COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

SEMINAR ON CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THOUGHT
2020-2021 SEMINAR
L 8866 / CPLS GR8866

ABOLITION 13/13

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THURSDAYS 6:00 PM TO 9:00 PM
14 SESSIONS SPREAD OVER THE 2020-2021 ACADEMIC YEAR

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

Seminar Description

This seminar will focus, each year, on a different set of topics at the heart of contemporary critical thought in law, politics, and social inquiry. During the 2015-2016 academic year, the seminar focused on Michel Foucault’s Collège de France lectures and produced the Foucault 13/13 series. During the 2016-2017 academic year, the seminar focused on critical readings of Friedrich Nietzsche and produced the Nietzsche 13/13 series. During the 2017-2018 academic year, the seminar focused on modalities of uprisings and produced the Uprising 13/13 series. During the 2018-2019 academic year, the seminar focused on the relationship between critical theory and praxis, and produced the Praxis 13/13 series. During the 2019-2020 academic year, the seminar returned to the fundamental texts of critical theory, and produced the Critique 13/13 series.

The upcoming seminar for 2020-2021 will focus on abolition today and will work through the different dimensions of contemporary arguments for abolition (regarding the prison, the police, and the death penalty, but also the abolition of property, of capital, of coverture and marital dominion, of oil, of borders, and it will consider the history of the abolition of slavery). To explore these arguments for different forms of abolition, we will read and discuss the following texts, among others:
The graduate student seminar will be structured to frame a series of 13 formal seminars at which one or more guests, from different disciplines, will be invited to discuss the readings and present on the themes of the seminar. Each formal seminar will host a contemporary critical theorist from across the disciplines. It will also frame and interrelate with a Paris critical theory seminar at the EHESS that will run alongside the seminar. 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. This seminar will function as an advanced graduate research seminar.

We will be holding the formal 13/13 seminars on Thursday evenings this coming year, generally from 6:15pm to 8:45pm EST, mostly at Columbia University. Students who are not able to be physically present at the seminar will have the option of joining via Zoom. 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 17 (introductory seminar just for enrolled graduate students) and 24
- October 15 and 29
- November 12
- December 3 and 17
- January 7 and 14
- February 4 and 25
- March 11
- April 1 and 22

The seminars will begin with a short introduction of the readings, followed by guest
presentations (15-20 minutes) and a commentary, and then open discussion with the students and participants for over an hour. The formal part of the sessions will begin promptly at 6:15pm and will end promptly at 8:45pm.

**Description of the Paris Seminar**

In addition, there will be a graduate student seminar in Paris at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) that will be take place in December-January and May-June. Information about that seminar can be found here: [https://enseignements.ehess.fr/2020-2021/ue/609](https://enseignements.ehess.fr/2020-2021/ue/609). These may be in French. We will find ways to coordinate sessions and make these accessible as well.

**Assignments**

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

This year may be different because of the pandemic, but there will also likely be a virtual dimension to the seminar, what we have called the Live Streaming and Twitter (LST) room. The LST room is a dynamic, interactive virtual space that will be run simultaneously alongside the 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 and Twitter. We will be in charge of the LST room, which means communicating with others, who are not physically present in the formal seminar but watching the livestream, to pose their questions or comments.

**Books and Texts**

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


Sample of Articles and Resources On-Line


Requirements

Graduate students are expected to read the assigned materials prior to the formal
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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 Fonda Shen (ccct@law.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 15 pages.

Professor Harcourt will hold office hours on Mondays from 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. via Zoom. Please contact his assistant, Bree Adesanya (aa4551@columbia.edu) to schedule an appointment. Office hours are by appointment only.

Laptop Policy

Please note that you may only use your laptop for three purposes: (1) as a word processor to take and read notes; (2) as a reader to consult assigned course materials that are on-line or saved on your hard drive; or (3) to participate on Zoom. You may not use your laptop during 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.
1/13 ABOLITION TODAY
Thursday, September 24, 2020 6:15 – 8:45 pm

Opening music with Ivan Calaff and the Musical Connections Band from Carnegie Hall, poetry by Ian Manuel, and artwork by persons who have been incarcerated and affected by racialized mass incarceration,

with an introduction to “Abolitionism Today” by Jindu Obiofuma, Cheryl Wilkins, the Abolition Collective, the Barnard Prison Abolition Collective, and the team at The Digital Abolitionist,

and a “Critical Conversation about Abolitionism” with Alexis Hoag and Bruce Western.

Please read:

Please visit the website of The Digital Abolitionist here: [https://www.thedigitalabolitionist.com](https://www.thedigitalabolitionist.com)

Please familiarize yourself with The Digital Abolitionist’s Library here: [https://www.thedigitalabolitionist.com/resources](https://www.thedigitalabolitionist.com/resources)

2/13 ABOLITION DEMOCRACY
Thursday, October 15, 2020 6:15-8:45 pm

With Robert Gooding-Williams, Ivan Calaff, Karuna Mantena, Brandon Terry*, and Kendall Thomas

This seminar will explore the theoretical lens of “Abolition Democracy” originally coined by W.E.B. Du Bois and later interpreted by Angela Davis, as a way to think critically about the different struggles for abolition, both historically and in their current context.

Please read:


3/13 ABOLISH THE POLICE
Thursday, October 29, 2020 6:15 – 8:45 pm

This seminar will explore the current movement to abolish the police and the relationship between abolition and #defunding the police.

With Amna Akbar, Mariame Kaba*, Josmar Trujillo, and Alex Vitale

Please read:

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Additional bibliographical resources:


Materials at http://criticalresistance.org/abolish-policing/.

