

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Sociology 920:516:01
Department of Sociology
Rutgers University
Spring 2018

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Sociology, like any science, aims for explanation and understanding—in our case, explanation and understanding of crucial things like social organization, social practices, social processes, and how differently situated persons experience social life. We generally do sociology in the first place by harnessing our curiosity and/or sense of moral judgment about social things. But going beyond curiosity and ethics, we pursue any explanation of social life (and for that matter, we explore the workings of social life) necessarily by means of theory. Using theory, we aim not only to describe something, but to give an account of it that identifies the key forces or factors producing it, and/or the key consequences flowing from it. That account will inevitably be somewhat stylized and less exhaustive than a complete description would be; but what we lose in detail hopefully we make up for in insight and clarity of comprehension, applicability to other cases, and an increased capacity to bring about social change.

This course cannot cover ‘contemporary sociological theory’ comprehensively; indeed no course could hope to do so. A lot of *theory* is specific to particular sociological fields, whereas we will try to cover theoretical materials here that self-consciously aim to describe fundamental features of social organization, to stimulate deep social thought on our part, and to explore social dynamics for society as a whole. At its best, general social theory is the stimulating lens through which we understand the social world most provocatively, and it energizes us.

We will follow in part a chronological order of presentation. Nevertheless, you should not think of theorizing as a cumulative exercise in which the most recent theory is the best. There are at least two good reasons for rejecting that view. First, theory is an essential part of how we experience and interact with the world, and theorizing necessarily changes as the circumstances of our lives change. We cannot know what theory will be in the future; it is likely that some past theories previously forgotten will be resurrected and assume a new relevance (Carl Schmitt may be a good case in point, or Gabriel Tarde). Theory must be responsive to, and in dialogue with, ever-changing life. Secondly, no single theoretical perspective is inclusive enough to account fully for the complexity of social structure, human agency, and their interactions. Thus *theorizing* is always an incomplete exercise, and multiple theories can provide enlightening insight into a single phenomenon. It would be best to think of ‘theory’ as an ongoing,

contentious, and collaborative debate among a number of impassioned participants, each providing distinctive tools for thinking, rather than a linear succession of ideas and concepts. **With that in mind, please note that I sprinkle a few (more or less) current works even into the earliest weeks of the semester.** Our main goal is to keep theoretical debate alive, internalize it, and *expand* on it through critical engagement, both with past theory and with the world around us. That means learning *to theorize*, rather than simply learning theory—although that is a high standard to attain.

The explicit learning goals of this course are fourfold:

- to understand some of the most fundamental arguments and theoretical texts in sociology and place them in dialogue with each other
- to devise questions and a critical framework for your *own* empirical analysis of the social world
- to develop a sense of how theory is a product of its own time and place
- to develop your oral and written communication skills, insofar as the course requires thoughtful discussion in the classroom and clear, trenchant writing in written work

In addition, among the many themes to be discussed at length and in various guises, we will consider: the durability of the social order and social reproduction; modernity and postmodernity; culture, politics, and hegemony; social entities as systems; the autonomy of the social interaction order; the phenomenology of everyday life; notions of rationality; structure and agency; the psychological and emotional bases of domination; the public sphere; knowledge and power; subjects and diverse subjectivities; gendered and racialized identities; relational theorizing; the emotions; and neocolonialism. Hopefully it will be stimulating to swim in these very heady waters for a while.

Course Requirements

Grades for this course will be assigned on the following basis:

- Written weekly memos (30%)
- Class participation and class discussion leadership (20%)
- Two 10-page papers (50%)

As with any graduate seminar, reading all the required material and participating in class discussions in a diligent way are the most essential ingredients for success. To that end, please give yourself ample time to do all the reading for a given week (and re-read parts as necessary).

Below I provide more specific information on the three elements that will determine your grade. Basically, each week (except one) you will *either* be writing a memo on the readings, or preparing to act as class discussion leader. You will sign up for slots during our first meeting.

