

Theory in Geography

GEO 6118, Fall 2022

Class Location: Charles Perry (PC) 445 **Time:** 11:00 - 1:45 PM, Monday

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Office Hours: Monday, 10-11 (or before class/during break or by appointment on Zoom)

This Course Defines Academic Geography

Nearly every geography graduate program in the United States and Canada teaches some version of this course. This is because it fulfills a unique role in the discipline: it is the only touchstone all geography PhDs share with one another, other than a focus on spatial processes.

Perhaps more than any other major discipline in the academy, geography is a big tent. At its core, it is in fact two disciplines: Human Geography and Physical Geography. If you attend the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers, many of the papers (those on the human side) are squarely in the camp of social science. They use social science methods, draw on social science styles of argumentation, and utilize theories that increasingly cross the boundaries of social science disciplines. At the same time, many of the papers follow a completely different path: they resemble field, lab, and theoretical work in the natural sciences, using their methods and styles of argumentation. A few scholars mix the two approaches in equal measure, but generally, geographers are on one side or the other.

But even just within the human side, the fragmentation continues as well. Geography, for reasons which will become clear during the course, has always had a relatively “weak” canon, compared to anthropology, sociology, economics and psychology. Generally, but especially today, debates within the sub disciplines of geography – urban, political ecology, migration, economic, GIS, etc... -- produce “major” scholars and debates, that largely go unnoticed outside that sub discipline. Conversations in geography tend to be specific instead of general; with small rather than broad audiences.

Thus, the first (and perhaps only), time geography PhDs take a moment to survey the entire discipline and think about where it has been and where it is going is when they take this course. From the geographers who dig holes in the ground to those who aim to partially present that which is just beyond human sensation, they all have been here. This course provides the lasting impression of what the rest of geography is like.

This Particular Version of Theory in Geography

How this particular course is being taught reflects its positioning in Global and Sociocultural Studies at FIU.

First and foremost, for reasons explained above, it is not a significant deviation from how this course is taught basically everywhere. It certainly is not “what I think is most interesting about geography today.” It is more “here are these authors and ideas most everyone in academic geography has heard of and uses to inform the background of their thought process”. No need to reinvent the wheel, because that would be a disservice to those of you taking it. This course is supposed provide a connection to the wider geographic community, not highlight my idiosyncratic interests.

Nonetheless, I did reach out to the other geography faculty members at FIU, to find out what they were taught in this version of the course and what they think is important for all geographers know about today. Quite on purpose, some of the authors you have read in other geography seminars in GSS will pop up again here (although hopefully, mostly, different selections from them). After all, I want to present a version of geography that is in sync with what you are being taught by others in this department.

But no matter the effort I make here to present geography as an enterprise with a well-defined core, it is not. Ultimately, there are many different versions of geography based on which topic/sub-discipline the geographer is engaged with. That is where the final project will come in: while the course readings and discussion will provide you with an overview of geography, your final task will be to find your place(s) within it.

Lastly, because this is not a full geography department you are immersed in, I will be filling in some details about the discipline around the readings. Not lectures per se, but times where I explain context. Sometimes, you will be finding this out for yourself – like with the journal assignment due in Week 2. But I also get that given the interdisciplinary nature of the department, you will have inevitably picked up less geography by osmosis than someone in a geography-only department.

Seminar Requirements & Grades

To make this a good seminar experience for everyone, you will have to 1) read all the required readings, every week, even if it is lengthy/difficult and 2) come prepared and ready to our weekly meetings so that we all can learn from each other. To make sure you reap maximum reward out of this reading and sharing, you need to 3) write about it.

To provide the incentive to do all this, I have to assign grades. Grades in the seminar will be broken down in the following manner:

Seminar attendance & participation	25%
Weekly questions for discussion	5%
Weekly thought pieces	20%
Journal Description Project	10%
Final Project	40%

Seminar Attendance & Participation

First off, to get the most out of the seminar, you have to be here, every week, on time. If you are going to miss or be late, please let me know before class starts. I understand that life happens: but you have to let me know.

To that end, if you let me know that you are going to miss a class (for example, because you or a family member are ill), I will turn on a Zoom feed of the class for you to listen in if you are able to do so. This will basically be audio-only and limited to what my microphone can pick up. It will definitely, 100% be a much better experience in the classroom – but the Zoom will also keep you from falling completely behind in the discussion. To be clear: Zoom will not be an every week attendance option, it is a “break glass in-case of emergency” fallback.

But showing up is only a fraction of it. You also must be alert and ready to participate. While I try to put the readings in context every week, it is not my job to lecture. My role is as a facilitator for discussion and getting your questions answered. While I do not like to (and thankfully, normally do not have to), I will start calling on people with questions if the discussion starts to ebb, so be prepared with something to say. Also, given that this is a relatively big class, if a small number of students start dominating conversation, I may start calling on others to get more people involved.

Using Canvas

Everything for this course (readings, weekly thought pieces, and assignments) will be made available and submitted through Canvas. So, make sure your Canvas access is in good order, and if not, reach out to UTS to get it sorted.

Weekly Questions and Thought Pieces

By **9 AM Monday morning**, you will need to login and click on the link for this course. Find the current week.

In the “Discussion” forum, you need to put a **single** post that includes two things:

1. A 600-900 word “thought piece” which touches on ALL the assigned readings for the week (more on this below).
2. At least one question for discussion in class. You may include more. These questions can be points you were unclear on, or perhaps something you think would get a cracking good discussion going.

