COMS 301—Core Concepts in Critical Theory

Department of Art History & Communication Studies
McGill University
Lectures: T/Th 10:05-11:25
Remote delivery
Fall 2020

Prof. Darin Barney
Remote office hours: Th 12:30-14:30
darin.barney@mcgill.ca

*** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this course will be delivered exclusively remotely for the duration of the term. Please consult the Course Delivery Guide posted on the course website for details concerning remote delivery***

COURSE OUTLINE:

“…if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present—I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing…”

- Karl Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge (1844)

This course will survey foundational texts and thinkers in critical social theory, as they relate to the fields of media and communication studies. This will include core texts in Marxism, the Frankfurt School, feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, queer theory, indigenous thought, and critical theory of and from the global south. The course will prepare students with key theoretical and conceptual vocabularies for advanced study in the field.

Required Texts:
All readings are available on the course website, either in .pdf format, or via copies held by the McGill library. Students are responsible for downloading and/or printing the readings for the course.

Course requirements:
- Group engagement – 20% (6 sessions x 3.35%)
- Tests – 40% (5 tests x 10% each; lowest-scoring test dropped)
- Final exam – 40%

Group engagement: students will receive 3.35% (per week) for attendance at scheduled small group discussions OR contributions to “Group 7” discussion board (e.g., a question, a brief comment or reflection, a response to a peer, etc.).

Tests: students will complete five (5) tests, each worth 10% of the final grade. The lowest-scoring test will be dropped. Test Guidelines and Grading Rubric will be posted on the COMS 301 MyCourses site and discussed during the first week of class. Tests will not be re-scheduled, and make-up assignments will not be permitted, except in cases of illness or emergency. Missed tests will result in a grade of “0.”

Final Exam: a take-home examination conducted remotely during the final exam period. Time-limit and submission window will be generous to accommodate differential circumstances and competing demands.
Electronic mail:
E-mail inquiries regarding substantive course material (i.e., material in course readings; ideas discussed in class) or to make appointments, will receive a prompt and courteous reply. It is preferable that substantive inquiries be made in class or on course discussion boards, so that other students may benefit from them. Additionally, students should be aware of the following guidelines:

1. I read and reply to electronic mail once daily, typically during the morning of standard working days. Under no circumstances will I read or reply to e-mail outside business hours. Do not expect that I will read or reply to an e-mail inquiry after 5 pm or on weekends.
2. Notification by electronic mail of a missed examination due to illness or emergency will be accepted but must be followed by hard copy of appropriate documentation.
3. Grade inquiries/disputes will not be considered or discussed via e-mail. All grade inquiries should be made in person during office hours, or by appointment. Exceptions will be made for those unable to attend remote office hours at scheduled times.
4. E-mail inquiries regarding course matters (such as assignment requirements, due dates, exam structure, etc.) that clearly arise from lack of attendance or inattention to the course syllabus will not receive replies. Inquiries requesting clarification will receive replies, though, it is preferable that these inquiries be made in class or on the course discussions board, so that others might benefit from replies.

Grading:
Grades will be assigned according to the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar, reproduced below. Students should note the following “definitions” attached to letter grades, as these will be observed strictly: “good” work will receive a grade in the C range; “very good” work will receive a grade in the B range; “excellent” work will receive a grade in the A range; the grade of A will be reserved for work that is unambiguously “outstanding.” It is expected that the distribution of grades in this course will reflect normal standards for courses at this level in the arts and sciences at Canadian universities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Grade point</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>85 -100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>80 - 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>75 - 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>70 - 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>65 - 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>60 - 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>55 - 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D (Conditional Pass)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>50 - 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F (Fail)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 - 49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Grade Appeals:* Assignments and quizzes are graded on performance, not effort. Grades are final, except where a mistake has been made in calculation. The professor will consider a grade change under the following conditions: (a) if an error has been made in calculation, or (b) if you have not been held to the same standard as everyone else. If you seek clarification of a grade you have received, you should consult your professor or TA during office hours, keeping in mind the criteria of evaluation on which your assignment was graded. The professor will neither defend nor contest the TA’s or grader’s evaluation; he will discuss ways in which you can understand the evaluation and improve upon your performance.
In the event you feel that you have received an undeserved grade and wish to dispute it, you must make your case in writing within one week (7 days) of receiving the grade. The case in writing must detail the grounds on which you are making an appeal, accompanied by the original assignment (make a copy for yourself). Grade complaints will not be considered after the one-week deadline, or if they are not made in writing. If the professor agrees to review your assignment and re-evaluate its grade, keep in mind that your grade could remain the same, be elevated, or be reduced.

**Accommodations:**
If you require accommodations due to special circumstances, challenges or disabilities, please notify both the professor and the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) as soon as possible. The OSD provides a broad range of support and services to assist students, faculty, and staff with disabilities. (3100 Brown Student Services Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TDD) (http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/). Every effort will be made to accommodate students with special needs arising from learning challenges and disabilities.

Please note the above commitment to accommodate applies equally to survivors of sexual assault and/or harassment on or off campus. Survivors are encouraged to consult the resources provided by the Students’ Society of McGill University (https://ssmu.ca/resources/sexual-violence/), the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Students’ Society (http://www.sacomss.org/wp/) and the McGill Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support and Education (https://www.mcgill.ca/ovrse/).

