Louis Althusser, Marx in his Limits. [pdf]


McInerney, D. 2005. Althusser’s Underground Railroad: From Dialectical Materialism to the Non-Philosophy of the Non-State, Borderlands, 4 [pdf]

[New Left in Anglo-American thought]
Part Two – The Real of Marx (Post-Marxism)


Chapter 1: Locating Zizek as Critical Theorist

Week 5

[Marx thru’ Lacan]

[On Lacan…]
WEEK 6

[Lacan and feminism]

Chapter 4: Beauty and the Beast II: Sex, Gender and Mothering, 117-161 [book]

Chapter 2: Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix, pp.47-106 [critique of Lacan’s formulation of desire in structural framework; reconfigure through multiplicity and play]


[Lacan in geography]


WEEK 7

[Rediscovering ideology]

Chapter 1 – How Did Marx Invent the Symptom? pp.1-56 (Lacan/ Marx – ideology introduction; Sloterdijk)
Chapter 2 – From Symptom to Sinthome, pp.57-94
Chapter 3 – Che Vuoi? pp.95-144 (heavy theory; Lacan – (post-)structuralist)


[Commentary]

Chapter 1: On Zizek’s Expanded Notion of Ideology, pp.23-54

Chapter 4: How can we distinguish reality from ideology?, pp.63-78


WEEK 8

[ideology and consciousness]

Chapter 3 – Class Consciousness pp.46-82


Chapter 1: Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness, pp.3-9
Chapter 2: Enlightenment as Dialogue: Critique of Ideology as Continuation of the Miscarried Dialogue through Other Means, pp.10-21
Chapter 5: In Search of Lost Cheekiness, pp.101-138


**WEEK 9**

**[Ontology and Politics]**

- Chapter 4: Political Subjectivities and Its Vicissitudes, pp.171-244

**[Agamben]**

Introduction and Part One: The Logic of Sovereignty, 9-44 [pdf]


**[ontology and geography – state of exception]**

Part Three – ANTI-POSTMODERNISM AND NEO-LENINISM (BADIOU)


**WEEK 10**

[truth/event]
- Author’s and Translator’s Preface, xi-xxxiii
- Chapter 1 – The One and the Multiple: a priori conditions of any possible ontology, pp.23-30

- Introduction – xxi-xxxvi
- Chapter 4 – Badiou’s Ontology, pp.81-106

- Chapter 2: Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits to Formalism, pp.11-43
[Debate]
Chapter 10: 1730 – Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible

[Commentary]

**WEEK 11**

[communism]


[Leninism]
Part Four – Radical Egalitarianism


**WEEK 12**

**[politics]**

- Chapter 1: The Beginning of Politics, pp.1-20
- Chapter 5: Democracy or Consensus, pp.95-122


[partition of the sensible]

- Chapter 1: From Victorious Democracy to Criminal Democracy, pp.5-32
- Chapter 4: The Rationality of a Hatred, pp.71-97

- Preface to Second Edition
[equality]

WEEK 13
[commentary]

[Ranciere and geography]

- Chapter 2: Politics and the Political, 8-34

- Chapter 2: Nihilism and the ‘social’: capitalism, post-politics and terror, pp. 55-89


WEEK 14
[Concluding discussion]