- ***Leading class discussion:***

Every week, one or two class members will serve as leader of class discussion, with each class member taking THREE turns during the semester. The moderators' job is to highlight major points and help get our discussion going. Leaders can (and probably should) coordinate their efforts ahead of class. I would encourage you to develop a *brief* presentation (about 15 minutes) using the following guidelines:

1. Identifying and defining the *three most important concepts or arguments* from among the week's theorists that you might need to remember ten years from now.
2. The *three most salient points of connection* with other theorists/schools of thought we have discussed previously in the course.
3. The *three most challenging problems, tensions, or shortcomings* you perceive in the theoretical approach discussed this week.

Of course, 'three' is an arbitrary cut-off point and you might focus on fewer or more of these points as you think best. The formula is more mechanical than I would actually like your presentation to be. The point is to be succinct and meaty, because comprehensive isn't possible. Handouts, diagrams, tables, maps, and other kinds of visual heuristics may be useful in organizing your points and keeping us all focused. You don't have to have such aids, but do develop them if you find them useful. As you do this exercise, think about creating notes that would help you if/when you have to teach this material down the road. Don't try to be exhaustive, as it is our collective responsibility to raise additional points and push the discussion beyond your initial presentation.

- ***Written weekly memos:***

You are required to write TEN weekly memos on the readings. [No memos for Week 1, plus you are allowed to take one week off.] These memos must be done before class, and posted in (or pasted into) the "Blogs" area on the course sakai site by **Sunday night at 9:00 pm**, so that I and your classmates have a chance to take a look at them before class. As a rough estimate, these blog posts should be about 400-600 words. I would like there to be little inflation in this length over the course of the semester. In these blog posts, I expect to see evidence that: a) you have done all (or most!) of the assigned readings and have a basic grasp of the core arguments; b) you are connecting the week's readings to previous theorists and schools of thought where applicable; c) you are grappling with the problems posed by the readings in a thoughtful and critical way, appreciating both the positive and the potentially problematic in each author.

Besides these requirements for preparing for class, you will write two papers. I will provide possible topics, although I am very open to you writing on your own topic with my prior approval. Each paper should be approximately ten pages in length. The first paper will be due some time before Spring Break; the second will be due, at the latest, by Friday, May 4 without exception.

Department Diversity Statement

The Rutgers Sociology Department strives to create an environment that supports and affirms diversity in all manifestations, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, disability status, region/country of origin, and political orientation. We also celebrate diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives among our faculty and students and seek to create an atmosphere of respect and mutual dialogue. We have zero tolerance for violations of these principles and have instituted clear and respectful procedures for responding to such grievances.

Required Readings

I would advise you to secure the following books:

- 1) Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (February 19)
- 2) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (March 5)
- 3) John Levi Martin, *Social Structures* (April 2)

Apart from these books, all of the required readings are posted on the course's **sakai** website. If you want to purchase other materials, feel free to do so. In particular, you *might* wish to purchase one or more of the following compendia for present or future use. [You can often get a slightly older edition very cheaply, and so acquiring a copy, for this course and beyond, can be a worthwhile investment.]

- Charles Lemert, ed., *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* (Westview)
- James Farganis, ed., *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*
- Scott Appelrouth and Laura Desfor Edles, eds. *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory*
- Craig Calhoun et al., *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Blackwell)
- Peter Kivisto, ed., *Social Theory: Roots and Branches. Third Edition* (Oxford)

I have used excerpts from these works in several selections below, as indicated.

Schedule of Classes

Session 1 (Jan 22): Logistics, and Thinking about Theorizing

Read: Scott Appelrouth and Laura Desfor Edles, "How Can We Navigate Social Theory?" Pp. 12-20 in *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory*

Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines*, prologue and pp. 3-33 (Chicago, 2001)

Richard Swedberg, *The Art of Social Theory* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 1-8, 14-28, 80-97, 160-1, 195-7

John Levi Martin, *Thinking Through Theory* (Norton, 2015), selections

Session 2 (Jan 29): Functionalism and Neo-functionalist Thinking

Read: Talcott Parsons, "The Unit Act of Action Systems" (1937), pp. 212-215 in Lemert

Talcott Parsons, "Actions and Social Systems," pp. 321-324 in Lemert, ed., *Social Theory* [Excerpt from *The System of Modern Societies*]

Robert K. Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions," pp. 328-334 in Lemert, ed., *Social Theory* [Excerpt from *Social Theory and Social Structure*]

Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Social Action," *American Sociological Review* 1 (December 1936): 894-904

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, "Some Principles of Stratification," pp. 163-171 in James Farganis, ed.

Herbert J. Gans, "The Uses of Poverty: The Poor Pay All," pp. 48-52 in Eve Howard, ed., *Classic Readings in Sociology* (Thomson, 2004)

John F. Padgett and Walter W. Powell, "The Problem of Emergence," in John F. Padgett and Walter W. Powell, eds., *The Emergence of Organizations and Markets* (Princeton, 2012)

Niklas Luhmann, "Limits of Steering" (1997), pp. 139-52 in Calhoun et al, eds, *Contemporary Sociological Theory*

Session 3 (Feb 5): Power and Resistance: Gramsci, Critical Theory, and the Public Sphere

Read: Antonio Gramsci, "Culture and Ideological Hegemony," pp. 47-54 in Alexander and Seidman, eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, pp. 55-9, 169-71, 180-182, 238-9, 242-245 (International Publishers, 1971)

C. Wright Mills, "The Structure of Power in America," pp. 214-23 in Farganis

James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, ch. 4 (Yale, 1990)

Jürgen Habermas, "Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere" (1996), pp. 351-376 in Calhoun et al. (read the editors' introduction as well)

Jürgen Habermas, "Emancipatory Knowledge" (1968) and "Social Analysis and Communicative Competence" (1970), pp. 380-383 in Lemert

Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," pp. 109-142 in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*

Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics," pp. 315-328 in Nicholson and Seidman, eds., *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge, 1995)

Session 4 (Feb 12): Rational Choice Theory: Interests, Exchange, and Collective Action Problems

Read: George Homans, "Bringing Men Back In," *American Sociological Review* 29: 809-818

James Coleman, "Social Theory, Social Research and a Theory of Action," *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1986): 1309-1335

Richard M. Emerson, "Power-Dependence Relations." *American Sociological Review* 27 (February 1962): 31-41

George A. Akerlof, "The Market for 'Lemons': Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism," from *An Economic Theorist's Book of Tales*, pp. 7-22

Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*, selections

Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, chs. 1 and 3 (California, 1987)

Session 5 (Feb 19): Meaning, the Everyday, and the Interaction Order

Read: Alfred Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action," from *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932/1967), in Farganis, 283-300

Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, pp. 1-4, 35-49, 79-94

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), chapters 1-3 (pp. 1-140); skim chapter 4 and more if you can manage

Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, pp. 1-47

Arlie Hochschild, "Exploring the Managed Heart," (2003), pp. 350-61 in Farganis

Randall Collins, "Interaction Ritual Theory" (2004), chapter 2

Session 6 (Feb 26): Symbolic Power and Domination: Habitus, Field and Social Reproduction

Read: Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, pp. 7-19, 36-41 [this is part of Wacquant's exposition, really helpful for reading Bourdieu himself]

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 1-7, 372-396 only (Harvard, 1984)

Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, 1990), sakai selections

Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," pp. 241-258 in J. G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Greenwood, 1986)

Pierre Bourdieu, "The Logic of Fields," pp. 94-115 in his *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago, 1992)

Pierre Bourdieu, "Symbolic Violence," pp. 167-174 in *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*

Also of some interest: "Sociology is a Martial Art"

