

SOC6329 Contemporary Social Theory

Spring 2024

W 6-8.50pm

Prof Denis O'Hearn

Old Main 201

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday 11-12pm and by appointment

As members of the University of Texas at El Paso community, we acknowledge that we are meeting on unceded Indigenous land. We would like to recognize and pay our respects to the Indigenous people with long ties to the immediate region: Lipan Apache, Mescalero Apache, Piro, Manso, Suma, Jumano, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Piro/Manso/Tiwa Indian Tribe of the Pueblo of San Juan de Guadalupe, and Tortugas Pueblo. We also acknowledge the nations whose territories include present day Texas: the Carrizo & Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, and the peoples of Chihuahua and northern Mexico from whom most/many of our students descend, such as the Rarámuri, Tepehuan, Wixarrika and Nahuatlaca peoples. Finally, we recognize all of the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories here in Paso del Norte. The University of Texas at El Paso honors your history and cultures and we seek greater awareness of the myriad ways in which your legacy can guide us in fruitful partnerships and mutually fulfilling relationships.

Welcome to Soc. 6329, our core PhD course in contemporary social theory. Social theories are the ways we look at the world. They should not be seen as static things but, rather, as dynamic bodies of thought that are modified and updated as we study the real world. We never change the facts we observe to fit our theories – as in “alternative facts” – rather we challenge and adapt our theories as they fail to fully explain what we observe. Social theories are idealized pictures of how the world works, meaning that they cannot be applied directly to any research project or problem, but they give us guidance for our research and for our understanding of the world.

Contemporary theory demonstrates how social theorists have attempted to adapt theoretical approaches, or create new ones, to make up for the shortcomings of classical theories. For example, how does capitalism change as monopolies emerge? How do materialist approaches benefit (or not) from the consideration of “culture”? How can we address problems that were hardly considered by Eurocentric classical approaches: global inequality, the environment, gender and race? We will also look critically at two attempts to create anti-classical/enlightenment paradigms that have faced considerable critique: postmodernism and postcolonial theory.

The syllabus is heavy on reading content, generally a book a week. I realize that graduate students have other responsibilities, so there may be weeks when you are unable to fully read the assigned materials. You should: do the best you can; and, learn to scan books for the most important concepts that you will want to study more carefully. Addressing the complete works will also give you the possibility of returning to key readings when you want or need to use them in more depth.

The course is organized into lectures and student-led discussions. The short lectures will closely cover course readings, but my style is conversational so I will always welcome interruptions and discussions. As the course proceeds, you will be responsible for leading discussions of the weeks’

readings. We always learn more by discussing things and asking questions than we will if I hand down “truth” from the front of the classroom.

Your grade will depend on section participation and an essay. Participation will include submission of reading responses/questions in advance of each week’s class. Suggested topics for essays will be provided but you are welcome to negotiate alternative topics with me. Preferably, they will be related to your chosen or prospective dissertation research.

Reading responses should be *short* comments or questions (no more than one or two paragraphs) that are designed to provoke discussion during each week’s class. They will be sent to me by email by 9pm each Monday, before the Wednesday meeting.

I encourage you to take up a position, whether or not it agrees with whatever you may perceive as my position. This is an open forum and all views are welcome except hate speech. I only require that your arguments be based on reasoned argument and not on unsupported “opinion.”

Finally, enjoy the course. Social theory can be seen as a chore. It can also be viewed as something that opens our minds toward the possibilities of social research, and that will enable us to have a better understanding of the world around us.

Learning outcomes:

- The ability to critically read texts and analyze the social world around them using basic sociological concepts and ideas derived from significant sociological thinkers drawn from the past and contemporary periods.
- The ability to communicate effectively in writing that is coherent, well- developed, and expressive of concepts, ideas, and themes derived from sociological thinking.
- The ability to express your thoughts orally and to lead discussion.
- Knowledge of themes, perspectives, and paradigms in particular areas of sociological thought.

Outline of course meetings

January 17 Week 1: Introduction

January 24 Week 2: Gramsci

Readings: selections from Prison Notebooks

January 31 Week 3: Fanon

Readings: Black Skin White Masks

February 7 Week 4: Materialism and the 'Cultural Turn'

Readings: Vivek Chibber, The Class Matrix

February 14 Week 5: Monopoly Capital

Readings: Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Monopoly Capital

February 21 Week 6: Development 1: World Systems Analysis

Readings: Immanuel Wallerstein, World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction

February 28 Week 7: Development 2: Capitalism and Environment

Readings: Jason Moore, Capitalism in the Web of Life

March 6 Week 8: Space

Readings: Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space

March 13 Week 9: Spring Break

March 20 Week 10: History of Work

Readings: Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, Andrea Komlosy, Work: the Last 1,000 Years

March 27 Week 11: Future of Work

Readings: Kathi Weeks, The Problem with Work

April 3 Week 12: Postmodernism

Readings: David Harvey, The Condition of Post-modernity

April 10 Week 13: Postcolonialism 1

Readings: Vivek Chibber, *Post-colonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*

April 17 Week 14: Postcolonialism 2

Readings: Debate on Chibber in *Journal of World-Systems Research*

April 24 Week 15: Gender

Readings: Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Commons*

May 1 Week 16: Race

Readings: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*