

# CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY

Spring 2007  
Sociology 516

Ira Cohen  
E-Mail: [icohen@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:icohen@rci.rutgers.edu)  
NB Office Phone (TU) 732-445-0975  
Cell Phone: 609-273-5926 (9 am-8 pm)

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

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**Themes:** The course is divided into two segments.

Part One deals with basic concepts in contemporary theory including social 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, and the culture of individualism in modernity.

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## 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 in past editions of this class 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 everyday realities (or empirical reports of them) and second-order sociological analyses; 3) that given the loose structuration of social events at any given level from intimate conversations to epochal events such as globalization, sociology should be humble in its explanatory expectations. If we can bring a sociological light to bear upon well-chosen aspects of social life, and if we can see more of what's going on than people who are involved in the immediacy of social events, then we have done our job well and we have a right to be proud of what we do.*

*For me there is an almost visceral sensation of relief when I come upon a sociological insight that makes sense of something I care about that previously made no sense. I also am delighted by new concepts and metaphors that enable me to envision what I could not see at all before. Almost all of the readings in this course were selected because they help us via their concepts and models to make sense of social life. Having said all of this, the real trick is knowing what is important to study. There is no method for determining themes worthy of sociological research. 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 more on sociological theory see:*

Ira Cohen, "Sociological Theory" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006 pp. 595-600. (Distributed in class).

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## **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.

Exam 1: after Bourdieu.

Exam 2: after structuration theory.

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.

Papers will be due after the term ends. The goal here is to get you thinking about a good topic for a qualifying paper

**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 on the take-home exams. They must be arranged in advance with a deadline for submission.

**Support:** I check my e-mail regularly and respond ASAP. I have office hours on Tuesday afternoons. 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.

1. Giddens, Anthony Modernity and Self-Identity Stanford U.P. 1991.
2. Goffman, Erving Interaction Ritual. Pantheon: 1967.
3. Held, David and Anthony McGrew, The Global Transformation Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate **Second Edition**. Blackwell 2003.
4. Heritage, John, Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology. Polity: 1984.
5. Michael Mann, The Dark Side of Democracy. Cambridge UP 2005.
6. Polanyi, Karl The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times Beacon 1944.
7. Swartz, David, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. University of Chicago Press 1997.
8. Charles Tilly, Durable Inequality. University of California Press 1998.

## **OPTIONAL BOOKS**

**(assigned readings from these books are included in the copies pack)**

- A. Turner, Bryan, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology (Cambridge UP, 2006)

## SYLLABUS

### APPROXIMATE

WEEK (actual week may vary)

(\*=Available in Class)

\*\*\*\*\***PART I: ANALYTICAL THEMES**\*\*\*\*\*

**1-2**            **THEME: Networks**

\*1. Mark Mizruchi, "Social Network Analysis: Recent Achievements and Current Controversies" Acta Sociologica (1994) pp. 329-341.

\*2. Barry Wellman, "Network Analysis: Some Basic Principles" Sociological Theory 1983 pp. 155-181.

\*3. Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties" American Journal of Sociology 78 (May 1973): 1360-1380.

\*4. Bernice Pescosolido and Beth Rubin, "The Web of Group Affiliations Revisited: Social Life, Postmodernism, and Sociology." American Sociological Review 65 (February 2000) pp. 52-57,62-66.

**2-4**            **THEME: Structures of Inequality**

1. Charles Tilly, Durable Inequality pp. Chapters 1-4.(Skip pp. 26-40 on individualistic theories.)

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

**week 4 FIRST EXAM DISTRIBUTED**

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**5-6**            **THEME: Action and Praxis**

\*1. Cohen, "Everyday Life" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p. 218.

\*2. Cohen, "Erving Goffman" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006. Pp. 248-260.

3. Goffman, Interaction Ritual pp. 1-136

\*4. Cohen, "Ethnomethodology" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006, pp. 177-180/

5. Heritage, Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology chs. 4-8, chs. 2-3 on Parsons and Schutz are optional.

