

HIS 703 Critical Theory (East and West)

Instructor: Viren Murthy (vmurthy2@wisc.edu)
Class meets: Monday 3:30-5:25
Location: Humanities 2611
Office Hours: TuThu 5:20-6:30 or by Appointment
Office Humanities 4108

Today, the adjectives critique and critical are ubiquitous. However, we rarely scrutinize what these terms mean. This course will examine attempts to explain what it means to be critical, with a special emphasis on what this adjective implies when applied to social theory. The course will begin by examining Kant and Hegel's respective attempts to be critical with respect to philosophy. Through these texts, we gain a perspective on what it means to subject categories to "critique." These categories can in turn become the basis for a critique of society. Without this initial step, our critique of society risks being uncritical because there is no justification of our foundational categories, such as freedom. We will then turn to Marx's *Capital*, which has the subtitle: "critique of political economy" and ask how Marx's conception of critique relates to his idealist predecessors. In this manner, we will see how the concept of "critique" can be applied to a specific social form such as capitalism. Frankfurt School theorist, such as Adorno and Horkheimer combine the insights of Kant, Hegel and Marx to construct a social theory, which they explicitly contend is critical. This course deals with how they explain critical theory and also how they put such theory in to practice, in classic texts such as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. More recently, the so-called second and third generation Frankfurt School philosophers have returned to Kant and Hegel to rethink the normative foundations of social critique. However, in the past few decades, scholars have raised the question of whether the later generation Frankfurt School scholars uncritically accept some assumptions of the capitalist system.

If we look beyond Europe, much Western critical theory has been charged with being Eurocentric and consequently uncritical. We will read attempts by non-Western intellectuals to supplement critical theory by addressing issues related to race, gender and imperialism. From this perspective, we will read key texts of postcolonial and decolonial theory. The course will end by looking at attempts by Asian intellectuals, such as Karatani Kojin and Wang Hui, to rethink universality by explicitly drawing on Western critical theory.

Assignments:

In oral assignments students will convey persuasive arguments, whether in formal presentations or informal discussions.

Oral Assignment 1 and 2: Students will be required to present two readings in class and lead the discussion by asking questions. This will be good training for taking some complex ideas in the texts we read and making them relevant for us. These presentations should grasp the argument of the text and also articulate their own position with respect to this text. Given the

amount of students in this class, we might need to have three presenters per class to enable everyone to present. The room 2611 does not have a projector, so students should send me a handout in advance, so I can print copies for the class.

Oral Assignment 3: Students give a longer oral presentation on their final paper. In addition to learning to present their own ideas orally, this presentation will allow them to receive feedback from both the instructor and other colleagues. These oral assignments are not graded specifically but will be calculated as part of your participation grade.

In written assignments, students will present original ideas in clearly expressed, persuasive arguments and narratives.

Writing Assignment 1: Students will be required to respond the readings and post their comments on Canvas. These comments should be approximately 250 words. This assignment is not graded and is primarily for your own benefit. However, I will give students credit for doing these assignments. In these comments or posts, you are to identify the point of a given author and give reasons for why you agree or disagree. The assignment is due every Sunday evening by 5pm. It is important that you turn in your posts on time because the second part of this assignments requires every student to comment on one other student's post. This comment should be at least 100 words and should engage with a point that the post is making. This second comment is due by 11 am on Monday. This should prepare us well for class discussion.

Writing Assignment 2: Students will write one longer paper (15-25 pages). undergraduate students will also write a longer paper, but the length can vary from 8-15 pages. (In other words, if undergraduates would like to push themselves, the requirements could be the same as graduate students.) The paper will be due on Dec. 14th, but students are expected to submit a rough draft to the instructor on November 30rd. They will also give this paper to a fellow classmate. In writing the final paper, students are expected to incorporate the various comments from both the student and the instructor.

Schedule

Jan 23 No class

Jan 30. **Kant and the Problem of Critique**

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Introduction" to both Editions "What is Enlightenment?"
Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?"

Feb 6. **Hegel and Critical Thinking**

Hegel, *Logic*, Prefaces, Introduction and Section on Being, Nothing and Becoming

Feb 13 **Debates Around What it Means to be Critical**

Stephen Houlgate, Chapter 1, 6, Robert Pippin, Introduction, Zyporin, "Hegel and China"

Feb 20. Critique and Marx

Ranciere, «Critique ». Marx, *Capital*, Chapters 1-3

Feb 27 Reinterpreting Marx Through Hegel

Lukàcs, Chapter on Reification, Postone, “Marx and Modernity” Horkheimer, “Social Theory: Traditional and Critical”, Aronowitz, “Introduction”

March 6. Immanent Critique, Hegel, Frankfurt School and Beyond

Becker “Critical Theory”, Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project”, Takeuchi, “What is Modernity?”, Karen Ng, “Immanent Critique”

March 13 Spring Break

March 20 Karatani and Zizek: Kant and Marx

Karatani Kojin, *Kant and Marx*, (Intro and Chapter One), Zizek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, “How Marx Invented the Symptom”, Zizek Critique of Pippin et al.

March 27 Lacanian Hegelianism and Utopia

Todd McGowan, Selections, Gary Wilder, “Concrete Utopia”

Todd McGowan will visit this same week.

April 3 Critique and Eurocentrism

Hamadi Dabashi, “Can Non-Europeans Think?” Forward and chapter 1, Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti”, Gary Wilder, “Time as Real Abstraction”

April 10 Hegel, Religion and Pluralism

Molly Farneth, “Absolute Emptying”, “Gender and the Given”, “Sacramental Politics”
visit from Molly Farneth

April 17 Critique, Postcolonialism and Marxism

Wang Hui, “Prophecy and Crisis” Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Selections Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* “Introduction”

April 21 Paper proposals Due for peer review

April 24

Presentations (Given the amount of people registered in this course, we might need to go over the class time during the last two days)

May 1

Presentations

May 8 Final Papers Due