Sociology 190 (Fall 2015). Absolutely Surplus: Social Exclusion in Contemporary Sociology.

Mondays, 2-4 pm, 321 Haviland.

Instructor: Zachary Levenson, Department of Sociology.

Office hours: Mondays 10-12, location TBD.

Contemporary sociology abounds with studies of social exclusion. From 1970s debates over marginality and informality to the revival of these concepts in the early 2000s; from the underclass debates of the 1980s and 90s to the rehabilitation of Marxian concepts like surplus population in current work; and above all, the recent return of debates over the rise of the precariat, the last forty years of Anglo-American sociology have largely been characterized by attempts to understand processes of social exclusion on domestic and global scales. Beyond the division of the social body into classes, groups, castes, and the like, social exclusion captures the phenomenon of being society’s remainder. In late twentieth century and contemporary sociological research, a repertoire of concepts has definitively emerged to capture this phenomenon. Yet rarely are these emergent conceptualizations treated in relation to the longstanding traditions of thinking through social exclusion that characterized classical social theory.

In this course, we will begin with a rigorous examination of the genesis of theories of exclusion, from Malthus and Hegel through Marx, ultimately working through the concept of “surplus populations” developed in Capital. We will then turn to biopolitical theories of exclusion, from Arendt and Foucault through Agamben and Mbembe, investigating how government itself is predicated upon a division into worthy subjects of civil society and those excluded from its realm. After thinking through the relationship between political-economic and biopolitical theories of social exclusion, we will examine contemporary sociological studies of exclusion. Our goal will be to assess the adequacy of sociological formulations in relation to these social theoretical traditions. How should we understand one in relation to the other? What do ethnographies and other empirical studies of social exclusion bring to bear upon theory, and vice versa?

Required texts: All course materials will be available as free, downloadable PDFs on bCourses (bcourses.berkeley.edu). However, we will be reading substantial portions of quite a few books on the syllabus, and so you may choose to purchase them if you’d prefer.

Grading: Participation (40 percent) + research paper (60 percent). In addition to discussing the readings on this syllabus, each student will be expected to produce a 12-15 page research paper on social exclusion, arguing for the use of the concept of their choice in a specific case study. We will be working on these over the course of the semester; this is not a project that can be pulled off during R&R week. Everyone is required to submit a research proposal by the fourth week of classes (5 percent), an abstract by the sixth week (5 percent), a literature review by the ninth week (10 percent), and a detailed outline by the end of the twelfth week (10 percent). Papers will be due on December 11 (25 percent).
In addition, the final meeting will be entirely devoted to students presenting their research to the class in a mini-conference, organized into a series of thematic panels (5 percent).

Your participation grade will be determined by general participation in the seminar (30 percent) + reading presentations over the course of the semester (10 percent: 5 percent X 2). Each student will be required to present twice: once as a proponent of a reading, and once as a critic. As a proponent, you should work to extract a central thesis from the text. What is the author arguing? All too often, writers will bury their arguments, either leaving them implicit, or else not presenting them systematically. It is your task to excavate the key thesis of the text, presenting it succinctly and forcefully. After doing so, lay out the evidence the author provides to substantiate her argument. Provide as much textual evidence as you can to support your reading, but please don’t simply read out a series of block quotes. This should be your reading of the text. Your presentation as a proponent should be 5-8 minutes.

As a critic, you should preemptively figure out what the author’s central thesis is and systematically work to refute it. This could include pointing to a disjunction between the argument and the evidence the author uses to support it; insufficient evidence; logical flaws; limitations of the argument in the context of existing scholarship; misuse of concepts; or something else entirely. Please be as thorough as possible. Critical presentations should be roughly 5 minutes.

**Week 1 (August 31): Surplus to What?**


**Week 2 (September 14): Scarcity and the Rabble**


**Week 3 (September 21): Capital’s Detritus**


**Week 4 (September 28): Choosing Who Will Live and Who Will Die**

*RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE!*


**Week 5 (October 5): The Politicization of Life**


**Week 6 (October 12): Underclass**

*ABSTRACT DUE!*


**Week 7 (October 19): Marginality Then…**


**Week 8 (October 26): …and Marginality Again**


**Week 9 (November 2): What Is Informality?**

**LITERATURE REVIEW DUE!**


Further Reading:


**Week 10 (November 9): The Politics of Informality**


**Week 11 (November 16): Precarity**


Further Reading:


**Week 12 (November 23): Surplus Humanity**

*DETAILED OUTLINE DUE!*


Further reading:


**Week 13 (November 30): Illegality, Stigma, Abjection**


Further reading:


**Week 14 (December 7): Social Death**


Further Reading:


**Mini-conference (December 11)**

*PAPER DUE!*