

**UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA
CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL THOUGHT PROGRAM**

**CSPT 501/601 A01
2015-2016**

**Course Outline
and
Study Guide**

**Instructor:
Peyman Vahabzadeh, Sociology**

We acknowledge that we meet one another and hold our learning experience on the ancestral land of the Lekwungen family group, Checkonien, and Sungayka. The CSPT Program operates on the unceded territory of the Coast and Strait Salish people.

We are grateful for this unique experience. We pray that our thoughts and deliberations will contribute to the process through which past and present injustices are rectified. We stand in solidarity with all the misplaced, human or nonhuman. We honour this land and its spirits, and we hope to see the time when every being will have a place uniquely proper to it, a place otherwise called home.

We begin our journey by walking gingerly on this land... and on the expansive plateaus of thought.

CSPT 501 A01 (CRN FALL13556/SPRING23398)

Peyman Vahabzadeh

CSPT 601 A01 (CRN FALL13557/SPRING23399)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This is the required Core Course for all incoming CSPT students and it offers an engagement with the major tenets of contemporary cultural, social, and political thought. The purpose of this course is to cover a breadth of key literature in contemporary theory in relative depth without losing sight of the broad mandate of the course (which arises from the nature of CSPT Program). As the wide range of readings and topics in this course indicates, the intention is to train the student in the “foundational” approaches in cultural, social, and political thought.

This course offers also a truly interdisciplinary experience for the students. We will read works of philosophy, theory, literature, and history. The intent is to accumulate theoretical knowledge throughout the entire course by going through interwoven *problématiques*, rather than the common practice of moving from one canonical theory or thinker to another.

This Course Outline provides the guiding thoughts for each week. The students are expected to come to the class having read the assigned readings and prepared to engage with the material. The instructor’s intention is not to provide formal lectures, although the instructor will guide class discussions. The students are expected to engage in group and class discussions with the purpose of clarification of the readings. Participation is an important component of the course. Equally important is the student presentation and leading class discussions. Each and everyone of us in

this course has a voice that must be heard, and as such we will try to maintain an inviting, egalitarian, and collegial environment in which we can all speak and be heard.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Please note that unless they are available through the legitimate sources on the Internet, the excerpts and articles for this course are placed on online Library Reserves, and they are available to students registered in the course. However, in case of larger excerpts from a book, some sources are only available as hard copy on Reserve. It is expected that the students purchase the assigned books.

EVALUATION:

NOTE: Differential evaluation will be used for grading MA and PhD students in terms of the depth of analysis and engagement with the readings.

Group Presentation on the week’s readings	10%
Participation	10%
Dialogue with the Instructor (December 8-10, 2015 by appointment)	30%
Paper abstract, 1 page (March 2, 2016)	10%
Term paper, 10 pages (MAs) or 15 pages (PhDs) (April 15, 2016)	40%

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Students will present in groups of 2-3. The presentation involves a 15-20 minute **critical** engagement with the reading(s) of the week. This is a **collective presentation**. The students are expected to collaborate and show theoretical understanding and deep reading. Individual presentations are not acceptable. The presenters will then lead the 10-minute class discussion. The total time allotted for this assignment is 30 minutes maximum. The depth of your engagement and criticism will earn you the grade for this assignment.
2. Participation (10%) is not attendance!
3. Dialogue with the Instructor is to be scheduled ahead of time (for December 8-10). Each student will have a 15-minute dialogue with the instructor regarding the theories studied in the first half of the course. Evaluation is based on report of knowledge and ability to engage with it.
4. The paper abstract is a one-pager that will explain to me what your term paper topic will be. You will receive the grade for it for submitting it, but you do need to come and see me as follow up and discuss your topic with me (mandatory!).
5. The Term Paper will offer a theoretical paper on a topic of your choice. The term paper will be graded based on the presentation of the theoretical problem, a journey into the various aspects of the theoretical problem, proper discussion, and an attempt at a solution and/or critique. Proper citation and academic writing are taken into account when grading. I expect a graduate student to have mastered citation, referencing, syntax, and paper structure.
6. All assignments should include proper referencing style for any information borrowed from another source in any form or shape (paraphrase or direct quotes). You may choose the style of your choice (APA, ASA, MLA, Chicago) as long as you use is consistently.

A Note on Late Assignments

Assignment due dates are **firm**. *Late assignments will not be accepted* unless accompanied by documentation (medical or extenuating). In such cases, advance notification to the instructor is required.

Course Experience Survey (CES)

I value your feedback about this course. Towards the term's end, as in all other courses at UVic, you will have the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey regarding your learning experience (CES). The survey is vital to providing feedback to me regarding the course and my teaching, as well as to help the department improve the overall program for students in the future. The survey is accessed via MyPage and can be done on your laptop, tablet, or mobile device. I will remind you and provide you with more detailed information near the time but please keep thinking about this important activity during the course.

Finding our way..., or where is *universitas*?



Relics of University of Gondishapur, possibly the world's oldest university, in today's Iran, founded during the Sassanid Empire, 5th century CE.



University of Karueein, founded in 859 CE in Fez, Morocco, known to be the longest running university in the world.



University of Bologna, Italy, founded in 1088, the longest running university in Europe.

Readings for Week 1:

Declaration of the Lillooet Tribe:

<http://www.lilwat.ca/lilwat7ul/our-history/declaration-of-the-lillooet-tribe.cfm>

First Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle:

<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/ezlnwa.htmlvolt/mexico/ezln/ezlnwa.html>

Martin Heidegger, "The Pathway," in Thomas Sheehan (ed.), *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent Publication, Inc., 1981 [orig. 1947/1948]). 69-72.

Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet* (London: Picador, 2009). ISBN: 978-0-330-51049-3

Ian Angus, *Love the Questions: University Education and Enlightenment* (Winnipeg: Arbiter Ring Publishing, 2009). ISBN: 978-1894037-40-2

Recommended Reading:

Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of German University." Available at:

<http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEHeideggerSelf-Assertion.pdf>

The University and Its Discontents

Universitas magistrorum et scholarium: the community of teachers and scholars. Universitas in Latin means the whole, the universe, the world. We are brought together at the university and to the community of scholars and teachers, but where is "the whole" when the land on which we learn has been expropriated from its original inhabitants? Where is "the whole" when, until recently, the memory of the original inhabitants of this campus was erased from public knowledge?

Every knowing, thus every learning, is a remembering, mostly remembering that of which we had no recollection before the knowledge under question was invoked by one of us, the professor who is the one who professes knowledge, by the student who "applies oneself" to knowledge, or by the public that demands certain knowledge.

Who is the professor? Who is the student? Where is the public?

Still, we convene here. The university is undergoing tremendous changes to fit itself with the current trending of knowledge as commodity. Education is yielding to training, knowledge to know-how. And caught in this juggernaut, we are trying to make sense of it all.

The university is an institution of knowledge, but knowledge by whom, for whom, to what end? These are the questions of which we should not let go throughout this course. We will always remember the land on which we enter into dialogue about knowledge.

We know what university is. Or at least we pretend we know. What is university aside from an institution, a place, of knowledge? Seeing the university is conforming to its essence, as its essence appears and reappears to us according to the code of epoch, the exploits of politics and industry, and the existing "prejudice" (as "deep common accord," to quote Gadamer). A university always stands on a land: it occupies land, and as such, it is an institution of dispossession, but not just the land: the university simultaneously confiscates and produces knowledge. Knowledge for whom? By whom? To what end?

Is there a knowledge of the whole? As a whole? Is the whole graspable?

Seeing Is Also Unseeing

MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS



An old woman was talking to her grandson. She said:

“Before I grasped Zen, the mountains were only mountains and the rivers were only rivers. When I got into Zen, the mountains were no longer mountains and the rivers were no longer rivers. But when I understood Zen, the mountains were mountains and the rivers were rivers.”

“Granny,” said the little boy.

“Yes, grandson,” she answered.

“The river’s right here and it’s a hot day. Can’t we go swimming?” he asked.

“Of course,” she laughed, “just jump right in!”

Readings for Week 2:

Zbigniew Herbert, "What Our Dead Do." Available at:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179882>

Nâzım Hikmet, "The Walnut Tree" ("Ceviz Ağacı"). Available at:

http://www.siir.gen.tr/siir/n/nazim_hikmet/the_walnut_tree.htm

Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971). 143-62. ISBN: 0-06-090430-5

LeRoy Little Bear, "Traditional Knowledge and Humanities: A Perspective by a Blackfoot." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39:4 (December 2012). 518–527. ISSN: 1540-6253

Georg Simmel, "The stranger." Available at:

http://www.infoamerica.org/documentos_pdf/simmel01.pdf

Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Reflections on A Diremptive Experience and Four Theses on Origins and Exile." *Journal for Interdisciplinary Crossroads* 3:1 (April 2006). 163-181. ISSN: 0972-9801

Eduardo Subirats, "Exile without Borders." *Journal for Interdisciplinary Crossroads* 3:1 (April 2006). 240-263. ISSN: 0972-9801

Recommended Reading:

Mohawk on Creation. Available at:

http://www.learnquebec.ca/export/sites/learn/en/content/curriculum/social_sciences/documents/creation.pdf

Of Seeing and Its Issues

One sees only by stepping outside of that which is familiar. The biblical ancestors of some of us became aware of their (reportedly shameful) nakedness (not nudity!) upon Satan's temptation and tasting the fruit of the tree of knowledge. For that they were exiled to earth, became mundane, mortal, sinful, murderous, greedy, caring, compassionate, and resilient. Humanity was born. Isn't our birth, in this Middle-Eastern/Abrahamic version of our descent, as a species, tragic?

We think we see when things are matters-of-fact. The world stops when we begin to see beyond the matter-of-course everydayness. A phenomenologist calls this *epoché* (or bracketing). This is when we realize we haven't been seeing, only receiving. Seeing is always unseeing. This is how we actually see, but this seeing is not just a gaze projected outwards—the act that creates objects. We begin to see ourselves through our gaze unto the object. The world becomes a mirror, in fact, a distorting mirror. We see the boundaries of our world not just as limitation but as an edge, a border, a boundary, that points at what lies beyond. Then we become aware of our situatedness, indeed, insertedness. Each of us in our own way. The concept of justice is born.

Seeing connects us to a place. Put inversely, in appearing before our gaze, in "offering" itself as an expanse stretching before our gaze, a place gives us the possibility of being somewhere else, something else. I become my own other when the place in question, through my seeing, embraces me. This other, who is no other than me, I can intimately embrace or resentfully exclude, or as is the case with most of us, I can relate to it somewhere between these two imaginary poles.

The bottom line, the most fundamental thing, is this: in seeing others one sees oneself.

