SOCIOI 710

Social Theory from Marx to Parsons

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Wednesdays 10:15am–12:45pm.

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. It is the first of a two-part sequence required of first year Ph.D students in the sociology department. It is a not a general introduction to the history of social or political thought. For the purposes of the course, “social theory” is work that has been influential within the discipline of sociology. Even if you may not see much of this work directly “used” in current work, a good understanding of it is necessary for graduate students hoping to have any sort of informed understanding of how people in the discipline think, and why they think that way. Indirectly, we will also try to self-consciously develop habits of reading, thinking, and discussing the material that are intellectually productive rather than sterile, generative rather than merely “critical”, and on the whole scholarly rather than stupid.
REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

This is a graduate seminar. I take it 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.

The main purpose of the first year sequence in the department is to teach you some core things that are required for you to do good work, but which you do not already know. This has some implications for you (as a student) and me (as the instructor) that might not be immediately obvious. First, I am not making you read this stuff in order to waste your time, or in order to transmit its content to you as if it were all infallible truth. Second, your role in the class is to try to learn things you don't already know and not, for example, to try to impress me or your peers or yourself with how clever you are. Third, much the same applies to my role in the class.

In addition to attendance and participation in both body and mind, 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. In principle, the core ideas of a field—its theories—are what hold it together intellectually. But there are no longer any theorists in sociology. There are theories and theory courses, people who teach theory and theory journals. 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 old. Since the late 1980s there has been no occupational position of “theorist” within American sociology. No-one gets a job as a theorist.

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, or some sort of conspiracy against first year graduate students. And yet, even now, a presumed acquaintance with a stream of “theoretical” thought—beginning perhaps with Smith or Marx, proceeding through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pausing to throw stones at the beached and rotting carcass of Functionalism, 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 proseminar 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.

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.
RE Danes

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. (Not necessarily the week we’re scheduled to read them!) 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 into 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).


**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).


**Recommended**


9. **AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS, SOCIETY, AND SOCIAL REFORM**

**Required**


Recommended


10. SOCIETY IN TURMOIL

Required


Recommended


11. SOCIETY IN EQUIPOISE

Required


Recommended


11. METHODS AND ATTITUDES

Required


Recommended


REMAINDER

Catch-up, byways, and matters arising.
References


