

Critical Theory

The Designated Emphasis (DE) in Critical Theory enables graduate students already enrolled in UC Berkeley PhD programs from across the social sciences, arts, and humanities to obtain certification of a Designated Emphasis specialization in Critical Theory. (The DE is not an independent degree-granting program.) Students admitted to the DE who complete its requirements will receive a parenthetical notation to that effect on their doctoral degrees. The program offers graduate fellowships, hosts international scholars, and presents lectures, seminars, and other events for the wider campus community and local public. Critical Theory also maintains important collaborative relations with other critical theory institutes and programs nationally and internationally.

What is Critical Theory?

Critical Theory, at its heart, is an interdisciplinary project that aims to go beyond simply understanding social structures and towards transforming them.

As an intellectual project, Critical Theory draws its roots back to the Frankfurt School, a group of German intellectuals in the 1930s and 40s who, in the midst of global crisis, turned the insights of social theory, literature, philosophy, media studies, and history towards the goal of political and social emancipation. The idea of “critique” they developed came out of formulations in 18th and 19th-century philosophy, most significantly the work of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Freud among a few key others.

Since the post-war period, Critical Theory has taken on new forms, and the problem of “critique” has been hotly debated. As a result, Critical Theory is no longer confined to the Frankfurt School (Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Ardent, and Jürgen Habermas), although these thinkers remain central to its meaning. The program at Berkeley engages an expansive understanding of Critical Theory, especially beyond Europe.

There are many contemporary examples of Critical Theory, including postcolonial theory, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and forms of queer, feminist, and trans studies. Rather than produce a single, orthodox vision of Critical Theory, the program at Berkeley builds out from these crucial inherited traditions to engage global formations and emerging crises.

A program that consists of faculty from over 34 departments across Arts & Humanities, the Social Science, and the schools of Law and Education, Critical Theory at Berkeley has been at forefront of producing scholarship takes on the daunting task of answering the unprecedented complexities and challenges of economics, politics, culture and the arts—and, indeed, of everyday life.

Only students enrolled in PhD programs at Berkeley are eligible to apply for the DE in Critical Theory. Students must apply in the first or second year of graduate study in order to fulfill the requirements of the DE in addition to those of their home departments.

Petitions for admission to the DE are accepted each spring for admission to the program. The DE in Critical Theory admits approximately 15 students each year. Petitions and due dates are available on the program’s website (<http://criticaltheory.berkeley.edu/academics/>).

For further information regarding admission to graduate programs at UC Berkeley, please see the Graduate Division’s Admissions website (<http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/>).

Curriculum/Coursework

CRIT TH 200	Critique in 19th-Century Thought	4
CRIT TH 205	The Classical Frankfurt School: The First Generation of Critical Theory	4
CRIT TH 240	Contemporary Critique and Critical Theory	4
Two Electives, selected from a list of courses offered by DE faculty, including CRIT TH 290		

Qualifying Exam

One of the members of the student’s qualifying examination committee must represent the DE in Critical Theory and be a member of the DE’s designated faculty. These faculty members may be outside or inside members of the student’s committees.

Dissertation

One of the members of the student’s qualifying dissertation committee must represent the DE in Critical Theory and be a member of the DE’s designated faculty. These faculty members may be outside or inside members of the student’s committees.

Degree Conferral

Upon successful completion of the dissertation, the student’s transcript will include the designation: “PhD in [major] with a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory.” This designation certifies that a candidate has participated in, and successfully completed, a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory in addition to all departmental requirements for the doctorate.

A full annual calendar of lectures, colloquia, and conferences contributes to Critical Theory’s rich research environment. The ongoing participation of international visiting scholars and researchers as well as student-led working and writing groups facilitate dialogue and build community across academic disciplines.

With adequate funding, the Program in Critical Theory awards yearly dissertation fellowships to Critical Theory DE students with records of achievement and promising dissertation projects. The annual fellowships are open to Critical Theory students in UC Berkeley departments including African American Studies, Ancient Greek & Roman Studies, Anthropology, Berkeley Law, Comparative Literature, East Asian Languages and Cultures, Energy & Resources Group, English, Ethnic Studies, Film & Media, French, Gender & Women’s Studies, German, Geography, History, History of Art, Italian, Medical Anthropology, Music, Philosophy, Political Science, Rhetoric, School of Education, School of Public Health, Sociology, South & Southeast Asian Studies, Slavic Languages and Literature, Spanish & Portuguese, and Theater, Dance and Performance Studies.

