Philosophy 310: Critical Social Theory
Kalamazoo College
Spring 2016

Instructor: Dr. Patrick Ahern      E-mail: patrick.ahern@kzoo.edu
Meeting Location: Dewing, Room 311
Meeting Times: Monday and Wednesday, 10:00am-11:35am & Friday, 10:00am-10:40am
Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 1:15pm to 2:15pm (and by appointment)
Office Location: Humphrey House, 202

Course Objectives: The objective of this course is to serve as an introduction to the work of several of the seminal writers in the formation of what is known as “Critical Theory,” or the Frankfurt School. The development of critical theory involves the re-conception of the role and interplay of philosophical thinking and social scientific research. Guided by the German philosophical tradition, particularly Kant and Hegel but most significantly by the “ruthless critique” of Karl Marx, critical theory departs from traditional theory in not simply seeking to explain or describe the world, but to change it toward “human emancipation.” A critical theory, therefore, must not only be self-reflective in its activity, but it must also provide a vision for understanding a critical relation to the social and historical processes, inequalities and dominations, that determine both its own activity and illuminate the possibility for change. Just as theory cannot only turn inward, the social sciences cannot only be directed outward toward the objects or ‘facts’ of examination. Critical theory opens up a model of theorizing that seeks to draw upon the insights of the philosophical tradition of dialectical materialism along with an informed engagement with social scientific research. The aspiration behind this shift in theory and research is to provide a critical engagement with cultural and political conditions in their historical specificity. In so doing, the writers that we will be reading in this course will confront such issues as the critique of instrumental reason, the development of a social praxis that unites theory and practice dialectically, the paradoxical relation of history and labor to emancipation, ideology and cultural critique (often understood through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis), and the understanding of and the possibility for human freedom. In doing so, this course will also provide the theoretical framework for understanding the “critical theories” that have subsequently developed in social scientific theory and research by those who are concerned with oppression and inequalities prevalent within a specific social-historical context (such as can be found in “critical” race, feminist, queer, or class theories).

Texts:
• Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, E.B. Ashton, Continuum
• Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press
• Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books
• Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man, Beacon Press

(Other required readings not in this list will be provided)
Suggested Reading:

Grading: The grades will be earned through a combination of two papers, journal reflections and class participation. The breakdown is as follows:

Two papers (30% and 40%, respectively)
Journal reflections (20%)
Class participation (10%).

Reading and Journal Reflections: It is crucial that you complete the readings on the assigned day and that you have given the text careful consideration before coming to class. Since it will take more than one reading of the texts to familiarize yourself with the ideas presented, you should have the initial reading of the material for the following week done by Monday of the assigned week. The reading schedule will serve as a guide. However, we may adjust the pace of the assignments to provide for more in-depth analysis and in the interest of opportunities for learning. You will be expected to write a journal entry for each reading that reflects upon the readings assigned for that day’s class. These journal entries will be periodically reviewed and graded. You should keep these journals in a notebook for review. Each entry should be at least four pages written. For each of the readings, you will be expected to find three questions or points of interest from the text that may be addressed in class discussion. These journals should provide for an opportunity to delve into your own insights regarding the readings. I will not be grading in terms of ‘correctness’ of an interpretation, but rather that you have shown a careful reading and depth of engagement with the reading of the day.

Essays: You will be required to write two papers. The first paper will be a at least seven pages, double-spaced, and the second paper will be at least ten pages double-spaced. Suggested topics will be distributed in class, though I encourage, especially on your final paper, to craft a paper topic that addresses your interest in the material that we have covered. Any departure from distributed topics will require approval in advance. I will be available to meet with anyone who seeks individual assistance with your paper, and I strongly encourage you to take advantage of this extra assistance in writing your papers. Essays that are late (i.e., not handed in at the time that they are due in class) are subject to a full grade reduction for each day that the essay is late. Exceptions will be made only for extreme circumstances (death, serious illness, etc.) and must be granted in advance.

Attendance and Participation: Active participation in class discussion is key to drawing as much as possible from the readings and the course in general. The class will involve a mixture of lecture and discussion, and you are expected to come to class with questions and comments about the reading. You are entitled to two unexcused absences before your grade is reduced by one step (A to A-, B+ to B, etc.).
Classroom Policies:

- This class will be treated as a collaborative effort and, to that end, it is absolutely required that you treat everyone in the class with respect. Any demeaning, dismissive, or insulting behavior toward anyone in the class will be treated very seriously. If you observe any such behavior, please bring it to my attention. All are here to learn and the class environment will be one where mistakes will be seen as opportunities, and the ability to ask questions and identify what is challenging about the material will be both fostered and encouraged.
- Cell Phones are prohibited. They must be off and packed away so that they are out of sight. They are distracting to all in the class, and besides, we all know that you don't like to stare at your lap that much.
- Computers will need to be put away unless stated otherwise.

Disabilities:

If you have a disability requiring special accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible so that the necessary arrangements can be made.

Final Note:

I view this class as a collaborative effort where as a group we will be engaging with these thinkers and texts. To that end, I encourage feedback from you regarding anything in the class that you find most or least helpful to your understanding or interest in the material. While I am aware that many of the ideas in the class will be challenging, it is my hope that the classroom atmosphere will be conducive to lively discussion and encourage you to take risks in your own thinking. You may even surprise yourself!
(Tentative) Reading Schedule:


Week Two (April 4, 6, 8): Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (Handout); Theodor Adorno, “Why Philosophy?” (Handout)

Week Three (April 11, 13, 15): Theodor Adorno, Introduction to Negative Dialectics

Week Four (April 18, 20, 22): Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment

Week Five (April 25, 27, 29): Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment

Week Six (May 2, 4, 6): Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” “Some Reflections on Kafka”

Week Seven (May 9, 11, 13): “Theses on the Philosophy of History”; TBD

Week Eight (May 16, 18, 20): Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man

Week Nine (May 23, 25, 27): Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man

Week Ten (May 30, June 1, 3): Memorial Day No Class; TBD