Purpose: This 12-week seminar surveys the field of contemporary social theory, exposing you to major approaches, themes, thinkers and debates. There are several ways one could organize such a course: as a historical narrative of issues and debates; as an introduction to a set of important books or important thinkers, around varying approaches to theory and theory construction (from metatheory to cumulative theoretical research programs), or around key theoretical dilemmas (theories of action, mechanisms bridging micro and macro, comparative history). This seminar does a little bit of each, providing a tasting menu that will, I hope, provide at least superficial literacy and equip you to probe more deeply the ideas and approaches that you find most stimulating and useful. The focus throughout is on the instrumental value of theory, as a means of improving research. There are many ways that theory can do that – by making one question taken-for-granted assumptions and thus liberating one from conventional habits of mind, by exercising the imaginative faculties, by clarifying presuppositions that form the implicit ground for research, by presenting models for thinking about problems, and even by suggesting empirical propositions.

Eligibility: This seminar is required of first-year graduate students in Sociology. It is open to any graduate student in Sociology or other social-science department or the Woodrow Wilson school, and to senior-year sociology majors. Others may apply to instructor for admission.

Requirements
A. Read thoughtfully in advance and participate. Students are expected to do the reading thoroughly before the class meeting for which it is assigned, and to participate actively in class meetings. (Some of the readings are very demanding, and the amount of reading in some weeks is quite substantial, so be sure to leave enough time.) Emphasis is on mastering, responding critically and creatively to, integrating the seminar’s material, and, especially, extracting from the material ideas or approaches that are useful to you in your own work. Try to extract something of value from each assigned reading, even as you evaluate it critically.

B. Three memoranda. During each 4-week period of the course (i.e., weeks 1-4, 5-8, and 9-12), you are required to submit (preferably as an e-mail attachment) one memorandum of approximately 1000-1200 words on the week’s readings. (No credit will be given for memoranda handed in late, as part of the point is to prepare you to participate actively in seminar discussions.) Please view memoranda as writing/thinking exercises, not as finished products. Use them to engage the week’s materials, respond with questions, criticisms and new ideas they suggest, put into words impressions that seem worth developing, and think about how the readings might contribute to your own intellectual projects. Memos also provide a means by which I can give you ongoing individualized feedback. If you want to do more than the three that are required, I’ll provide feedback on those, too.

C. Two brief presentations. Each student will make 2 brief (10-15 minute) presentations to the seminar on new topics and supplementary readings of particular interest. A list of presentation topics is attached to this syllabus. Presenters will meet with me before their presentation to review presentation strategies.
The good news: No term paper or research project is required, nor is there a final examination.

Readings: Two copies of each week's set of readings will appear in the seminar box in Sociology Department mailroom at least one week before seminar.
CONTEMPORARY THEORY

After a brief list of general references, topics and readings assignments are listed by week. Required readings come first, followed by week-specific reference resources. Readings associated with particular presentation topics appear on the separate topics list.

Reference resources for course as a whole:
The following are useful secondary sources on some of the materials included in the required reading.


Stinchcombe, Arthur L. 1987. Constructing Social Theories. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. Deservedly a classic, this lucid and engaging exposition of several forms of theory-building, is a bit dated (it was first published in 1965) but still unsurpassed. Includes causal, functional, demographic, and historicist forms of explanation.


Week 1 (February 6): Intro – Visions of theory

Required:


Week 2 (February 12): Parsons, the problem of action, and functional analysis

Required:
Parsons, Talcott. 1949 [1937]. The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers. NY: Free Press. Part I, pp. 3-128; chapter 12, pp. 451-72.


Reference resources for week 2:

Week 3 (February 19): Microsociologies: Ethnomethodology, Phenomenology, Goffman

**Required:**

**Reference resources for Week 3:**

Week 4 (February 26): Individualism and rational choice

**Required:**

**Reference resources for week 4:**

Week 5 (March 6): Structuralism & role theory: Nadel, Blau & White

**Required:**

Week 6 (March 13): Conflict theory: Marxism and social closure
Week 7 (March 27): Practice Theory: Bourdieu and Giddens  

Required:

Reference resources for week 7:

Week 8 (April 3): 2 Leading German Theorists: Habermas & Luhmann  

Required:

Reference resources for week 8:
Contemporary Theory ---6---


Week 9 (April 10): Postmodernism

Required:


Week 10 (April 17): Evolutionary Theory

Required:


Week 11 (April 24): Theories of Gender

Required:


Reference Resources for Week 11:

Week 12 (May 1): Society as a Complex System

Required:

Reference resources for week 12: