

IRVINE  
Fall  
1999

***SOCY 5161***  
***Special Topics in Social Theory***  
***Fall 1999***

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***Aim of the Course***

This course will introduce you to some of the leading approaches in contemporary social theory. We will not cover *all* contemporary theories, in the manner of a Cook's Tour. Instead, we will concentrate on pivotal works that are representative of two central themes: (1) the decentering of power; and (2) the failure of grand narratives of progress.

The central concerns of classical theory were to elucidate the features of modern society that differentiated it from previous forms of society. Two of these features were the concentration of power in the industrialized nation states and the belief that rational, human control (i.e., "progress") could produce a better world. Since roughly the late 1960s, the promises of modernity have been questioned and criticized from a variety of perspectives. The results have had far-ranging implications, including, but not limited to:

- a radical critique of the ideal of seeking Truth (note capital "T") and the use of empirical scientific methods;
- the claim that domination operates through the organization of knowledge;
- the debate between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity;
- the idea that exploitation, in the form of colonialism and male violence, supports the development of international capitalism.

***Organization and Requirements of the Course***

The course comprises five sections. Each section will begin with an overview by me of the principal issues, followed by a general discussion. There will then be a variable number of sessions devoted to specific topics. In these sessions, we will discuss selected texts and, in some instances, examples from film, visual art, and music.

Each student will take responsibility for leading one class session. In preparation, student leaders should develop (perhaps in concert with me) a set of questions to orient the discussion. These questions should be printed, copied, and distributed to every student in the seminar (and to me!) in advance of the meeting in which they are to be discussed.

Finally, you must choose between two writing options.

- *Option 1:* Write brief essays (2-3 double-spaced pages) for each of sections 2 through 5. The topics should be selected from the questions listed below (choose only one).
- *Option 2:* Write a well-researched paper on a particular body of theory. For this option, you will have to do extensive additional reading. You must discuss your choice with me by Sept. 21. No change of topics allowed after Oct. 12.

## A Note on the Texts

You will have to do a *considerable* amount of reading. It is important not to fall behind. Plan your reading, and make sure you get it done on time.

In the field of theory, there is no substitute for reading primary texts. I have deliberately chosen works that are considered fundamental in given areas (e.g., Lyotard and Lemert on postmodernism, Fanon on postcolonialism, etc.). I have also made an effort to choose works that, while unarguably difficult, are accessible (e.g., *Discipline and Punish* is one of Foucault's most readable books).

We will accompany the primary texts with three works in which leading social theorists provide commentaries and interpretations. These books are Agger's *Critical Social Theories*, Fraser's *Unruly Practices*, and Rule's *Theory and Progress in Social Science*. We will read Rule as an introduction to the domain of contemporary theory. We will read Agger as an interpretation, often in conjunction with original works. Fraser will serve as a critique to follow Foucault's idea of power/knowledge.

Agger, Fraser, and Rule will inevitably refer to works that we will not read in the course. Please do not let this be a stumbling block to your understanding of the main points. I will make every effort to clarify conceptual issues when we have not read a work in its original form.

In addition, we will read a number of articles, copies of which will be on file with Michele for you to photocopy.

## Books to purchase

- Agger, Ben. 1998. *Critical Social Theories: An Introduction*. Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1989. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lemert, Charles. 1997. *Postmodernism Is Not What You Think*. Malden MA: Blackwell.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1997. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rule, James B. 1997. *Theory and Progress in Social Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

## Schedule

(I reserve the right to change the schedule if unforeseen circumstances make it necessary.)

### **SECTION 1: Theory as Vision**

**Week 1:** Introduction to the course

**Week 2:** The question of cumulative knowledge and the hope of progress

READING: Rule, chaps 1-5

**Week 3:** The uses of theory: expression and coping

READING: Rule, Part III (chaps 7-9)

**Week 4:** The move from sociological theory to social theory

READING: Agger, chap 1 (*Note:* this is not much reading, but it is dense. Please spend some time thinking about, following up on, and perhaps referring to, some of the canonical works Agger mentions that you may have already read (or with which you need to be familiar).)

**SECTION 2:** Post-Marxism, post-Fordism, poststructuralism, postmodernity

**Week 5:** Theorizing postmodernity

READING: Agger, chap 2  
Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism"

**Week 6:** The French Poststructuralists

READING: Lyotard  
Baudrillard

**Week 7:** The French Poststructuralists (cont'd)

READING: Agger, chap 3  
Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher"

***Essays due\****

**Questions:**

- Why does postmodernism get such a bad rap?
- What distinctive dilemmas does postmodern society pose for the individual trying to live in it?
- What is the poststructuralist vision of society?
- What are some of the unresolved issues and problems in poststructuralism?

**SECTION 3: Critical Theories: Theorizing culture, gender, race, and sexuality**

**Week 8:** The Frankfurt School

READING: Agger, chap 4

**Week 9:** Feminist theory

READING: Agger, chap 5  
Rule (with L. Irvine), chap 6

**Week 10:** Queer Theory

READING: Seidman, "Symposium: Queer Theory/Sociology: A Dialogue"  
Stein & Plummer, "I Can't Even Think Straight': 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology"  
Irvine J., "A Place in the Rainbow: Theorizing Lesbian and Gay Culture"

**Week 11:** Postcolonialism

READING: Fanon

***Essays due\****

**Questions:**

- If there is no objective, universal standpoint from which to generate categories and explanations, if all standpoints are partial and perspectival, how are knowledge and social criticism possible?
- You have read about feminism from two men (although one had some help from a woman). Can men "do" feminist theory? What, if anything, does Rule's having a female co-author do for his claims?
- According to Fanon, how do nations that think of themselves as humanitarian rationalize domination?

**SECTION 4: Power and Discourse**

**Week 12:** Cultural Studies

READING: Agger, chap 6  
Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

**Week 13:** Foucault

READING: *Discipline and Punish*. Part I: read chap. 1 closely. In chap. 2, skim pp. 32-42; read 42-57 closely; skim 57 to end.  
Part II: Skim chap. 1; read chap. 2 closely.  
Part III: read chap. 1 closely. In chap. 2, read closely to p. 177, then skim to end.  
Read chap. 3 closely.

**Week 14:** The Genealogy of Modern Power

READING: Fraser (Intro and chaps 1-3)  
Dews, "Power and Subjectivity in Foucault"

***Essays due\****

Questions:

- What does the field of "Cultural Studies" do that sociology cannot, and vice versa?
- How is power exercised through the body?
- What insights does *Discipline and Punish* offer for the study of deviance and social control?

**SECTION 5: Postmodernisms and Sociologies**

**Week 15:** What is postmodernism and why are they saying such terrible things about it?

READING: Lemert

**Week 16:** Where to now?

READING: Smith, "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism"  
Fraser, chap 8 (chap 7 optional)  
Agger, chaps 7 & 8

***Essays due\****

Questions:

- What is the future of sociology?
- Discuss the "Marx-was-wrong" thesis.
- How can a society justify some interpretations of social needs as better than others?
- What role, if any, does postmodernism leave for human agency?

***Research papers due\****

\*Exact deadlines for essays and papers will be determined in class.