Contemporary Theory in Sociology

Sociology 516
Department of Sociology
Rutgers University
(Spring 2019)

Professor: Ali R. Chaudhary
Time: Tuesday, 9:30am to 12:10pm
Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00 to 3:00pm or By Appointment
Room: Davisson Hall – Main Conference Room
Email: arc249@sociology.rutgers.edu

Required Readings:
All of the Required and Most of the Recommended Readings are available as PDFs on Sakai

Course Description
The purpose of the course is to introduce you to some of the major theoretical developments in the field of sociology over the past four decades. In contrast to classical sociological theory, graduate-level courses on contemporary theory tend to vary far and wide across departments and the faculty members. In preparing the readings and organization of the class, I spent considerable time looking at graduate-level contemporary theory course syllabi across several sociology departments in the United States and the United Kingdom. Through this examination, I found two general types of courses. One approach presents key theorists and important works in a chronological order beginning with Talcott Parsons and arriving at postmodernism or postcolonial theory. Another approach organizes readings according to key theoretical perspectives such as functionalism, structure-agency, feminism, postcolonial theory, modernity with weeks devoted to key theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu or Michael Foucault. Rather than mimic either of these two models, I have opted to create a hybrid approach with respect to the selection of readings. My primary interest is to introduce you to theoretical ideas and theorizing that are relevant to sociological inquiry TODAY!!! In this sense, the course will not focus on some of the standard theorists one would read in a social theory course taught in the humanities or area studies. Instead, the course is organized around a handful of theoretical concepts that I believe should be clearly understood by graduate students pursuing a doctoral degree in sociology in the United States. These concepts are by no means reflective of the vast and exciting field of sociology or sociological theory. Rather, I have selected readings in accordance to concepts and perspectives, which I believe are relevant to many subfields within mainstream American sociology. Since there is no possible way to cover the totality of contemporary sociological theory in one semester, consider this course a tasting or intellectual buffet. We’ll try a bunch of stuff. You may not like everything; however, the things you do find potentially “tasty” you can further investigate as you develop your original scholarship during your doctoral training.
After spending a week reading and discussing what it means to theorize in contemporary sociology, we will embark on our trip to the intellectual buffet and read sets of theoretically-rich readings that form the basis of key sociological concepts. Our journey will take us to diverse readings that help sociologists understand ideas such as social action, agency, culture, taste, boundaries, knowledge, fields, intersectionality, racialization, globalization, post-colonialism, and collective action, among others. My hope is that through in-depth reading, discussion, and writing, you will get a sense of how sociologists use theoretical frameworks and concepts to guide and interpret their empirical work. I also encourage you all to think about how the authors we are reading are using empirical research to refine, challenge, or introduce new theoretical concepts and perspectives. While some social scientists (e.g. economists) get by with purely empirical research, this is seldom the case in sociology. As sociologists, you must excel at conducting rigorous research that either tests, develops, challenges, or produced rich theoretical perspectives and concepts. Your ability to theorize your work in a meaningful way will ultimately help you clarify how and why your research contributes to sociological knowledge.

**Learning Goals**

- Acquire a solid understanding of the major theoretical perspective and key concepts used within the discipline of sociology as it is practiced in the Untied States
- Learn how sociologists theorize from their empirical research and how theorizing contributes the development and refinement of pre-existing sociological theories, ideas, and concepts.
- Learn how to frame empirical questions using theoretical perspectives and ideas common in contemporary sociology
- Acquire analytic skills necessary to form critiques of existing theories, concepts, and perspectives within the discipline of sociology.
- Apply sociological concepts, ideals and perspectives to your own research endeavors.

**Assessment**

- Active participation in weekly seminar discussions
- Submission of one or more weekly discussion questions where student’s practice formulating critical questions in relation to weekly assigned readings.
- 10 memos where students much apply one contemporary theory, concept, or perspective to a contemporary social problem/phenomenon
- Two argumentative essays in which students must demonstrate their abilities to write in a comparative fashion about the strengths, limitations, and differences/similarities between two or more theoretical perspectives, concepts, or theorists.
Diversity Statement for Classroom Interaction/Discussion

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. This department celebrates a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives among our faculty and students and seeks 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.