Week 3
Wednesday October 7, 2015

On the Problem of Reading



(Source: <http://evelyn.smyck.org/2010/04/10/franz-kafka-for-president/>)

Readings for Week 3:

Franz Kafka, "The Hunger Artist." Available at:

<https://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/kafka/hungerartist.htm>

Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (79-124) in *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). ISBN: 0-374-52136-0

Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (351-370) in *Writing and Difference* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001). ISBN: 0-415-25383-7

Jacques Derrida, "Différance" (3-27), "Signature Event Context" (309-330) in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) ISBN: 0-226-14326-0

Michel Foucault, "The Incitement to Discourse" (17-35) in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). ISBN: 0-679-72469-9

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). ISBN: 0-8166-1515-2

Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," (1-54) in *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971). ISBN: 0-06-063859-1

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### **You Are Being Read**

Various strategies of reading—or better, bringing awareness to the act of reading—serve as gestures toward self-consciousness. They *inevitably* render visible the otherwise invisible act of reading. Inadvertently perhaps, by giving visibility to reading, they create schools. Then we enter the realm of endless quibbles or supposedly epoch-making criticisms: Saussurian linguistics abolishes philology; structuralism declares the "dissolution of man" (Claude Levi-Strauss) against the existentialist-humanists (Sartre); deconstruction exposes structuralism's metaphysical foundationalism; one critiques another, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*, before slipping into its own demise. It's never settled.

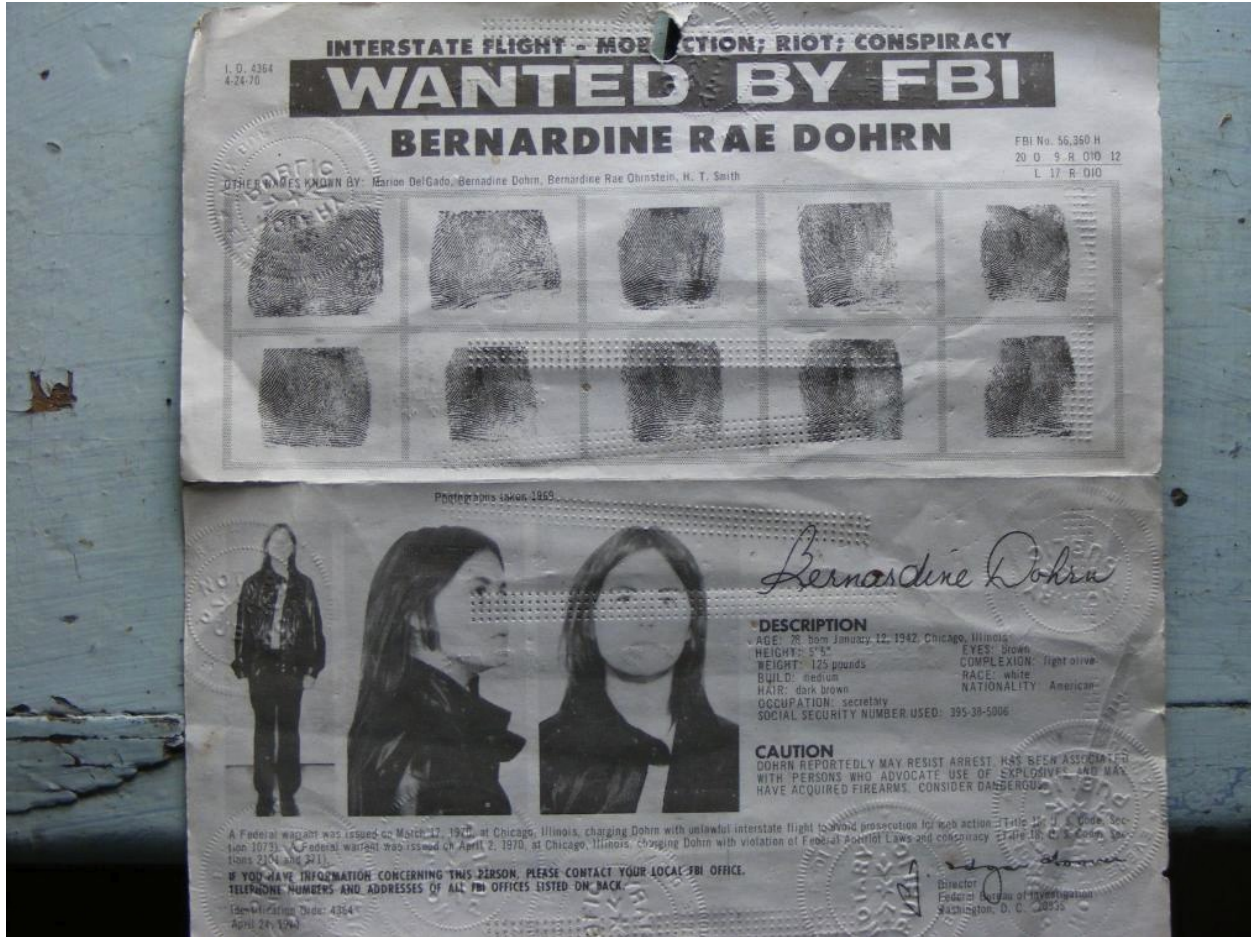
Paul Ricoeur, following the hermeneutic tradition, makes a distinction between "the saying" and "the said," and he maintains the saying is never the said. The rift between the two, of course, enables the possibility of reading and thus the conflict of interpretations. This gap is where everything happens. From this gap schools arise. Out of this gap, our shared reality becomes multiple and multilayered, as each of us becomes many, standing on different vectors and at a specific nexus commonly called "subject positions." And yet, we tend to read in the singular, even (perhaps especially) when we claim that there is more than one way of reading. In reading, then, we inadvertently yield to being read (that is, we expose ourselves) while the act of reading remains a matter-of-course, and by virtue of that, invisible.

