

Seeing Society • Contemporary Theories of Power

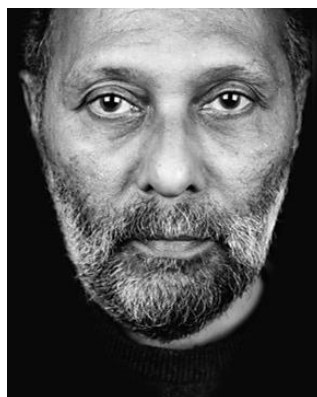
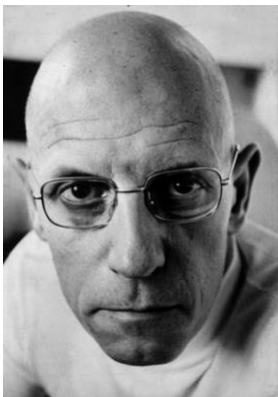
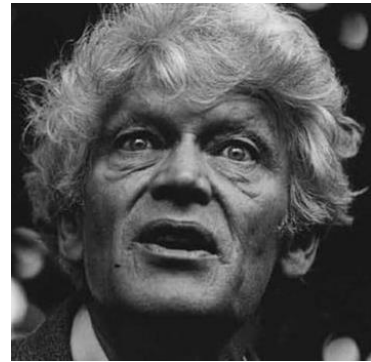
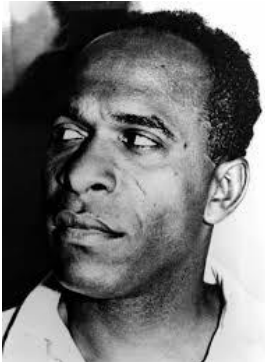
SOC 490 • Fall 2020 • Tu/Th 12:30-1:45

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Office hours Th 2-4 via Zoom (<https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/xpakt>)

“If what we can perceive with our senses delimits what is politically possible, then how do we make legible forms of power that are invisible?”

—Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (2018)



Welcome back to the world of social theory. In this class, we will remain intently focused on one of the central questions that emerged from the writings of classical sociological theorists: *How is power exercised in the modern world?* In order to answer this question, of course, we will need to think through what exactly power is; what it means to exercise it; who would do such a thing; over whom; by what means; and to what ends. And of course, some of the theorists we will read reject some of these formulations I have just laid out. Foucault, for example, insists that power is not something wielded “over” other people. But what else is there? You get the point.

This class assumes a working familiarity with the writings of thinkers like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, but I do not expect you to be experts. These writers taught us much, but of course, their work was only a point of departure. As white, cis-heterosexual, male Europeans, they were never particularly concerned with the ethics of colonialism, for example, which is precisely where we will start. We will then return briefly to Marx and think through a number of possible trajectories that have developed out of his writings. We will see how subsequent writers have built upon and reformulated some of his key insights. Instead of deciding to accept or reject certain theorists, we’ll ask what they have to give to us, and what we should leave in the dustbin of history. Or to repurpose one of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce’s old titles, we’ll be asking what is living and what is dead in classical social theory.

The question of power is an enormous one, and we can only begin to address it over the course of the semester. Where to even start? I have organized this syllabus around three central themes. These are not really themes so much as modes through which power is exercised, or at the very least, ways it manifests in the contemporary world. Here are three, but there are countless others. We will begin with a discussion of *violence*. While some theorists, most notably Pierre Bourdieu, have theorized forms of violence that transcend the physical realm, we will be thinking about violence as the deliberate exercise of physical force. If you were to smack your neighbor square in the mouth, you would be exercising power. But who else does so? Are there entities larger than individuals that deploy violence? What happens when we think of capital or the state as the agents of coercion?

Second, we will shift to a discussion of *stigmatization*: power enacted through the symbolic marking of a person or group of people as inferior in relation to those doing the enacting. This is a convenient lens for thinking of a number of phenomena. In some sense, all social interaction contains moments of stigmatization. But there are also more specific types of stigma we can observe. Think about the way certain groups of people are stigmatized for their poverty, class position, or immigration status. And stigmatization is obviously a central part of racializing, gendering, and sexing populations. But who enacts these processes? Do they actually do so deliberately? And for what reason(s)? These are some of the questions we’ll explore in this part of the class.

Third and finally, we will look at *surveillance*. You are probably thinking of surveillance cameras in stores, or even closed-circuit cameras mounted in everything from lampposts to ATMs. But what else surveils? And are we all surveilled equally? How is surveillance refracted through categories like class, race, ethnicity, immigration status, sex, gender, and bodily ability? Why do bosses surveil their employees in workplaces around the world, even following them into their homes after they leave for the day? Why do lawmakers seem to care so much about the

ways people enact or perform gendered and sexed identities? We know that police disproportionately surveil people of color, and above all, black people, but why? In the service of what kind of project? Given all of these various instances of surveillance, how should we think about the concept more generally? And what does it tell us about power?

