Spring 2017

ANTH 689:
Social Theory for the Contemporary
(or, Social Theory II)

WHERE: 313 Condon Hall
WHEN: Wednesdays, 6-8:50pm
OFFICE HOURS: Tuesdays 1-3 pm, 357 Condon Hall

INSTRUCTOR: Prof. Bharat Venkat, bvenkat@uoregon.edu

WHAT IS THIS COURSE ABOUT?

In the aftermath of the recent American presidential election, a consensus that had been built around ideas of truth, propriety and common sense has come under sustained attack. In this moment of uncertainty, what can social theory offer us? In what way can social theory be brought to bear on a present that resists easy diagnosis? How might social theory illuminate our dark times?

In this course, we will carefully read and think through a range of work from the second half of the twentieth century, with the occasional detour into more archaic writings. We will begin, for example, with Sophocles’ *Antigone*, a play that has been invaluable for philosophers and anthropologists from Hegel and Lacan to Lévi-Strauss and Butler. *Antigone* spans the present-day divisions between the humanities and social sciences and has provided a fertile ground for theorists to ask a series of questions not only about poetics, but about the state, kinship, gender, the right to violence, desire, justice, mourning, suffering and death (the list goes on). The possibilities are endless, and that is precisely why this text provides an attractive entrance into the reading of social theory. The remainder of the course will work through a series of texts written by anthropologists, historians and philosophers, all of whom have contributed to this evolving cannon that we call social theory.

This course will expose students to classical and contemporary concerns within cultural anthropology and its allied fields of inquiry. However, as this course is about contemporary social theory, we might rightly ask how such forms of thinking can help to elucidate the present. As such, this course is organized around a range of themes that speak to the kinds of anxieties and conundrums that have come to characterize our post-election moment. As we move through the weeks, it will hopefully become apparent that anthropology has much to say about the world.

Moreover, we will consider the mobility of theoretical insight, whether its truths can hold across space, time and circumstance, and in what way. To put it differently, what is the relationship between particularity and universality? Between relative sameness and radical difference? Might a singular occurrence illumine a more general phenomenon? One of the primary aims in this course is to read texts contextually, in relation to their moment of production, as well as in relation to the present. In pursuing this aim, we will consider both the potential and limitations of drawing upon extant social theory in thinking through our own research materials.

As with all courses of this kind, the texts that we will work through together in this course represent only one way in which contemporary social theory might be read and thought. There are always
other ways, other texts to read, other thoughts to have, other conversations to engage, but we have only ten weeks together. If there are specific questions or themes that you would like to explore further, please feel free to speak with me for recommendations. Moreover, this syllabus is a work-in-progress, which means that there is the possibility of making adjustments in relation to student interest.

While this course is part of a two-course sequence for graduate students in cultural anthropology, it is open to anyone interested in thinking carefully, critically and creatively about the status and potential of social theory in the contemporary moment. Graduate students in biological and archaeological anthropology are required to take either Social Theory I or Social Theory II.

WHAT WILL YOU LEARN?

1. To read, interpret and critique a variety of texts that constitute contemporary social theory
2. To examine the relationship between research, theory and forms of writing within cultural anthropology
3. To traces the conditions of production of theory as well as how theory can be brought to bear on different kinds of situations across time and space

WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW?

This is a seminar course that meets once a week. As such, the success of this course depends on every participant finishing the reading before class and participating in the conversation - which include listening attentively but critically to your classmates. A good conversation sharpens your thinking and exposes you to new ideas. If you fear speaking in class, challenge yourself to make a comment or ask a question a certain number of times each week. Your active engagement in discussions will count toward your attendance & participation grade.

We will take a 5-minute break in the middle of class. Stretch, breathe, use the bathroom.

Laptops and other electronic devices are discouraged. Our collective aim should be to create an environment that encourages engagement. Despite our best intentions, technology can easily become a distraction to ourselves and to others. If you require some form of technology, please use it – but avoid emailing, texting, online shopping and other forms of diversion. That said, feel free to text/email/etc. during the break.

Office Hours. If you have any questions or concerns about your performance in the course, please come to office hours as soon as possible. The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to get back on track. You may also attend office hours to address any difficulties with the course or to further discuss any of the topics or texts covered in class. If you have irreconcilable conflicts with the scheduled office hours, please contact me via email to set up an alternative time to meet.
Official course communication will occur in class, through email and via Canvas. Any changes to the syllabus will be sent in an email and/or announced via Canvas. Students are responsible to keep up-to-date on any changes to the syllabus. Final grades will also be posted to Canvas.

HOW CAN YOU DO WELL IN THIS COURSE?

Read before you come to seminar. Readings provide a shared foundation for our discussions. The materials for this course include work by anthropologists, historians, cultural theorists and philosophers. Please bring the readings to class so that we can refer to specific passages in the texts. You will have between 100-150 pages of reading per week. On average, readings should take you about 4-6 hours per week to complete, although some weeks will require more time and others less. It is highly recommended that you start reading early for weeks with heavy reading loads. Recommended readings provide additional context and theorization related to the week’s theme, but there is no expectation that you will read these texts during the term. If you have any concerns about the readings, please do not hesitate to come to office hours.

Take notes (in the margins or in a separate notebook) while you read, as well as in class, as this will help you process the materials. Some questions to consider while reading:

1.) What are the conditions of production of this text? (historical, geographical, etc.)  
2.) What are the author’s central arguments or main points?  
3.) What evidence does the author use to support their argument?  
4.) What ideas or authors are being argued against?  
5.) What assumptions does the author rely on to make their argument?  
6.) Do you find the author’s argument convincing? Why or why not?  
7.) What surprised you about the reading? What did you learn?  
8.) What experiences in your life, or in your research, resonate with the reading?

Turn work in, on time. Late work is not accepted in this course and will receive a failing grade. Please notify me as soon as possible if a serious issue arises that hinders the completion of an assignment, the taking of an exam or your attendance in class. Rather than waiting until the term is over or nearly over, please speak with me as soon as possible. Make-ups and extensions will not be granted without a documented or previously-established reason, such as a written note from your doctor or the observation of a religious holiday. There is no extra credit offered in this course.

Proofread your work. Ask a friend to proofread it again, or take it to a Writing Tutor at Knight Library. Spelling and grammar errors, as well as typos, will negatively affect your grade. All work must be fully referenced following the guidelines in the Chicago Manual of Style.
GRADING

Your regular attendance and participation (15%) are critical to the success of this seminar. It is important that you come to class on time prepared for discussion, having first completed the readings.

Every week, you will write a response paper (35%) to the assigned readings. Responses should be about 350 words in length and uploaded to Canvas by Tuesday at 9pm (the day before class). Please read your fellow classmates’ responses so that we are all on the same page for class discussion. A response paper is a first attempt at grappling with ideas from the readings and putting texts into conversation. In your response papers, focus on laying out the major ideas or arguments raised by the texts. Include any questions you have about the readings.

Each student will be responsible for preparing and presenting an introduction to the readings (15%) for 2 class sessions, alone or in pairs. Your presentation of roughly 15 minutes should provide background on the texts, summarize and critique the readings, draw out and critically assess key points for class discussion, and include at least three discussion questions. Presenters are required to incorporate questions and comments from their classmates’ response papers.

The final paper (35%) will require you to substantively, generously and critically engage closely with at least four texts from the course on a topic or question chosen in conjunction with the professor. Papers should be 10-12 pages in length, double-spaced and with 1-inch margins, in Times New Roman with 12-point font. Submit on Canvas and deposit a hard copy in my mailbox in Condon 308. Due Wednesday, June 14 by 4pm.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The University of Oregon’s policies on academic honesty and plagiarism can be found at conduct.uoregon.edu. Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. By way of example, students should not give or receive (or attempt to give or receive) unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. Students should properly acknowledge and document all sources of information (e.g. quotations, paraphrases, ideas) and use only the sources and resources authorized by the instructor. Students should not turn in assignments or exam questions written by anyone else, nor should they include text written by someone else without citing the source. Paraphrased material must also be cited. This includes material from the Internet, as well as material from class lectures. Plagiarized work will receive a failing grade. If there is any question about whether an act constitutes academic misconduct, it is the students’ obligation to clarify the question with the professor before committing or attempting to commit the act. Additional information about a common form of academic misconduct, plagiarism, is available at researchguides.uoregon.edu/citingplagiarism.
REQUIRED BOOKS

Some required readings will be posted online to Canvas. Students are required to read these carefully prior to coming to class, take notes, and to bring both texts and notes to class.

