

Subject name: Critical Theory

Lecturer: Zsolt Kapelner

Goal of instruction:

By the end of the course, students will acquire the ability to:

- understand Critical Theory's approach to the study of society, its rough historic trajectory, and contemporary relevance.
- use the tools of Critical Theory to examine contemporary social phenomena (e.g., digital technology, post-truth politics, etc.) and their role in social regulation and domination.
- critically reflect on the prospects and limits of progressive social change in contemporary society.
- conduct independent research on Critical Theory including both its history and contemporary developments.

Students will develop the following skills:

- critical thinking, particularly regarding contemporary social issues
- analysing and interpreting complex texts and arguments
- argumentation and rational persuasion
- independent research in contemporary philosophy and social theory

Subject content:

This course surveys 20th and 21st century Critical Theory from the Frankfurt School to contemporary critical theorists. The goal of the course is to familiarize students with key texts in the tradition of Critical Theory, major intellectual trends in Critical Theory, and how the key concepts and methods of Critical Theory can be applied to the philosophical study of contemporary social and political issues.

The course proceeds in rough chronological order from the beginnings of Critical Theory in the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, through key texts written during World War II, particularly the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and *On the Concept of History* by Walter Benjamin. Then we turn to Herbert Marcuse's work in the 1960s examining both his analysis of "New Forms of Domination" in the seemingly free and equal western democracies as well as his vision for social change he describes in relation to the social movements of '68. We engage with the work of Jürgen Habermas, the main figure of the second generation of Critical Theory, in two consecutive classes before turning to the critical examination of his work from a feminist point of view by Nancy Fraser as well as Fraser's debate with Habermas' student Axel Honneth. In the last two sessions we discuss contemporary developments of critical theory particularly in the work Rahel Jaeggi and Rainer Forst.

The course does not presuppose any previous knowledge of the discussed authors or any background in philosophy.

Examination and evaluation system:

Your final grade is determined by the following components depending on whether you take the course of 4 or 8 credits:

4-credit students:

- Participation: 30%
- Writing assignment: 70%

8-credit students:

- Participation: 30%
- Presentation: 20%
- Writing assignment: 50%

Participation

This is a discussion-based seminar, each session focusing on one or two texts. Students' participation is evaluated in terms of preparation and contribution to in-class discussion.

Preparation

To prepare for each class, students are expected to

- read the mandatory reading carefully and reflect on its content.
- submit **2 short discussion questions (50–100 words)** about the text 24 hours before class.

Some of the texts we will discuss you might find challenging. Don't be discouraged! If you don't understand something, that is fine, you'll get there. The first step is to engage with the text read through it and try to get out some key ideas. In-class discussion will illuminate many things, and you can always email me for additional literature and resources.

In-class discussion

During in-class discussions students are expected to

- demonstrate familiarity with the text under discussion
- critically engage with the argument of the text and other students
- try to connect discussion with other course topics and wider social phenomena

To maintain an inclusive classroom environment based on mutual respect, keep in mind that we will discuss topics on which you and others are likely to have strong and often conflicting opinions; you are welcome to express these opinions and have them charitably discussed as long as you also treat others' views with respect and openness.

Presentation

For those who take the course for **8 credits** (e.g., Erasmus students), giving a presentation is **mandatory**. For those who take the course for **4 credits**, it is **optional** and will contribute to your participation grade. The presentation is 10–15 minutes long. If you give a presentation at a class, you are expected to:

- Reconstruct the central thesis of the mandatory reading and its key argument and explain it through the example of a contemporary social or political phenomenon.
- Raise 1–3 objections to the text's thesis and/or argument.
- Choose 2 or 3 questions from the student submissions to start the conversation with.
- **Do not summarize the text, assume that everyone has read it already.**

Writing assignment

Your main writing assignment is to produce an argumentative essay by the end of the semester. You will develop this assignment in several stages continuously through the semester. At each stage you will receive feedback and guidance on how to proceed with your writing.

You will have 2 options in your writing assignment.

Option 1: Examine social phenomena.

If you choose this option, you will have to explain how the concept of ideology, the culture industry, the critique of enlightenment progressivism, Marcuse's thought of the technological domination of society, or any other concept of Critical Theory is relevant to a contemporary social or political phenomenon. You will use the tools of Critical Theory to discuss (1) why the issue at hand is an apt subject of critical study, what problems it raises, and how these problems should be understood, and (2) how Critical Theory helps developing potential solutions.

Possible topics include but are not restricted to:

- The dominance of social media in contemporary life
- Post-truth politics and fake news
- Automation and the future of work
- Institutional racism and the Black Lives Matter movement
- The COVID-19 Pandemic
- The politics of climate change between denialism and the Extinction Rebellion

Option 2: Theoretical reflection

If you choose this option, you will approach the problems of Critical Theory from a more abstract, theoretical or philosophical point of view. You can either discuss texts from the history of Critical Theory or engage with contemporary debates. In either case, you will analyse and reflect upon ideas and arguments in Critical Theory using the toolkit of theoretical philosophy, including social and political philosophy, moral philosophy, epistemology, etc. or the history of philosophy.

Possible essay topics include, but are not limited to:

- Can we be free from domination in contemporary society?
- How to settle the "Recognition or Redistribution" debate?
- A defence/critique of Critical Theory from the point of view of Feminist Philosophy/Critical Race Theory/Post-colonial Studies/Queer Theory
- Is a philosophy of history still possible today?
- What is the political philosophy of Critical Theory?
- Does moral philosophy have a place in Critical Theory?

Deadlines and writing stages:

Summary:

- Week 4: choose between Option 1 and Option 2, notify me
- Week 8: submit Essay Proposal
 - 4 credit students: 250 words
 - 8 credit students: 500 words
- Week 12: submit Essay Outline + Bibliography
 - 4 credit students: 500 words + 4 bibliography entries
 - 8 credit students: 1,000 words + 8 bibliography entries
- December 31: submit Final Paper
 - 4 credit students: 2,000 words
 - 8 credit students: 3,000 words

Footnotes and bibliography are excluded from the word count.

Break-down of your tasks at each stage:

1. Choosing topic category (deadline: Week 4)
 - 1.1. Make a choice between Option 1 and Option 2 above.
 - 1.2. Notify me of your choice via email.
 - 1.3. If you already have a concrete topic in mind, feel free to share that too.
2. Essay Proposal (deadline: Week 8)
 - 2.1. Your Essay Proposal should be a summary of your plan for the final essay. It includes:
 - A title.
 - A clear thesis statement for or against which you argue.
 - A brief plan for the argument
 - A concise research strategy, e.g., which authors or papers you are planning to read, how do you plan to identify resources.
 - 2.2. Word count
 - 4 credit students: 250 words
 - 8 credit students: 500 words
3. Essay Outline (deadline: Week 12)
 - 3.1. Your Essay Outline should spell out the structure of the argument of your final essay. It should include:
 - The title.
 - Your thesis statement.
 - The main steps of your argument.
 - Possible objections you plan to address and your answers
 - 3.2. You can write the Outline either as a true outline with bullet points or as continuous text.
 - 3.3. You also have to attach a proposed bibliography with 4 entries for 4-credit students, and 8 entries for 8-credit students.
 - 3.4. Word count
 - 4 credit students: 500 words
 - 8 credit students: 1,000 words

4. Final Paper

- 4.1. Your final paper should be an argumentative essay. It should present a well-structured argument for a clear thesis statement.
- 4.2. Your argument should be clear and easy to follow with no [logical fallacies](#).
- 4.3. Be sure to always cite your sources, and clearly indicate which ideas are yours and which you get from others, and **do not plagiarise**.
- 4.4. If you are unfamiliar with writing papers in philosophy, check out these [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#) by Jim Pryor.
- 4.5 Word count
 - 4 credit students: 2,500 words
 - 8 credit students: 3,500 words

Literature:

Readings week by week:

Week 1: The concept of Critical Theory

Mandatory reading: Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, M. O’Connell (ed.), New York: Continuum Press. 1972 [1937]. pp. 188–243.

Recommended readings:

- Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory.” *Negations: Essays in critical theory*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1996 [1937]. 134–158.
- Karl Popper, “Reason or Revolution.” In *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann. pp. 288–300.
- Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.
- Karl Marx: Estranged Labour. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

Week 2: The critique of progress I.

Mandatory reading: Max Horkheimer–Theodor Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment.” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2002 [1947]. pp. 1–34.

