Contemporary Sociological Theory

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Weds 1:45pm–4:15pm.

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

Course Description

This graduate-level course is a selective 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. Active participation is something that requires both speaking up yourself and listening to what your peers are saying. You should also be reading beyond the requirements as much as possible.

In addition, two other kinds of work are required:
1. Each 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, we followed the more or less conventional sequence of “classical” sociological theorists through the long nineteenth century, ending 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. Early in this period, Parsons tried to further ground his earlier historical synthesis in a framework that brought together cybernetics-style “systems” concepts, a broadly Freudian psychology, and sociological notions of the collective regulation of social action by way of shared values and institutional structure. 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. Post- or Anti-Parsonian theory groups 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. Sometimes newcomers could be seen as trying 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. In practice, the most influential attempts within the discipline tended 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. 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 at least the 1990s. Instead, we will try to get a sense of why the
arguments you see made in the books, articles, and talks get set up and pursued in this
way rather than that.

I have avoided producing miniature versions of the theory sections of topic-focused
courses offered in the department. You should take those courses. Nor will we exam-
ine very much of the often excellent contemporary theoretical work in other social sci-
ences, in the humanities, and elsewhere. (Though there is some, especially in the rec-
ommended readings.) Instead, we will mostly examine ideas and research programs
generated and pursued within the discipline that remain relevant to current sociolog-
ical research. That relevance may take the form of lineal descent, strong critique, or
elephant-in-the-room.

As was the case last semester, 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 of the basic ideas that have been influential 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.

Press.

Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl. 2009. Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures. New York: Cam-
bridge University Press.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

1. OVERTURE: 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.


**Recommended**


**PART I: FRAGMENTS OF ROLE THEORY**

**2. INTERACTION WITHOUT ACTORS**

*Required*

Hall. Excerpts.

**Recommended**

tice Hall
ern University Press.
cerpts.
ter.

**Heritage 1984.**

D.W Maynard, Jeremy Freese, and Nora Cate Schaeffer. 2010. “Calling for Participation: Requests, Block-
view* 63:494–511.
Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt. 2014. “Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People,

3. **STRUCTURES WITHOUT FUNCTIONS**

**Required**

1415.


Recommended

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


Giddens 1979, Chapter 1, “Structuralism and the Theory of the Subject”.


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: MAKING SOCIETIES

8. STRUCTURE FROM CHOICES

Required


Recommended


9. FIELDS FROM PRACTICE


**Recommended**


## 10. WORLDS FROM THEORY

**Required**

Recommended


11. NETWORKS FROM CATEGORIES

Required


Recommended


12. CULTURE FROM COGNITION

Required


**Recommended**


**13: EMANCIPATION FROM SOCIETY**

**Required**


References