As you can probably tell already, these are enormous questions, and as such, most of the readings we will be doing this semester are quite dense. Above all, I expect you to spend an adequate amount of time with the texts. I tend to print them out and mark them up, scrawling notes in the margins and underlining key statements. You may choose to color-code, or else you might want to do all of this on a tablet. I really don't care how you do it; I care *that* you do it. We will be learning how to read carefully, and as such, this is a major part of your grade:

1. **Attendance, reading assignments, and discussion questions (30 %):** This is not the class to skim on readings. It is a small seminar, and I will be treating it as such. I will rarely lecture after the first couple of days; instead, I expect engaged participation throughout each meeting. Yes, we all have our off-days. But I do expect you to be present most of the time. This means both active listening and above all, *engagement*. This class is a rare opportunity in a large university: an opportunity to actually engage in dialogue. And that is exactly what we will be doing. (Please do so respectfully, though I do expect substantial differences of opinion, politics, and otherwise. Sharp disagreements are fine; disrespectful behavior is not.) In preparation for every class meeting, you are *required* to submit two things: first, one or two discussion questions; and second, what you find to be the most meaningful sentence from the day's readings. While I will only be grading these on a *pass/not pass* basis, the simple fact of submission does not automatically earn you a pass. I expect you to engage deeply with these texts. Yes, they're quite difficult; but that's why I'm asking you to pose questions about them! And no, "What does ____ mean?" does not qualify as an acceptable question. Like I said, engage *deeply*. If you are having trouble figuring out what this means, I am happy to chat during office hours.

In addition, attendance is mandatory for this class: this course *requires* attendance. You can miss three classes without letting me know. But after that, you need a documented excuse. If you plan on missing more than three, this probably is not the class for you. Once you have missed six classes, you will lose your entire attendance score, or 10 percent of your final grade, and I will very likely drop you another 10 percent for lack of participation. But please do not miss class. Not only do you need to show up to comprehend the material, but it is difficult to hold discussions when people do not show up, and that is unfair to your classmates.

Let me break down this 30 percent for you in schematic form: 10 percent is for attendance, 10 percent is for participation in class, and 10 percent is for posting discussion questions online prior to class.

2. **Class leadership (25 %):** During the first class session, each student will select a class in which they will lead. Class leadership means:

- a. Preparing a **presentation** with which to begin the session. This is *not* an opportunity to prove to me that you did the reading and summarize the day's selection for the class. We have presumably all done the reading. Instead, I want you to do something quite difficult: extract an argument from the text. What is the author trying to argue? How do they do so? What concepts do they develop in the service of this argument? And finally, do you find it convincing? What are its merits and what are its limits? Presentations should last roughly ten minutes and be accompanied by either hand-outs or slides.
 - b. Preparing a **list of questions** to be used in class. This need not be exhaustive. Two or three thoughtful questions will do if you formulate them well. Your final question must relate to at least one previous reading.
 - c. Leading the discussion as a **moderator**. While your questions will do most of the work for you, it's up to you to facilitate the flow of discussion. Of course, it is up to your classmates to actually discuss, but it's your duty to moderate the process. If one or two people are monopolizing the conversation, try to draw others into the discussion. I will of course help where it is needed.
3. **Final paper (45 %):** This is, after all, a writing intensive class, and so it's only fitting that writing comprises the most important part of your grade. But what exactly does this entail?
- a. First, I want to see you lay out a viable **idea for the paper (5 %)**. This is due before class begins on September 15. This should be no longer than a half page single-spaced and submitted via Canvas. If you're indecisive and have two or three ideas, try writing them all up, and even feel free to submit all three. And above all, use my office hours. If you are having trouble coming up with ideas, visit me in office hours. But remember, the theme of this course is power, and power is everywhere. You can quite literally write about anything you want as long as you engage the course material.
 - b. Second, after you've thought about your topic in relation to a few more readings, I want you to write it up as an **abstract (10 %)**. This means laying out the argument you (at least *think*) you'll be making and referring to at least three theorists we have covered by that point. This is due in class on September 24. We will be workshoping these in groups of four, and so I want you to have something on which to get feedback from your classmates. This also means bringing four hard copies to class: one for me and two for your peer reviewers. By midnight on Sunday, September 27, you need to revise your abstract in line with the criticism you received in class. That night, I need two things submitted in a single file via Canvas: (1) your original abstract, and (2) your revised abstract.
 - c. Third, I want you to think long and hard about two things. How does the feedback you received from your peers necessitate a rethinking of your argument, or even your very topic? And second, how do the additional authors we have read up to

that point force you to revise your project? Based on these two questions, I want you to write up a two-page (double-spaced) **outline (10 %)** of your entire paper, including an introductory statement of your argument, the argument itself (working through your chosen topic while engaging theorists covered in class), and concluding remarks. This is due in class on October 29. As before, we will be doing peer review and workshopping your arguments. And once again you have an opportunity to revise them before meeting with me during office hours and finally...

