

../ Hacking Critical Theory

CCTP 716

Professor Garrison LeMasters

Spring 2011

Monday 4:15 – 6:05, CCT Conference Room

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“Dare to know! ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’ — That is the motto of enlightenment.” — Kant

“The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.” — Judith Butler

“What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse, had outlived their usefulness, and deteriorated to the point of now feeding also the most gullible sort of critiques?” — Bruno Latour



L'Etat de l'Etat

While the death of Critical Theory has been a favorite trope of antagonists since Karl Popper published *The Poverty of Historicism* in 1957, the end of the twentieth century seems as convenient a place as any to mark its demise. Sloterdijk's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Cynical Reason*), published in 1983, suggested that Theory's promise of emancipation through enlightenment was always a hollow hope, anyhow: Ours was already a state of “enlightened false consciousness.” Eve-of-Millennium events like the Alan Sokal affair and *Philosophy and Literature's* “Bad Writing” contests, revealed perhaps just how problematic this cynicism was. In that fashion, perhaps

Sokal's prank was really a *kynical* revelation of Critical Theory's chronic morbidity.

And so we are faced with a dilemma: Enlightenment is still a one-way street. If Critical Theory is dead — if the project of emancipation is stalled — then surely there is no more cynical, nihilist gesture than yet another course on Critical Theory.

Hacking Critical Theory is not content merely to revisit already routinized ideas about Theory in predictable fashion, but insists instead on participation in the act of Critique, and the generation of Theory. This course argues that hacking, as an incipiently ludic category of activity, offers simultaneously a way of reading Critical Theory and a way of reinvigorating its project.



Course Overview

To consider Critical Theory is to weigh how we may best describe a *just world*, and how we may work towards its instantiation. But insofar as our analytical and descriptive vocabularies are drawn from the common reserve, it seems likely that they can not but reinforce injustice and obscure freedom.

Which brings us to "Hacking Critical Theory." What would it mean, to hack critical theory? I want to argue that hacking is the very model that we 21st century thinkers need to adopt in order to provide the kinds of Critique that Kant first called for.

And so that's what we'll do, all semester long: *Hack*. We'll deliberately misuse people's ideas. We'll intentionally detach means from ends, purposes from effect. We will play. We'll self-consciously mashup totally unrelated theories and practices, just to see what happens. Because that is what motivates hackers: Not politics, not an ethical concern for the other. Curiosity.



Course Description

Have the promises of modernity been redeemed and are they still redeemable or should they be forgotten in a postmodern age or return to premodern faiths and traditions?

Has the Enlightenment project of rational autonomy and human dignity realized itself in contemporary societies and global capitalism or has this project produced and legitimated its opposites?

Why has modernity (especially beginning with the enlightenment and its hopeful declaration of the rights of man, democracy, and individual liberty as well as rationality, progress, and open scientific inquiry) seen the rise and recurrence of nationalism, racism, genocide, totalitarianism, religious fanaticism, terrorism, wars of mass destruction, and the potential manipulation of industrial and media-driven consumerist mass societies? Is there a "dialectic of enlightenment" in which specifically modern values, practices, and ideas produce ideologies justifying and blurring forms of power and domination? What prospects are there for socialism or other alternatives to capitalism today? We will confront these and other questions by considering the potential extent and limits of the various modes of rationalization involved in modernity such as democracy, bureaucracy, charismatic authority and the authoritarian personality; capitalism, socialism, and communism; science, industry, and technology; consumerism, media, and the social-political uses of pleasure and the instincts. We will also reflect on the idea of "critique" and the meaning and consequences of social criticism: Is there anything to hope for? Is social change possible or even worthwhile?

Should one be socially engaged or devote oneself to one's own individuation and the aesthetics, spirituality, and/or prosperity of personal existence?



Agenda

Jan 12 // Introduction: The End(s) of Critical Theory

Jan 24 // On Kant and Critique

Read Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"

Read Foucault, "What is Critique?"

Read Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue"

Jan 31 // On Marx and Dialectic

Read Marx, "Eleven Theses on Feuerbach"

Read Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (selections)

Read Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party"

Feb 7 // Dialectic of Enlightenment (Adorno, Horkheimer)

Read Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (excerpts)

Feb 14 // One-Dimensional Man (Marcuse)

Read Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

Feb 28 // Project of Modernity / Postmodern Condition (Habermas, Lyotard)

Read Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project"

Read Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (excerpts)

Mar 14 // Free Play of the Signifier (Derrida)

Read Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play"

Mar 21 // Enlightened False Consciousness (Sloterdijk)

Read Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (excerpts)

Mar 28 // After Theory (Eagleton)

Read Eagleton, *After Theory*

Apr 4 // On Becoming (Deleuze)

Read Deleuze, "How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?"

Read Zizek, "Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences"

Apr 11 // Hysteric and Master (Zizek, Badiou)

Watch Fiennes, *Pervert's Guide to the Cinema*

Read Zizek, *Looking Awry* (excerpts)

Read Badiou, "On the Idea of Communism"

Apr 18 // Hacker's Manifesto (Wark)

Read Wark, *A Hacker's Manifesto*

May 2 // Presentations



Grading

In-class participation, 15%

Mid-Semester Exam, 20%

Final Exam, 30%

Assigned Presentation, 20%

Course Blog, 15%

Required Texts

Wherever possible, I will provide you with PDFs of our readings, accessible from our weblog. You will need, however, to purchase the following texts:

Eagleton, Terry. 2003. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Wark, McKenzie. 2004. *A Hacker Manifesto*. Cambridge: Harvard.



The Course Blog

During the week of your presentation, the blog becomes your journal as you prepare your material. It is a place to test ideas, experiment with readings, and refine your approach prior to your presentation. In this fashion, the blog will always be raw, the writing a bit ragged. Do not be afraid of the first person; embrace idiosyncrasy and the anecdote. Take risks.

The following suggestions are meant to help you get started, but they should be regarded as rules of thumb, not rules of law.

* On Wednesday, you will introduce yourself: Remind us of what we are reading, and situate yourself within it. E.g., Have you read this text before? Do you have misgivings about it? Are there unanswered questions about the text that you've always wanted to clear up? Analog: Gameshow patter. Before you start winning big money, we have to care about who you are. Let us get to know you and your relationship with the text.

* On both Thursday and Friday, you will talk about issues you are seeing in the text, point to things that do not make sense, quote favorite passages, and solicit help or

advice from other readers. If you have met with your partner to discuss the work, tell us how the meeting went.

* Over the weekend, only one post is required: Bring your story to its conclusion. Tell us about what you anticipate on Monday; tell us about how you will present the material.

* Finally, on Tuesday, briefly summarize your impression of Monday's conversation. Point to unexplored questions, problematic assumptions.