Columbia University
Center for Contemporary Critical Thought

Fall 2015 Seminar

**The Idea of a Critical Political Theory**

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Monday Through Friday, October 19-23, 2015

Seminar Description

Anyone who goes beyond procedural questions of a discourse theory of morality and ethics and, in a normative attitude . . . embarks on a theory of the well-ordered, or even emancipated, society will quickly run up against the limits of his own historical situation.

--Habermas

For some time now, a certain strand of contemporary critical theory has understood its task not in terms of providing a substantive critique of real world power relations, let alone an alternative normative conception of what social relations might be, but of how to justify critique as such: how to “justify those elements which critique owes to its philosophical origins” (Habermas), albeit in a nonfoundationalist manner. This focus on—if not obsession with—the theoretical problem of how to ground one’s own critique arose largely as an intervention into the now longstanding debate over positivism and scientism in figurations of the relation between theory and practice. As important as this intervention has been for exposing the dangers of, and social/political philosophy’s implication in, a purely technocratic order, it has not been without costs to the very idea of critique itself: namely the crucial connection between critique and social/political transformation.

Seyla Benhabib has usefully characterized the two tasks of critical theory as “explanatory-diagnostic” and “anticipatory-utopian.” In this seminar we aim to explore what each of these tasks might be and how they are connected. Central to our discussions will be an examination of how the loss of the second of these tasks, that is, of providing an anticipatory-utopian vision of what might supersede our current social and political predicament, results in a failure to adequately fulfill the first task of critically analyzing that very predicament. To speak with Cornelius Castoriadis, how might we refigure theory as “critical” (of what exists) by means of its capacity to posit “new forms/figures of the thinkable”?
In preparation for the seminar, it will be useful to consult the following texts:


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(October 19)

**I. Critique as a Creative World-Building Practice of Freedom**

The first session sets out two visions of critique and of a critical political theory’s role and purpose in the world. “On the one side is a vision… that, in recognition of the value pluralism and social complexity of modernity, restricts itself to the normative clarification of the procedures by which moral and political questions should be settled; on the other, a vision … that, in recognition of the various ways in which conditions of modernity obscure or foreclose our possibilities, conceives itself as a possibility-disclosing practice” (Kompridis). Rather than see critique in terms of a proceduralist practice of normative justification (Habermas), how might we rethink it as an array of imaginative practices of freedom that disclose new ways of living and acting politically? In our current climate of political despair, can we rethink critique in terms other than those of the corrosive skepticism that attends its idealization as the total unmasking of our current socio-political relations? How might we break closure through practices of critique that neither seek the external standpoint nor begin with radical doubt but work from within our forms of life and employ radical imagination to posit “new forms/figures of the thinkable”?

**Readings:**


Cornelius Castoriadis, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” “The Social Imaginary


**Recommended:**


(October 20)

**II. Critique and the Art of Governance**

The second session will explore the emergence of the modern idea of critique and its relation to governance, crisis, judgment, and ethics. What does it mean to think (with Foucault) of critique as “the suspension of judgment” and as inaugurating “a new practice of values based on that very suspension,” as Judith Butler puts it. How can we think of critique as practiced from within relations of knowledge/power rather than from a supposedly objective because external standpoint? How can we move from an intellectualist and individualistic idea of critique to one that is based in modes of both self-transformation and collective practice?

**Readings:**

Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” and “What is Enlightenment?,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 1997), 41-82, 97-120.


**Recommended:**

Raymond Williams, “Criticism,” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 84-86.


III. Critique and Judgment

The third session explores Kant’s idea of the distinctively public use of reason and critique as elaborated by Hannah Arendt. We seek to complicate the idea of critique as the suspension of rule-governed (determinative) judgment (as it was introduced by Foucault and developed by Butler and Raunig) by turning to Arendt’s political refiguration of “common sense” and Kant’s reflective aesthetic judgments of taste in the third Critique. How might critique be understood as part of a practice of reflective judgment, that is, judgment without the mediation of a concept? How might this understanding of critique allow us to practice critique from within our forms of life rather than from what we have now seen to be an illusory external standpoint?

Required Reading:

Recommended:

IV. Critique and the Ordinary

The fourth session will explore further the question of whether context-transcendence is the sine qua non of critique and how a rule-based conception of normativity makes it difficult to imagine critique as originating from within rather than outside our forms of life. What resources are there in our current practices and in what Stanley Cavell calls “the ordinary” for developing new ways of going on and relating to ourselves and to others in collective and public space?

Stanley Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” and “Knowing and Acknowledging” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 44-72, 238-266.
-----, “The Normativity of the Natural,” in *Varieties of Skepticism: Essays after Kant,*

Recommended:

(October 23)

V. Critique and Collective Political Practice
In the final seminar we turn to the Occupy Movement(s) as a recent political example of critique understood as (1) the resistance to being governed in this way (Foucault), (2) the public practice of action and judgment (Arendt), (3) the capacity to project a word into new contexts (Cavell), and/or (3) the work of radical imagination and its positing of forms/figures of the newly thinkable (Castoriadis). To what extent do these various ways of thinking about critique capture what you take Occupy to be about? To what extent do they support, contest, or mutually exclude each other? Which of these approaches to critique better grasps the events now gathered under the sign “Occupy”? Can we revisit more distant political protests (e.g., not just those that culminated in world-historical revolutions but also those associated with, say, 1968) and felicitously rethink them with one or more of these conceptions of critique?

Readings:

Recommended:
Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in Crises of the Republic (New York: Harcourt
Brace, 1972), 49-102.


