SENIOR SEMINAR:

THE LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF AGENCY:
HABERMAS, HONNETH, AND ZIZEK ON THE RECOGNITIVE STRUCTURE OF (INTER)SUBJECTIVITY

Fall 2010 & Winter 2011
KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

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Offices Hours:

- Monday: 1:00 – 3:00
- Tuesday: 10:30 – 11:30
- Thursday: 10:30 – 11:30
- By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
The central purpose of the Philosophy Department Senior Seminar is to support seniors in their individual research projects. The Seminar begins with the reading and discussion of a body of literature selected to establish a common knowledge base to support seniors in their exchange, discussion, critical examination, and formal presentation of individual research papers and manuscripts throughout fall and winter terms. Seniors read, discuss, and write about the seminar’s required texts from the perspective of their own research, using the conceptual resources developed in such common readings to support and deepen their own research manuscripts. The overall goal of the seminar is to establish an intensive, mutually supportive research group that gains expertise in a specific domain of contemporary philosophy pertinent to our own particular research activities. Seniors are required to read texts, write a brief précis of the arguments, and vigorously discuss the material during seminar times, both on its own terms and in light of its potential connection to his/her own research. The seminar is emphatically interactive.

The theme of this year’s senior seminar is critical social theory. What is critical social theory? Who are the major contemporary figures in this distinctive tradition of European Continental philosophy, which began as an interdisciplinary group of Neo-Marxist scholars who referred to themselves as the “Frankfurt School of Social Criticism.” More specifically, we will examine the two most influential contemporary theorists – Juergen Habermas and Axel Honneth – who marshaled and defended the “Communicative Turn” in critical social theory, one that showcased communicative inter-subjectivity as the central phenomenon of social life. While Habermas defends “undistorted communication” as the basic normative ideal of critical social theory, Honneth defends a related thought alternative ideal of “undamaged identities.” We will examine how Honneth both builds upon and criticizes Habermas’s theory of communicative action. In the last half of the course, we explore Slavoj Zizek’s brand of critical social theory.

From a broad philosophical perspective, the theme of this year’s seminar is the linguistic, social, and institutional conditions of agency, while the more specific focus is upon social recognition as constitutive of agency and subjectivity. We begin with Habermas’s attempt to reconceptualize the self or “ego” as communicatively structured – his famous “Communicative Turn” in theorizing the subject – and we focus upon his central diagnostic claim that distorted communication leads to and maintains damaged identities. We then turn to Axel Honneth’s Neo-Hegelian appropriation of Habermas “Communicative Turn” in critical social theory, to his famous claim that “damaged identities,” not “distorted communication,” should be the basic norm of social criticism. For Honneth, communication is just one aspect of inter-subjective co-existence, any form of which rests upon mutual recognition as a constitutive condition. We devote the first half of the course, then, to two figures who defend modernity along, respectively, broadly Neo-Kantian and Neo-Hegelian lines. In the second half, we examine Zizek’s account of the social and symbolic conditions within which subjectivity is sustained, an approach that is perhaps best described as a Neo-Nietzschean orientation to modernity, one that is decidedly opposed to Habermas’s Neo-Kantian and Honneth’s Neo-Hegelian orientations.

The second half of the course is devoted to Zizek’s Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation of Hegel and his implicit critique.
of Honneth's account of the social and ideological conditions of modern subjectivity. While Honneth defends a view of Hegel as championing mutual reconciliation as the central ideal of ethical life, Zizek defends an opposing view of Hegel that showcases the negativity, antagonism, and irreconcilable rivalry as the perennial conditions of social co-existence – i.e. a struggle for recognition that is structurally incapacitating. While Honneth defends modernity as committed to universal norms of mutual recognition and the associated prospect of moral development, Zizek emphasizes the perennial nature of political antagonism and difference, offering a view of social relations as structured antagonism. What makes Hegel such a fascinating figure in contemporary critical social theory is his centrality in the modernist-postmodernist debate, where different interpretations of Hegel define the three central positions currently defended: namely, modernists (Habermas & Honneth), postmodernists (Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, & Butler), and those who define themselves as neither (Zizek & Badiou).

