SOCIO 710

Social Theory from Marx to Parsons

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Fall 2019. Sociology/Psychology 248.
Wednesdays 10:05am–12:35pm.

Say what you mean. Bear witness. Iterate.
John M. Ford, "De Vermis".

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This graduate-level course is an intensive introduction to some main themes in social theory, where that is understood as work that has been influential in the discipline of sociology. It is the first of a two-part sequence required of first year Ph.D students in the sociology department. It is not a general introduction to the history of social or political thought.

REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

This is a graduate seminar. I take for granted that you have a basic interest in the material, an enthusiastic attitude toward participation, and a respectful attitude to your peers. I expect you to attend each meeting, do the reading thoroughly and in advance, and participate actively in class. Participating actively means contributing to class discussion, something that involves both speaking and listening. You should also be reading beyond the course requirements as much as possible. In addition, two other kinds of work are required:
1. Except for the first week, each week you will write a brief (up to two pages) memo and send it to me in PDF format via the class Dropbox folder. It is due by 3pm the day before class. This is a hard deadline. Your memo should discuss a topic, a problem, or questions arising from the week's reading. The memos are writing and thinking exercises. I do not expect a finished paper or a polished short essay. However, I do expect them to engage with the readings in a clear and intelligent way. Use them to develop ideas informally, and raise issues that seem to you worth discussing in class or pursuing further 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. You are required to share your memos with everyone else in the class. (Putting them in the class Dropbox folder will accomplish this.)

2. A final paper is required. It should be fifteen to twenty pages in length and address an interesting *empirical* question of your choice, discussing at least two possible explanations for it, using the perspectives developed in the seminar. Exegetical or purely conceptual papers—e.g., papers devoted to questions internal to some theory—will not be accepted. You should work on your paper throughout the semester. I encourage you to discuss the topic with me ahead of time.

**A WORD ABOUT THE APPROACH**

As is standard practice in our field, the department requires its graduate students complete a two-semester survey course in social (or “sociological”) theory. Theory within sociology is in a strange position. Normally, the core ideas of a field—its theories—are what hold it together. But there are no longer any theorists in sociology. There are theories, or things people call theories; there are theory courses, people who teach theory, theory journals, and theory articles. Inside research papers there are theory sections. Inside the American Sociological Association there is a Theory Section. There are career returns to being thought of as the sort of clever person who can do good theory. Indeed, you cannot get published in a top-flight journal without convincing the reviewers that you have made a theoretical contribution. It’s true that there are people in the field who started out as theorists, and who still think of themselves primarily as such. But they are getting old. Since the late 1980s or early 1990s there has been no *occupational* position of “theorist” within American sociology. No-one gets a job as a theorist.¹

¹For more on this, see Lamont (2004) and also Healy (2007). Crudely, the sort of people who once would have thought of themselves—and hoped to be hired—*primarily* as theorists now typically think of themselves as sociologists of culture instead, or (much less often) as disciplinary historians of ideas.
As a consequence, many people are not sure what, from a disciplinary point of view, theory in sociology is supposed to be any more, or how it should be done, or what if anything distinguishes it from intellectual history, or philosophy, or normative political theory, or humanities-style “Theory”, or applied mathematics. And yet, even now, a presumed acquaintance with a stream of “theoretical” thought—beginning with Smith or Marx, pausing to throw stones at the beached and rotting carcass of Parsons, and ending with one of several more recent thinkers in an attitude of reverence or contempt, according to taste—is very nearly the only material you can rely on being shared by everyone across the field, along with a statistics sequence up to the generalized linear model and a pro-seminar focused on how to submit a paper to the ASA Meetings. As the course unfolds, we will occasionally examine the reasons for this odd state of affairs.

In deference to our professional duty, we follow much of the standard “theory stream” this semester. In the Spring you will move to a survey of contemporary work in the sequel to this course. Inevitably, a great deal will get left out, both now and next semester. Some of what is omitted might be covered in the theory sections of other courses offered by the department. The rest will be covered in the extracurricular reading that you will be doing in your spare time.

READINGS

All required readings will be available either via a link in the syllabus or through the course Dropbox. 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—are generally available for purchase new or used online.

If you do not have a strong background in social theory coming in to the class, it is worth reading one or more of the following books:


If you do have a strong background in social theory coming into the class, you are probably overestimating how strong it really is, so start reading anyway.
SCHEDULE

1. TURN YOUR KEY, SIR

Required


Recommended


2. SMITH, MARX, AND MODERNITY

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels “Manifesto of the Communist Party”.

Recommended

3. **MARX’S POLITICAL ECONOMY**

**Required**


Read the following selections:

- Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (pp. 3–6). [Link](#)
- “Wage Labor and Capital” (pp. 203–217).


Excerpts.


**Recommended**


4. **WEBER ON ACTION AND IDEAS**

**Required**


**Recommended**


5. Weber on Class, Rationalization and Bureaucracy

Required


Recommended


6. Durkheim and the Division of Labor

Required


Recommended


7. DURKHEIM ON SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND MORAL ORDER

Required


Recommended


8. SIMMEL’S FORMAL SOCIOLOGY

Required

Donald Levine, ed. 1972. *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Read the following selections:

- “How is Society Possible?” and “The Problem of Sociology” (Pp. 6–35).
- “Conflict” (Pp. 70–95).
- “Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality” (Pp. 251–293).


9. SOME EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

Required


Recommended


10. SOCIETY IN TURMOIL

Required


Recommended


11. SOCIETY IN EQUINOX

Required


Recommended


11. METHODS AND ATTITUDES

Required


Recommended


REMAINDER

Catch-up, byways, and matters arising.
References