--<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csbu08SqAuc>

--<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFuAOP1H6Go>

--<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6XM9IHRias>

--<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TKvVBvDFe0>

Session 7 (March 5): Foucault on Power, Knowledge, and Regulatory/Disciplinary Regimes

Read: Michel Foucault, "Lecture Two: 14 January 1976," in his *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, pp. 92-108

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 3-7, 195-230 ("The body of the condemned," and "Panopticism") (Vintage, 1979)

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Volume I* (1976)

SPRING BREAK

Session 8 (March 19): Pondering Modernity: Structuration, the State, Selfhood, Globalization

Read: Anthony Giddens, "Agency, Structure" (1979), and "The Consequences of Modernity" (1990), pp. 233-256 in Calhoun et al.

Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social, and Personal Life*, chapters 3 and 4 (Polity, 2008)

Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, chapter 1 (MIT, 2012)

Arjun Appadurai, "Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in Kevisto

Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, possible selections TBA

Session 9 (March 26): The Cultural Turn

Read: Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," from *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 3-30

Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 273-286.

Stephen Vaisey, "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action," *American Journal of Sociology* 114 (2009): 1675-1715

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith, "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology," in *The Meanings of Social Life or Handbook of Sociological Theory*

Jan Fuhse, "The Meaning Structure of Social Networks," *Sociological Theory* 27 (2009): 51-73

Session 10 (April 2): Structuralism, Old and New

Read: Ferdinand de Saussure, "Signs and Language," pp. 55-63 in Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (1990)

Claude Levi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis in Linguistics and in Anthropology," and "The Structural Study of Myth, pp. 31-51 and 206-17 in his *Structural Anthropology* (Basic, 1963)

John Levi Martin, *Social Structures* (Princeton, 2009), selected chapters

Session 11 (April 9): Postmodernism

Read: Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Madman," pp. 159-161 in Peter Kivisto, ed., *Social Theory: Roots and Branches*

Jacques Derrida, "The Decentering Event in Social Thought," pp. 447-451 in Charles Lemert, ed., *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*

Jean-François Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition" (excerpts), pp. 330-341 in Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman, *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (Cambridge, 1990)

Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" pp. 166-184 in Mark Poster, ed., *Selected Writings* (Stanford, 2001)

Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Objects," pp. 10-28 in Mark Poster, ed., *Selected Writings* (Stanford, 2001)

Session 12 (April 16): Identities in Question: Standpoints and Intersections

Read: Dorothy Smith, "Women's Experience as a Radical Critique of Sociology" (1990), pp. 366-374 in Farganis

Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991), pp. 575-85 in Lemert

Raewyn Connell, "Femininity and Masculinity" (1995). Pp. 355-363 in Kivisto

Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" (1990), pp. 553-554 in Lemert

Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, *The Racial Order* (Chicago, 2015), selections

Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity Without Groups," pp. 398-410 in Kivisto

Session 13 (April 23): Post-colonial Encounters, Subaltern Challenges

Read: Edward Said, *Orientalism* Introduction, pp. 1-28

Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), pp. 548-552 in Lemert

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Weidenfield, 1967), pp. 141-160

Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Studies and the History of Sexuality," pp. 1-18 in *Race and the Education of Desire; Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Order of Things* (Duke 1995)

Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question" (excerpts), pp. 388-402 in Jeffrey Alexander and Steven Seidman, eds. *The New Social Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2001)

Saba Mahmood, "The Subject of Freedom," pp. 1-39 in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton 2005).

Session 14 (April 30): Various Recent Trends (tbd)

Read: Harrison C. White, *Identity and Control* (2nd edition; Princeton, 2008), pp. xvii-xxii, 1-16, 24-26, 36-38, 66-69, 128-130

Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15,1 (Winter 2003): 11-40

Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications" (1997) or his "Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

Michael Burawoy, 2004. "Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas and Possibilities." *Social Forces*. 82(4):1603-1618