So, let us remember: anything I am reading is a book, and the book I am reading is reading me reading the book that is reading me... *Lecture en abyme!*

Mind the gap.

Week 4  
Wednesday October 21, 2015

The Adventures of Dialectical Thought



The FBI "wanted" poster for Bernadine Dohrn, on FBI's 10 Most Wanted List, key SDS organizer and leading cadre of the Weather Underground (1970s) and Professor Emerita of Law

## **Readings for Week 4:**

Bertolt Brecht, *He Who Says No, He Who Says Yes*. Available at:

<http://www.ahewar.org/eng/show.art.asp?aid=800>

F.W.G. Hegel, "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness" (111-119), in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). ISBN: 0-19-824597-1

Karl Marx, "Marx on this History of His Opinions" (3-6) in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978). ISBN: 0-393-09040-X

Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). ISBN: 978-0-8070-0595-8

Simone de Beauvoir, "The Independent Woman" and "Conclusion" (641-687) in *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953). ISBN:

Frantz Fanon, "The Trials and Tribunals of National Consciousness" (97-144), in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004). ISBN: 978-0-8021-4132-3

Slavoj Žižek, "Stalinism Revisited, Or, How Stalin Saved the Humanity of Man," (211-263) in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London/New York: Verso, 2008). ISBN: 978-1-84467-429-9

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A No and a Yes, or This Is (apparently) How History Moves

Dialectic refers to a method—conjured up from Greek thinking with a zest of Christian Trinity—through which world-history, put in motion by the immanence of *Geist*, moves forward toward greater advancement of Reason and expansion of freedom. Dialectic primarily refers to a relationship between, on the one hand, the universal, and on the other, the particular the former has enabled and begotten. Thus the relationship between the universal and the particular is inherently one of necessity. In seeing itself as independent from the universal world-history, the hubristic particular emerges as alienated from the universal, thus rendering the relation of necessity into that of contingency. This constitutes a contradiction. At some point, the particular acquires self-consciousness, seeing its necessary connection with the universal and understanding its historic destiny. Recognition thus emerges and world-history is reconciled with itself (and within itself), putting an end to the contradiction. The universal (thesis) incorporates the particular (anti-thesis) and world-history transcends (*Aufheben*) the present stage and moves up to the next.

For Hegel, this process is best shown in world history (bracket his Eurocentrism for the moment but perhaps don't forgive it): "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning." "What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History." "The East knew and to the present day knows only that *One* is Free; the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are free; the German World knows that *All* are free." The foundation is laid and all we need to do now is to partake in history (his story).

However, what we have done with dialectical thought ever since is beyond Hegel's wildest dreams. Can you imagine in what ways?

Week 5
Wednesday November 4, 2015

Trench Thinking and Understanding Hegemony



Enhanced satellite image of WWI trenches in a European battlefield
(somewhere between French and German lines)

Readings for Week 5:

Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question" (441-462), in Q. Hoare (ed.), *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978). ISBN: 978-0816618422

Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals" (3-23), "Notes on Italian History" (52-59, 104-114, 118-120), "Political Struggle and Military War" (229-238), "The Transition from the War of Manoeuvre to the War of Position" (238-239), "Some Problems in the Study of the Philosophy of Praxis" (323-343), "Structure and Superstructure" (365-366), "The Term Catharsis" (366-367), in Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971). ISBN: 0-7178-0397-X

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). 85-126. ISBN: 978-1-58367-039-2

Kishwar, Madhu. 1990. "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist." *Manushi* No. 61 (November-December 1990). 2-8. Available at: http://www.manushi.in/blog_content.php?blogid=23

Consciousness and Praxis

Perhaps fascism and the fateful prison experience were essential to Antonio Gramsci's theorizing one of the most pertinent and meticulous theories of modern society and politics. Perhaps his living and thinking, as an Italian, on the margins of "great theories" was equally important in the way his understood the Hegelian-Marxian "letter." Perhaps.

Gramsci unravelled something essential about modern society, something at best hinted at in the works of earlier thinkers—above all, his medieval compatriot Niccolò Machiavelli. His observation that the Russian Revolution was "a revolution against *Capital*" alluded to an interesting inversion of Hegelian philosophy of history that Marx had also contracted (although he thought he had decontaminated Hegel's metaphysical agent). Gramsci no longer treated the universal (Hegel's Absolute Spirit and Marx's productive forces) as a given. A dialectician in his thinking, Gramsci debunked, often politely, the enabling but baseless pre-giveness of the universal. As such, he rescued dialectical thinking from its fundamental assumption. Hegemony refers to the condition in which a particular rises to become a universal through the articulation of others' demands. The institutional seat of this universal was the state, but hegemony would not be possible without totalizing society such that every "association" sees in the ruling group's rhetoric its own (partial) reflection. This is Gramsci's "Italian" reading of Marx's "the ruling ideas in every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class."

Under these conditions, the subaltern groups are left with no promise of history. What remains is for the organic intellectuals of a class, those whose life is tangled with the life of the class they represent (communists and workers; feminists and women), to articulate the demands of these group such that such articulation would create a class consciousness that solidifies the experience of the class in question and such that articulation exceeds the demand deemed to be particular to that class. In the aftermath of the Red Years in Italy (1919-1920), he advised that the Italian proletariat of the North must incorporate into its revolutionary program the demands of the southern peasants. *A class that exceeds itself through praxis*: it universalizes its consciousness through revolutionary praxis. What a novel idea!