4/13 THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY
Thursday, November 12, 2020 6:15 – 8:45 pm

With Dennis Childs, Maeve Glass, and Jennifer Morgan*

This seminar will focus on the long history of the abolition of slavery. The passage from a de jure to de facto system of racial oppression in this country raises many important questions. Some involve the continuities and the differences: What can we learn from thinking of these different periods as similar or different? Some involve the lessons to be learned for abolitionist movements in other domains: In what ways do the struggles enrich each other? Some involve the hidden and not-so-hidden pitfalls of abolitionism: What are the shoals to be avoided in future abolitionist campaigns? These will be some of the themes we explore in this seminar on the abolition of slavery.

Please read:

Childs, Dennis. Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary. University of Minnesota Press, 2018 (chapters 2 and 3)


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Additional Bibliographical Resources:


5/13 PROPERTY IS THEFT!
Thursday, December 3, 2020 12:15 – 2:45 pm EST / 6:15 – 8:45 pm Paris time

With Amy Allen and Étienne Balibar

The abolition of private property is a refrain that traces to antiquity, but its modern form emerged at the time of other abolitionist movements. This seminar will explore the most influential writings and thought on the abolition of property, Marx and Engels’ The Communist Manifesto and Proudhon’s writings on property.

Please read:

6/13 ABOLISH CAPITAL
Thursday, December 17, 2020 12:15 – 2:45 pm EST / 6:15 – 8:45 pm Frankfurt time

A Joint Session with Professor Martin Saar* and the Institute for Social Research at Goethe-Universität Frankfurt.

This session will explore the regime of capital that displaced feudal property relations, and imagine its overcoming. In the process, we will discuss the abolition of feudal property relations and paradigm shifts in political economy.

Please read:

Harcourt, Bernard E. *For Coöperation and the Abolition of Capital; or, How to Get Beyond Our Extractive Punitive Society and Achieve a Just Society* (draft).

7/13 BEYOND THE PUNITIVE SOCIETY
Thursday, January 7, 2020 12:15 – 2:45 pm EST / 5:15 – 7:45 pm UK time

A Joint Session with the Centre for Research in Post-Kantian European Philosophy at the University of Warwick, including Miguel Beistegui, Claire Blencowe, Irene Dal Poz, Stuart Elden, Daniele Lorenzini, Goldie Osuri, and Federico Testa.

In 1973, Michel Foucault delivered a series of lectures at the Collège de France on *The Punitive Society* that tied together the exploitation of the working class to the invention of the prison. Foucault brought together the different strands of oppression—
economic, social, carceral—under the larger rubric of a “punitive society.” In this seminar, we will explore what it would mean to abolish our punitive society.

Please read:


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**8/13 DEATH PENALTY ABOLITION**  
**Thursday, January 14, 2021 6:15 – 8:45 pm**

**With Bryan Stevenson*, Ray Hinton*, and Alexis Hoag**

In this seminar, we will explore the long struggle to abolish the death penalty.

Please read:


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**9/13 PRISON ABOLITION**  
**Thursday, February 4, 2021 6:15 – 8:45 pm**

**With Angela Davis*, Ian Manuel, Allegra McLeod.**

This session will discuss the decades-long effort to abolish prisons spearheaded by Angela Davis and Critical Resistance. It will also broach the topic of the deinstitutionalization of asylums and mental hospitals in the 1960s, which prefigured the abolition of total institutions, but also points to certain risks and pitfalls of abolitionism.

Please read:


Additional Bibliographical Resources:


10/13 ABOLISHING COVERTURE
Thursday, February 25, 2021 6:15 – 8:45 pm

With Dorothy Roberts.

This seminar will explore the campaign to end and the abolition of coverture and other forms of men’s domination over women in the marriage context. Under the law of coverture, a married woman essentially became the property of her husband and lost her civil rights to contract or own property, as she was effectively merged into her husband. These de jure relations were ultimately displaced, but had long-lasting shadows over marital relations including, for instance, the exception to rape laws for marital rape. This seminar will explore the long legacy of coverture.

Please read:


Other bibliographic resources:


11/13 ABOLISH OIL
Thursday, March 11, 2021 6:15 – 8:45 pm

With Alyssa Battistoni*, Daniela Gandorfer, and Reinhold Martin.

“Oil abolition implies social transformation—a systemic change toward collective freedom,” Reinhold Martin writes. In this seminar, we will explore the relation between fossil fuels and social inequality, and focus on efforts, like the Green New Deal, to abolish oil dependency.

Please read:


12/13 OPEN BORDERS
Thursday, April 1, 2021 6:15 – 8:45 pm

With Tendayi Achiume, Seyla Benhabib, and Joseph Carens.

“The feudal system was once deeply entrenched. So was the institution of slavery. For a long time, there was no real hope of changing those social systems. Yet criticism was still appropriate,” Joseph Carens argues. It is time, now, to ask fundamental questions about the justice of borders. This seminar will explore those questions in all their complexity, including the fraught relation between borders and colonialism. We will also discuss the movement to Abolish I.C.E.
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Please read:


Additional bibliographical resources:


13/13 AN ABOLITIONIST FUTURE
Thursday, April 22, 2021 6:15-8:45

With Katherine Franke and Nkechi Taifa*

We end our Abolition 13/13 series looking forward to the possibility of an abolitionist future, with a special focus on reparations. What will it take to get there? What will it look like? How soon will we be there?

Please read:
