

# IHSS 6960 – Advanced Social Theory

**Syllabus, Fall 2020**

**Tuesdays, 4:45 to 7:30 PM, Online**

**Professor: Dr. Jim Malazita (malazj@rpi.edu)**

**Office: West 403, Office Hours: Tuesday/Friday 12-1**

Advanced Social Theory is an interdisciplinary HASS graduate course that covers broad and major strands of social, cultural, and literary theory (and their significant overlaps), always with an eye toward how those theories have evolved and how they are multiply in use today. As it's an interdisciplinary course, readings are sourced from many of the disciplines that contribute to the shaping of social and cultural theory, including sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, art/design history, and geography. We will also spend significant time (especially in the beginning of the semester) working through some definitional complexities, like "what is theory, anyway?" and "does it actually do anything?", as well as breaking down relationships and intersections between social theory, critical theory, critical theory, Critical theory (that's a joke that will make more sense later in the semester and I promise is really funny), cultural theory, and reading/writing/empirical/interpretive research practices.

One of the inevitable frustrations of teaching a Social Theory course, especially an interdisciplinary one, is that you can't cover everything, you can't cover what you *are* covering in depth, and you can't assign all the readings at once. So you may find that we return to certain conversations or strands of thought throughout the semester, and you may also see that some groups of scholars interpret a key text in a completely different way than other groups of scholars. Such is the joy of being theory nerds.

The way we organize our readings does epistemic work, and constructing a class like Social Theory necessarily highlights certain thematic/historical connections and disguises others. I tried to not take a historical approach to reading theory (i.e., "this is 1920s theory week. Next week is 1960s theory week."), but different strands of thought occurring at the same time are in conversation together, and you kinda have to read Marx before you read Bourdieu. Maybe.

Syllabi also do political work. For example, I attempt to not have feminist, Black, queer, colonized, disabled theoretical frameworks as separate strands of thought on a syllabus, as it can segment those authors out of "standard" theory and at times can feel tokenizing. However, uncritically integrating the works of marginalized authors into the broader traditions they are a part of (and critiquing!) can also erase the fact that these authors often had to work on their own, and in their own scholarly networks, for a long time, in order to have their work accepted as an integral part of a theoretical apparatus (if it has been accepted at all). It can also erase the fact that, for example, feminist theory, black feminist theory, and feminist materialism are all very distinct (though connected!), and even conflicting, bodies of scholarship, and to fold them all into "materialism" or "post-structuralism" or even "feminism" is reductive.

In summary, it's all really complicated, and please bring the same critical and inquisitive lens to the structure of the course as I know you will to the readings.

The class will feature two major analytic assignments. Each week, students will submit short synthesis assignments that connect and critique that week's bundle of readings. Finally, students will submit a "Secondary Source" paper that historically and critically engages with a theoretical apparatus of the student's choice.

### **Required Text:**

Links to all readings (including the following books) will be available on LMS. You can, however, feel free to purchase the following short books, which we will be reading in full:

- Jean Baudrillard (1991) *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*
- Phillippe Descola (2013) *The Ecology of Others*.

### **Assignments:**

**Synthesis Memos: 60 Points total (12 Memos, 5 points each)**

**"Secondary Source" Literature Review Outline: 10 Points**

**"Secondary Source" Literature Review Paper: 30 Points**

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### **Weekly Synthesis Memos**

500-800 words each

Due Monday night (or as close to it as you can reasonably get in your time zone!) to LMS, every week there is assigned reading

5 Points each, 60 Points total

This course features a heavy and diverse reading list, and generally requires that students engage with four to five readings each week. While all of the readings in a given week are designed to speak "to" each other, not all are direct response pieces to one another; there may even be some weeks where readings share no common citational networks.

Due to the volume and breadth of readings in the class, we won't have time each week to do a comprehensive summary of each text (though, of course, students are encouraged to bring critical and comprehension questions to class for discussion/clarification). Rather, students will need to do diffractive work before class each week, reading "across and through" the week's assigned texts.

The Weekly Synthesis Memos represent fragments of students' diffractive work in prose form. While every memo should ideally, touch upon most or all of the assigned readings, the goal is for students to begin to form analytic arguments through the constraints of the assigned readings. **For example**, if students were to write a memo for the Introductory week, one might

do a general comparison/contrast of the ways that sociological and literary/cultural disciplines treat theory, or one might write on the tensions in how Kellner, Benzecry et. al., and Healy each construct the relationship of social theory to empirically examinable behavior.

In these cases, though both example essays demonstrate understanding and depth of critique of the same readings, they each take different analytic or diffractive “reads” of the relationships among the texts, including which texts operate as critical lenses and which as objects of critique. Importantly, while the sample memos implicitly draw from each student’s prior knowledge and disciplinary expertise, they are also structured in a way that uses the assigned texts as the primary vehicles for argumentation and analysis, rather than leaning on an outside authority, which may distance the engagement with the text (e.g., “All of these people are wrong because Marx says so” in a week that we did not engage with Marxist materialism).

Though memos are graded, they are not designed for developing refined thesis statements. Rather, they are for practicing synthetic and hermeneutic writing and analysis skills, and to help provide scaffolding for later assignments, portfolio pieces, and lines of argumentation. I want to give everyone full credit as much as I can, so use the following rubric more as a guideline for structuring and thinking through your Weekly Memos, rather than a super strict delineation of what a “good” memo is:

Grade	Qualities
5	Writeup shows understanding, depth of thought, and engagement with most or all of the assigned texts. Summary is kept to a minimum in favor of synthetic analysis. Claims are generally backed up with careful reference to the text. Writing is relatively clear and precise.
4	Analysis lacks depth, or shows limited engagement with most of the texts. Argument may be cogent, but relies too heavily on “outside” sources. May replace analysis with summary. Texts are referred to only generally, or only one text is engaged with thoroughly. No proofreading.
3	Summarizes readings, does not connect readings to one another, or show any level of engagement with the text beyond a surface level reading. References to the text are vague or rushed. Prose is bordering on outline/notes.
2	Does not show engagement with the text, even through summary. Writing may be a thinly disguised rant or manifesto.
1	Student has clearly not read the text, has submitted hastily cobbled together notes, possibly passive-aggressively. Or because we’re in a pandemic and everything is awful. It’s okay, we’ll talk about it.

**“Secondary Source” Literature Review (40 Points)**

**3-page Single Space Outline Due November 23 (10 Points)**

**6000 Word Final Paper Due December 18 (30 Points)**

The “Secondary Source” Literature Review assignment gives students the opportunity to explore social and cultural theoretical apparatuses that this class has glossed over. Rather than being a summary document, however, this assignment is designed to help students learn how

to piece together literature reviews, how to compare readings of texts across authors and across time, and how to make their own arguments by re-configuring and re-purposing the language of others.

In this assignment, students will assume the role of a “secondary source” analyst, an underrated and highly important kind of writing craft within the academy. While secondary writings can often be stereotyped as “summarizing” the work of other thinkers, this genre is actually marked by its attention to detail, historical and social analysis, and rigorous research practices. The ways scholarly communities end up developing meta-theoretical practices are as much due to secondary readers as they are primary writers, and often secondary readings become transformed into primary texts (i.e., Marx’s readings of Hegel, and Althusser’s readings on Lenin).

Your role will be to identify a strand of socio/cultural thought, either centered around a particular concept (e.g., structuralist approaches to language) or through a particular author (e.g., Lacan’s psychoanalysis), and trace the (or some) history, politics, and lineages of that thought. For example, if you were to choose Marxist brands of materialism, you might begin by collecting primary sources (e.g. what has Marx/Engels written?), prior secondary interpretations/critiques (Althusser? Robinson?), and more genealogical uses/transformations of that theory (Irigaray? Freire? Lewis?). Google Scholar, the RPI Library, Wikipedia, and good ol’ fashioned “read the bibliographies of papers you really like” approach can be useful for finding authors in your desired citational network.

Your goal, however, is not (just) to summarize and explain core components of your theory. Rather, you will be arguing for a particular “reading” of that theory. This might be by integrating and comparing critiques and criticisms (e.g., “Some folks say Marx’s materialist class analysis is one-dimensional and reductive, but as we can see through feminist materialisms, Marx’s analysis is both more-than-material and more-than-class”), or through “rescuing” readings (e.g. “Marx’s scholarship has a difficult time dealing with queerness and hybridized identities, and might even be actively hostile to it; by infusing Sarah Ahmed’s concept of “orientations” we can reformulate Marxism to be more queerly productive”), or to describe alternatives or clarifications (e.g., People think that Marx means thing “A” by his materialist analysis, but if we read his works next to other prominent scholars of the day, he might actually be meaning “B”).

You are not limited to these kinds of discourses, and several of the papers that we are reading in the class serve as diverse examples of a well-done reading. I’ll be providing additional examples on the LMS as we move through the semester, but for now, you might want to take a look at this article by Yola Kipcak, which, structurally, does a nice job blending background, summary, comparative analysis, and a call to action/argumentation:

<https://www.marxist.com/marxism-vs-queer-theory.htm>

A detailed outline of this paper will be due on November 23<sup>rd</sup> in lieu of class and weekly readings. The 3 page, single spaced outline should be detailed enough that I can get an idea of

who you are reading, how you are putting them into conversation, and what argument you are making. The outline primarily serves as a structuring exercise for you, but will also give me something to provide feedback on about your sources (is there something helpful to you that you might be missing?) and on argumentative structure (how are you reading your sources, is your argument convincing, how can it be sharpened?).