To make this post, please write it out on your favorite word processing software. Then go into the discussion forum and reply to the original post. Then please copy both your thought piece and questions.

A couple of **DO NOTs**

1. DO NOT make your initial post as a reply to someone else’s post. Hit the “Add a new discussion topic” button to make your first post. However, you are of course free to reply to each other’s posts if you want (although it is not required)
2. **DO NOT include your thought piece and questions as an attachment. It just takes everyone more time to look at yours if you do that.**

Once 9 AM has passed, you should take time (provided you have it) to read over each other’s posts, so we are ready to discuss.

This writing and sharing is probably the single most beneficial part of the class – it allows you to collect your own thoughts and learn from the thoughts of your fellow students.

Weekly Thought Pieces

To make sure you have thoughts to share each week, and also have some notes available as you prepare for qualifying exams and thesis writing, each of you are to write a single 600-900 word commentary each week, focusing on all the assigned readings. A commentary should give a brief informal abstract of *EACH AND EVERY ONE* of the readings assigned for the week (a few sentences on what it is about, what the author argued, what it speaks to, etc.). It must also contain some original thoughts, analysis and/or criticisms on whatever you found striking in the readings: maybe how they connected together (or disagreed), maybe a way a particular theory or method was used, maybe a novel interpretation, maybe how it connects to your own research or life experience. These thoughts don’t have to be incredibly refined – but they absolutely do have to be there. Luckily, in the course in particular, most weeks the connections between the articles will be extremely obvious – the pieces are often a reaction to the other pieces assigned for that same week

Again, to repeat, I only want one 600-900 word commentary from you each week. The exact format is up to you and whatever works best for you is fine (e.g. one long flowing essay, more distinct sections for each reading, followed by a paragraph that makes connections and analysis, etc). However, that one commentary must address all the readings, while also showing some original thoughts.

I expect them to be ready by 9 AM for each class session. I am not expecting you to turn out a polished dissertation, but I do expect you to try to be grammatically correct, analytically rigorous and to not just babble on with no structure. Continually sub-par work will be rewarded as such – and apparent to all your hard-working peers.

Each week, you will receive “3” for doing the assignment; a “2” if it is turned in late but done correctly, a “1” if it is turned in, but showed lack of effort; or 0 if it is not turned in.

Additionally, **once (and only once)** during the semester, you are allowed to pass on a week’s readings (if you are going to conference, or out of town, or are sick). To use your pass, you still have to make a new post in the forum, but just write “Pass” in the message box. This will be scored as a “2.5”.

Semester Project

In the previous times I taught this course, the final project is something I call “Locating Your Research in Geography”. It is designed to be an exercise to begin to link your own research (or potential research interests) to similar research being done right now in geography. **It is not a research paper**: instead, it is an extremely detailed outline following a set recipe that establishes the terrain in geography on which your research program can be built. Students who were going into Proposal Writing or starting to think about exams found it extremely helpful in the past.

There are several steps in the process throughout the semester. The first step, which comes halfway through the course, is a brief one-page proposal with an attached bibliography that outlines what you think the literature/sub-discipline in geography most connected to your research might be. Once I give you feedback and approve your topic, you begin working through the whole “recipe” for the project. In the last weeks of the semester, you will turn in a summary of a single article in geography that most closely resembles the topic/approach you plan to take with your own research (which is one of the requirements in the final project) and then present that to the class. The final project will be due during Final Exam Week.

I think it is a good exercise for nearly everyone regardless of where they are in the program. However, if you have something else in mind, I am open to listening – provided it works with the overall goal of connecting your own research to research in geography.

Journal Project

This is a project that will kick off the semester, where you will find out about geography by going to the actual places where geographers publish their work. Instructions are provided on Canvas.

Academic Integrity

Do not plagiarize. If you do, I will hunt you down, or even worse, have the craziest of my many cats hunt you down. She is very fearsome.

Required Readings

No books! All readings will be distributed through Canvas, and all of them are articles or book chapters. I will do my best to keep the number of readings reasonable – I recognize the more there is, the less in depth you are likely to examine each one.

Changes to the Syllabus

As instructor, I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus and schedule, especially in the event of a hurricane caused disruption to the semester. Plenty of time will be given to adjust to

Preliminary Topics Schedule (open to negotiation or hurricane disruption):

Week 1: August 22 – Introductions and Course Brainstorm

Week 2: August 23 – Journal Reports and Mapping Academic Geography

Week 3: September 5 – Labor Day, No Class Meeting

Week 4: September 12 – Regions, Landscapes, and (No Such Thing as) Culture

Week 5: September 19 – Spatial Science/GIS/Big Data

Week 6: September 26 – Political Economy (cough, cough, Harvey, cough, cough) and Economic Geographies

Week 7: October 3 – Post-Modernism/Post Structuralism/Space

Week 8: October 10 – Gender and Sexuality

Week 9: October 17 – Race and Postcolonialism

Week 10: October 24– Nature/Society/Political Ecology

Week 11: October 31 – Urbanisms

Week 12: November 7 – Political Geographies

Week 13: November 14 – Humanism, More Than Representational, and More Recent Turns

Week 14: November 21 – Turn in Closest Article Assignment/Final Project Workshop

Week 15: December 28 – Individual Presentations

Finals Week: Turn in Final Project