

PHIL 4900: Special Problems

Spring 2026

Wednesday 6:00 – 8:50 PM

ENV 225

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EESAT 225-D

Course Description:

Transdisciplinary analysis of culture, popular culture, politics, subjectivity, and everyday life. Topics may include Marxism and critical theory, power and knowledge, deconstruction and literary theory, semiotics and psychoanalytic theory, post-colonial discourse and globalization theory.

This course is designed to do three things:

First, and most narrowly, this course will serve as an introduction to political ontology. *What is a society? What is a state? What is political power?* Our course will approach the “analysis of culture, politics, and subjectivity” through a series of engagements with these and related questions. Ultimately, we will focus on two specific politico-ontological concepts: *machines* and *the production of subjectivity*.

Second, the course will act as a survey of cultural-critical methods. Close readings of works by Derrida, Althusser, Lacan, Castoriadis, Foucault, and others will serve as a basis for studying the methods and heuristic devices that social theorists use to arrive at their conclusions. Over the course of the semester, you will read and discuss examples of deconstruction, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, Marxism, critical theory, and phenomenology. Furthermore, the course material aims to specifically familiarize you with many of the most famous and enduring texts and concepts referenced by cultural theorists, including Ideological State Apparatuses, the real/symbolic/imaginary distinction, schizomanalysis and deterritorialization, *dispositifs*, etc. My goal is for you to leave this course with an expanded “critical toolkit” which you can put to use within your philosophical projects, even if those projects are quite distant from questions of political ontology.

Finally—and most broadly—this course is designed to be a “crash course” in French critical theory. This will be a chance to encounter and sample works from some major figures in post-World-War-II French philosophy (Althusser, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, etc.) and get a sense of the “lay of the land” of what Americans now call “French Theory.” We do not have time to cover every major figure in French thought from the last seventy years, but the course will still provide a context for the conversations unfolding in postwar France, such that you should have some entry points for starting to engage with even authors we are not going to read (Bourdieu, Larouelle, etc.). I should also point out up front that, while we will skip some prominent French theorists, we will also read some non-French thinkers; the tradition of French post-Marxism especially has benefitted significantly from conversations with currents of Italian political theory, a group of Slovenians, and even a prominent Argentinian voice. Moreover, the focus on “French critical theory” will be a chance to develop a concept of critical theory that is both wider than but also essentially continuous with the more well-known German “Frankfurt School” tradition most closely associated with the term. As a basic jumping-off point, we might take “Marx + Freud” to be the core of the “critical theory” traditions; but as this course will show, the critical questions raised by this tradition are

then taken up further developed by thinkers who feel no particular loyalty to or affinity with either Marx or Freud.

Required Course Materials:

All required (and many supplementary) readings have been posted on Canvas in PDF format. You do not have to purchase any texts for this course. You will need to be able to access Canvas, and I also ask that you have the reading we are discussing with you in class each week; so please plan on either printing out the required readings or attending class with a laptop or tablet that will allow you to access the PDF.

Required Readings:

The reading(s) in each module under the “Required Reading” heading are the assigned readings for the session. You must read these in preparation for class, you must have these with you in class, and your response paper (see below) must address these. Our session will focus on a close reading and discussion of these texts.

Optional Materials:

Most modules have a set of optional materials; as the heading implies, you are not required to read these for class, you do not have to have them with you in class, and your response papers need not address or even mention them. In most cases, these optional materials are provided for extra context and explication; you will likely find them useful if you have no background in French critical theory (or if you simply find some of the authors a little impenetrable). In some cases, the extra materials will also get you up to speed on some of the conversations around the assigned reading; this can give you a quick sense of how the assigned material is being used or even criticized. In every case: These are meant to be helpful and/or interesting. I recommend taking a quick peek at each one; but if you aren’t finding a particular essay useful, then don’t feel like you need to finish it!

Course Projects and Requirements:

- 1. Regular attendance and participation in seminar discussions. 30%**
This course will run as a seminar. I therefore expect you to attend, remain engaged, and productively participate in the discussion.
- 2. A written seminar presentation framing the discussion for one of the sessions. 10%**
Your presentation should distill the main arguments of the required readings and formulate an agenda of critical questions for class discussion. It is to be submitted on Canvas by no later than 12 noon on the Tuesday prior to the class meeting.
- 3. Written reflection papers for all other sessions. 25%**
Your reflection paper should pick out two or three specific areas or aspects of the assigned readings for closer examination and discussion. These may include points of disagreement, particularly impenetrable or confusing claims or passages, or productive connections to other materials in the course.

4. **A 1-2 page prospectus for a term paper on a topic of your choice.** **5%**
Your prospectus should present your research question/issue along with a core bibliography of scholarship related to this topic. It will be due April 3.

5. **A term paper of approximately 3,000-5,000 words, following the plan of an approved prospectus.** **30%**
Your term paper will be due on May 4, the Monday of Final Exams week.

Grading Policies:

1. The grading scale I will use in this course is as follows:
A: 90-100% B: 80-89% C: 70-79% D: 60-69% F: below 60
2. In accordance with UNT policy 06.003, students are expected to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the University's status as an institution of higher education. A student is responsible for responding to an academic dishonesty report issued by an instructor or other University official. If a student fails to respond after proper attempt at notification have been made, the University may take appropriate academic actions in the absence of the student.
3. This course is part of your development as an academic scholar. For this reason, the use of Generative AI (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc. is not permitted. While these tools can be helpful in some contexts, they do not align with our goal of fostering the development of your independent thinking, research, or writing. Using GenAI to complete any part of an assignment or term paper will be considered a violation of academic integrity, as it prevents the development of your own skills, and will be addressed according to the Student Academic Integrity policy.

ADA Accommodation:

The University of North Texas makes reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. To request accommodations, you must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) by completing an application for services and providing documentation to verify your eligibility each semester. Once your eligibility is confirmed, you may request your letter of accommodation. ODA will then email your faculty a letter of reasonable accommodation, initiating a private discussion about your specific needs in the course.

You can request accommodations at any time, but it's important to provide ODA notice to your faculty as early as possible in the semester to avoid delays in implementation. Keep in mind that you must obtain a new letter of accommodation for each semester and meet with each faculty member before accommodations can be implemented in each class. You are strongly encouraged to meet with faculty regarding your accommodations during office hours or by appointment. Faculty have the authority to ask you to discuss your letter during their designated office hours to protect your privacy. For more information and to access resources that can support your needs, refer to the [Office of Disability Access](#) website.