Week 6
Wednesday November 18, 2015

Society of Diversity: the Futures of Social Movements



Zapatista Elementary School, in the Autonomous Zapatista Region, Chiapas, Mexico

Readings for Week 6:

Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (87-128) in *For Marx* (London/New York: Verso, 2005). ISBN: 978-1-84467-052-9

Herbert Marcuse, Chs. 5-6 of *One Dimensional Man* (London/New York: Routledge, 1991). ISBN: 978-0-415-28977-1

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Chs. 3-4 of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985). ISBN: 0-86091-769-X

Subcommandante Marcos, "Marcos Is Gay." Available at:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/16118>

Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" (36-46) in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso: 1996). ISBN: 9-781859-841655

Recommended Reading:

Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996). ISBN: 1-85984-165-1

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### **A New Hegemonic Logic**

How are we to understand, in the age of postcolonial, national liberation, the actual movements for national self-assertion of former colonies as they "identified," through praxis, with the emancipatory potential of the failed and/or exhausted Marxist revolutionary discourse? Theoretically, this was rather perplexing. To address the problem, Althusser, an Algerian-French structural-Marxist, retrieved the vintage and marginal concept of overdetermination (from Engels) in his attempt at reconciling the reality of the 1960s with classical Marxism. As such, he presented one of the most useful concepts to theory.

In a rather similar fashion but a generation later, in the aftermath of failing "actually existing socialism," the rise of Thatcherism in UK and Reaganomics in US, and the concomitant full-fledge assault on the welfare state, Laclau tried to bring out what was at the heart of a socialist project: the hegemonic project of the subaltern, by reading Gramscian theory through Derridean deconstruction—with the added flavour of Saussurian linguistics, Foucaultian discourse, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is a difficult read but fun! In any case, the formation of the hegemonic front of the subaltern is informed by a "constitutive lack," an enemy in the outside, that we must exclude for our political program to succeed. And yet, because this "enemy" (Mouffe calls it an "adversary") actually enables my political alliances it actually turns out to be on the inside. The formation of the subaltern hegemonic front, hinging on a context-specific nodal point, will then have serious implications for the concept of rights as we inherited them from the liberal discourse. The outcome will be a form of radical democracy aiming at the elimination of the relations of domination.

Laclau's theory managed to permeate the renewal of the leftist project in Europe and Latin America: from the 1996 electoral victory of the Italian Left, to the recent victory of Greek Syriza and getting official parliamentary status of Turkish (Kurdish) HDP. And yes, Subcommandante Marcos, the military commander of the Zapatistas, also read (carefully) Laclau and Mouffe in his secret base in the Lacandon Jungle, Chiapas... I am told.



Week 7  
Wednesday December 2, 2015

Rights and Exceptionalism: What Constitutes a Human?



Gulag Magadan, USSR, circa 1929

## **Readings for Week 7:**

Hannah Arendt, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of Rights of Man" (267-302) in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958). ISBN: 0-15-670153-7

Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). ISBN: 0-226-00925-4

Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees" (110-19), in E. Robinson (ed.), *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1996). ISBN: 978-0156003896. Available at: [https://web.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah\\_arendt\\_we\\_refugees.pdf](https://web.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah_arendt_we_refugees.pdf)

Dan Pagis, "Poems from a Camp Survivor." Available at: [http://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/EchoesAndReflections\\_Lesson\\_Five\\_Poem-PoemsFromACampSurvivor.pdf](http://echoesandreflections.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/EchoesAndReflections_Lesson_Five_Poem-PoemsFromACampSurvivor.pdf)

Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001). ISBN: 9-780415-227124

## **Recommended Reading:**

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). ISBN: 0-8047-3218-3

### **Rights Make Human. Or Do They?**

Hannah Arendt's historical account of the political unfolding of totalitarianism in the mid-twentieth century ominously announces the end of the rights of man. With this, she declares, humans are reduced to bare-naked life, mere existents. Influenced by Arendt, Giorgio Agamben develops this thesis through a number of well-received works, and by incorporating the study of the Roman laws he offered the interconnected theories of "*homo sacer*" (sacrificial life) and "state of exception." These ideas enabled certain methods of historiography, however controversial. The key thing here is the conceptual linking of human to rights. As such, the recognition of "man" is based on human entitlement to rights. This in turn connects the rights-bearing citizen to the political community and thereby to the state as the sole grantor of rights. Given that both Arendt and Agamben recognize that the sovereign stands above and beyond the law and thus can make exceptions with regard to the applicability of the law, man's status remains utterly precarious. The idea is, of course, much older, and one can trace it to Rousseau (among others) who, in *The Social Contract*, declared the lawgiver to be outside of the law. So we are all equal before the law, as long as the law applies to us, or to be precise, as long as the one(s) more equal than us decide(s) to have us protected by law. The specter of Gitmo hangs above our heads.

This tradition in western thinking involves a reduction of humanity to membership in political community, an old idea, once again, that goes back to the classical Greeks for whom *demoi* of the city-states (political beings) were distinct from the *ethnoi* of the Germanic tribes ("savages") to the North. Is this what distinguishes humans from nonhumans? Is there indeed a distinction as such? Political life remains precarious life. And yet somehow we hold on to the idea. And what does our insistence say about our humanity?

Week 8  
Wednesday January 6, 2016

Looking for the Human?



