

Master of Science in Social Policy Program: Approved Theory Electives

All courses in this document are approved theory electives for the MSSP program.

The Theory Elective requirement is intended to provide students with an understanding of how global forces such as capitalism, anti-Blackness, and settler colonialism influence policy formation and development. These courses also push students to wrestle with how to work through, with, and against policy to challenge global processes of oppression and build equitable, emancipatory, and justice-oriented worlds. MSSP Theory Electives examine these issues through the various frameworks of critical theory and through different assemblages of policy, governance, politics, and technology.

MSSP students are required to take one approved theory elective course. Students choose from a menu of options offered by the MSSP program and may take the Theory Elective in the fall or spring semester. Courses that are considered approved Theory Electives are indicated in the course descriptions below.

Table of Contents

[MSSP Elective Courses](#)

The courses in this section are elective courses regularly offered by the MSSP program that are considered approved theory electives.

- **MSSP 6090: Invisible Injustices: How Policy and Bureaucracy Create (and Hide) Difference and Power**
- **MSSP 6670: Critical Global Politics, Policy & Identity**
- **MSSP 7010: Race, Technology, & the Body**
- **MSSP 7040: Critical Studies in Health Inequity and Policymaking**
- **MSSP 7100: Democratizing Data? Critical Data Studies in Algorithmic Governance**
- **MSSP 7410/SWRK 7410: Gender & Social Policy**

[MSSP Special Topics Courses](#)

Special Topics Courses (MSSP 7980-XXX) are courses that cover topics of temporal or special interest based on current events in the policy landscape. Dependent on course enrollment and interest, special topics courses *may* be made a regular, on-going part of the curriculum. *Please note: not all special topics courses are approved MSSP theory electives, however, the MSSP 7980 courses listed below are approved MSSP theory electives.*

- **MSSP 7980: Special Topics: Criminal Justice Policy**

- MSSP 7980: Special Topics: Reproductive Justice Policy
- MSSP 7980: Special Topics: Global Abolition, Decolonization, & Social Policy

SSPP Courses

SSPP Courses are SP2 school-wide courses available to *all* SP2 Master's students, regardless of their program. SSPP courses are elective courses covering a wide-range of topics centered on social justice and equity. *Please note: not all SSPP courses are approved MSSP theory electives, however, the SSPP courses listed below are approved MSSP theory electives.*

- SSPP 6000: Advocacy in Emergent Technology, Digital Media, and Society
- SSPP 6010: Comparative Urban and Distributive Politics
- SSPP 6020: Applied Data Ethics, Law, and the Social Good
- SSPP 6030: Journey to Joy: Designing a Happier Life for Social Work, Social Policy and Non-Profit Leadership Praxis and Research

Prior Theory Elective Offerings

The courses in this section were offered in the past and can be used to understand additional types of courses that the program has approved.

- MSSP 7030: Ethics, Art, and Resistance: Visual Techniques for the Contestation of an Unjust World
- MSSP 7080: Data, Decision, Death: Security, Raciality, and Policy during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic (thus far)
- MSSP 7800: Policy and 'Difference' in Postmodernity
- MSSP 7970 (SWRK 7970): Whose Colony? Politics, Identity, and Social Policy in Revolutionary Cuba (1959-2017)

MSSP Elective Courses

The courses in this section are elective courses regularly offered by the MSSP program that are considered approved theory electives.

MSSP 6090: Invisible Injustices: How Policy and Bureaucracy Create (and Hide) Difference and Power (1 CU)

Usually offered in the fall semester.

How does the design of everyday objects and systems in our social world—from the workplace to the civic sector—produce variation in our political participation to promote or stifle the collective project of social justice? Systemic injustice expresses itself in everything from software interface designs to paper passport applications. Using these objects and others, this course focuses on the ways in which power operates through and within aesthetics to create and enforce difference and produce the inequalities that demand a collective reimagining of our world. What might we learn from these “aesthetic assemblages” of power and difference, and their manifestations in current social policy?