**Academic Conduct:**
*Nondiscrimination:* As academics, we value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial, ethnic, sexual, physical, and cultural diversity. Be assured that we will promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. This will include enforcing the norms of open inquiry, respectful dialogue, and tolerant disagreement. In accordance with University policy, we will not tolerate discrimination or harassment based on race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, civil status, familial status, sexual orientation, or disability. We will also make every effort to avoid discrimination based on class or income. In addition to the University’s policy, we do not discriminate based on political creed. This means that you do not have to agree politically with the professor, TA or course material in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, you are under no obligation to agree with it. If there is something we can do to make the class more hospitable, please let us know.

*Academic integrity:* McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

*Remote learning:* Teaching and learning via remote means present additional challenges and responsibilities for maintaining a safe, inclusive and fair learning environment for everyone. It is presumed that teachers and students enrolled in COMS 301 commit to the following:

- I will not share my login or password information, or share or provide access to course platforms and materials, with any third parties or individuals.
- I will not distribute course materials (including lecture recordings and interactions with peers) without the express permission of the author and/or participants.
• I will not copy, store or share images, recordings, identifying information or contact details of any course participants.
• At all times, I will respect the privacy, safety and well-being of course participants.
• I will refrain from initiating or sharing disrespectful, demeaning, lewd, aggressive, disruptive, abusive, bullying or otherwise inappropriate images, sound or text via any course platforms.

Failure to adhere to these commitments will be subject to the McGill Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

Additional information:
Remote learning: McGill has established a hub for support for students with questions or concerns related to remote student life and learning here: https://mcgill.ca/remote-students/.

Academic resources: Students looking for additional assistance with academic reading, study, research and writing skills should consult the McGill academic resources website at www.mcgill.ca/students/academicresources/.

Counseling: The Student Wellness Hub provides personal, academic, and career counseling to undergraduate and graduate students. They also offer workshops on study skills, multiple choice exams, and text anxiety/stress management. The hub is located in the Brown Student Services Building, 300 McTavish Street (514.398.6017 https://www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub) and makes many services available remotely. Additionally, SSMU provides access to a counselling service with 24/7/365 support from licensed counsellors through telephone and mobile chat in over 60 languages here: https://ssmu.ca/blog/2020/03/mental-health-resource-available-keep-mesafe/.

Illness: Students are responsible for material covered in all classes, including those missed due to illness. Under remote delivery, lectures will be recorded and available on the course website. Tests and examinations will not be re-scheduled, and test/exam due date extensions will not be considered, for any reason other than documented illness or emergency. Anyone unable to complete tests or examinations due to illness is expected to make every effort to contact the professor prior to the examination or due date, and to co-operate in arranging a make-up examination or revised due date. Appropriate documentation will be required to support requests for special consideration due to illness (see “Illness” tab at http://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/programs/common-issues).

Language: In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue).

Content notes:
Some of the course readings may contain material that some students might find upsetting. These readings are indicated below with content notes briefly describing the potentially upsetting material. Students who prefer not to be exposed to this material will be excused from responsibility for that text, and will be assigned an alternative. Students should review the content notes in the course schedule and indicate to the professor any readings for which they would prefer an alternative, in advance of the week for which the reading is assigned.
CLASS SCHEDULE

Optional background reading:

Week 1 (Sept. 3): Entrance

Sept. 3 - Lecture

Content note: The short story by Le Guin contains a fictional depiction of child abuse. The depiction is contained primarily in one paragraph.


Week 2 (Sept. 8-10): What is critical theory (for)?

Sept. 8 – Lecture Sept. 10 – Lecture


Week 3 (Sept. 15-17): Class struggle and the critique of capitalism

Sept. 15 – Lecture Sept. 17 – Group discussions

Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels. “The German Ideology.” 57-70; 92-97; 133-134
Karl Marx. “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” The Marx-Engels Reader 4-5.

Week 4 (Sept. 22-24): Ideology (and other ideas)

Sept. 22 – Lecture Sept. 24 – Test

Week 5 (Sept 29-Oct.1): Foucault I

Sept. 29 – Lecture Oct. 1 – Group discussions


Week 6 (Oct. 6-8): Foucault II

Oct. 6 – Lecture Oct. 8 – Test

(Vintage 1990), 135-145

Optional additional reading:

Week 7 (Oct. 13-15): Feminist theory I

Oct. 13 – Lecture Oct. 15 – Group discussions

Content note: The readings this week refer to violence against women and sexual violence. The selections from Caliban and the Witch contain some historical images depicting this violence.


Week 8 (Oct. 20-22): Feminist theory II

Oct. 20 – Lecture Oct. 22 – Test


Optional additional reading:
Patricia Hill Collins, “Intersectionality as Critical Inquiry,” Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory (Duke 2019) 21-53
Week 9 (Oct. 27-29): Queer theory

Oct. 27 – Lecture Oct. 29 – Group discussions


Week 10 (Nov. 3-5): Colonialism, anti-colonialism, decolonization

Nov. 3 – Lecture Nov. 5 – Test

Content note: The Césaire and Fanon readings this week contain brief accounts of violence against racialized persons and sexual violence.

Aimé Césaire. “Discourse on Colonialism” (1955) in F.L. Hord and J. S Lee (eds.) I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy (University of Massachusetts 2016) 196-204.

Week 11 (Nov. 10-12): Critical theories of race and racism

Nov. 10 – Lecture Nov. 12 – Group discussions


Week 12 (Nov. 17-19): Indigenous critical theory

Nov. 17 – Lecture Nov. 19 – Test


Week 13 (Nov. 24-26): Critical theory from the Global South

Nov. 24 – Lecture Nov. 26 – Group discussions

Frantz Fanon. “Conclusion.” The Wretched of the Earth (Grove 1963) 311-316.

Week 14 (Dec 1): Exit

Dec. 1 - Lecture