Bill Reid's famous "Raven and First Men," Museum of Anthropology, UBC. It captures the birth of humanity by Raven who tries to coax first peoples out of clamshell found on beach.

### **Readings for Week 8:**

Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" (217-265) in D. Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977). ISBN: 0-06-063763-3

Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism" (31-62) in *Essays in Existentialism* (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1965).

Georgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). ISBN: 9-780804-747387

Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" (149-182) in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). ISBN: 978-0-415-90378-5

Vandana Shiva, "Mad Cow, Sacred Cow" (57-78) in *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000). ISBN: 089608-607-0

Leonard Cohen, "All There Is to Know About Adolf Eichmann." Available at: <https://readalittlepoetry.wordpress.com/2005/12/05/all-there-is-to-know-about-adolph-eichmann-by-leonard-cohen/>

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Where Is the Human? Humanity? Humanism? Does It Matter?

The animal is outside of the political community. The human outside of politics becomes sacrificial, like an animal, with impunity. The animal is outside of the political community. Or is it?

Which comes first, human or humanism? The "-ism," is a suffix that normalizes, routinizes, and naturalizes being human, fixing the human to an idea. It also excludes and by virtue of that turns the binary human-nonhuman into a hierarchy (Derrida). We become the "paragon of animals" (Shakespeare). Civilizations rose and fell through this idea. Today's world, possibly the last in which the question may still be asked with any pertinence, is an outcome of humanism.

But why do we need this vestige of prejudice? Humans change their environment to fit it to their ideas. As such, they create a "world" (*welt*) that is deemed unique to them. In so doing, while groups of humans may act belligerently toward one another and/or direct their action to enhance their own conditions at the expense of the misery of other groups, precisely in acting like this, they find a common denominator: humanity. Humans also find a common denominator in caring for one another and showing compassion. Humanism justifies the ashes and diamonds of humanity alike.

Is the human thinkable without or beyond humanism? And anyways, which comes first, human or humanism? Does it matter?

But the human becomes the "paragon of animals" by virtue of repressing, murdering, and consuming the animal in flesh and blood. Living beings become sources and resources. They are granted existence insofar as they serve humans. Humanity rises above the animal by virtue of an "original sin." But the specter of the animal is never too far. In order to remain "human," humanity must maintain its age-long rapist and murderous relationship with the animal. In this brutal business: the human is aided by the machine that is supposed to be at humanity's disposal. The human in our age grows ever closer to the machine, not seeing that it is the machine that runs the human affairs (as Heidegger says). In any case, the animal shows the violent structure through which humanity emerges.

Week 9
Wednesday January 20, 2016

Thinking Outside the (Non)Violence Box



Image credit: Andy Menconi

Readings for Week 9:

George Sorel, "The Ethics of Violence" (175-214) in *Reflections on Violence* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004). ISBN: 978-0-486-43707-1

Walter Benjamin, "The Critique of Violence." Available at:
http://english.columbia.edu/files/english/content/Critique_of_Violence.pdf

Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004). 1-62.
ISBN: 9-780802-141323

Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance." Available at:
<http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/60spubs/65repressivetolerance.htm>

M. K. Gandhi, "Between Cowardice and Violence." Available at:
<http://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/phil8.htm>

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1969). ISBN: 978-0-15-669500-8

Recommended Readings:

"Herbert Marcuse: Prophet of Violence." Available at:
<http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/booksabout/60s/68HumanEventsDonaldFeder.pdf>

The Revolutionary Nonviolence Theory. Available at:
<http://beautifultrouble.org/theory/revolutionary-nonviolence/>

Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics" (19-49) in *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). ISBN: 978-1-84467-544-9

Violence

We seem to have a pretty clear idea about violence. We tend to know violence by its manifestations: war, military conquest, oppression, torture, rape, and corporal punishment. You name it. The list is inexhaustible. We seem to be able to recognize violence through its manifestations. But how do we identify an act (torture) with a category (violence)? In understanding violence, it seems to me, we are quick to make the connection between the deed and the notion. So quick, in fact, we never question the epistemological grounds through which we make the connection—the grounds that we hardly ever create but mostly follow. And the question remains, how is it that we recognize violence as violence?

In discussions pertaining violence there is a tendency to simply throw around the word "violence" as a catchall signifier that supposedly gathers together a vast range of signifieds and unifies multiple, diverse, contradictory, and changing (not to mention painful) experiences. And this is how the concept survives in our endless jargons. And then, to complicate matters, we oppose violence to its negation, "nonviolence." If violence perpetuates itself as the master signifier of sorts, the elusive nonviolence, as privative, has no such privilege. It is hard to perceive a signified for nonviolence. Anything you can think of might at best have nonviolence as a signified. The difficulty persists: it is easy, not to mention politically correct, to condemn violence and condone nonviolence, but are we sure where the distinction stands?

To answer this question through an answer that does not evoke a chain of signifiers will possibly be the greatest challenge of our time.

Week 10
Wednesday February 3, 2016

Heidegger Isn't a Proper Noun!