In this course, we will work with case studies from a range of politically urgent topics—mass incarceration, immigration reform, healthcare inequity—through the lens of critical theories and pedagogies that center the lives of those communities most impacted by discriminatory social policy. Students will learn to apply the thinking of scholars such as Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, Dean Spade, and Mel Chen towards their own social justice-informed approaches to social policy and practice. Through independent study projects, students will explore their own unique areas of interest beyond the scope of this course to rethink how critical theory can shape and be shaped by on-the-ground, everyday practices.

MSSP 6670: Critical Global Politics, Policy & Identity (1 CU)

Usually offered in the fall or spring semester.

What is identity? Why do we identify with categories such as “Black”, “Latino”, “Queer”, “American,” or “Asian”? How do these categories play a role in current Global Politics, and how have Global Politics & Policies helped configure different identities throughout history? According to Fredric Jameson, in the 60’s there was a Global Shift by which the “natives of the world” became human beings. Concepts such as “diversity” and “identity” as we know them today originated in these global reconfigurations of subjectivity that occurred in the context of the decolonization of Africa, the Civil Rights movements in the United States, and the Cuban Revolution, among other historical events. As western nations were coming to terms with Otherness within their own borders, confronting the needs of women and minorities, underdeveloped nations were fighting for independence and liberation claiming their rights in

the new geopolitical arena. At the same time, the Orient had become the West's most powerful cultural contestant and, as Edward Said put it, its "deepest and most recurring" Other. This course is designed to provide students with the critical and analytical tools to understand different global policies and political events, while examining their implications in the formation of identity through the lens of critical theory. Each class will be structured around a case study that students will reflect upon using the assigned readings and supporting materials. Students will learn about the discursive formations that have made possible to name ourselves in opposition or in relation to others, claiming gender, race, national, class identities that are indebted to power-knowledge dynamics rooted in colonialism. We will examine how class is reformulated into different types of Capitals that inform positionality in the social space (Bourdieu). We will analyze how race as a tool for classifying bodies became a global category present, for example, in the War on Terror after 9/11, as well as in the Global division of nations based on different degrees of development. We will question how nationalism is formed and enacted in a changing world where migration is so prevalent. Along with racial, national, and global processes for subjectivization, we will examine gender, non-binary and queer identities, and how they all intervene LGBTQ rights, abortion, and same-sex marriage policies. Finally, we will discuss ethics and climate change in the context of environmental racism (i.e. Flint & Newark) and Global climate strikes instigated by activist Greta Thunberg. This course will enable students to analyze and understand policy as always-already intersectional, global, and political.

MSSP 7010: Race, Technology, & the Body (1 CU)

Usually offered in the spring semester.

The history of the relationship between race and technology has long been fraught. On the one hand, the sociopolitical formation of race constituted black and brown bodies in juxtaposition to the logics of reason that the instruments of post-Enlightenment technicity were built. On the other hand, as Wendy Chun argues, the discursive formation of race was a technology in and of itself that was designed to hierarchize and differentiate bodies as well as to make black and brown bodies extracted technologies for labor and Capital. This seminar will explore this deeply enmeshed history between race and technology by engaging text in the history of science and philosophy, critical theories of technology, cybernetics, and critical theories of difference. These texts will range in topics from the transparent subject to surveillance studies to algorithmic bias to the speculative fiction of Afrofuturism. The text will include both scholarly written products as well as media and popular culture. Students will learn about the history of philosophy and technology in relation to race and the (em)body as well as how to examine for speculative futures.

MSSP 7040: Critical Studies in Health Inequity and Policymaking (1 CU)

Usually offered in the spring semester.