- d. Fourth, writing the **final paper (25 %)** itself. This should be between 10 and 15 pages, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins and in 12-point font. (No wacky fonts. If you are in doubt, use Times New Roman. I hate reading wacky fonts. Don't do it.) While sometimes the contents of final papers can be a mystery until you actually sit down to write them, that won't be the case this time around. You've just spent the better part of the semester formulating (and twice reformulating!) your argument. Now you just need to write it up. Easy! Or is it? At a minimum, you are required to use at least three theorists covered in this class. These will be due via Canvas on November 24.

Course Schedule

August 18:

- Introductory remarks

Part I: Violence

August 20:

- Frantz Fanon. 2005 [1961]. "On Violence." Pp. 1-26 in *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.

August 25:

- Frantz Fanon. 2005 [1961]. "On Violence." Pp. 26-52 in *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 26-52.

August 27:

- In-class short film: "*Borom Sarret* [The Wagoner]" (d. Ousmane Sembène, 1963).
- Andrea Dahlberg. 2003. "On the Fortieth Anniversary of "*Borom Sarret*," *Film-Philosophy* 7(13). Available online (<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol7-2003/n13dahlberg>).

September 1:

- Karl Marx. 1976 [1867]. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. New York: Penguin, 896-926.

September 3:

- Glen Sean Coulthard. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1-24.

September 8:

- Nikhil Pal Singh. 2017. "On Race, Violence, and 'So-Called Primitive Accumulation'." Pp. 39-58 in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, edited by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin. New York: Verso.

September 10:

- Silvia Federici. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 163-205.

September 15:

- Stuart Schrader. 2019. "Rethinking Race and Policing in Imperial Perspective." Pp. 27-51 in *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- *Ideas for papers due!*

September 17:

- Nicholas De Genova. 2010. "The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement." Pp. 33-65 in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, edited by Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

September 22:

- Wendy Brown. 2010. *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone, 107-33.

September 24:

- First writing workshop: *Abstracts due in class!*

Part II: Stigmatization

September 29:

- Erving Goffman. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simone & Schuster, 41-73.

October 1:

- Erving Goffman. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simone & Schuster, 73-104.

October 6:

- Gareth Stedman Jones. 1971. *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*. Oxford: Clarendon, 281-314.

October 8:

- Herbert J. Gans. 1994. "Positive Functions of the Undeserving Poor: Uses of the Underclass in America." *Politics and Society* 22(3):269-83.
- Loïc Wacquant. 2007. "Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality" *Thesis Eleven* 91(1):66-77.

October 13:

- Frantz Fanon. 2008 [1951]. "The Lived Experience of the Black Man." Pp. 89-119 in *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove.

October 15:

- Michele Wallace. 2015 [1978]. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Verso, 89-127.

October 20:

- Michele Wallace. 2015 [1978]. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Verso, 128-77.

October 22:

- Gail Pheterson. 1993. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Text* 37: 39-64.

October 27:

- Judith Butler. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* London: Routledge, xi-xxiv.

October 29:

- Second writing workshop: *Outlines due in class!*

Part III: Surveillance

November 3:

- Michel Foucault. 1995 [1975]. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage, 170-94.

November 5:

- Michel Foucault. 1995 [1975]. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage, 195-228.

November 10:

- Simone Browne. 2015. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1-23.
- Simone Browne. 2012. "Race and Surveillance." Pp. 72-9 in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, edited by Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggarty, and David Lyon. London: Routledge.

November 12:

- Stuart Hall et al. 2013 [1978]. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, 7-31.

November 17:

- E. P. Thompson. 1967. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past & Present* 38:56-97.

November 19:

- Toby Beauchamp. 2019. Pp. 1-23 in *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- J. Bryan Lowder. 2016. "North Carolina's Anti-LGBT Law Encourages Dangerous Gender Surveillance." *Slate*. Available online (http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/03/25/north_carolina_s_hb2_encourages_gender_policing_on_trans_folks_and_everyone.html).

November 24:

- Final paper due (via Canvas)