Texts not posted to Canvas are available for purchase at the Duck Store, the University of Oregon’s Bookstore at 895 East 13th Street, as well as on reserve at the Knight Library.

Required Texts
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*
Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*
Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*
John Borneman, *Cruel Attachments: The Ritual Rehab of Child Molesters in Germany*

Recommended
James Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today*
Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench*

ACCOMODATIONS

Please communicate with me, preferably within the first week of class, if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your learning or participation. Of course, if concerns arise later in the term, do not hesitate to let me know. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center located at 164 Oregon Hall, by phone (541-346-1155), by e-mail (oruoaec@uoregon.edu) or on the web (aec.uoregon.edu).

CLASS SCHEDULE

**April 5, 2017: ON AUTHORITY**

“highly overrated”

Sophocles, *Antigone*

**April 12, 2017: NO CLASS**

“Nobody has more respect for women than me!”

*** Talk in Gerlinger Lounge by Dr. Sameena Mulla, April 12, 2017 at 2PM ***

Recommended
Sameena Mulla, *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention*
April 19, 2017: ON THINKING & REPRESENTATION

“All my Cabinet nominee[s] are looking good and doing a great job. I want them to be themselves and express their own thoughts, not mine!”

Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”
Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?”
Edward Said, Orientalism, “Introduction”
Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors”
Martin Heidegger, “Discourse on Thinking”

Recommended
Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”
Talal Asad, Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter, “Introduction”
Nicholas Dirks, “Edward Said and Anthropology”

April 26, 2017: ON RECOGNITION & SUBJECTION

“For the 100th time, I never ‘mocked’ a disabled reporter (would never do that) but simply showed him ‘groveling’ when he totally changed a 16 year old story that he had written in order to make me look bad.”

G.W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, “Lordship and Bondage”
Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, Introduction, Ch. 1-5, 7

Recommended
Alexandre Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, “In Place of an Introduction”
Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

May 3, 2017: ON THE NATURE OF EVIL

“These are sick evil people that want to destroy this country.”

Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, Ch. 1-8

Recommended
Wendy Doniger, The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology, Ch. 1 & 3
Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture
May 10, 2017: ON VIOLENCE, TERROR & THE NATION

“Far more killed than anticipated in radical Islamic terror attack yesterday. Get tough and smart U.S., or we won’t have a country anymore!”

Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”
Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*, Introduction, Ch. 1 & 2
Michael Taussig, “Culture of Terror–Space of Death: Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture”

**Recommended**
Sigmund Freud, “Considerations on War and Death”
Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*
Veena Das, “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain”

May 17, 2017: ON WORDS, TRUTH & TRUST

“FAKE NEWS – A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!”

J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Lectures 1 & 2
Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*, Parts 1 & 2

**Recommended**
Fritz Staal, “Bird Song and Mantra”
Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench*

May 24, 2017: ON AUTHENTICITY & THE IMAGE

“Totally biased, not funny and that Baldwin impersonation just can’t get any worse. Sad”

Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”
Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry”

**Recommended**
Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*
William Mazzarella, “Why is Adorno So Repulsive?”
May 31, 2017: ON POLYMORPHOUS PERVERSITY

“Yes, I’m very embarrassed by it, and I hate it, but it’s locker room talk.”

John Borneman, *Cruel Attachments: The Ritual Rehab of Child Molesters in Germany*, Ch. 1-5

Recommended
Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*
Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*
Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

June 7, 2017: ON HISTORY & MEMORY

“I don’t remember saying that. As good as my memory is, I don’t remember that, but I have a good memory.”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”
Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Ch. 1 & 4

Recommended
James Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today*
Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*

Final Papers due on Wednesday, June 14 by 4pm. Submit on Canvas and deposit a hard copy in my mailbox in Condon 308.