Hydroelectric Dam, Montana, USA

Readings for Week 10:

Martin Heidegger, “The Thinker as Poet” (1-14) in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). 163-186. ISBN: 0-06-090430-5

Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). ISBN: 0-226-32378-1

Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” (3-35) and “The Turning” (36- 49) in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). ISBN: 0-06-131969-4

Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” (165-182) in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). 163-186. ISBN: 0-06-090430-5



Changing the Question

With Heidegger the fundamental question that governed the entire Western philosophy since the classical Greeks changed. Heidegger exposed how in the West the search for the fundamentals that govern over action led to a specific way of understanding the world. He showed that in every epoch a “first philosophy” holds everything in place and ordains them according to the epistemological prerequisites held by the philosopher/metaphysician. Beginning with Aristotle, for whom metaphysics was held as the first philosophy up to the modern age in which Descartes’ *ego cogito* becomes the verifier of truth about phenomena—we had tried to secure beings to (seemingly) unwavering principles. Heidegger’s ontological difference (between Being and beings) showed how western thinking mistook existents, entities, or beings for Being as such for 2500 years. And yet, this is not a blame game. For two-and-a-half millennia, Heidegger says, Being self-concealed. As Heraclitus (a pre-Socratic) declared, *Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεί*, “nature loves to hide” or perhaps more accurately, the essence/nature of things (which is thought by consciousness) is the companion/friend of concealment. The history of philosophy, therefore, has been a history of oblivion.

With this radical exposure, the philosophy that dominated this age, despite its vicissitudes, withers away, and in its stead thinking arises, a mode of thinking no longer concerned with securing foundations and thus diverted toward the observation of the “phenomena” (from Greek: that which appears) in their myriad manifestations. Such is not a concern of the philosopher—the securer of foundations—but a task of poets, thinkers, woodcutters, and forest rangers, as Heidegger said.

This is no small feat. The entire history up to this point re-emerges in a new light; the future is no longer a certainty out of increased rationalization of social life. “All that is solid melts into thin air” (Marx). Instead of a history of progress (Hegel, Marx) we have an open history in which everything is possible. Instead of epistemological fasteners based on various determinations, context shines forth. Phenomena are no longer mere solid actualities but precarious embodiments of possibilities. With the debunking of the metaphysical certainties, our common age of “-posts” arises. We become posties of one shade or another, not knowing exactly where we are going.

Welcome to the age of leaps...

Week 11

Wednesday February 17, 2016

Is There a... mmm... “After Heidegger”?



Couldn't have said it better!

Readings for Week 11:

Gianni Vattimo, Chs. 1-3, 5-8, 12, 14 in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law* (Columbia University Press, 2004). ISBN: 0-231-13082-1

Gianni Vattimo, "Metaphysics and Violence" (400-421), in Santiago Zabala (ed.), *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007). ISBN: 987-0-7735-3143-7

Schürmann, Reiner, "Deconstruction Is Not Enough: On Gianni Vattimo's Call for 'Weak Thinking'." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10:1 (1984). 165-176. ISSN: 0093-4240

Reiner Schürmann, "Symbolic Difference." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19:2/20:1 (1997). 9-38. ISSN: 0093-4240

Reiner Schürmann, "Symbolic Praxis." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 19:2/20:1 (1997). 39-65. ISSN: 0093-4240

The Post-Modern Epoch: What's the Big Deal?

Perhaps the most important consequence of Heidegger's dislodging of metaphysics from its conceptual hideouts—and the most relevant to everyday, practical issues pertaining to our current global-civilizational decline—is the exposing of violence that permeates our lives, a matter-of-course violence that passes right in front of our dazed gazes, a systemic violence set out by us and through us but against us (and others) which we don't feel. Should a radical critique of metaphysical violence yield a nonviolent future? Logically, it should, but here logic doesn't hold really. Besides, what are the criteria with which we gauge radical departure from violence?

Vattimo's suggestion is an active participation in disavowing violence, but this is not simply an ethical choice. The steps toward "reduction of violence" should rather be institutional and legal. That said, the possibility of envisioning a nonviolent future is a gift of our epochal caesura, at the time of impoverishment or depletion of Being (Vattimo). Schürmann also proposes a similar idea in his epochal analysis when he sees an epoch by the institutive or archic point that sets out the principles for governing an entire subsequent era, principles that, even at their point of zenith, are nonetheless destined toward their eventuality.

The epistemological criteria with which we can understand this possible "turn" is already right here: our time is the age of diversity, cultural, social, political, sexual, spiritual. You name it. This diversity is irreducible and as such it is becoming evident that universal norms can no longer dictate the way humans live and act.

The political consequences seem inevitable: Vattimo proposes "hermeneutic communism" and Schürmann philosophical anarchism and anarchic acting and thinking. These ideas seem farfetched, given that what we see around us are images of unending sovereign impositions, states of exceptions, proxy wars, austerity measures, resource depletion, massive pollution, rampant exploitation, and sheer destruction. And yet, behind the silhouette of oppression and occupation, there shine, every now and then, important exercises in creative resistance everywhere. Will these anarchic-communist moments open up the possibility for a new turn in our common-global future?

Week 12
Wednesday March 2, 2016

We Africans, Indians, Indochinese, Hybrids, and Postcolonials



South Vietnamese National Police Chief Brig Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon, February 1968. The photograph, by Eddie Adams, won a Pulitzer Prize.

Readings for Week 12:

Aimé Césaire, "Portfolio" [introduction and selected poems]. Available at:
http://www.bookslut.com/features/2009_12_015470.php

Nâzım Hikmet, "To Asian and African Writers." Available at:
<https://cetinbayramoglupoetry.wordpress.com/2011/11/12/nazim-hikmet-6/>

Frantz Fanon, "The Negro and Language," & "The Fact of Blackness," in *Black Skins White Masks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1968). 17-40, 109-140. ISBN: 9-780802-150844

Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures* (Basingstock: Macmillan Education, 1988). 66-111. ISBN: 978-0252014017

Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990). 207-22. ISBN: 978-0853157205

Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2015). ISBN: 9781783604197

Recommended Readings:

Ranjit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). 210-309. ISBN: ISBN 13: 978-0195635362

Can We Ever Be "Post" (Past) Colonial(-ism)?

