

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THOUGHT
PRAXIS & CRITIQUE: “PRAXIS 13/13”
2018-2019 SEMINAR

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WEDNESDAYS 6:00 PM TO 9:00 PM
14 SESSIONS SPREAD OVER THE 2018-2019 ACADEMIC YEAR

This seminar will be cross-listed in Law, Political Science, and ICLS

Seminar Description

We live in critical times. Mercifully, we’ve inherited a rich set of critical theories to help us parse through our contemporary crises and pierce the veils of illusion. Tragically, we remain impoverished when it comes to critically thinking through practice. We remain disarmed before the most critical question of all: What is to be done?

Our predicament is the product of centuries, no, millennia of privileging philosophical inquiry, contemplation, and reason over what the Greeks referred to as *πρᾶξις* — *praxis*, or practice, the ethical and political form of being. The former, *theoria*, involved predominantly understanding and comprehension—in essence, knowing—and it was oriented towards wisdom. The latter, *praxis*, revolved around activity, action, performance—in essence, doing—and it was oriented towards proper behavior in ethical and political life.

For the ancients, these were two importantly different modes of engaging the world—two among others, *poesis* being another—and these categories shaped human experience ever since. The early Christian writers would draw on them in their struggle to square contemplative faith with actions of charity. Medieval scholastics pushed further toward the idea of the “practical application” of theoretical knowledge. With Enlightenment philosophy, from Descartes through Kant to the German Idealists, the privilege of reason

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would tilt the field further toward the mind, away from *praxis*.

Many critical thinkers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries struggled to correct the imbalance—Marx, the first among them, as so strikingly encapsulated in his posthumously published *Theses on Feuerbach*. The second: “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question.” The eighth: “Social life is essentially *practical*.” And, of course, the eleventh.

And Marx was by no means alone in this project to elevate *praxis* and infuse it with *theoria*—many critical thinkers would follow in his footsteps. Hannah Arendt would privilege the *vita activa* before turning, in her later years, to the contemplative realm in *The Life of the Mind*. Michel Foucault would extricate critical theory from the dominant Platonic path—*gnōthi seanton*, “know thyself”—and take the one less travelled: techniques of the self, practices of the self, or what he called “care of self.”

The tension recurred throughout the twentieth century—fueled by the liberal myth of the invisible hand and the centuries-long struggle between the contemplative and active orders. Under different rubrics—dirty hands, applied ethics—the tension persisted. But every time we came even close to *praxis*—from antiquity to the present—we, critical theorists, we found a way to divert the conversation.

Socrates got close in a few dialogues, in the first *Alcibiades* or the *Statesman*: confronting young men who wanted to live the life of *praxis*, rather than contemplation, Socrates made them realize that they didn’t really know much about justice or about governing, and that they needed first to gain knowledge. So he convinced them to know themselves first—to gain knowledge. He convinced them that doing politics is a skill, requires *technē*. Like being the captain of a ship, or shepherd of a flock, there is skill and knowledge to be had. So it all requires wisdom first. Knowledge. Contemplation. And that then pushes everything back to philosophy. It pushes us back to the *Republic* and definitions of justice, and the just person. And one never really got back to the original question: how to act politically.

Foucault got even closer in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* and his final volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. We’ve spent too much time on Socrates’ know-thyself, Foucault argued there, there is a whole other tradition of *practice* that we’ve ignored. Foucault returned to Plato’s first *Alcibiades* as a vehicle to discuss those practices. He interpreted the Socratic move as a move toward practices of the self, toward care of the self, rather than simply knowledge of self—but then pivoted to the permanent practices of the self in the Stoics and Epicureans: and from there on in, it was practically exclusively about practices of the self. The dimension of subjectivity dominated the analysis.

