

WHAT IS THE WORLD'S QUESTION? LONG HISTORIES, CONCURRENT POLITICS

TERRY SMITH

CULTURAL STUDIES COMMON SEMINAR, University of Pittsburgh, Spring 2020

Wednesdays, 6-8:30pm, Room 302 CL

REVISIONS DUE TO COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS: SEE BELOW

If there is one question that haunts every other question being asked today, it might be this: *How do we move from the current state of affairs in which the contemporaneity of divisive difference prevails to a world in which we work together to construct the kinds of coeval communality that are necessary—and, hopefully, will become sufficient—for our survival?*

Let us—hypothetically, of course (although, in fact, *this is serious*)—call this “the World’s question.” And regard it as the question that everything that makes the world possible as a world, everything that is actual within it, is asking of itself, of every other thing, and about their relationships to each other, right now. There are, of course, many other questions that seem as large, or as opening onto questions this big. Among them: Is there a viable alternative to capitalism as an economic driver, within nations, between them, and outside them? Will the United States and China hold back from plunging global geopolitics into a new Cold War? Does the persistence of authoritarian rule and the rise of reactionary populism within many nation states signal the permanent decline of democracy as a model of social organization? Which of the following most presciently imagines our future: *Crash*, *Children of Men*, *Babel*, *Tree of Life*, *Melancholia*, *Cloud Atlas*, *Avatar*, *In Time*, *Tomorrowland*, *A Touch of Sin*, *Ten Years*, *Blade Runner 2049* or *Black Panther*? (Insert your favorite TV series.) How do we create or recreate a free public sphere in our town, our city, our country, between nations, and on the Internet? Can global warming be mitigated sufficiently to save our species? Answers to questions like these, I suggest, depend on answering a question of this kind: How do “we” become

“our,” how does “mine” and “yours” become “ours,” for each of us and on a planetary scale?

Of course, every element in such a question—each word, concept, relation and every connotation—calls itself and every other term into question and requires explanation and qualification. Soon, however, it will become necessary to *reassert* a question of this kind as pointing to what needs to be said, and what needs to be done, right now.

The seminar will explore modes of world questioning that are operative today within and between several disciplines with a view to assessing their contribution to the formulation of a differentiated, and open mode of world questioning that might be widely shared.

The syllabus below enables us to read examples of many of the most influential modes. **I am open to substituting others at your suggestion.** Please send me pdfs so that I may read them. We also have flexibility with the format of the last three sessions of the course.

Assignments are outlined at the end of the document. The invited visitors are also noted.

SYLLABUS

* = core reading, the focus of seminar discussions. The other texts are supplementary, for reading if you have time, or are pursuing this topic in depth. Scans of each text may be found on Courseweb in the folder for each session, or a link is provided for you to access them.

Preliminary and background reading or viewing:

*Terry Smith, “Defining Contemporaneity; Imagining Planetarity,” *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 49-50 (2015): 156-174.

Terry Smith, “The Contemporary Condition: Composition, Planomena, Worlding,” August 23, 2016, EGS videos at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=durNqyZPx-g>; “Deconstructive States and the Post-contemporary Distraction,” October 12, 2017, EGS videos at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irb2aDwG01A>; “Difference and Concurrence,” August 14, 2018, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a9AXAif7m0>; “Exhibitionary Times: Art Against Spectacle,” August 16, 2019, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8mvqnMat3M>.]

1. January 8 Introductory and Indigenous Perspectives

Yolgnu peoples, *The Yirrkala Church Panels*, 1962-3, natural ochres on bark.

*Dura Nurruwuthun, “Declaration,” in *Saltwater, Paintings of Sea Country, The Recognition of Indigenous Sea Rights* (Yirrkala: Baku-Larrngay Art Centre, [1999], 2nd ed. 2014), 9-12.

2. January 15 European Universalism, Modern World Picturing

Immanuel Kant, ““Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?” [1784], in Allen W. Wood ed., *Basic Writings of Kant* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 133-141.

Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in Paul Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50, at <https://leap.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2017/01/Foucault-What-is-enlightenment.pdf>

*Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History With Cosmopolitan Intent* (1784), in Allen W. Wood ed., *Basic Writings of Kant* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 117-132.

Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1794), in Allen W. Wood ed., *Basic Writings of Kant* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 433-475 .

*Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," [1938] in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Garland, 1977), particularly pages 128-136 and relevant appendixes.

*Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," [1951], in David Farrell Krell ed., *Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 323-339.

3. January 22 Colonization, Decolonization

*Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] (London: Verso, rev. ed. 2016).

Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, "Americanness as a Concept, or The Americas in the modern world-system," *International Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 134, no. 4 (1992): 149-557.

*Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), Preface and Introduction.

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concept, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

4. January 29 Globalized Overviews

*Hans Rosling, "The Best Stats You Have Ever Seen?", TED talk, February 2006, at https://www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_the_best_stats_you_ve_ever_seen?language=en#t-1174687.

*Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), chapter 1 "While I Was Sleeping," 3-47.

Matt Ridley, "We've just had the best decade in human history. Seriously," *The Spectator*, December 21, 2019, at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2019/12/weve-just-had-the-best-decade-in-human-history-seriously/>

*Mark Zuckerberg, "Building Global Community," Facebook, posted February 16, 2017, at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>.

Nick Feik, "Killing Our Media: The impact of Facebook and the tech giants," *The Monthly* (July 2017): 25-33.

5. February 5 Deep Histories

*Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35 (Winter 2009): 192-222.

*Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Climate and Capital; On Conjoined Histories," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 41 (Autumn 2014): 1-23.

*Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 46 (Autumn 2019): 1-31.

David Christian, *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018), chapter 12, "Where Is It All Going?", 287-305.

February 12 No seminar due to national conference: Reading week, first assignment writing time

6. February 19 Ecology, Dark Matter

Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

*Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), "The End of the World," 99-133.

*Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 7-16, 158-160, 169-70.

Richard Flanagan, "Australia is Committing Climate Suicide," *New York Times*, January 4, 2020, A23.

7. February 26 Cyborgs to Chthulucene

James Lovelock, *Gaia; A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

*James Lovelock, *Novacene: The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

*Donna J. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Later Twentieth Century" [1985], in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016).

*Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, Introduction, chapters 2 and 4.

8. March 4 Contemporary Composition

*Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," *The Republic*, Bk. VII, 509d-511e; Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy eds. and transl. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

*Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), chs. 1 and 6.

*Terry Smith, "Defining Contemporaneity; Imagining Planetary," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 49-50 (2015): 156-174.

Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

Geoff Cox & Jacob Lund, *The Contemporary Condition; Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

*Terry Smith, "Placemaking, displacement, worlds-within-worlds" and "Arts of the Multiverse," chapters 7 and 8 of *Art to come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 198-242, 388-393.

SPRING BREAK

9. March 18 SEMINAR CANCELLED

CHANGES FROM NOW ON. All seminar session will be held at the usual time via Zoom meetings. Meeting ID is 384-175-478.

Readings for weeks 9 and 10 are combined. We will focus on discussing those that are asterisked.* Readings originally assigned for week 11 should be understood as background material. Weeks 11, 12, and 13 will be devoted to presentations of your work-in-progress towards the second assignment.

10. March 25 World Representing and Name the System! (readings combined)

United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, New York, 2015 at

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

*United Nations, *Framework Convention on Climate Change*, Paris, 2015, at http://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/conveng.pdf.

*Bruno Latour, "On a Possible Triangulation of Some Present Political Positions," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 44 (Winter 2018): 213-226.]

*Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015), chapter 1, 17-78.

