SOCIOl 711

Contemporary Sociological Theory

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Spring 2016. Sociology/Psychology 329.
Tues 10:05am–12:35pm.

Say what you mean. Bear witness. Iterate.

John M. Ford, De Vermis.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This graduate-level course is an introduction to some main themes in sociological theory since the 1950s. It is the second of the two-part theory sequence required of first year Ph.D students in the sociology department. It is not a general introduction either to social theory broadly conceived or to humanities-style “Theory”.

REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

This is a seminar. I take for granted that you have a basic interest in the material and an enthusiastic attitude toward participation. I expect you to attend each meeting, do the reading thoroughly and in advance, and participate actively in class. You should also be reading beyond the requirements as much as possible. In addition, two other kinds of work are required:
1. Each week (except for the first week), you will write a brief (2-4 page) memo and put it in the class Dropbox folder by 3pm the day before class. This is a hard deadline. The memos should discuss topics or questions arising from the week's reading. They are writing and thinking exercises, not finished papers or polished short essays. However, I expect them to engage with the readings in an intelligent way. They should be used to develop ideas informally, and raise issues that seem to you worth developing in class or in your own writing. I will read them each week and sometimes give you written feedback, in addition to using them to help focus class discussion.

2. There will be either a final paper assignment or the option to write a paper of your own. We will discuss the alternatives as we go.

A WORD ABOUT THE APPROACH

Last semester, you followed the more or less conventional sequence of “classical” sociological theorists through the long nineteenth century. You ended a generation later with Talcott Parsons’s effort to unify these thinkers into some sort of research program. Along with the rest of the social sciences, Sociology grew and differentiated rapidly after World War II. Parsons tried to ground his historical synthesis in a systems framework. Structural-functionalism’s period of dominance was disputed and relatively brief, but much of what followed in American Sociology can be seen as a reaction to its failure. Some of the theory groups that followed began working out parts of the post-Parsonian wreckage. Sometimes this was accompanied by a self-consciously modest view about the scope and limits of theory, but sometimes they sought to replace the entire framework using a single part of the original. Others attempted to build a new canon of previously neglected classics, or imported work from outside the field. Amongst the most influential in practice were attempts to develop theory in direct engagement with empirical research rather than by way of quasi-philosophical system-building or armchair cultural criticism.

This semester, we read some of this material. We cannot be comprehensive and we will not try, if only because that would be pedagogically insane. One of the easiest moves in the Theory Game is to say “I can't believe we're not reading x”, for any x. But this move depends for its effectiveness on the word “theory” (or “Theory”) continuing to have its old disciplinary power, and the “theory course” continuing to exercise its old, canon-defining function. This has not been true in Sociology since the 1980s.

I have tried to avoid producing miniature replications of the theory sections of other courses offered in the department. You should take those courses. Nor will we examine very much of the theoretical work that's been done over the same period in other social sciences, in the humanities, and elsewhere. Instead, we will mostly
examine ideas and research programs generated and pursued within the discipline, and that remain relevant to current sociological research. That relevance may take the form of descent, critique, or elephant in the room.

You should see this seminar as a starting point from which to read more widely and deeply than the material we can cover in our allotted time. It provides you with some basic ideas within the discipline together with a framework for interpreting the many critiques, reactions, reformulations, and recombinations of those ideas in the literature.

READINGS

Readings are available either via a link in the syllabus or through the course Dropbox folder. The contents of the Dropbox supersede the contents of this syllabus.

I encourage you to buy and read as many of the required and recommended books as you can. These books—even the quite obscure ones—can generally be acquired cheaply online. The following texts are useful for getting oriented.


FUNCTIONALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Assignment

Come to class having re-read your work from last semester.

Required

Note: This week's readings are best read in the order listed.
PART I: FRAGMENTS OF ROLE THEORY

2. INTERACTION WITHOUT ACTORS

Required


Recommended


3. STRUCTURES WITHOUT FUNCTIONS

Required

Recommended

Peter M. Blau. 1977b. *Inequality and Heterogeneity*. Free Press.

4. INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT SYSTEMS

Required


Recommended

5. CULTURE WITHOUT VALUES

Required


Recommended


PART II: MEANWHILE, IN CAPITALISM

6. CLASS STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL CLOSURE

Required


**Recommended**


### 7. CLASS AND ITS INTERSECTIONS

**Required**


**Recommended**


PART III: REMAKING SYSTEMS

8. STRUCTURE OUT OF CHOICES

Required


Recommended


9. FIELDS OUT OF PRACTICE


Recommended


10. WORLDS OUT OF THEORY

Required


Recommended

11. NETWORKS OUT OF CATEGORIES

Required


Recommended


12. CULTURE OUT OF COGNITION

Required


**Recommended**


13, 14, 15. **CATCH-UP AND TOPICS ARISING**
References