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Truth-telling, parrhesia, and the courage of truth are of course essential elements to engaging politics. Speaking out and denouncing injustice is central. Emile Zola's *J'accuse* is perhaps the most classic example, for which he was convicted of libel and had to flee France. Foucault's taking of positions in editorials and signed statements, on so many occasions, are another example. But notice the model: the influential intellectual, even as a specific intellectual, taking an individualist stance against the state in a truth-telling way—at personal risk, to be sure, but often alone standing against authority. That may be important, that may be necessary—but surely, it cannot capture *praxis*. And yet it seems to, practically always.

Somehow, *praxis* invariably took a second seat to theory. “Practice,” “practical knowledge,” “practical activities” became the handmaid of theoretical knowledge—whether in philosophy, physics, law, engineering, or government. To the point where, today, in our domain, we laud critical theory, but cannot even identify properly critical *praxis*.

No more. It is time to take stock and begin to chart new directions for critical practice. In times like these, there is a burning need for a new vision and renewed critical practices for the twenty-first century. What does or should political action look like from a critical perspective today, especially when the underlying theoretical structure of the dialectical imagination has become so fractured? This, I would argue, should be the main task of critique for the next decade.

This year's seminar will take this problem as its task: to buck centuries of contemplative complacency and return *praxis* to its proper place in the order of things. In doing so, the seminar will strive to address the most critical question today: What is to be done? What exactly is critical practice today? This year's seminar will explore thirteen contemporary interventions that directly address, as their central challenge, how to envisage critical practice today. The 13 texts will be selected from among the following, but may also include others:

Domenico Losurdo	<i>War and Revolution</i>
The Invisible Committee	<i>Now</i>
Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor	<i>From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation</i>
Josh Clover	<i>Riot, Strike, Riot</i>
Moten and Harney	<i>The Undercommons</i>
Mauvaise Troupe Collective	<i>The ZAD and NoTAV</i>
Hardt and Negri	<i>Assembly</i>
Judith Bulter	<i>Notes Toward Performative Theory of Assembly</i>
Silvia Federici	<i>Caliban and the Witch</i>

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Banu Bargu	<i>Starve and Immolate</i>
Agamben, et al.	<i>Democracy in What State? (selections)</i>
Bernie Sanders	<i>Political Revolution</i>
Sara Ahmed	<i>Living a Feminist Life</i>
Douzinas et al.	<i>The Idea of Communism (selections)</i>
Houria Bouteldja	<i>The Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love</i>
Hakim Bey	<i>TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism</i>
Jodi Dean	<i>The Communist Horizon</i>

This graduate student seminar will be structured to frame a series of 13 formal seminars (the “formal seminars” or “Praxis 13/13”) at which two or three guests, from different disciplines, will be invited to discuss the readings and present on the themes of the seminar. Each formal seminar will host specialists from across the disciplines, from Columbia University and from outside campus. It will also frame and interrelate with a Paris Reading Group that will run alongside the seminar. (See Paris Reading Group below). The graduate student seminar thus will serve as the vehicle to enrich the formal 13/13 seminars and support the intellectual apparatus that will accompany those formal seminars. It will also prepare entries for the blog of the formal seminars, host the scholars invited to participate in the formal seminars, and prepare questions and comments for the formal seminars. This seminar will function as an advanced graduate research seminar.

We will be holding the formal 13/13 seminars on Wednesday evenings this coming year, from 6:15pm to 8:45pm, all at Columbia University (except those marked). Students will be expected, though, to be seated and in discussion with the other participants from 6pm to 9pm. Tentatively, the seminars will be scheduled for:

September 5 (introductory seminar just for enrolled graduate students)
September 12
October 3
October 24
November 14
*December 5
*December 19 (in Paris or Tunis)
*January 16 (in Paris)
January 23
February 13
March 6
March 27
April 17

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May 8

Each seminar will follow a similar format as in previous years ([Foucault 13/13](#), [Nietzsche 13/13](#), and [Uprising 13/13](#)), beginning with a short introduction of the readings and guests, followed by two short guest presentations (15-20 minutes max each) and a commentary (10-15 minutes max), and then open discussion with the participants for over an hour. The formal part of the sessions will begin promptly at 6:15pm and will end promptly at 8:45pm. The format, then, will be as follows:

6:15pm	Introductions
6:25pm	Presentation by guest
6:45pm	Presentation by guest
7:00pm	Commentary and questions
7:15pm	Open discussion and comments
8:30pm	Closing remarks of the guests
8:45pm	End of the seminar

Description of the Paris Reading Group

In addition, there will be a graduate student reading group in Paris that will be spearheaded by Florent Jakob, Daniele Lorenzini, Christine Valero, and Loren Wolfe at the Columbia Global Center—Paris that will meet regularly to participate virtually in the formal Praxis 13/13 seminar and to run a parallel reading group to discuss the readings. These sessions will invite leading experts from various disciplines to discuss the readings at the Paris reading group.

Assignments

For each seminar, there will be assigned readings (one book and optional additional materials). The readings may be updated and revised, in which case any changes will be posted on our Courseworks page. You should consult the Courseworks page regularly to get updates and information about the seminar.

Each student, in coordination with the others, will be responsible during one of the formal seminars for the Live Streaming and Twitter (LST) room. The LST room is a dynamic, interactive virtual space that will be run simultaneously alongside the formal seminars. The idea of the LST Room is to virtually extend participation beyond the seminar room and create a virtual space for our public to not only watch our guests speak, but also to formulate questions that will directly inform the seminar discussion. Questions arising in the LST room will be transmitted to our guest speakers during the formal seminar itself via email

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and Twitter. So being in charge of the LST room means communicating with others, who are not physically present in the formal seminar but watching the livestream, to pose their questions or comments.

Required Readings

The texts for the course will be assigned readings, mostly available on Courseworks and/or at Book Culture. In order to access the readings and syllabus on-line, please go to the Courseworks page and login using your UNI and password here: <https://courseworks.columbia.edu/welcome/> All digital materials will be posted to the Courseworks page.

Requirements

Graduate students are expected to read the assigned materials prior to the formal seminar and should be prepared to offer public comments to facilitate seminar discussion. There should be no absences. If a student has an excused absence, please e-mail Ghislaine Pages (gmp2142@columbia.edu) by 10:00 a.m. of the day of the seminar.

Students will conduct their own research and prepare, for each semester, (a) one ex ante 5-page book review or pre-seminar blog-post providing guidance on the book we will be reading that week, and (b) one ex post 5-page blog-post discussing and elaborating on the intellectual discussion at one of the 13/13 seminars. In addition, this work will form part of a final paper for the seminar of about 20 pages.

Professor Harcourt will hold office hours on Wednesdays from 3:00 – 5:00 p.m. in his office, Jerome Greene Hall 603. Please contact his assistant, Ghislaine Pages (gmp2142@columbia.edu) to schedule an appointment. Office hours are by appointment only.

Laptop Policy

You are discouraged from bringing a laptop to the formal seminar. Should you choose to bring one anyway, you *may only use* your laptop for two purposes: (1) as a *word processor* to take and read notes; or (2) as a *reader* to consult assigned course materials that are on-line or saved on your hard drive. You *may not* use your laptop in the seminar, ever, to write emails, shop on-line, or for any other purpose that is not seminar related. If you are the kind of person who cannot resist temptation, please leave your laptop at home. It is *very distracting* to one's peers when someone else is shopping on-line. Please respect your peers and this policy.

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There is one exception: if you are responsible for the Live Streaming and Twitter (LST) room. *See assignments above.* When you are responsible for the LST room, you will be on-line throughout the designated seminar.

Background Readings for the First Organizational Seminar on Sept. 5, 2018

Please read the following articles available on Courseworks:

- Seyla Benhabib, “Critique and Emancipation,” Comments for Berlin Conference, May 25, 2018
- Bernard E. Harcourt, “[Counter-Critical Theory and Practice: An Intervention in Contemporary Critical Thought and Practice](#),” *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 5-22 (2018)
- Bernard E. Harcourt, “Critical Futures: New Directions in Critical Practice for the 21st Century,” forthcoming in *A Time for Critique*, eds. Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt (Columbia University Press, forthcoming)