

PHL 657: Topics in Social and Political Thought. **Walter Benjamin: Philosophy as Critique**
M 3:00-6:15
Arts and Letters 211

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Description The main objective of this seminar is to offer a first overview and general introduction to Walter Benjamin's work, with an emphasis on the value and depth of his philosophical contribution to 20th century thought. Given Benjamin's multifaceted and non-systematic writings, I propose that we achieve this objective by exploring together during this quarter the different meanings, uses and connotations of Benjamin's notion of critique [*Kritik*]. We'll approach this question by studying what this term means in Benjamin's metacritical and theoretical works, as well as in his writings on art and literary criticism, and in some of his major philosophico-historical essays. My contention is that this will give us (i) an opportunity to discover a common thread among his literary, philosophical and political writings, as well as between the different periods of his intellectual production, (ii) and a chance to discover the depth and specificity of his *philosophical* contribution, both in terms of a broadening (and a redefinition) of the field of philosophy, and in relation to the essential connection between philosophy and the *task* of (historical) critique.

Schedule (subject to change)

FIRST PART: Early years: a study in the concept of *Kritik*

- 1.2 Introduction: the three “sides” of *Kritik*. “The Life of Students” [1914-5] (SW 1, 37-47), “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” [1918] (SW 1, 100-110) and “The Theory of Criticism” [1919-1920] (SW1, 217-219)
- 1.9 *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* [1919] (SW1, 116-185)
- 1.16 Martin Luther King's Day (university closed)

SECOND PART: A *critique* of violence: history, philosophy and language

- 1.23 “Critique of Violence” [1921] (SW1, 236-252)
- 1.30 Violence and language: Werner Hamacher, “Affirmative, Strike”, and “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” [1916] (SW1 62-74)
- 2.6 Violence, justice and law: Jacques Derrida, *Force of Law* (second part): “Prénom de Benjamin”, Christoph Menke, *Recht und Gewalt* (Law and Violence).

THIRD PART: Critique and critical theory: the task of *historical critique*

Special guest for two sessions: Prof. Rocío Zambrana, University of Oregon

- 2.13 Dialectics as Resistance: Hegel, Benjamin and Adorno. “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 27-56) and Convolute N, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress” (Arcades Project, 456-488).
- 2.20 Neoliberal coloniality and critical “decolonial” theory. “Capitalism as Religion” [1921] (SW 1, 288-291)

2.27 “Experience and Poverty” [1933] (SW 2,2 731-735) and “The Storyteller” [1936] (SW 3, 143-166)

3.6. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (Third Version) [1936 or 1939] (SW 4, 251-270).

3.20 Final paper

Participation (and presentations) The success of a seminar depends a great deal on the quality of everyone’s participation. Everyone should come prepared to participate actively in the discussions during the class and to contribute substantially to our reading of the assigned texts. It is of particular importance for me that besides learning how to engage actively with the texts, you also learn to dialogue with each other and pose critical questions to one another. Another way to contribute to the seminar is through a short presentation, to be read during the class (no more than 5 pages long). These presentations are voluntary and should only try to give an account of the main arguments of the text assigned for the session. Ideally, you should present on the subject you are particularly interested in and planning on working on for your final paper. Presentations are a very good opportunity to test out your ideas and interpretations. I particularly encourage second and third year students to commit to one during the quarter. Participants (non enrolled students) are also welcome to propose ideas for presentations.

Final paper Final papers should be the continuation and re-elaboration of the ideas you have been developing during the quarter. Besides giving an account of the main arguments of the text(s) chosen, you should also give a proper philosophical context for these arguments and offer an introduction to the main concepts needed to understand the author’s proposal. Ideally, you could also take a position, be it critical or exegetical, and risk some thesis and questions you want to propose in relation to the author’s proposal and/or its contemporary appropriations. Final papers are due on Monday, March 20, at five pm. Please send them via email in word doc format. No late papers will be accepted.

Secondary bibliography: Part of your responsibility as a participant of the seminar is to research and find the appropriate secondary bibliography to help you prepare for every session and ultimately write your final paper. I am also always happy to redirect you to secondary readings once you have a specific topic in mind. For the final papers, I would like to encourage you to have at least three sources of secondary bibliography.