Colonializing the other is as old as civilization itself. Yet, what distinguishes European colonialism from its medieval and ancient counterparts is the double trajectory out of which this colonialism emerged: European Enlightenment and capitalist economic system. The age of European colonialism started (somewhat symbolically) with the 1492 disembarking of the Spaniard on the New World (which was not new after all!) and began to wither away with WWII and the age of national liberation movements. Enlightenment brought such ideas as freedom and rights but these ideas were brought about through a certain conception of history which presumed Europe (read: north-western Europe) to be ahead of the rest of the world on the developmental scale—in particular, in terms of the development of the human mind. The second, capitalism (beginning with bullion capitalism, then trade capitalism, and finally industrial capitalism) embodied progress and changed the human geography of Europe, and through colonialism, the world.

Now we live in the post-colonial age. Apparently. I cannot but wonder about the European "world-history" having already changed the course of world *histories*. We have been assimilated already. The question will be: is it possible to retrieve the non-colonized, pre-colonial, the indigenous, and the diversity lost to European universalism? In other words, is dis-assimilation possible? Can we ever become *post-colonial*?

These reflections give us a moment to wonder about the future of globalization. Will the universal ultimately lead to total domination and assimilation? Or does it indicate withering and impoverishment of sorts?

Aboriginal Political Thought



The iconic image from the “Oka Crisis,” Kanehsatake, Quebec, 1990, when members of the Mohawk Nation took a stand against building of a golf course on their ancestral burying site. The movement marked a turning point in Canadian history: after Oka the relationship between the First Nations and Canadian government could not return to status quo. In the picture, Mohawk warrior and economics student at University of Saskatchewan, Brad Larocque, confronts Canadian soldier Patrick Cloutier. (image: Shaney Komulainen)



The nation-wide “Idle No More” movement for Aboriginal self-determination and in response to the continued (neo)colonial stalling of Aboriginal issues by the government of Canada, in particular Bill C-45. The movement was founded in November 2012 by Nina Wilson, Sheelah Mclean, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon.

Readings for Week 13:

“Idle No More Manifesto.” Available at:

<http://www.idlenomore.ca/manifesto>

Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014). ISBN: 978-0-8166-7965-2

Recommended Readings:

“The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” Available at:

<http://undesadspd.org/indigenouspeoples/declarationontherightsofindigenouspeoples.aspx>

Audra Simpson, *Theorizing Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). ISBN: 0822356678

Settlement Colonialism and Its Complications

We began this course by reminding ourselves that we communicate our knowledge on an unceded territory. Ethically, there is something expressly wrong about this situation. And yet such is a common practice in places where the indigenous peoples have been misplaced through the processes identified as colonialism. Creating settlements has been as old as colonialism: in fact colonialism is a drive for creating new settler communities in Outlandia that not only facilitate the movement of raw materials to the *métropole*, they also create the nuclei—satellite states—of an extended *métropole*. Colonialism comes from Latin *colere*, to cultivate, and *colonus*, settler/farmer. Theoretically (and practically), the African or Asian peoples could (in fact they do) drive colonial powers from their traditional lands through a war of liberation. But the situation is more complicated when the entire indigenous population is politically and demographically overwhelmed by the ever-growing settler colonialism that completely transforms the aboriginals’ land: this is the story of the Americas.

The First Nations’ struggle in Canada is a point in case. Questionable treaties, or in many cases the lack of such treaties, repression of aboriginal movements and uprisings, racist practices such as banning traditional ways of life (e.g., potlatch) or residential schools, systemic differential and detrimental treatment of aboriginal communities—these are just a few example of systematic impediments imposed upon First Nations of Canada. With the rise of aboriginal movements, a politics of reconciliation, often only reluctantly pursued by governments, has emerged to address the grievances of First Nations. Rights and reconciliation, in this context, can break a new road to redefining Canada, but they can also mean colonialism by other means.

Theoretically, the First Nations worldviews can indeed create a workable and sustainable platform for Canada’s attaining a historic self-consciousness beyond its colonial roots. The question is, where is the national and the political will to make such a historic transformation possible? The answer must be clear.

Week 14
Wednesday March 30, 2016

Back to Where We Started!

So... the course is done and thinking has begun. We have returned to where we started. We posed questions that have not been answered and we answered the questions we did not ask. This is the nature of thinking. It is not the product of thought that matters; it's the act of thinking not as an intentional act, volitional, but as a stream in which one finds oneself suddenly. All thinking is responding to the past and "bringing into nearness of the distant" (Heidegger).

And perhaps it's all in the seeing and unseeing.

That is when we discover thinking has history but perhaps no origins, and that schools of thought are ultimately only disposable garments of the invisible wo/man.

I leave you to it.

Readings for Week 14:

Italo Calvino, "Learning to Be Dead" (121-126) in *Mr. Palomar* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dynnys, 1985). ISBN: 0-88619-096-7. Available at:

<http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/calvino/caldead.html>

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome" (3-25) in *A Thousand Plateau: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987). ISBN: 0-8166-1402-4

Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Ultimate Referentiality: Radical Phenomenology and the New Interpretive Sociology." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35: 4 (2009). 447-465. ISSN: 0191-4537