Course Requirements

Weekly Memos (40 points)

You will be required to write a 500 to 750-word memo each week where you will reflect on the assigned readings and try to apply one or more of the ideas from the readings to a contemporary sociological phenomenon. These memos will need to be uploaded to Forums on Sakai by 10pm on the Sunday before our Tuesday morning meetings. It is essential for you to upload these memos by Sunday night so that I and your classmates can have some time to look them over before we meet. You will need to write and upload 10 of these memos during the semester. These memos will account for 40% of your final grade. I will be looking for two things: 1) that you understand the theoretical ideas you have been reading; 2) you have tried to apply these concepts/ideas to a real world social phenomenon/problem. The purpose of this weekly exercise is to help you clarify your thinking by trying to apply the ideas, arguments, or concepts you are reading to the social world. I strongly believe that this type of exercise can help sharpen your theoretical skills and hopefully contribute to your intellectual cultivation as theoretically-driven researchers and knowledge producers.

Weekly Question(s) (10 points)

One of the most important skills one acquires in doctoral training is the ability to ask well-formulated questions. While asking questions may seem like an easy enough task, asking good questions requires a set of skills that are sometimes left out of doctoral training or forgotten soon after completion of the degree. Just observe a Q&A session at ASA or on campus following a talk and you will notice a wide range of questions. While some may be clear and concise, others
will entail a long monologue by the individual asking the question. Both styles are quite common in sociology. In an effort to practice asking questions in relation to theoretical ideas/arguments, we will work on crafting at least one critical discussion questions in relation to assigned readings every week. Each of you will be responsible for posting a discussion question to the course forum on Sakai every week by **Monday at 2pm**. Your 10 points for this part of the course will be assessed by posting the question by 2pm and the overall quality of the question.

**Two Argumentative Essays (25 points each)**

Over the course of the semester, you are required to write two argumentative essays (10-12 pages doubles spaces). In these essays you will need to make an argument about one or more theoretical perspectives/concepts and offer supporting arguments to make your case. This can be done by pitting one scholar/perspective/framework against one another or drawing on outside research to challenge the theorizing presented in the readings we have been covering. Your job is to identify hidden assumptions, limitations, or other problems inherent in the scholarship of one or more authors and to argue how another set of authors/concepts are better at capturing or explaining a given phenomenon. **You are free to write about any of the theories or theorists we have been covering as long as you submit the first essay before Spring Break and the second essay on or before our final class meeting (4/30).**

(Each essay will be worth 25% of your final grade)

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<tr>
<th>Grade Breakdown</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly Memos</td>
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<td>Weekly Questions</td>
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**Disabilities**

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where they are officially enrolled, participate in an intake meeting, and provide documentation: https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/applying-for-services If the documentation supports your request
for reasonable accommodations, your campus’s disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with me as soon as possible, and discuss the accommodations with me as early as possible.

**Code of Classroom Conduct**
I expect students to be on time for class and to stay for the duration of the lecture. The classroom should be a place for the free exchange of ideas where students act with civility, dignity, and an awareness of respect for one another. I welcome all viewpoints and perspectives that are not consistent with “HATE SPEECH”. In other words, conservative or “liberal” perspectives on immigration are welcomed and encouraged. What I will not tolerate is reducing discussions to baseless or purely anecdotal statements (i.e. immigrants are rapists, drug dealers, terrorists, etc.). This class deals with a very controversial topic and I expect to have class discussions that may at times become emotionally charged. These kinds of discussions that are necessary for intellectual growth and what you should expect at a Research 1 university that pre-dates the Declaration of Independence and the formation of the United States of America. All classroom conduct must be consistent with the Rutgers Code of Student Conduct (see the code here: https://slwordpress.rutgers.edu/studentconduct/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/2017/05/UCSC2016.pdf 3)

**Academic Integrity and Plagiarism**
I take cheating on tests and plagiarism very seriously. I refer all suspected cases of cheating and plagiarism to the Rutgers Office of Student Conduct. All students must review the Rutgers University Academic Integrity Policy. Refer to: https://slwordpress.rutgers.edu/academicintegrity/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2014/11/AI_Policy_2013.pdf.

**Course Schedule (Buffet Menu)**

**First Class - Theorizing and the Theoretical  (1/2)**

*Please come to the first class meeting prepared to discuss the two readings below:


Swedberg (2014) “From Theory to Theorizing”

**Recommended Further Readings:**

Merton (1967) “On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range”

Nisbet (1996) “The Unit-Ideas of Sociology” (P.3-20)

Blumer (1954) “What is Wrong with Social Theory”
Paulsen (2014) “The Counterfactual Imagination” (Ch.7 P.158-167)

