Contemporary Political Theory
POS 310 (9348), Fall 2012
HU 137, Thursday 2:45 – 5:35

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Office Hours
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Milne 218, by appointment

Contemporary Political Theory
The Politics of Mass Culture

Since Alexis De Tocqueville wrote Democracy in America in 1835 political theorists have been concerned that democratic society’s commitment to equality breaks down class distinctions and other types of differences only to create a homogeneous mass whose members all have the same beliefs, attitudes, values, and aspirations. The consequences of such homogeneity are thought to be pernicious. To name a few -- the suppression of individuality and the individual’s independence of mind by a tyrannical majority; the construction of forms of Otherness – such as racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism – that become the target of discrimination by a population requiring Otherness to empower and legitimize its own identity; and the political mobilization of a mass swayed by the appeals of political demagogues. At the extreme, of course, mass culture, mass society, and mass politics have been associated with Fascism. Through an examination of certain entertainment and communications media, the purpose of this course is investigate their role in shaping the character of mass society, culture, and politics in modern democratic society to determine if the aforementioned concerns apply to it. Such an investigation may be especially pertinent during an election year when the media of mass culture are fully involved in the day to day reporting and shaping of publics’ attitudes about political candidates.

Learning Objectives

The goal of this course is to teach students how to carefully read and interpret texts, how to identify key concepts on which theoretical arguments are based, and how to use these arguments and concepts to develop critical analyses and understandings of modern democratic societies and their politics. Students will be taught to think about the complex matter of what counts as politics and how the definition of politics changes for political theory as modern democratic societies evolve. These objectives will contribute to teaching students how to formulate concepts and arguments of their own in their written work (examinations) and in oral presentation (class participation). Finally, students will be taught how to interpret the meaning of the dominant media circulating in mass culture in so far as they may contribute to the political socialization and education of citizens in a modern democratic society.
Course Requirements

There are two requirements for this course:

1). A midterm and final examination, both of which will be take-home exams. Dates for the exams are given in the weekly schedule of assignments below. Each exam counts for 40% of final grades.

2). Class participation: 20% of final grade. No student can receive the grade of 'A' in this class without a record of regular class participation.

Attendance Policy: as class meets only once a week students are permitted – but not encouraged – to miss one class during the semester only if it is unavoidable. All other missed classes must be accompanied by a written excuse. Attendance will be taken each class.

Required Texts
(available, as indicated below, either from Mary Jane Books at the corner of Western and Quail, Albany or Dropbox)

Available at Mary Jane Books.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*
Publisher: Stanford University Press (May 2002)

Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*
Publisher: Routledge; 2nd edition (May 30, 2001)

Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*
Publisher: University of Toronto Press

Readings Available from Dropbox
Patch this link –
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/fsdw678yv9f84a/mkmq3YOKad
– into your browser for access to Dropbox Shared Public Folder:
Contemporary Political Theory POS 310
Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory”
“The Social Function of Philosophy” & “Postscript”
“Art and Mass Culture”
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
Johan Hellman, “Reading Benjamin”
Davide Panagia, “Why Film Matters to Political Theory”
Morton Schoolman, "Mass Deception as Enlightenment"
Weekly Assignments

8/30/12. Thursday. Course Introduction.

“The Social Function of Philosophy” & “Postscript”
“Art and Mass Culture”

9/13/12. Thursday. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment
“The Concept of Enlightenment”
“Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality”

9/20/12. Thursday. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment
“Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment”
“Enlightenment as Mass Deception”

“The Schema of Mass Culture”
“Culture Industry Reconsidered”
“Culture and Administration”

“How to Look at Television”
“Transparencies on Film”
“Free Time”
“Resignation”

10/11/12. Thursday. Theodor Adorno, The Culture Industry
“The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening”
“Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda”


11/15/12. Thursday. Film examples of “The Reconciliation Image”
11/22/12. Thursday.  
Johan Hellman, “Reading Benjamin”


12/6/12. Thursday. Final Examination handed out for take-home. Due date the officially scheduled examination date.