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:


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 posted on the course’s web-page at least 24 hours before our meetings. Their role is to help you and the other seminar participants 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 (15 percent of the grade).

3) A 5-7 pages paper that describes, sorts out, and analyzes the range of theories discussed in Required Reading: Sociology’s Most Influential Books (edited by Dan Clawson). This collection includes reviews by leading experts of seventeen books judged “the most influential in American sociology over the past 25 years” (15 percent of the grade) (due April 27).

4) Take-home exam or a paper on a topic to be discussed with me (30 percent of the grade; due May 11th).

Readings:

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


Part 1: Introduction

Week 1 (February 2): What is Theory?


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


Part 2: Toward Structure

Week 3 (February 16): Rational Choice and Network Theory


Week 4 (February 23): Neo-Marxism, Kindred, and Less-Kindred Spirits


Part 3: Toward Culture

Week 5 (March 2): Symbolic Interactionism, Emotions, and Pragmatism


**Week 6 (March 9): Developments in Cultural Theory: Mental Maps et al.**


**Week of March 16: Spring break**

**Week 7 (March 23): Developments in Cultural Theory: Identity et al.**


**Part 4: Post-, New, and Improved**

**Week 8 (March 30): Structuralism and Post-Structuralism**


**Week 9 (April 6): New French Theory**


**Week 10 (April 13): Improved Feminist Theory**


**Week 11 (April 20): Postmodernism and Postmodernity**


Part 5: Conclusion

Week 12 (April 27): Metatheoretical and Practical Issues