**Agency & Social Action (1/29)**
Coleman (1990) *Human Action as Rational Choice*

**Structure(s) (2/5)**
Giddens (1972) “Elites in the British Class Structure”

*Recommended Further Readings:*

***First Theory Happy Hour Afternoon Film***
Viewing of Segments of Documentary on Pierre Bourdieu “Sociology is a Martial Art” followed by discussion if time permits (Thursday 2/7 - 4:30pm to 6:30 – In the Library)
Wine and Appetizers provided!!!!
**Everyday Life (2/12)**

Blumer (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, Perspective and Method (P.1-60)

Goffman (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Intro-Ch.3, & Ch.6)

Luckman (1989) “On meaning in everyday life and in sociology”


*Recommended Further Readings:*


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**Culture (2/19)**

Adorno and Horkheimer (1943) “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”

Bourdieu (1990) *Logic of Practice* - Read Ch. 3 – “Structures, Habitus, Practices”


Friedman (1996) Cultural Identity and Global Process


Massey et al. (2014) “Understanding Inequality through the lens of cultural processes: on Lamont, Beljane, and Clair ‘What is Missing?’, *Socio-Economic Review*

*Recommended Further Reading:*


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**Discourse & Knowledge (2/26)**
Foucault (1972-77) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews* (Pp. 110-133)

Foucault and Deleuze (1977) “Intellectuals and Power”


**Recommended Further Reading:**

Foucault (1975) *Discipline and Punishment*

Foucault (1961) *Madness and Civilization*


***Second Theory Happy Hour - Afternoon Film***

Viewing of 1971 Foucault Vs. Noam Chomsky Debate and an Interview with Foucault on his work. (4:30pm to 6:30 Thursday (2/28) in Dept. Library) – Wine and Appetizers provided!!!!

**Boundaries and Tastes (3/5)**


DiMaggio (1987) “Classification in Art”


Roy (2004) “Race Records” and Hillbilly Music…”, *Poetics*


**Recommended Further Reading:**


**Fields (3/12)**

Bourdieu (1989) “Social Space and Symbolic Power”


Martin (2003) “What is Field Theory?”

Martin and Gregg (2015) “Was Bourdieu a field theorist?


**SPRING BREAK (3/16-3/24)**

**The Relational (3/26)**

Emirbayer (1997) “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology”, *American Journal of Sociology*

Block (2012) “Relational Work in Market Economies”, *Politics & Society*

Zelizer (2012) “How I became a Relational Economic Sociologist and What Does that Mean?”, *Politics & Society*


Mische (2011) “Relational Sociology, Culture, and Agency”, *Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis*


**Race & Racialization (4/2)**

Blumer (1958) “Race as a Sense of Group Position”, *Pacific Sociological Review*


Omi and Winant (2014) *Racial Formations (Chapters 1-3)*


*Recommended Further Reading:*

***Third Theory Happy Hour -Afternoon Film***
Viewing of Cambridge Debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. (or we can watch I am Not Your Negro) (Thursday 4/4 4:30pm to 6:30 in Dept. Library) – Wine and Appetizers provided!!!!

**Gender & Intersectionality (4/9)**

Roth & Dashper (2016) “Sociology in the 1980s: The Rise of Gender (and Intersectionality),” *Sociology*

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) “Contextualizing Feminism-Gender, Ethnic, and Class Divisions”, *Feminist Review*

Crenshaw (1989) “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*


Cho, Crenshaw & McCall (2013) “Towards a Field of Intersectionality Studies”


*Recommended Further Reading:*


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**The Postcolonial (4/16)**


Said (1978) *Orientalism* (P. 9-36)

Said (1985) “Orientalism Reconsidered”, *Cultural Critique*


Go, (2013) “For a Postcolonial Sociology”, *Theory & Society*


*Recommended Further Reading:*

Boroz & Sarkar “Empires”

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**The State and Neoliberalism. (4/23)**

Bourdieu (1998) “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field”

Bourdieu Selected Lectures on the State(1989-1990) (On Sakai)

Wacquant (2010) “Crafting the Neoliberal State…”

Harvey (2007) “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction”


**Recommended Further Reading:**

Harvey (2016) “Neoliberalism is a Political Project”

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**Collective Action & Mobilization. (4/30)**


McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (1996) “To Map Contentious Politics”, *Mobilization*

Benford & Snow (2000) “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*


Goldstone (2004) “More social movements or fewer? Beyond political opportunity structures to relational fields”, *Theory & Society*

Tarrow (2016) “War, States, and Contention: From Tilly to the War on Terror”, *Mobilization*

**Recommended Further Readings:**

Chaudhary and Moss (forthcoming) “ Suppressing Transnationalism: Bringing Constraints Back into the Study of Transnational Political Action”