

**SYLLABUS**  
**CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS: DOING SOCIAL THEORY**  
**PHIL 0190**  
**ROCK 205, 2.30-350PM, T/TH**

Instructor: Tim Syme  
Email: Timothy\_Syme@Brown.edu  
Office: Rock Café  
Office Hours: Thursday 11:00 – 1:00, and by appointment.

**COURSE MATERIALS:** To be distributed by instructor via email. Please bring to class: printed or on an e-reader.

**COURSE INFORMATION**

**Purpose:** In this course, students will learn to find the central arguments in philosophical accounts of social life and social enquiry, to critically engage with those arguments, and to refine and develop their own views more clearly and systematically. These skills will be developed by way of an overview of a range of historical and more contemporary texts in social theory and will be oriented towards investigating commonalities between often apparently heterogeneous approaches.

**Description:** This course concerns the fundamentals of social theory, the branch of philosophy concerned with the theory and practice of social enquiry. In the first half of the class, key concepts and approaches are introduced by way of classic works by Plato, Hobbes, Karl Marx and John Rawls. The second half of the class applies these approaches to a range of classics of modern and contemporary social theory. Key questions we will ask throughout the course include:

**What is the social world made of?**

- Is it a holistic entity or the aggregation of discrete parts?
- In what sense is society 'natural' or otherwise?

**How do societies work?**

- Can society be measured and predicted? Interpreted and changed?
- To what extent and in what ways does society constrain or facilitate

**What should we do?**

- Do social theories necessarily have an ethical or moral dimension?
- How should social enquiry be pursued?

**Assessment:** Students will be graded on the following rubric:

- Participation (incl. attendance) 20%
- Reading responses 20%
- Reading response portfolio 10%
- Midterm paper (due after **first week of Unit II**) 20%
- Final paper (due midnight, **12/13**) 30%

**Participation:** This includes attendance\* (and tardiness), general alertness, and discussions. A note: some students are very outgoing, while others are simply quieter. But philosophy

essentially involves discussion and interaction with the ideas of others, so vocalizing some ideas is required. However, quality is preferred to quantity. Don't be shy, but do think before you speak.

\*Attendance policy: Attendance is not compulsory. But regular non-attendance, especially without explanation, is disrespectful to both instructor and fellow students and will make success in other elements of the course significantly more difficult.

**Reading responses:** Students will be assigned short reading responses each day. These will be due in class, at the beginning of class. They will not be accepted if you are more than 10 minutes late. They will be graded on a check, check-plus, check-minus system. Student should prepare reading responses completely on their own, without assistance from the internet or other students.

**Reading response portfolio:** Students will collect and hand in all of their reading responses from the semester. They will be responsible for writing any they have missed, and revising any that received a check-minus grade. Due with the final paper.

**Papers:** Students will write a 1,500-word (~5pp.) midterm paper and a 3,000-word (~10pp.) final paper. Each student must send me an outline one week before the paper is due. I strongly recommend (but do not require) discussing paper ideas with peers and engaging in peer review.

**Expectations:** Most of this is obvious but two basic things you absolutely must do: respect each other and respect the instructor. This includes (but is obviously not limited to) the following: avoid both physical and verbal violence, do not plagiarize, attend classes, and arrive on time. In general, take the class and each other seriously, and take yourselves seriously.

**Food:** Eating is fine as long as it's not a nuisance.

**Plagiarism:** It should be clear what counts as plagiarism, but basically don't take chunks of things that aren't yours without citing the original source (yes, even if you paraphrase!).

**Computers, e-readers:** Please leave laptops at home and take notes the old-school way. Any student with special need for a computer should contact me. E-readers that lie flat on the table are perfectly fine.

**Cell phones:** Just don't

**Email:** The instructor will not respond to any email which does not include a greeting, a closing, and information in the subject line. In addition, the instructor will not respond to any email which includes internet slang, text speak, etc.