The fellowships support students writing their dissertations, providing full fee remission (where required) and a full stipend, usually for a semester. Other research grants of shorter term (including summer) may also be awarded, as resources permit.

Critical Theory

CRIT TH 200 Critique in 19th-Century Thought 4 Units

Terms offered: Spring 2018, Spring 2017, Fall 2015

This course will examine various formulations of critique in 19th-century theory. Thinkers who may be studied include Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Weber, though the selection will vary by instructor. This is the "foundations" course for the Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory.

Rules & Requirements

Prerequisites: Admission to the critical theory designated emphasis or consent of instructor

Repeat rules: Course may be repeated for credit without restriction.

Hours & Format

Fall and/or spring: 15 weeks - 2-3 hours of seminar per week

Additional Details

Subject/Course Level: Critical Theory Graduate Group/Graduate

Grading: Letter grade.

Instructor: Brown

CRIT TH 205 The Classical Frankfurt School: The First Generation of Critical Theory 4 Units

Terms offered: Fall 2016, Fall 2015, Spring 2015

This course will explore the founding texts of the Frankfurt School's first generation: Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, Lowenthal, and their circle. It will follow the development of critical theory through its Weimar years, American exile, and return to postwar Germany.

Rules & Requirements

Prerequisites: Admission to the critical theory designated emphasis or consent of instructor

Hours & Format

Fall and/or spring: 15 weeks - 3 hours of lecture per week

Additional Details

Subject/Course Level: Critical Theory Graduate Group/Graduate

Grading: Letter grade.

Instructor: Jay

CRIT TH 240 Contemporary Critique and Critical Theory 4 Units

Terms offered: Spring 2017, Fall 2016, Spring 2016

This course will explore various contemporary engagements with the foundations of critical theory in relation to other histories and locations. Topics will vary by instructor but may include: post-continental political theory, critique and the problem of political dissent and citizenship, gender and race in relation to critical practices, psychoanalysis, and literary and art theory and criticism.

Rules & Requirements

Prerequisites: Admission to the critical theory designated emphasis or consent of instructor

Repeat rules: Course may be repeated for credit with instructor consent.

Hours & Format

Fall and/or spring: 15 weeks - 3 hours of lecture per week

Additional Details

Subject/Course Level: Critical Theory Graduate Group/Graduate

Grading: Letter grade.

CRIT TH 290 Critical Theory Elective 2 - 4 Units

Terms offered: Fall 2025, Fall 2024, Fall 2023

Critical Theory electives are taught by core and affiliated faculty in the Critical Theory program and offer important treatments of theoretical materials significant to the intellectual traditions of the program's course of study in nineteenth-century social theory and philosophy, Frankfurt School and related currents in theory and criticism, and contemporary critical theory. In a typical Critical Theory elective, theoretical materials are presented in dialogue with an anthropological, artistic/aesthetic, economic, educational, historical, philosophical, political, rhetorical, sociological, or other disciplinary matrix that constitutes the course's primary materials for study and inquiry.

Rules & Requirements

Prerequisites: Admission to the Critical Theory Designated Emphasis or consent of the instructor

Repeat rules: Course may be repeated for credit with instructor consent.

Hours & Format

Fall and/or spring: 15 weeks - 2-3 hours of seminar per week

Additional Details

Subject/Course Level: Critical Theory Graduate Group/Graduate

Grading: Letter grade.

CRIT TH 298 Critical Theory Special Study 4 Units

Terms offered: Spring 2017, Spring 2016

Advanced study in interpretive approaches within the field of critical theory, focusing on the question of how critical theory enters into the framing of a long-term research project. We will consider the status and limits of theory, the relation between literary and social theory, reading practices, and archival research.

Rules & Requirements

Prerequisites: Admission to the Critical Theory Designated Emphasis or consent of the instructor. This course is intended for graduate students who are working on their prospectus or dissertation

Repeat rules: Course may be repeated for credit with instructor consent.

Hours & Format

Fall and/or spring: 15 weeks - 2 hours of seminar per week

Additional Details

Subject/Course Level: Critical Theory Graduate Group/Graduate

Grading: Letter grade.

Instructor: Butler