Special Topics in Critical Theory

This umbrella course examines select topics in critical, cultural, social, and political theory, with special attention to problems of interpretation in the humanities and related social sciences in both historical and theoretical contexts.

Suspicion and Interpretation

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously labeled Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud the “masters of suspicion.” Though they practiced theory and theorized practice quite differently, they shared a proclivity for unmasking, unveiling, demystifying. More recently, this hermeneutics of suspicion has been criticized by proponents of the “anti-hermeneutic turn,” who contend that it reproduces a metaphysics of surface and depth, existence and essence. The objective of this seminar is to read the major theoretical statements of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in search of critical theory’s suspect origins.

Course Requirements

Students are expected to attend all sessions prepared to discuss the day’s readings in sometimes excruciating detail. Participation will account for 30% of the final grade, but more important will help you to establish a reputation as an emerging scholar with something important to say.

Written work will consist of

- Four single-paged, single-spaced papers. Papers should be set in eleven-point type and have the smallest margins possible. Your name can be written on the back.
- One final essay, 15-20 pages, on a topic to be determined in class.

The short papers will each count for 10% of your final grade. The final paper will constitute 30%. All papers will be made available to all participants in the seminar, so you don’t feel like you’re simply writing for the private enjoyment of the instructor.

Student Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will

- Convey a familiarity with the major theoretical texts of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud
- Be able to situate these thinkers in the context of modernity and modernism
- Grasp the intellectual roots of the critical-theoretical tradition
- Understand why Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” has been so influential/controversial
- Articulate a clear and coherent position in the debates over hermeneutics
Make complex theoretical arguments in lucid, disciplined prose

Books

Marx, Early Writings (Penguin)
Marx, Communist Manifesto (any edition)
Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire (International Publishers)
Marx, Capital Vol. 1 (Penguin)

Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals (Vintage)
Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (Vintage)
Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations (Cambridge UP)

Freud, Interpretation of Dreams (Norton)
Freud, Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Norton)
Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, ed., Freud on Women (Norton)
Freud, Ego and the Id (Norton)
Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (Norton)

Articles and other excerpts will be available on Blackboard

Week 1 - Introduction(s)

Week 2 – The Hermeneutics of Suspicion
Ricoeur, from Freud and Philosophy
Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”
Zizek, from The Sublime Object of Ideology
Brian Leiter, “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud” (SSRN)
Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, from The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey (Stanford)

Week 3 — Marx 1
Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” from Early Writings
Wendy Brown, from States of Injury

Week 4 — Marx 2
Feuerbach, Introduction to The Essence of Christianity
Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” from Early Writings
Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” from Early Writings

Week 5 — Marx 3
Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto
Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire

Week 6 — Marx 4
Selections from Capital vol 1
First paper due the following Monday
Week 7 — Nietzsche 1
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Week 8 — Nietzsche 2
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*

Week 9 — Nietzsche 3
Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Abuses of History,” from *Untimely Meditations*
Selections from Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*
Second paper due the following Monday

Week 10 — Freud 1
Freud, *The Interpretations of Dreams*

Week 11 — Freud 2
Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, cont’d

Week 12 — Freud 3
Freud, *A Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* plus
Selections from Young-Bruehl, *Freud on Women*

Week 13 — Freud 4
Freud, *The Ego and the Id*

Week 14 — Conclusions
Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*
Bersani, Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Civilization*
Third paper due the following Monday

Final essay deadline - TBD