### **Note on Readings:**

The reading load for this course is not especially severe in terms of quantity but will likely be fairly demanding in terms of substance, especially in the first and last units. In part this is because some of the readings *apply* frameworks rather than defending them, making your interpretive task that much harder. A central challenge of the course is to work out if and how the diverse views under discussion fit together, in part because of the often wildly varying conceptual frameworks used by different thinkers. Our concern here is less with the minutiae of each theorist's particular claims but with the general contours of their theory of society and social enquiry. The relatively low page count allows you to read harder pieces more than once. This is highly recommended, especially for archaic or jargon-heavy readings and will make it easier to get past the often obscure surface of the text to the important substantive claims.

## SCHEDULE:

### UNIT 1: CLASSIC FOUNDATIONS

Week 1:

Plato, selections from *The Republic*; Books 1-4 and 5, 8-9 (up to 580c)

- Holism and structure
- Teleology and hierarchy
- Nature and possibility

Week 2:

Hobbes, selections from *Leviathan*.

- Individualism and materialism
- Disagreement and trust

Week 3:

Marx, *The German Ideology* and selections from *Capital*

- History
- Ideology and power

Week 4:

Rawls, *Two Concepts of Rules*, *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical*

- Distribution and the Basic Structure
- Justification and Fairness

### UNIT 2: THE SCIENCE OF SOCIETY

Week 5:

Society and Nature

Steven Pinker, *Why Nature and Nurture Won't Go Away?*

Michael Ruse, 'Does life have a purpose?', *Aeon Magazine* (Published on 24 June 2013:

<http://aeon.co/magazine/world-views/does-life-have-a-purpose/>)

- Naturalism
- Reduction and Explanation

Week 6:  
Structure and Science

Emile Durkheim, 'Social Facts'  
Alexander Rosenberg, 'Macrosocial Science' from *Philosophy of Social Science*

- Structure and Function
- Unintended Consequences
- Measurement

Institutions and Interpretations

Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'  
Max Weber, 'Bureaucracy'

- Agency and Interpretation
- Values and Social Enquiry

### UNIT 3: RATIONALITY, PREDICTION AND GOVERNMENT

Week 7: Individualism

Mancur Olson 1965, Chapter 1 of *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*.  
Robert Paul Wolff, 1990, 'Methodological Individualism and Marx: Some Remarks on Jon Elster, Game Theory, and Other Things.' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 469-486

- Collective action problems
- Rational Choice

### ***MIDTERM PAPER DUE!!***

Week 8: Public Policy

Amartya Sen, 1999 'The Ends and Means of Development from, *Development as Freedom*  
Jolls, Christine; Sunstein, Cass R.; and Thaler, Richard, 1998 'A Behavioral Approach to Law and Economics', .Faculty Scholarship Series. Paper 1765.

### UNIT 4: CRITIQUE AND PRACTICE

Week 9: Critical Theory

Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory'  
Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History' from *Fortunes of Feminism*

- History and knowledge.
- The role of the theorist

#### Week 10: Experience and the Other

Husserl 'The Basic Approach of Phenomenology' from *The Essential Husserl*, p60-85.  
 Frantz Fanon, 'The Fact of Blackness' from *Black Skin, White Masks*

- Phenomenological explanations and constraints
- Social theory and non-western experience

#### Week 11: Radical Practices

Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*  
 Judith Butler, 'Subversive Bodily Acts' in *Gender Trouble*

- Theory and Practice
- Discourse and Performance

#### UNIT 5: IS SOCIAL THEORY EVEN POSSIBLE?

Week 12: Putting it all together, tearing it all apart.

Anthony Giddens, 'Introduction' to *The Constitution of Society*  
 Patrick Baert, 'The Skilful Accomplishment of Social Order' in *Social Theory in the 20th Century*  
 Bruno Latour, 'Introduction' to *Reassembling the Social*  
 -----'How to Do Words With Things'

- Structuration
- New Materialism

**FINAL PAPER DUE BY MIDNIGHT MAY 15th!!**