Our critical comparison and contrast of Honneth's and Zizek's competing interpretations of Hegel attains a sharp focus in their respective choice of psychological theorists: respectively, Donald Winnicott and Jacques Lacan. Both Winnicott and Lacan offer competing theories of childhood development, and these developmental theories provide the framework within which each reinterprets Hegel’s account of the development of human mindedness or “spirit.” Winnicott belongs to a tradition of Post-Freudian psychology known “ego psychology,” a school of thought that conceives of human social life as crisis ridden though defined by an optimistic normative ideal of mutual reconciliation. In contrast, Lacan inaugurates a traditional of Post-Freudian psychology distinctive in its emphatic focus upon misrecognition and social antagonism as the basic structure of social commerce and identity formation. More simply put, Winnicott conceives of human development as a process of gradual ameliorative transformation – the sublimation – of human drives, while Lacan conceives of human development as a process of gradual deconstruction of and extraction from essentially compromising social relations. By examining their competing conceptions of recognitive social relations, we gain a better understanding of their alternative ideals of political agency and emancipatory social change.

**HABERMAS, HONNETH, AND ZIZEK AS CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORISTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliated Philosopher</th>
<th>Affiliated Psychologist</th>
<th>Ideal of Critical Theory</th>
<th>Philosophical Method</th>
<th>Principle of Social Integration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habermas</td>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>Undistorted Communication</td>
<td>Rational Reconstruction</td>
<td>Communicative Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honneth</td>
<td>Hegel</td>
<td>Undamaged Identities</td>
<td>Narrative Historiography</td>
<td>Recognitive Sociality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zizek</td>
<td>Hegel &amp; Nietzsche</td>
<td>Subjective Destitution</td>
<td>Genealogical Dismantling</td>
<td>Symbolic Interpolation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**BACKGROUND TEXTS:**


**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

1) Habermas, Juergen:
   d) “Reflections on Communicative Pathologies,” from *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the

2) **Axel Honneth:**

  - Author’s Introduction
  - “Critical Theory.”
  - “From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Social Theory.”
  - “The Struggle for Recognition: On Sartre’s Theory of Intersubjectivity.”
  - “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on a Theory of Recognition”“Decentered Autonomy: The Subject After the Fall.”

3) **Zizek, Slavoj.**


b) Articles & Chapters:


a) Introduction.

b) “Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes towards Persons.”

c) “Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualized Agency in Hegel’s Jena *Phenomenology*.”

d) “Recognition as Ideology.”

e) “Rejoinder.”

**READING SCHEDULE**

**FALL TERM:**

**Part One: Habermas’s Communications Theoretic Reconceptualization of Ethics, Agency, and Identity:**

**Week One:**
- Introduction to Senior Seminar.

**Week Two:**
Background Reading:

Week Three:
- Abstract for Senior Research Paper #1 due.

Part Two: Axel Honneth’s Hegelian Appropriation of the Communicative Turn: Social Recognition and the Formation of Agency:

Week Four:
- The Fragmented World of the Social.
  - Author’s Introduction
  - “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on a Theory of Recognition”
  - “Critical Theory.”
  - “From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Social Theory.”
  - Background Reading:

Week Five:
- The Fragmented World of the Social.
  - “The Struggle for Recognition: On Sartre’s Theory of Intersubjectivity.”
  - “Decentered Autonomy: The Subject After the Fall.”
  - Abstract for Senior Research Paper #3 due

Week Six:

Week Seven:

Week Eight:

Part Three: The Reception of Honneth’s Neo-Hegelian Theory of Agency, Freedom, and Ethical Life:

Week Nine:
Week Ten:

Finals Week:
1. Senior Research Paper #2 due
2. Individual Meetings with each senior

WINTER TERM:

Part Four: Zizek’s Lacanian Interpretation of Hegel’s Theory of Agency:

Week One:
· ”Not Only as Substance, but Also as Subject,” from Zizek, Slavoj. The Sublime Object of Ideology. London: Verso 1989.

Week Two:

Week Three:
· Review:

Week Four:

Week Five:

Week Six:

Week Seven:

Week Eight:

Week Nine:
· Open

Week Ten:
· Open

Finals Week: