

SOC 502

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Spring 2000

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Office hours: by appointment.
Green Hall 2-C-8

Tuesdays: 9:00-12:00

This course offers an introduction to contemporary sociological theory for graduate students aspiring to lead a life of research in the social sciences. The first and primary goal is to provide guidelines for a reflection on the role of theory in sociological research. We will examine questions such as: What is theory? How is it to be evaluated? How can we build on available theories in constructing new ones? Our second goal will be to understand how theories are shaped by the context in which they are produced. We will also discuss whether the impact of contexts should prevent us from aspiring to the production of generalizable theories. A third, broader, objective will be to provide students with bases needed for achieving a decent level of intellectual literacy within the field of sociology.

Students who have not had exposure to sociological theory at the undergraduate level are encouraged to read one of the following books prior to our first meeting:

Randall Collins, 1994. *Four Sociological Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press (for true beginners)

Jonathan H. Turner, 1991. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (encyclopedic, with a functionalist twist)

George Ritzer, 1988. *Frontiers of Social Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

These books will provide you with a general road-map of the field of sociological theory, as well as basic information on some of the approaches that we will not be cover due to time constrains (e.g., critical theory, exchange theory, neo-functionalism).

The first part of the course defines and contrasts various approaches to sociological theory. The second part focuses on structural approaches that privilege the objective properties of social reality. In particular, we will discuss the ongoing crisis of

neo-Marxism. The third part privileges cultural approaches that emphasize the subjective aspects of social reality. We will contrast traditional approaches (e.g., symbolic interactionism) with more recent work that focuses on the structural aspects of cultural phenomena. Our goal here will be to go beyond the structure/culture dichotomy that often organizes the teaching of postwar sociological theory. The fourth part turns to the post-, new, and improved European and American contributions which have had a powerful impact in transforming the meaning of theory in sociology and other disciplines. We will conclude with a general reflection on the impact of the material we have covered on our practice as sociologists.

Requirements:

- 1) Four memos on a group of weekly readings of your choice. These memos, of a maximum length of three to four pages, should be emailed to all class participants at least 24 hours before our meetings. Their role is to help you and others prepare our discussion by pointing to a number of substantive and critical issues, and by identifying connections and contrasts between theoretical approaches (40 percent of the grade).
- 2) Several class presentation (30 percent of the grade).
- 3) Take-home exam or a paper on a topic to be discussed with me (30 percent of the grade; due Friday, May 12th).

Readings:

The following books are available at the U-Store. A reading packet is also available at Pequod, 6 Nassau St.

Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basics.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Vintage.

Paula England, ed. 1993. *Theory on Gender: Feminism on Theory*. New York: A. de Gruyter.

Part 1: Introduction

Week 1 (February 1): What is Theory?

Alford, Robert R. 1998. *The Craft of Inquiry. Theories, Methods and Evidence*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 1-4 and chapter 3.

Turner, Jonathan. 1991. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, chapter 1.

Mouzelis, Nicos, 1995. *Sociological Theory. What Went Wrong?* London: Routledge. Introduction.

Week 2 (February 9): Overview and Approaches to Theory

Calhoun, Craig. 1992. "Sociology, Other Disciplines, and the Project of a General Understanding of Social Life." Pp. 137-195 in *Sociology and Its Publics*, edited by Terence C. Halliday and Morris Janowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Connell, R.W. 1997. "Why is Classical Theory Classical?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (6): 1511-57.

Collins, Randall. 1997. "A Sociological Guilt Trip: Comments on Connell." *American Journal of Sociology*. 102 (6): 1511-57.

Lamont, Michèle. 1987. "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida." *American Journal of Sociology*. 93 (3): 584-622.

Part 2: Toward Structure

Week 3 (February 15): Rational Choice and Network Theory

Turner, Jonathan. 1991. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, Calhoun, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Chapter 17.

Somers, Margaret R. 1998. "We're No Angels: Realism, Rational Choice, and Relationality in Social Science." *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (3): 722-84.

Kiser, Edgar and Michael Hechter. 1998. "The Debate on Historical Sociology: Rational Choice Theory and Its Critics." *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (3): 785-816.

Wellman, Barry. 1988. "Structural Analysis: From Method and Metaphor to Theory and Substance." Pp. 19-61 in *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, edited by Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Emirbayer, Mustapha and Jeff Goodwin. 1994. "Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency." *American Journal of Sociology*. 99 (6): 1411-1454.

Week 4 (February 22): Neo-Marxism, Kindred, and Less-Kindred Spirits

Pakulski, Jan and Malcolm Waters. 1996. "The Reshaping and Dissolution of Social Class in Advanced Society." *Theory and Society* 25 (5): 667-691.

Eric Olin Wright, 1996. "The Continuing Relevance of Class Analysis. Comments." *Theory and Society* 25: 693-716.

Grusky, David and Jesper B. Sorensen. 1998. "Can Class Analysis be Salvaged?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (5): 1187-1235.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1991. "Call for a Debate about the Paradigm." Pp. 237-256 in *Unthinking Social Science. The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*. London: Polity Press.

Part 3: Toward Culture

Week 5 (February 29): Ethnomethodology and Symbolic Interactionism

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor/Doubleday.

Garfinkel, Harold and Harvey Sacks. "On Formal Structures of Practical Action." In *Ethnomethodological Sociology*, edited by Jeff Coulter. Brookfield, Vt: Edward Elgar Pub. co. , pp. 55-84.

Week 6 (March 7): Culture Theory: From Functionalism to Recent Developments

Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf. 1980 "Talcott Parsons: Grand Theory" in *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Englewoods Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 20-52.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic. Chapters 1, 4, 6, and 15.

Mennell, Stephen and Johan Goulsblom, ed. 1998. *Norbert Elias, On Civilization, Power, and Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Introduction.

Jenkins, Richard. 1996. *Social Identity*. London: Routledge. Chapters 4, 6, and 9.

Week of March 14: Spring break

Part 4: Post-, New, and Improved

Week 7 (March 21): Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

Lamont, Michèle and Robert Wuthnow. 1990. "Betwixt and Between: Recent Cultural Sociology in Europe and the United States." Pp. 287-315 in *Frontiers of Social Theory: The New Synthesis*, edited by George Ritzer. New York: Columbia University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage. 3-131 and 195-228.

Week 8 (March 28): Giddens, Bourdieu, and Beyond.

Anthony Giddens, 1993. *The Giddens Reader*, London : MacMillan, Pp. 1-36 and 88-176

Brubaker, Rogers. 1985. "Rethinking Classical Social Theory: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu." *Theory and Society*. 14-6: 745-775.

Sewell, William H. Jr., 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *American Journal of Sociology* 98: 1-29.

Week 9 (April 4): New French Theory and Pragmatism

Lamont, Michèle and Laurent Thevenot, 1999. "Introduction: Toward a Renewed Cultural Sociology" *Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*. Unpublished ms., Department of Sociology, Princeton University.

Benatouil, Thomas. 1999. "A Tale of Two Sociologies. The Critical and Pragmatic Stance in Contemporary French Sociology." *European Journal of Social Theory* 2 (3): 379-396.

Joas, Hans. 1993. *Pragmatism and Social Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Introduction and conclusion.

Week 10 (April 11): Feminist Theory

England, Paula, ed. 1993. *Theory on Gender: Feminism on Theory*. New York: A. de Gruyter. Selection.

Week 11 (April 18): Postmodernism and Postmodernity

Antonio, Robert J. 1998. "Mapping Postmodern Social Theory." Pp. 22-75 in *What is Social Theory? The Philosophical Debates*, edited by Alan Sica. New York: Blackwell.

Huyssen, Andreas. 1986. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Pp.179-221 and 235-240.

Steven Ward, 1995. "The Revenge of the Humanities: Reality, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Postmodernism." *Sociological Perspectives* 38 (2): 109-128.

Part 5: Conclusion

Week 12 (April 24): Metatheoretical and Practical Issues and Synthesis

Skocpol, Theda. 1984. "Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology." Pp. 356-391 in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Van Den Berg, Axel 1998. "Is Sociological Theory too Grand for Social Mechanisms?" Pp. 204-237 *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, edited by Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smelser, Neil J. 1988. "Social Structure" in *Handbook of Sociology*, ed. by Neil J. Smelser, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pp. 103-129.