Recommended readings:

- Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason*. London: Continuum Press, 2004 [1947].
- Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*. New Jersey and London: Humanities Press. 1983 [1941].
- Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973 [1966].
- Julian Roberts, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, Fred Rush (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 57–73.

Week 3: The critique of progress II.

Mandatory reading: Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History.” 1940

Recommended readings:

- Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: A Reading of Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* London: Verso. 2005.
- Theodor Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT.,

1983, pp. 227–242.

- Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin.” *New German Critique* No. 17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-59.

Week 4: The critique of culture

Mandatory reading: Max Horkheimer–Theodor Adorno, “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2002 [1947]. pp. 94–136.

Recommended readings:

- Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” 1936.
- Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [1970].
- Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books. 2005.

Week 5: From domination to liberation – 1968

Mandatory readings:

- Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. Chapter 1: New Forms of Domination. 1964.
- Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*. Chapter 2: The New Sensibility. 1969.

Recommended readings:

- Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*. London: Routledge. 2004.
- Herbert Marcuse, *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse* (Volume 3), Douglas Kellner (ed.), London and New York: Routledge.
- Letters between Adorno and Marcuse on the student movement: <http://www.critical-theory.com/letters-adorno-marcuse-discuss-60s-student-activism/>
- Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*. Boston: Beacon. 1970.

Week 6: Habermas I.

Mandatory reading: Jürgen Habermas, “What Does A Crisis Mean Today? Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism.” *Social Research* Vol. 40, No. 4 (WINTER 1973), pp. 643-667.

Recommended readings:

- Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, T. Burger and F. Lawrence (trans). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1989 [1962].
- Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon. Vol. I–II. 1984, 1987 [1981].
- Matthew G. Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 2010.

Week 7: Habermas II.

Mandatory reading: Jürgen Habermas, “Three normative models of democracy.” *Constellations*. Vol. 1, No. 1. 1994. pp. 1–10.

Recommended readings:

- Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1996 [1992]
- Joshua Cohen, “Reflections on Habermas and Democracy.” *Ratio Juris*. Vol. 12, No. 4. 1999. pp. 385–416.
- Uwe Steinhoff, *The Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009.

Week 8: Critical theory and feminism

Mandatory reading: Nancy Fraser, “What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender.” *New German Critique*, Spring - Summer, 1985, No. 35, Special Issue on Jürgen Habermas (Spring - Summer, 1985), pp. 97-131

Recommended readings:

- Marie Fleming, “The Gender of Critical Theory.” *Cultural Critique* No. 13, The Construction of Gender and Modes of Social Division (Autumn, 1989), pp. 119-141.
- Seyla Benhabib–Drucilla Cornell (eds.), *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late-Capitalist Society*. Polity. 1991.
- Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2008.

Week 9: Recognition or redistribution I.

Mandatory reading: Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age.” *New Left Review* 212 (July/August) 1995: 68–93.

Recommended readings:

- Nancy Fraser–Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, New York: Verso. 2003.
- Iris Marion Young, “Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory.” *New Left Review* (1997): 147-60.
- Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Week 10: Recognition or redistribution II.

Mandatory readings:

- Axel Honneth, “Recognition or Redistribution?” *Theory, Culture & Society*. Vol. 18 No. 2–3. 2001. pp. 43-55.
- Axel Honneth, “Recognition and Moral Obligation.” *Social Research*, SPRING 1997, Vol. 64, No. 1, The Decent Society (SPRING 1997), pp. 16-35

Recommended readings:

- Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*,

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1995.

- Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, A. Gutmann (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1992. pp. 25–73.
- Simon Thompson, *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Week 11. The critique of forms of life

Mandatory reading: Rahel Jaeggi, “Towards an immanent critique of forms of life.” *Raisons politiques*. Vol. 2015/1 No. 57. 2015. pp. 13–29.

Recommended readings:

- Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2018.
- Titus Stahl. What Is Immanent Critique?. SSRN Electronic Journal. 2013.
- Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012.

Week 12. The critique of power

Mandatory reading: Rainer Forst, *Normativity and power*. Chapter 2: Noumenal Power. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017. pp. 37–54.

Recommended readings:

- Rainer Forst, *The Right to Justification*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2014.

Online resources:

“Critical Theory” by James Bohman on the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>

“The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory” by Claudio Corradetti on the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: <https://iep.utm.edu/frankfur/>

“The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory” on the Marxist Internet Archive:
<https://www.marxists.org/subject/frankfurt-school/index.htm>