*Jason W. Moore, "Name the System! Anthropocenes and the Capitalocene Alternative," posted October 9, 2016 at <https://jasonwmoore.wordpress.com/2016/10/09/name-the-system-anthropocenes-the-capitalocene-alternative/>

*Mackenzie Wark, *Capital is dead: Is this worse?* (London: Verso, 2019), chapter 2.

***Read the following texts in your own time as back-up readings.**

Activism in Post-Truth Times

President Donald J. Trump, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

Philip Rucker and Robert Costa, "Bannon vows a daily fight for 'deconstruction of the administrative state'," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2017.

*Mishiko Katutani, "The 2010s were the End of Normal: A Decade of Distrust," *The New York Times*, December 27, 2019, Opinion, at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/27/opinion/sunday/20...-america-trump.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

Timothy Garton Ash, "Central Europe: Time for a New Liberation?" *New York Review of Books*, vol. LXVI, no. 16 October 24, 2019, 54-7.

Steven Henry Madoff ed., *What About Activism?* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019).

*Terry Smith, "Truth in Transition: As the Decade Breaks," in Bill Balaskas and Carolina Rito eds., *Fabricating Publics: The dissemination of culture in the post-truth era* (DATA browsers series, Open Humanities Press in partnership with Exhibition Research Lab, Liverpool John Moores University, projected 2020).

*Naomi Klein, *No Is Not Enough: Defeating the New Shock Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), Introduction, 1-12; Conclusion "The Caring Majority Within Reach," 257-266; and "Postscript: The Leap Manifesto," 267-271.

11. April 1 Presentations of work in progress on assignment 2 (5 x 30 minutes each)

12. April 8 Presentations of work in progress on assignment 2 (5 x 30 minutes each)

13. April 15 Presentations of work in progress on assignment 2 (5 x 30 minutes each)

Presentations will be made through Zoom meetings. Please indicate if you will be using Powerpoint or wish to post texts via Zoom's Share Screen function. If you wish to share your essay in progress with the seminar beforehand (for more focused discussion) you are welcome to do so, via me as an email circulation. Those who have not yet discussed with me their plans for second assignment and who wish to do so, please email and we will set up a time for a Zoom meeting.

ASSIGNMENTS

- 1. What kind of world question is being asked by the objects of your research, and how is world questioning taking place in your research process?**

2. The question of world questioning: what is your understanding of it how it is being asked, and how it should be asked, in the wider world today?

Assignment 1 should be approximately 2,000 words and is due on **February 23**.

Assignment 2 should be approximately 3,000 words and is due on **April 22**.

VISITORS (Unable to come, Chakrabarty due to previous engagements, Wark due to COVID-19, Silverman due to retirement.)

The Cultural Studies Program provides for visitors to the Common Seminar each year. Invitations have been extended to

Dipesh Chakrabarty, Lawrence A. Kimpton Distinguished Service Professor in History, South Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the College, at the University of Chicago. A founding member of the editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies*, a consulting editor of *Critical Inquiry*, a founding editor of *Postcolonial Studies*, he has served on the editorial boards of the *American Historical Review* and *Public Culture*. He is the author, among other books, of *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000; second edition, 2008).

Mackenzie Wark, Professor of Culture and Media, The New School for Social Research, New York. His publications include *Capital is Dead*, Verso Books, 2019, *General Intellects: 21 Thinkers for the 21st Century*, Verso Books, 2017, *Molecular Red: Theory of the Anthropocene*, Verso, 2015, *The Spectacle of Disintegration*, Verso Books, 2013, *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture & Class*, Polity Press, 2012, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Like and Glorious Times of the Situationist*

[International](#), Verso Books, 201, [Gamer Theory](#), Harvard University Press, 2007, and [A Hacker Manifesto](#), Harvard University Press, 2004.

Kaja Silverman, the Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of nine books: *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part 1* (2015); *Flesh of My Flesh* (2009); *James Coleman* (2002); *World Spectators* (2000); *Speaking About Godard* (with Harun Farocki, 1998); *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996); *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992); *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988); and *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983).

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