CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY  
Spring 2010  
Sociology 516

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Class hours: Tuesday 1:10-3:50  
Office: B227 Lucy Stone Hall  
Office Hours: TU: 11:00-12:15  
Appointments in advance recommended

Themes: The course is divided into two segments.

Part One deals with basic concepts in contemporary theory including social structures and networks, structures of material and cultural inequality, action, praxis, and structuration.

Part Two deals with modernity as the sociologically encompassing civilization in our time with special emphasis on globalization, capitalism, the modern state, the disciplinary society society, the social psychology of modernity, and the critical theory of modernity.

Purposes

The course as a whole combines intensive reading, extensive writing, practical intentions and high hopes.

Practically speaking, I expect that at least some students will use this course to find their sociological bearings in contemporary theory for the first time. Thus, my practical intent is to provide a basic class, a class that requires little knowledge of advanced analysis in social theory. But I hope that this class will stimulate an interest in moving out into deeper theoretical waters as well, or at least to move beyond the shore in one area or another on the syllabus.

From time to time students have asked me about my own position on the purposes of social theory, which sometimes only shine clearly in my interstitial criticisms and comments on the views of the authors under discussion. I believe that social theory has many purposes including, but not limited to my own. However, as for my own views, I begin with three notions: 1) what Isaiah Berlin (following Kant) called the notion of the "crooked timber of humanity," i.e. "out of timber so swirled and gnarled nothing straight and true can be made"; 2) the notion that basic sociological concepts provide indispensable links between first-order, familiar everyday realities (or empirical reports of them) and second-order sociological analyses; 3) the point of social theory is to respect what is familiar in everyday life and then to discover social unfamiliar phenomena that shape, channel or structure familiar realities, or social phenomena that are implicated, but unnoticed in the everyday lives most people lead. In some cases the most valuable task of social theory is simply to recognize and define the unfamiliar yet real. In other cases, the task is to show how unfamiliar phenomena structure how we act and what we can or cannot accomplish through what we do. Sociological theory, in brief is one part everyday common sense and one part visionary imagination.
So how do we know when common sense and imagination are successfully merged? Well, the simple answer is we succeed when theory is consistent with fact. But there is a personal feeling of success as well. For me, whether doing my own work or reading the works of others there is a visceral excitement when I recognize some new, unfamiliar social phenomenon that opens new visions and vistas of what was previously hidden from view. Personally, I don't care how these discoveries are achieved. There is no single method that produces sociological magic.

The real trick is knowing what is important to study. This is where the inspiration (and the moral relevance) at the heart of truly great sociology is found, and it's where the talent is as much a matter of art as science.

For a general discussion of the nature of social theory and the differences between classical and contemporary social theory see:


CLASS LOGISTICS

Lectures: Given that many students use this course to acquaint themselves for the first time with some of the most challenging ideas in contemporary sociological thought, a good deal of structured lecture is unavoidable. I will do my best to keep things lively and some time is built in for discussion in every class.

Papers and Exams:

Two multi-part long-form take home exams will be assigned on analytical themes. Due dates will be at least two weeks after distribution.

Exam 1: after Bourdieu (approximate distribution mid February)

Exam 2: after structuration theory (approximate distribution mid March)

During the second half of the course, a paper will be assigned with a structured format on a theme regarding modernity of the student's choice.

Grading: The final grade will be compiled from the grades on the three assignments. In general equal weight will be given to each assignment. In exceptional situations, such as circumstances of special merit or unusual discrepancies in quality between assignments, more weight may be placed on one assignment than another. The Graduate School grading scale applies to final grades: A, B+, B, C+, C, but I will use a more fine-grained approach in grading exams and papers including more extensive uses of pluses and minuses.

Incompletes: You can rely on incompletes for illness or family crises or other emergencies. They are freely granted upon request. Non-emergency incompletes are
strongly discouraged and will be granted only if due dates are arranged with penalties to follow for further incompletes.

**Support:** I check my e-mail regularly and respond ASAP. I have office hours on Tuesday mornings. **Students often make appointments in advance.**

**READINGS**

**Articles:** A collection of assigned readings will be made available in class.

**BOOKS:** The following books are **required.** They may be purchased at the Livingston branch of Rutgers Bookstore, Livingston Campus.


SYLLABUS

(*=Articles Available in Class)

PART I: ANALYTICAL THEMES

WEEK 1 THEME: Structures and Networks


WEEKS 2-3 THEME: Structures of Inequality

*1. Charles Tilly

1. A. Broad Concepts of Durable Inequality (summarized in lecture)
   1.B. Focused Conceptual Themes in Durable Inequality (recommended but implicit in lecture)

2. Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Inequality

2. A David Swartz, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, Chapters 5,6,7,4 (in that order)

WEEK 4 FIRST Exam Distributed
WEEKS 4-6 THEME: Action and Praxis

1. Erving Goffman

2. Harold Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology
   2.B. Heritage, Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology chs. 4-8 (chs. 2-3 on Parsons and Schutz are optional).

3. Anthony Giddens and Structuration Theory

WEEK 7 SECOND Exam Distributed
PART II: MODERNITY AND SOCIETY

WEEK 7 THEME: The Never-Ending, Ambiguities of Modernity


WEEK 8 THEME: Globalization: The New Axis of Institutional Order*


WEEK 9 THEME: Capitalism and Social Welfare: The Double Movement

1. Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation pp. 33-200. (Also the Preface by Joseph Stiglitz and the Introduction by Fred Block, both of which will help clarify Polanyi’s intent for newcomers to his work.)

WEEK 10 Theme: the Modern State


WEEK 11: THEME: ETHNIC CLEANSING

1.* Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy* Chs. 1 and Intro to Ch 17


WEEK 12: Theme: Michel Foucault: The Disciplinary Culture of Modernity


WEEK 13: Theme: The Social Psychology of Late Modernity


WEEK 14: Theme: Jürgen Habermas: The Colonization of the Life World


PAPER ASSIGNMENT DISTRIBUTED CIRCA WEEK 10. ASSIGNMENT DUE BY ARRANGEMENT SHORTLY AFTER THE END OF THE TERM