The relentless focus on the being of health inequity often overshadows the becoming of health inequity. Each drip of social injustice pools into a confrontation that disproportionately affects the health and healthcare of the socially disadvantaged groups. This course navigates health policymaking through a sociohistoric lens and grapples with contemporary perspectives in health equity. We explore the theoretical frameworks that best informs the existence of health inequity along with the practices that eliminate health inequity. Students will have the opportunity to learn how to effectively communicate evidence-based strategies in both policy and academic grant formats. While generally structured as a seminar, this course extends the walls of the classroom and encourages students to confront real-life health policy issues while engaging local, state, and federal health policy influencers. Students will spend time in the robust archives and cutting-edge medical facilities at Penn to best hone their policymaking voice.

MSSP 7100: Democratizing Data? Critical Data Studies in Algorithmic Governance (1 CU)

Offered in the fall semester.

With the advent of digital technologies and the increasing power of computational analytics, the proliferation and ubiquity of data production has increased at exponential rates enabling new possibilities for social analysis. This course will examine the emergence of democratizing data – the movement to make government and other data more widely or publicly available and its potential enabling for democratic possibilities. The types of data being made available, through various analytic systems, and the ways in which their accessibility and inaccessibility is contributing to reconfigured power relations, will be described. The paradigmatic tensions and shifts that have emerged in the debates on “Big Data,” such as deductive versus inductive reasoning and the challenges posed to statistical sampling theory, will be interrogated. The appropriation of machine learning and predictive analytic algorithms for social analysis will be critically explored. Issues related to the ethical and legal use of administrative data, particularly data related to patient, client, student, and taxpayer information will be considered, as well as from internet-based sources including social media. Potential solutions to data security challenges will be additionally considered.

Methods for web-scraping of data, analysis of web traffic data, and the use of social networking data in the modeling of social phenomena and public opinion will be examined. Students will learn how to make results accessible to non-technical audiences via data visualization tools, such as web-based data dashboards and web-based maps. These topics will be discussed for the analysis of health, education, and social policy as well as their implications for questions pertaining to race, gender, class, sexuality, dis/abilities, age, and youth culture. This course will develop students’ knowledge of computational and data analytics and its applications for social policy analysis.

MSSP 7410: (SWRK 7410) Gender & Social Policy (1 CU)

Offered in the spring semester.

Gender and Social Policy develops an advanced understanding of social policies through the lens of gender – a socially constructed classification system based on ideals of femininity and masculinity, which are most commonly understood to be binary, mutually exclusive categories corresponding to sex (female and male). [Gender is] a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment*. The class provides students with the opportunity to explore how social policies respond (and contribute) to the needs and risks of different groups of people based on gender classifications. Rather than a survey of “gender” policy, students will be introduced to key feminist and trans concepts and frameworks that can be applied to any social issue and policy intervention. Policy examples may include reproduction, state violence, exclusionary/inclusive space, and national emergencies. The topics and specific readings may change based on the class’s interests and current events. Class assignments are designed to provide an opportunity to practice applying gender theory, as well as for each student to examine a policy issue of import to them through a gendered lens. *paraphrasing Garland-Thomson, 2002, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory”, *NWSA Journal*, 14(3): pg 4.

MSSP Special Topics Courses

Special Topics Courses (MSSP 7980-XXX) are courses that cover topics of temporal or special interest based on current events in the policy landscape. Dependent on course enrollment and interest, special topics courses *may* be made a regular, on-going part of the curriculum. *Please note: not all special topics courses are approved MSSP theory electives, however, the MSSP 7980 courses listed below are approved MSSP theory electives.*

MSSP 7980: Special Topics: Criminal Justice Policy

Usually offered in the spring semester.

This criminal justice policy course will address the criminal justice system from arrest to adjudication, sentencing, and incarceration. This course will be rooted in critical race theory, with special attention paid to how the system differentially affects people of color. We will also discuss how other populations are affected by the system, such as women and queer folks, and examine alternatives to our current system. In this course, students will examine a criminal justice policy of their choosing and use data to make policy recommendations. Course readings will include scholarly work, advocacy papers, and commentary from community advocates.