\*6. Cohen, "Theories of Action and Praxis" in Bryan Turner (ed.) Companion to Social Theory Blackwell 2000 pp. 89-92.

**6-7**      **THEME: Structuration Theory: Praxis as the Basis of Social Life**

\*1. Cohen, "Agency and Structure" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006. Pp. 75-77.

\*2. Cohen. "Anthony Giddens" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006. Pp. 242-243.

\*3. Cohen, "Theories of Action and Praxis" in Bryan Turner (ed.) Companion to Social Theory Blackwell 2000 pp. 130-135

\*4. Cohen, "Structuration. " Encyclopedia of Social Theory; Volume 2. George Ritzer (ed.) Sage 2005 pp. 811-814.

\*5. Cohen, "Structuration Theory and Social Praxis" Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner, Social Theory Today. Polity 1987, oo. 273-308.

\*6. Cohen, "Structuration Theory and Social Order: Five Issues in Brief" in Clarke, Modgil and Modgil (eds.) Anthony Giddens: Consensus and Controversies. Taylor and Francis 1990.

week 7 or 8 **SECOND EXAM DISTRIBUTED**

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**\*\*\*\*\*PART II: MODERNITY AND SOCIETY\*\*\*\*\***

**8**      **THEME: The Never-Ending, Ambiguities of Modernity**

\*1. Roger Rosenblatt, "No Escaping Modern Times" U.S. News and World Report October 2, 1989, pp. 10-11.

\*2. Cohen, "Modernity" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006, pp. 378-394/

**9-10**      **THEME: The Global and the Local: The New Axis of Institutional Orders in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Modernity**

*Note: The readings have been ordered so that they appear in a sequence that differs from their appearance in the Held/McGrew volume. One item (by Castells see item below) does not appear in the Held/McGrew volume.*

*The diversity of the readings precludes lecturing on many items in the depth they deserve. More than other units in the course, you will gain a great deal of the basic theoretical understanding you need exclusively from the readings.*

**TOPIC: Steps Toward an Adequate Sociology of Globalization**

1. David Held, et. al. Section from Introduction Entitled "Understanding Globalization" pp. 3-8 and "Rethinking Globalization."
2. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane, "'Globalization: What's New? What's Not?; (And So What?)."'
3. Anthony Giddens, "The Globalization of Modernity"
- \*4. Manuel Castells "Toward A Theory of the Network Society"Contemporary Sociology 29:5 (Sept. 2000), pp. 693-699.

**Global Capitalism?**

5. Section in Introduction entitled "Global Economy?" in David Held and Anthony McGrew pp.19-28.
6. Paul Hirst and Grahme Thompson "Globalization: A Necessary Myth?"
7. Manuel Castells, "Global Information and Capitalism."
8. Manuel Castells, "The Rise of the Fourth World."

**The Global Erosion of the Nation-State?**

9. Sections in Introduction entitled "Political Power and Civil Society: A Reconfiguration? Pp. 8-14 and "Divided World, Divided Nations" pp. 28-32.
10. Michael Mann, Has Globalization Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation-State?"

**A Global Culture?**

11. Section in Introduction entitled "The Fate of National Culture" pp 14-18.

12. Kevin Robins, "Encountering Globalization."

13. Section subtitled "Globalized Diffusion, Local Appropriation: Toward a Theory of Media Globalization" in John B. Thompson, "The Globalization of Communication" pp. 255-257 (only)

**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.)

**12           THEME: THE MODERN STATE**

\*1. Michael Mann, "A Theory of the Modern State" Ch. 3 in The Sources of Social Power: Volume II: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914 (Cambridge UP 1993) pp. 44-91.

\*2. Michael Harrington, Excerpt from The Politics at God's Funeral Penguin 1983. Pp. 1-11

**13           THEME: ETHNIC CLEANSING**

\*1. Michael Mann, The Dark Side of Democracy Chs. 1-3 & 17

**14       THEME: MODERNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

1. Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity Chapters 1-5 (more if time permits).

**PAPER DUE BY ARRANGEMENT SHORTLY AFTER THE END OF THE TERM**