

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY

Spring 2008
Sociology 516

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Class hours: Tuesday 1:10-3:50
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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, and the culture 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 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, 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 know 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:

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

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.

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 morninga. 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.

1. Michel Foucault, Disicpline and Punish: The Birt of the Prison [1975] Vintage/Random House 1979.
2. Giddens, Anthony Modernity and Self-Identity Stanford U.P. 1991.
3. Goffman, Erving Interaction Ritual. Pantheon: 1967.
4. Heritage, John, Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology. Polity: 1984.
5. Polanyi, Karl The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times Beacon 1944.
6. Swartz, David, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. University of Chicago Press 1997.
7. Charles Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries Duke UP 2004.

OPTIONAL PURCHASES

- A. Turner, Bryan, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology (Cambridge UP, 2006) (assigned readings from these books are included in the copies pack)
- B. Charles Taylor, The Age of Secularity Harvard UP 2007) (For those who want a deeper (and much denser) exposure to Taylor.

SYLLABUS

APPROXIMATE

WEEK (actual week may vary)

(*=Articles Available in Class)

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

1-2 **THEME: Structures and 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**

1. A. Broad Concepts of Durable Inequality (summarized in lecture)

*1A. 1. "Durable Inequality" in Tilly, Identities, Boundaries, Resources, and Societies [1999] Paradigm Press: 2005, pp. 71-90.

*1. A. 2 "Creation of Categorical Inequality" excerpt from Tilly, "Equality and Inequality" in Tilly, Democracy Cambridge UP 2007, pp. 111-117.

1.B. Focused Conceptual Themes in Durable Inequality (recommended but implicit in lecture)

*1.B. 1 "Changing Forms of inequality" in Tilly, Identities, Boundaries, Resources, and Societies [2003] Paradigm Press: 2005, pp. 109-115.

*1.B. "Chain Migration and Opportunity Hoarding" in Tilly, Identities, Boundaries, Resources, and Societies [1999] Paradigm Press: 2005, pp. 153-170

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

5-7 **THEME: Action and Praxis**

1. Erving Goffman

*1.A. Cohen, "Everyday Life" in Bryan Turner (ed.), The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p. 218.

*1.B. Cohen, "Erving Goffman" in Turner (ed.), The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006. Pp. 248-260.

1.C. Goffman, Interaction Ritual pp. 1-136.

2. Harold Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology

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

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

3. Anthony Giddens and Structuration Theory

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

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

*3C. Cohen. "Anthony Giddens" in Turner, The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 2006. Pp. 242-243.

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

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

*3.F. Cohen, "Structuration Theory and Social Praxis" Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner, Social Theory Today. Polity 1987, pp. 273-308.

*3.G.. 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**

*******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

8-9 THEME: Globalization: The New Axis of Institutional Orders

*1. David Held and Anrthony McGrew, in Held and McGrew, The Global Transformation Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate Second Edition. Blackwell 2003, pp. 1-50.

*2. David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, Jonathon Perraton, "Rethinking Globalization" in Held and McGrew, The Global Transformation Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate Second Edition. Blackwell 2003, pp. 67-74.

*3. Michael Mann, "Has Gobalization Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation State?" in Held and McGrew, The Global Transformation Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate Second Edition. Blackwell 2003, pp. 135-146.

*4. Manuel Castells "Toward A Theory of the Network Society"Contemporary Sociology 29:5 (Sept. 2000), pp. 693-699.

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.)

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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. Pp. 1-11.

11-14

Theme: The Culture of Modernity

1. **Charles Taylor**, Modern Social Imaginaries **pages to be announced.**

2. **Michel Foucault**

2.A. Michel Foucault, excerpt from "14 January 1976" in Foucault, "Society Must Be Defend": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976 Picador 1997, pp 23-31.

2. B. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, pp. 1-193 (195-308, though optional, are quite relevant as well.) Take special note of the section entitled "Docile Bodies" pp. 135-193.

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

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