MSSP 7980: Special Topics: Reproductive Justice Policy

Usually offered in the fall and spring semesters.

With the impactful decision of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the US Supreme Court in 2022 struck down almost 50 years of federal policy precedent of *Roe v. Wade* (1973). This opened a time of confusion as states scrambled to determine the meaning and implications of existing and future state and local policies. This course specifically utilizes the term reproductive justice. As Ross & Solinger (2017) describe, the definition of reproductive justice intentionally moves beyond the pro-choice/pro life perspectives of policies regulating abortion and focuses policy assessment through core principles of 1) the right not to have a child, 2) the right to have a child, 3) the right to parent children in a safe and healthy environment, and 4) sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being. This course will first provide historical context of reproductive justice policy in USA history, then focus on local, state, and federal policies regulating reproductive justice. Policies will be particularly analyzed through the lenses of LGBTQ+, race, disability, and critical theory.

MSSP 7980: Special Topics: Global Abolition, Decolonization, & Social Policy

Usually offered in the spring semester.

Social policy reflects social structure, and this course seeks to chart how dramatic transformations of that structure can give rise to previously unforeseen policy alternatives. Focusing on

abolitionist movements past and present and ongoing global struggles for decolonization, we will analyze not only the concrete impact that these structural shifts produced in the realm of policy, but also—more qualitatively—what kinds of abolitionist and decolonized social policy alternatives can become possible in the process of dismantling entrenched structures of global inequality.

SSPP Courses

SSPP Courses are SP2 school-wide courses available to *all* SP2 Master's students, regardless of their program. SSPP courses are elective courses covering a wide-range of topics centered on social justice and equity. *Please note: not all SSPP courses are approved MSSP theory electives, however, the SSPP courses listed below are approved MSSP theory electives.*

SSPP 6000: Advocacy in Emergent Technology, Digital Media and Society

Offered Fall 2023

This course is designed to build a critical foundation for understanding the interplay of digital technologies and society and the important role of advocates in this space. Providing an overview of the history, students will investigate and critique contemporary emergent technologies in a social context, and explore their use in advocacy efforts. The course uses interactive lecture, discussion, readings, and guest speakers from technologists in the field.

SSPP 6010: Comparative Urban and Distributive Politics

Offered Fall 2023

As of 2007, more than half of the world's population resides in cities. Cities and metropolitan regions are much more unequal than the countries that host them. For example, income inequality in the New York Metropolitan Area parallels that of Rwanda at around 15 Gini points higher than the U.S. as a whole. Especially in the world's developing regions, the onset of rapid urbanization occurs in tandem with environmental degradation that disproportionately affects impoverished and marginalized communities. This course provides an introduction to the observable patterns and challenges confronting cities and metropolitan areas and the policy remedies and options available to government, NGOs, and the private sector. First, the course will explore the political, social, and economic explanations for the origins and evolution of urban environments. We will trace the historical development of local government institutions, analyze how urban coalitions form, and investigate distributions of power. In the second half of the course, we will examine urban welfare policies in the areas of growth, housing, the distribution of public goods/services (e.g., education, public security, sanitation), identity politics and culture wars, and poverty. Focusing especially on cities in the Global South, the topics covered in this course include: poverty and urban slums, informal housing, informal labor markets, public goods and distributive justice, urban land rights and other "rights to the city" (RTC), climate change adaptation in cities, environmental risk and urban precarious settlements, gentrification and evictions, among other topics.

SSPP 6020: Applied Data Ethics, Law, and the Social Good

Offered Fall 2023

This course explores the applied use of civic data, specifically “using data for the social good.” Data can help us understand needs, improve services, shift policies, and build stronger, healthier, and more just communities. However, use of data can also reinforce legacies of racist policies and produce inequitable resource allocation, access, and outcomes. These tensions are the crux of this course. We will interrogate assumptions and ask difficult questions of ourselves as we hold this duality—that data can be used for good and for harm. It is up to us as practitioners to weigh the risks and benefits to ensure that civic data use is legal, ethical, and a good idea.

