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, and integrating the material, and, especially, extracting from the readings 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. Four memoranda. During each 3-week period of the course (i.e.g, 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 four that are required, I’ll provide feedback on those, too.

C. One brief presentations. Each student will make a brief (c. 15 minute) seminar presentation on a topic of particular interest. Presenters will meet with me before their presentation to review strategies.

The good news: No term paper or research project is required, nor is there a final examination.
Readings: Books of which we are reading very large chunks are available at Micawber’s books at 110-14 Nassau Street. (These selection will not be available for photocopying, because the scope of the readings go beyond “Fair Use”). Except for these books, 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.

Books available at Micawber
List Price: $11.95 Paperback - 219 pages (August 1967)

James S. Coleman, Foundations of Social Theory
List Price: $35.50 Paperback Reprint edition (December 1994)
Harvard (Belknap Press); ISBN: 0674312260

Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual : Essays on Face to Face Behavior
List Price: $10.75 Paperback - 270 pages (February 1982)

Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere


List Price: $19.95 Paperback Student edition (July 2000)
Cambridge Univ Pr (Pap T xt); ISBN: 0521663946.
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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 7): Intro – Visions of theory

Required:

Other readings

Week 2 (February 14): 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. 3-125; chapter 12, pp. 451-70.

**Reference resources for week 2:**

**Week 3 (February 21): Microsociologies: Ethnomethodology, Phenomenology, Goffman**

**Required:**

**Other resources for Week 3:**
Click on me: http://www.theorycards.org.uk/card06.htm

**Week 4 (February 28): Individualism and rational choice**

**Required:**

**Other resources for week 4:**
Week 5 (March 7): Structuralism & role theory: Nadel, Blau & White

Required:

Other resources:

Week 6 (March 14): Conflict theory: Marxism and social closure

Required:

Other readings:
Week 7 (March 28): Bourdieu and Douglas

**Required:**


Other Resources:


Bourdieu bibliography on-line: http://www.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/lxe/sektktf/bb/hyperbourdieu80-89.html#BM1985


Week 8 (April 4): Habermas

**Required:**


Reference resources for week 8:


Habermas On-Line: http://www.sla.purdue.edu/people/soc/mdeflem/HabermasOnline/default.html

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**Week 9 (April 11): Postmodernism**

**Required:**


Click on me: http://www.theorycards.org.uk/card05.htm

http://www.theorycards.org.uk/card03.htm

**Other resources for week 9:**

Foucault website: http://www.foucault.info/


Giddens, Anthony. Modernity and Self-Identity.

David Harvey, The Postmodern Condition


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**Week 10 (April 18): Evolutionary Theory**

**Required:**


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Week 11 (April 25): Theories of Gender

Required:
Theory.” Annual Review of Sociology 23: 97-120.
301-16.
Smith, Dorothy E. 1990. “Women’s Experience as a Radical Critique of Sociology” and “The Ideological
Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Other Resources for Week 11:

Week 12 (May 2): Society as a Complex System

Required:
Arthur, W. Brian, Steven Durlauf and David A. Lane. 1997. “Process and Emergence in the Economy.” 4-
page selection from Introduction to The Economy As an Evolving Complex System II: Proceedings. Volume
27 in the Santa Fe Institute Studies in the Sciences of Complexity. Santa Fe: Santa Fe Institute. (Ms.
Sociology 105: 493-527. (OK to skim technical parts.)
1-24 (“Approaching Complexity”) and pp. 112-140 (“Complexity and Postmodernism”).


Other resources for week 12:


