SOCIOL 710

Social Theory from Marx to Parsons

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Fall 2022. Reuben-Cooke, 331.
Mondays, 12:00pm–2:30pm.

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” means theory 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 discussion that are intellectually productive rather than sterile, generative rather than merely “critical”, and on the whole scholarly rather than stupid.
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 required 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 graduate sequence is to teach you some core things about the field that are required for you to do good work, but which you do not already know. This has some implications that might not be immediately obvious. First, I am not making you read this stuff in order to waste your time, or to evangelize its content to you as if it were all revealed truth, or to haze you in some weird fashion. 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, your peers, or yourself with how clever you are. Third, this point also applies to my role as the instructor. Fourth, the people in the room—including me—are not your competitors or enemies; they are your interlocutors. Academic disciplines are just highly-structured, long-running conversations. This is where you start learning what the conversation topics are, what the standards of evaluation look like, and where you begin thinking about making your own contributions. So please, trust the process. Everything will go better if you do.

REQUIREMENTS

In addition to reading, attendance, and participation, 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 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.)

The memos are not summaries of or your notes on the readings. A summary is unnecessary because you can assume we have all read the material. Meanwhile,
you should be taking reading notes separately. Nor are memos the place to express your gut reaction to what you read. Neither I nor, I regret to say, anyone else is interested in whether you “liked” or “disliked” any reading or author in some general sense. While such reactions are inevitable, they should galvanize your memos by prompting you to reflect on and analytically detail your reactions. They do not constitute an interesting response in and of themselves.

2. A final paper is required. It should be fifteen to twenty pages in length and address an interesting substantive 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 wholly 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 discipline—its theories—are what hold it together intellectually. Disciplines are not subjects or topics. An intellectual discipline is a way of thinking about and investigating a possibly quite varied set of subjects and topics. 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, too. 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.¹

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

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.
conspiracy against first-year graduate students. And yet, a presumed acquaintance with a particular stream of 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 outlining how to submit a paper to the ASA Meetings.

As the course unfolds, we will examine the reasons for this odd state of affairs. We shall also take advantage of it in order to sharpen our sense of how sociologists think about and come up with explanations for the phenomena they study. One of the advantages of reading the material we do—even when it may seem desperately out-of-fashion or hopelessly inadequate—is that it allows us to see, in a fairly clear way, the distinctive (bad) habits of mind and (terrible) explanatory moves that still very much characterize the theories sociologists are temperamentally inclined to produce.

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. Recommended readings are where you might go next if you want to pursue a topic a little further. 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 Interpretation

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