SSPP 6030: Journey to Joy: Designing a Happier Life for Social Work, Social Policy and Non-Profit Leadership Praxis and Research

Offered Fall 2023

What does joy really mean? Could joy be an intervention for complex trauma, pain, grief, and loss? How does joy show up in policy making and leadership? This innovative new course combines cutting-edge research, practical techniques, and real-world examples to help you understand the power of joy and develop community-informed, anti-racist strategies for promoting it. From exploring the latest in clinical intervention, popular ideas around manifestation, self-care, and #Blackjoy, to examining the role of technology and cultural differences, you will gain a culturally humble and comprehensive understanding of what it takes to design a happier life. This course includes a blend of immersive, hands-on activities, short lectures, and engaging reflexive discussions that will leave you feeling inspired and empowered. Whether you are social work, non-profit leader or social policy student, or someone who wants to increase their own experiences of joy and happiness, this course is a perfect way to jump start your journey to joy.

Prior Theory Elective Offerings

The courses in this section were offered in the past and can be used to understand other types of courses that the program has considered and approved towards the theory elective requirement.

MSSP 7030: Ethics, Art, and Resistance: Visual Techniques for the Contestation of an Unjust World (1 CU)

Previously offered in the spring semester.

In this course we will work through a select history art, social movements, and collective organizing. This material will be used for gaining new clarity on present conditions of social injustice and to tease out novel solutions. In combination with these case studies, students will also read literature related to the field of political and decolonial aesthetics by authors such as Jacques Rancière, David Graeber, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. We will discuss how social issues such as poverty, incarceration, and racism are reframed from the perspective of those positioned within impacted communities, and/or outside of government and policy. A central question of this course is to ask how aesthetics plays a role in the formation of political conflicts and subjectivities, and whether or not this role can be turned back on itself to offer new possibilities in thinking resistance and abolition.

The ultimate goal of this course is twofold. One is to train students in a new analytic framework through which to approach issues of conflict, injustice, and asymmetries of power. By drawing from diverse and potentially unfamiliar examples students are encouraged to free themselves up to think more broadly with the new tools they will gain during this course. The second goal is to encourage students to critically assess existing ethics, or evaluative patterns, by which problems and solutions are thought in policy today. Experience with and knowledge of art history is not a requirement for this course, and in fact, students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and interests are encouraged to participate.

MSSP 7080: Data, Decision, Death: Security, Raciality, and Policy during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic (thus far) (1 CU)

One-time offering in Spring 2021.

“Bio-power [covers] the set of mechanism through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy (...), how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species.” – Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*

When the spread of the disease caused by the new corona virus (Sars-CoV-2) took the form of a global pandemic, in the second and third week, March 2020, very quickly we were hailed by abstract representations and had to become literate on graphs, curves, lines, and computer models. In addition to informing the public, these became the guides for biopolitical strategies, that is, policy decisions – which included the setting up of an apparatus of security, which consists primarily of abstract tools and procedures (calculation, probability, averages) that would mean life and death to millions and have led to the death of almost one million persons worldwide (so far 27 Sept 2020).

Definitely these abstract presentations of COVID-19 fit very well with Foucault's description of bio-power and its security apparatus. To be sure, abstraction has been claimed as the distinguishing feature of modernity. Early philosophical texts dealing with scientific (Galileo's, Bacon's, Newton's) and juridic (Hobbes's, Locke's, Montesquieu's) matters devised and defended abstract procedures and tools because they allowed for objective descriptions of Nature and decisions on Human affairs that were not contaminated by subjective elements, such as inclinations, desires, emotions, etc. Consistently, the same applies to principles said to orient prevailing conception of social justice, namely, the principles of liberty and equality, the ethical force of which reside in their being abstractions, which support the claims to their universal applicability.

However, as the COVID-19 global pandemic showed us (also very quickly), even if the abstract presentations of this invisible threat seem to suggest that we are all in it together, the spatial distribution of the number of contaminations and deaths in the United States, shows a concentration in urban and regional areas with larger proportion of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous residents. That is, the data reveals another abstraction – one that Foucault does not take into account in his definition of biopolitics – is at work in the spread and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, that is, raciality, a social scientific apparatus that institute racial subjects, that is, that classify and describe persons according to physical traits that are said to express moral and intellectual attributes.

In this course, we will consider these orders of abstraction – security and raciality – in order to map policy decisions during the early moments of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Our guiding question is: whether and how raciality has determined the decisions taken in that moment and if so, whether and how that was done so in such a way that takes into account the principles of social justice? Our goal is not so much to answer these questions as to consider what kind of shifts at the level of conceiving, designing, and implementing policies in the United States that do mitigate, contain, and eliminate the operations and effects of raciality.

MSSP 7800: Policy and 'Difference' in Postmodernity (1 CU)

Previous offering.

Social constructions of “difference” permeate the institutions, spaces, and assumptions of our society. These social constructions include but are not limited to the racialized, gendered, sexed, classed, and dis/abled constructions of the body. By leaning on postmodern thinkers such as Iris Marion Young, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Michel Foucault, this seminar course will begin by engaging the questions of what is “difference” and how is “difference” discursively constructed and reproduced in society. Using a postmodern lens, the remainder two-thirds of the course will engage various social science text that deal with the varieties of “difference” (i.e. race, gender, class, sexuality) and the explicit and/or implicit policy implications of these works. Thus, we will critically engage policies such as welfare, affirmative action, economic policies of taxation, and same-gender marriage among others. The underlying questions throughout the course will be to what extent does social policy enable the possibilities of freedom, justice, and democracy for the “Other”, the deviant, the abject, the marginalized, those of assumed “difference”? And, to what extent does policy constrain those possibilities at the same time?

MSSP 7970 (SWRK 7970): Whose Colony? Politics, Identity, and Social Policy in Revolutionary Cuba (1959-2017) (1 CU)

Previously offered in the spring semester.

Cuba represents one of the world’s long-standing institutionalized revolutions whose narrative and policies have changed from a strong nationalism yearning for Independence, to an alignment with communism’s ideology and modus operandi, to a nostalgic, post-Soviet Union “socialism” ruled by a binary, state-controlled capitalism. In addition to the myriad of social and political changes affecting the island, the transition of leadership from Fidel Castro to his brother, Raúl, and the death of the former in 2016, has put into question the theoretical pillars of the Revolution, thus undermining its initial legitimacy. This course is designed to provide students with the critical and analytical tools to dissect Cuban revolutionary politics, policies, and identity mutations within the island’s historical trajectory. We will begin by analyzing the notion of Independence – upon which Castro relied to gather massive support – in the context of the 60’s debates on decolonization and underdevelopment. In addition, we will delve into the theoretical foundations of the Revolution focusing, among other texts, on the literature by Cuba’s “founding father” José Martí, who deeply influenced the Spanish-American war (1898)’s outcomes as well as Fidel Castro’s vision for Cuba. Throughout the course, students will also have the opportunity to critically read and discuss main Cuban social policies such as its famous Literacy Campaign, and other Education, Housing, Cultural, Health, and Immigration policies, as well as the island’s complex relationship with technological development and communications. Finally, we will study identity and race dynamics, which are inextricably embedded in Cuba’s political landscape.

This course will begin with several introductory sessions at the University of Pennsylvania, followed by ten class meetings during a two-week stay in Havana, Cuba. Once in the island, students will visit key historical and cultural sites, and engage in conversations with distinguished Cuban scholars and cultural critics. Lastly, students are required to develop a research project on a particular Cuban social policy and produce a final paper.