

SOC6101H Contemporary Theory

Facilitator: Prof. Kristin Plys

Timing: Tuesdays 5-8 pm

Location: Room 17020

Teaching Assistant: Roberta Silveira Pamplona

This course focuses on both 20th and 21st c. classics of social theory that have particular resonance in the present along with recent breakthrough statements in the most vibrant areas of contemporary theory with a focus on Marxism, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory and other critical approaches to theory. After taking this course students will have a better understanding of the most cited and talked about works of theory in the contemporary Continental tradition along with a deeper understanding of their influences, genealogies, tensions, and contradictions. Students will not only come out of this course with a better understanding of the theories and debates in contemporary sociology in a global perspective but also with an inter- and post-disciplinary approach to theory through which they can engage across the social sciences and humanities across the globe.

There is much precedent in Canadian sociology for looking to critical theory for theoretical inspiration instead of to the more parochial theoretical conversation within sociology in the United States. Canadian Francophone social theory was initially inspired by Marx, Lenin and Mao but also Gramsci, Althusser, and Poulantzas. But beyond this, Canadian sociology has historically blurred distinctions between social theory and Continental philosophy (See Dumas 1987; Laurin 2006). Looking more to the European tradition instead of the American better befits our local Canadian context as part of the British and French Empires. While US influence is ever-present in Canada, we also have the inheritances of both the UK tradition and the French tradition, along with our own traditions such as the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist traditions in Canadian francophone sociology, and the central place of Political Economy in Canadian anglophone sociology, both of which have a long history of being oriented towards Europe and shaped by Continental philosophy.

But because these theoretical traditions are central to the way social thought has been articulated in the British and French Empires beyond Canada, these theories and their traditions have resonance well beyond Europe and North America and are similarly central to theoretical conversation and debates in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, particularly in places that are also former British and French colonies.

Readings:

I understand that because this is a required course, not all of you enrolled are would-be theorists. Even for those of you who intend to become theorists you may not be interested in taking a deep dive into every one of these theorists' work every single week. To accommodate a range of ability and interest, each week there are three options for what to read in preparation for that week's discussion. If you are just interested in doing the bare minimum, read the first option which will be limited to the most important essay or book chapter by that theorist. For those of you with moderate interest, read the first plus the second options which will allow you to get a

bit further into concepts and ideas of that theorist. However, for those of you interested in specializing in theory I suggest you attempt the first, second, and third options which will give you a very deep, intense dive into that theorist, their work, along with some of the important secondary literature on that theorist.

Assessment:

There are multiple options for assessments in this course depending on your learning style and working habits. Course participants may choose **(1)** to write two shorter essays, one due at the mid-term and the other due at the end of term, or **(2)** one longer essay due at the end of the term.

Course participants choosing **Option (1)** will write an 8-10 page essay after Week 6 that puts Marxism (Gramsci, Althusser, Mao), Psychoanalysis (Lacan and Fanon), and Deleuze and Guattari in conversation, examining how each theorist builds on the work of previous theorists in both critical and complimentary ways.

The second essay of 8-10 pages due after the end of term will either (A) put theorists from weeks 8-11 in conversation with each other detailing their influences in Gramsci, Althusser, Mao, Lacan, Fanon, and Deleuze & Guattari and comparing and contrasting their approaches to theory building. OR (B) course participants can choose a theory book published in the past 5 years that was not included on the syllabus and situate that book in the context of theorists we have read in class.

Course participants choosing **Option (2)** will write a 15-20 page essay that either (A) puts every one of the theorists we have read in conversation examining how each theorist builds on previous theorists in both a critical and complimentary way, OR (B) Read a contemporary theory book of your choosing, written in the past five years, and not included on the syllabus. Then, incorporate that book into a discussion of the theorists we have read in this course examining their commonalities and distinctions.

The paper(s) should be double spaced, 12pt times new roman font, with standard margins. For those doing the two short essays option the first essay will be due **4th March 2025** and the second will be due on **8th April 2025**. For those choosing option 2 the essay will be due on **8th April 2025**.

The late penalty is 10% marks per 24 hours late. Work will not be accepted more than 7 days after the deadline without an extension. The essay(s) are 80% of your mark. For course participants choosing option 1, each essay will be worth 40% for a total of 80% marks.

In order to stay on track with this final assessment regardless of which option you choose, I recommend that you take notes each week or write up a brief summary of the readings to aid you in writing your papers. You are certainly welcome to ask questions of the course facilitator and teaching assistant about the readings (in class, office hours, via email and other opportunities) but we will not be marking your notes or summaries.

The remainder of your mark will be assessed based on class attendance and participation in weeks 2-11. During weeks 1 and 12 attendance is optional. Attendance and active participation in the conversation is worth 2% per class for a total of 20% over the course of the term.

Extensions will be granted by request for extenuating circumstances. Late assignments without approved extensions will be deducted 10% marks each 24 hours that the assignment is late. No assignments will be accepted after 7 days without an approved extension.

Academic Integrity Clause:

Copying, plagiarizing, falsifying medical certificates, or other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Any student caught engaging in such activities will be referred to the Dean's office for adjudication. Any student abetting or otherwise assisting in such misconduct will also be subject to academic penalties. Students are expected to cite sources in all written work and presentations. See this link for tips for how to use sources well:

(<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize>).

According to Section B.I.1.(e) of the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters it is an offence *"to submit, without the knowledge and approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere."*

By enrolling in this course, you agree to abide by the university's rules regarding academic conduct, as outlined in the Calendar. You are expected to be familiar with the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (<http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai/The-rules/code/the-code-of-behaviour-on-academic-matters>) and *Code of Student Conduct* (<http://www.viceprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/publicationsandpolicies/codeofstudentconduct.htm>) which spell out your rights, your duties and provide all the details on grading regulations and academic offences at the University of Toronto.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.

Accessibility Services:

It is the University of Toronto's goal to create a community that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner. In creating such a community, the University aims to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all persons. Please see the University of Toronto Governing Council "Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities" at

<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppnov012004.pdf>.

In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community. We take seriously our obligation to make this course as welcoming and accessible as feasible for students with diverse needs. We also understand that disabilities can change over time and will do our best to accommodate you.

Students seeking support must have an intake interview with a disability advisor to discuss their individual needs. In many instances it is easier to arrange certain accommodations with more advance notice, so we strongly encourage you to act as quickly as possible. To schedule a registration appointment with a disability advisor, please visit Accessibility Services at <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>, call at 416-978-8060, or email at: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca. The office is located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400.

Additional student resources for distressed or emergency situations can be located at distressedstudent.utoronto.ca; Health & Wellness Centre, 416-978-8030, <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc>, or Student Crisis Response, 416-946-7111.

Equity and Diversity Statement:

The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As a course instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated.

Additional information and reports on Equity and Diversity at the University of Toronto is available at <http://equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca>.

Required Books:

Althusser, Louis (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Davis, Angela (2023). *An Autobiography* (New Edition) Chicago: Haymarket.

[Make sure you read the 2023 edition for this course!]

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari ([1972]). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* New York: Penguin Classics.

Fanon, Frantz (1965 [1959]). *A Dying Colonialism* New York: Grove Press.

Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *The Prison Notebooks* New York: International Publishers.

Lacan, Jacques (2004 [1966]). *Écrits: A Selection* New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
Liu, Petrus (2023). *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* Durham: Duke University Press.
Mao Zedong (1966). *Four Essays on Philosophy* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
Mbembe, Achille (2024). *Brutalism: Theory in Forms* Durham: Duke University Press.
Toscano, Alberto (2023). *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and The Politics of Crisis* London: Verso.

Supplemental Books:

Althusser, Louis (2010 [1965]). *For Marx* London: Verso.
Althusser, Louis, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière (2015 [1965]). *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* London: Verso.
Badiou, Alain (2020). *Lacan* New York: Columbia University Press.
Mao Zedong (1977). *On Literature and Art* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
Marriott, David S. (2021). *Lacan Noir: Lacan and Afro-Pessimism* Palgrave Macmillan.
Parr, Adrian Ed. (2010). *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Plys, Kristin and Charles Lemert (2022). *Capitalism and its Uncertain Future* New York: Routledge.

Supplemental articles + book chapters:

Balibar, Étienne (1994). “Althusser’s Object” *Social Text* 39(Summer): 157-188.
Braidotti, Rossi (1996). “Nomadism with a difference: Deleuze’s legacy in a feminist perspective” *Man and World* 29: 305–314.
Dirlik, Arif (1983). “The Predicament of Marxist Revolutionary Consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci and the Reformulation of Marxist Revolutionary Theory” *Modern China* 9(2): 182-211.
Frostini, Franco and Vittorio Morfino (2016). “Althusser e Gramsci, Gramsci e Althusser: intervista a Etienne Balibar” *Décalages* 2(1): 1-25.
Gramsci, Antonio (1978) *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926* London: Lawrence & Wishart.
Hall, Stuart (1986). “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10(2): 3-29.
Hall, Stuart (2016). “Ideology and Ideological Struggle” in Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg Eds. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* Durham: Duke University Press.
Kadri, Jude (2023). “Comparing the Two ‘Cold Wars’ Through Gramsci, Althusser and Mao” *Journal of Labor and Society* 26(2): 185-222.
Liu, Kang (1997). “Hegemony and Cultural Revolution” *New Literary History* 28(1): 69-86.
Mao Zedong (1977). *On Literature and Art* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press
Mao Zedong (1977). *Selected Works* 9 Vols. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
Sotiris, Panagotiris (2022) “Revisiting the Passive Revolution” *Historical Materialism* 30(3): 3-45.

Tandon, Yashpal Ed. *Debate on Class, State & Imperialism* Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House.

Thompson, EP (1978). "An Orrery of Errors" in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* London: Merlin Press.

Richards, Sinan (2021). "The Logician of Madness: Fanon's Lacan" *Paragraph* 44(2): 214-237.

Wallerstein, Immanuel (1979). "Fanon and the revolutionary class" in *The Capitalist World-Economy* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 250–268.

Wallerstein, Immanuel (2009). "Reading Fanon in the 21st Century" *New Left Review* 57: (May–June): 117–125.

Zizek, Slavoj (2014). "The Wound of Eurocentrism" in *Trouble in Paradise* Brooklyn: Meville House. pp. 183-195

Course Schedule:

WEEK 1: 7th January

Introduction to Contemporary Theory (no reading)

Marxism

WEEK 2: 14th January

Antonio Gramsci (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* New York: International Publishers.

Gramsci, Antonio (1978) *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926* London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Option 1 (beginner):

If you can't stand Gramsci just read –
"State and Society"

Option 2 (intermediate):

If you want a bit more Gramsci than the bare minimum also read –
part of "The Intellectuals" (pp. 5-14); part of "Notes on Italian History" (pp. 52-90 make sure not to miss notes #5 + #49); and "Some Aspects on the Southern Question" in *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926*

Option 3 (advanced):

If you're loving Gramsci read the whole book and/or --

Kristin Plys and Charles Lemert (2022). "Finance and Capitalism" in *Capitalism and its Uncertain Future* New York: Routledge.

Timothy Brennan (2001) "Antonio Gramsci and Postcolonial Theory: "Southernism"" *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10(2): 143-187.

Stuart Hall (1986). "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10(2): 3-29.

Panagotiris Sotiris (2022). “Revisiting the Passive Revolution” *Historical Materialism* 30(3): 3-45.

WEEK 3: 21st January

Louis Althusser (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Louis Althusser (2010 [1965]). *For Marx* London: Verso.

Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière (2015 [1965]). *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* London: Verso.

Option 1 (beginner): If you can't stand Althusser just read --
“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy*

Option 2 (intermediate): If you want a bit more Althusser than the bare minimum also read--
“Contradiction and Overdetermination” in *For Marx*;
“Marxism is not a Historicism”, “The Epistemological Propositions of Capital (Marx, Engels)”,
“The Object of Political Economy” and “Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution” in *Reading Capital*

Option 3 (advanced):

If you're loving Althusser also read --

“Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon” and the appendix in *Lenin and Philosophy*, all of “Part 4: The Object of Capital” in *Reading Capital* and/or

Étienne Balibar (1994). “Althusser's Object” *Social Text* 39(Summer): 157-188.

Stuart Hall (2016). “Ideology and Ideological Struggle” in Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg Eds. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* Durham: Duke University Press.

EP Thompson (1978). “An Orrery of Errors” in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* London: Merlin Press.

And if you read French:

Franco Frostini and Vittorio Morfino (2016). “Althusser e Gramsci, Gramsci e Althusser: intervista a Etienne Balibar” *Décalages* 2(1): 1-25.

WEEK 4: 28th January

Mao Zedong (1966). *Four Essays on Philosophy* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

Mao Zedong (1977). *On Literature and Art* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press

Mao Zedong (1977) *Selected Works* 9 Vols Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

Option 1 (beginner): If you can't stand Mao just read --
“On Contradiction” in *Four Essays on Philosophy*

Option 2 (intermediate): If you want more Mao than the bare minimum also read --
“On Practice” in *Four Essays on Philosophy*; “Combat Liberalism” in *Selected Works* Vol. 2;
“Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art” in *On Literature and Art*; “US Imperialism is

a Paper Tiger” and/or “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People” in *Selected Works* Vol. 5

Option 3 (advanced): If you absolutely loving Mao also read some of the secondary literature—Dirlik, Arif (1983). “The Predicament of Marxist Revolutionary Consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci and the Reformulation of Marxist Revolutionary Theory” *Modern China* 9(2): 182-211.

Kadri, Jude (2023). “Comparing the Two ‘Cold Wars’ Through Gramsci, Althusser and Mao” *Journal of Labor and Society* 26(2): 185-222.

Liu, Kang (1997). “Hegemony and Cultural Revolution” *New Literary History* 28(1): 69-86.

Plys, Kristin and Charles Lemert (2022). “Existential Unfolding as Revolutionary Praxis” in *Capitalism and its Uncertain Future* New York: Routledge.

Plys, Kristin (2024). “The Cold War from the Global South: Maoism and the future of liberalism” *Social Science History*

Mahmood Mamdani and Horkat Bhagat (1982). “Comments on the Political Economy of Imperialism” in Yashpal Tandon Ed. *Debate on Class, State & Imperialism* Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House.

Dan Wadada Nabudere (1982). “A Reply to Mamdani and Bhagat” in Yashpal Tandon Ed. *Debate on Class, State & Imperialism* Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House.

Psychoanalysis

WEEK 5: 4th February

Jacques Lacan (2004 [1966]). *Écrits: A Selection* New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Option 1 (beginner): If you can’t stand Lacan just read – “Mirror Stage” and “Subversion of the Subject”

Option 2 (intermediate): If you want a bit more Lacan than the bare minimum also read— “The Function and Field of Speech”, “The Freudian Thing” and “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious”

Option 3 (advanced): If you’re absolutely loving Lacan read the whole book and flag these for future reading --

Alain Badiou (2020). *Lacan* New York: Columbia University Press.

David S. Marriott (2021). *Lacan Noir: Lacan and Afro-Pessimism* Palgrave Macmillan.

WEEK 6: 11th February

Frantz Fanon (1965 [1959]). *A Dying Colonialism* New York: Grove Press.

Option 1 (beginner): If you can’t stand Fanon just read— “This is the Voice of Algeria”

Option 2 (intermediate): If you want a bit more Fanon than the bare minimum also read -- “Preface”, “Algeria Unveiled” and “Conclusion”

If you’re specializing in sociology of the family also read “The Algerian Family”

If you’re specializing in medical sociology/sociology of health also read “Medicine and Colonialism”

Option 3 (advanced): If you’re absolutely loving Fanon read the whole book and/or -- Immanuel Wallerstein (1979). “Fanon and the revolutionary class” in *The Capitalist World- Economy* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 250–268.

Immanuel Wallerstein (2009). “Reading Fanon in the 21st Century” *New Left Review* 57: (May–June): 117–125.

Kristin Plys and Charles Lemert (2022). “The Modern World and Capitalism, 1500-1991” in *Capitalism and its Uncertain Future* New York: Routledge.

Sinan Richards (2021). “The Logician of Madness: Fanon’s Lacan” *Paragraph* 44(2): 214-237.

Zizek, Slavoj (2014). “The Wound of Eurocentrism” in *Trouble in Paradise* Brooklyn: Meville House. pp. 183-195

Posts

WEEK 7: 25th February

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1972]). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* New York: Penguin Classics.

Option 1 (beginner): If you can’t stand D&G just read – “The Urstaat” and “The Civilized Capitalist Machine”

Option 2 (intermediate): If you want a bit more D&G than the bare minimum also read— “Desiring Production”, “The Body Without Organs”, “Capitalist Representation” and “Psychoanalysis and Capitalism”

Option 3 (advanced): If you’re absolutely loving D&G read the entire book and/or -- Rossi Braidotti (1996). “Nomadism with a difference: Deleuze’s legacy in a feminist perspective” *Man and World* 29: 305–314.

Kristin Plys and Charles Lemert (2022). “Assemblage Theory: The New Necessary Analytics of Global Capitalism” in *Capitalism and its Uncertain Future* New York: Routledge.

Flag this for future reference or as a reading guide:

Adrian Parr Ed. (2010). *The Deleuze Dictionary Revised Edition* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

WEEK 8: 4th March

Queer Theory

Petrus Liu (2023). *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* Durham: Duke University Press.

WEEK 9: 11th March

Black Feminist Autotheory

Angela Davis (2023). *An Autobiography* (Revised Edition) Chicago: Haymarket Press.

Please note that it is important that you read the new revised edition published by Haymarket in 2023.

WEEK 10: 18th March

Post-Fascism

Alberto Toscano (2023). *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and The Politics of Crisis* London: Verso.

WEEK 11: 25th March

Postcolonialism

Achille Mbembe (2024). *Brutalism: Theory in Forms* Durham: Duke University Press.

WEEK 12: 1st April

Wrap up discussion (no reading)