**Units** (Readings and synthesis memos for each unit are to be completed prior to the start of class for that Unit; there is no synthesis memo required for the first week of class, but please come to that class having read the assigned material):

**Unit 1: Introduction (September 1) (No Synthesis Memos due for this week)**

- Douglas Kellner (2014) "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture"
- Claudio Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac Ariail Reed (2017) Introduction to *Social Theory Now*
- Kieran Healy (2017) "Fuck Nuance" in *Sociological Theory* 35 (2), 118-127

**Unit 2: Materialism and Ideology (September 15)**

- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1846) "Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks," in *The German Ideology*
- Louis Althusser (1970) "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*
- Cedric J. Robinson (1983) "Richard Wright and the Critique of Class Theory," in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*
- Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan (1989) "The Construction of Woman in Three Popular Texts of Empire: Towards a Critique of Materialist Feminism" in *Textual Practice*

**Unit 3: Language and Post-structuralism (September 22)**

- Jacques Derrida (1966) "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"
- Roland Barthes (1967) "The Death of the Author"
- Hélène Cixous (1976) "The Laugh of the Medusa" in *Signs*
- Patricia Hill Collins (1986) "The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought" in *Social Problems* 33 (6)
- Surya Monro (2005) "Beyond Male and Female: Post-structuralism and the Spectrum of Gender" in *International Journal of Transgenderism* 8(1)

**Unit 4: Critique and Critiquing Critique (September 29)**

- Kenneth Burke (1973) "Literature as Equipment for Living" in *Philosophy of the Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*
- Jean Baudrillard (1991) *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*
- Bruno Latour (2004) "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" in *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter)

- Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell (2013) "What is 'critical' about critical design?" in *CHI '13: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*
- Heather Love (2017), "The Temptations: Donna Haraway, Feminist Objectivity, and the Problem of Critique." In *Critique and Postcritique*, Eds. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski

#### **Unit 5: Systems, Assemblages, Ecologies (October 6)**

- Gregory Bateson (1966 and 1969) "From Versailles to Cybernetics" and "Pathologies of Epistemology", collected in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*
- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988) "Introduction: Rhizome" and "10,000 BC: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?)" from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*
- Phillippe Descola (2013) *The Ecology of Others*.
- Eden Kinkaid (2020) "Can Assemblage Think Difference? A Feminist Critique of Assemblage Geographies." *Progress in Human Geography*

#### **Unit 6: Practice and Enactment (October 13)**

- Erving Goffman (1956) "Introduction" and "Performances" from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*
- Pierre Bourdieu (1972) "The Objective Limits of Objectivism (Section 1)" and "Structures and the Habitus" in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*
- Judith Butler (1993) "Preface," "Introduction" and "Bodies that Matter" in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*
- Annemarie Mol (2002) "Doing Disease" in *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*

#### **Unit 7: Agency and Causality (October 20)**

- Anthony Giddens (1986) "Elements of the Theory of Structuration" in *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*
- Bruno Latour (2005) "Introduction" and "Objects too Have Agency" from *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*.
- Peter Hedström and Petri Ylikoski (2010) "Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences." In *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (1)
- Karen Barad (2013) "'Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers.'" Interview with Karen Barad" in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* Eds. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin

#### **Unit 8: Colonies and Settlers (October 27)**

- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In Nelson, Cary; Grossberg, Lawrence (eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*.
- Homi K. Bhabha (1994). "The Commitment to Theory." In *The Location of Culture*
- Patrick Wolfe (2006) "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4

- J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, " (2016) "A structure, not an event": Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5.1

### Unit 9: Space and Place (November 3)

- Henri Lefebvre (1974) "Plan of the Present Work" in *The Production of Space*
- Larry Knopp (2004), "Ontologies of place, placelessness, and movement: Queer quests for identity and their impacts on contemporary geographic thought" *Gender, Place and Culture* 11 121–134.
- Katherine McKittrick (2011). "On plantations, prisons, and a Black sense of place." *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12(8)
- Rachel Colls (2012). "Feminism, bodily difference and non-representational geographies". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(3)

### Unit 10: Intersections (November 10)

- Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." In *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8)
- Kathy Davis (2008), "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful." In *Feminist Theory* 9(1)
- Jasbir K. Puar (2012) "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory" in *philoSOPHIA* 2(1)
- Sumi Cho, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall (2013) "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis." In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38(4)

### Unit 11: Orientation, Affect, Phenomena (November 17)

- Eve Sedgwick (1990) Introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*
- Sara Ahmed (2006) "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*
- Erin Manning (2006) "Making Sense of the Incommensurable: Experiencing Democracy Expressions of the Political—Thick to Think—Shifting Skinscapes— Democracy— Making Sense of Politics," in *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*
- Patricia T. Clough (2010) "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies" in *The Affect Theory Reader* Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth

### Unit 12: Ontologies (December 1)

- Sally Haslanger (1995) "Ontology and Social Construction" in *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2)
- Martin Paleček and Mark Risjord (2012) "Relativism and the Ontological Turn within Anthropology" in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*
- Rebekah Sheldon (2015) "Form/Matter/Chora: Object Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism" in *The Nonhuman Turn* Ed. Richard Grusin
- Calvin L. Warren (2018) "Introduction: The Free Black **Is** Nothing" in *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*

**Unit 13: More-than-Human (December 8)**

- Rosi Braidotti (1994) "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines" in *Nomadic Subjects*
- Eduardo Kohn (2013) "Introduction" to *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*.
- Donna Haraway (2016) "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulucene," in *e-flux 75*
- Annie Goh (2019) "Appropriating the Alien: A Critique of Xenofeminism." *Mute*

**Final Essay: December 18**