Sociology 8701: Sociological Theory

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Office hours: Weds 9:00-11:00 or by appt.

Fall 2016, Tues/Thurs 2:30-3:45, 614 Social Sciences

Course overview

Sociological theories seek to understand the relationship between “biography and history” as C. Wright Mills put it, or how the association of individuals creates broader cultural and material realities which in turn shape and constrain our lives. Sociology is a diverse discipline and our theories reflect that fact. Sociological theories differ in style, epistemological viewpoint, level of analysis, focus (social structural or cultural orientation), and methodological implication. Yet there are also enduring themes that cut across these differences: an interest in the basis of social order, and change, in distinctions of power, and in what marks our own era of history (“modernity”) as different from what came before or what might come after.

Understanding both the divisions and the unifying threads that shape our discipline is the central goal of the class. We will cover both the traditional core theorists as well as the modern paradigms that are widely influential. While many of the figures and themes we explore will be familiar to you already, this work is the basis for every professional sociologist’s toolbox. I say “toolbox” because I want to foster the view that theories are not static things to be read and worshipped. They are active things–tools to be used in the important work we have yet to do.
Requirements

Attendance and participation (30% of course grade). I expect everyone to attend class and participate each seminar day. Please let me know in advance when you plan to miss class. Emergencies are sometimes unavoidable, but catch up with me as soon as possible—ideally the day of seminar.

Engagement memos (40% of course grade). Everyone will write five short, focused memos of 800-1200 words. We will set the schedule for memos, which will be then posted before class. For seminar days when you do not have a memo due, you will read the posted memos and help engage the authors in class discussion.

Final paper: epistemic modes (30% of course grade). We do not have a final exam in this class. Rather, there will be a longer paper (10-12 pages) that considers the connections between theoretical positions and empirical research. We will discuss the specifics of the paper later in class, but it will be tied to our discussion of Isaac Reed’s book, which we read at the end of the semester.

Memos

The memos are short and focused rather than sprawling; they need clear thinking and careful writing. Successful memos will do three things:

1. Identify and explain the structure of a key argument or concept. It is best to focus on specific points you find especially important rather than try to summarize everything! Also note that sometimes it may be helpful to identify and assess key parallels and distinctions between readings. I will try to talk briefly with memo authors about key points for upcoming sessions; if you have other ideas for what you would like to do, please discuss them with me.

2. Engage with the concept or argument. This may involve using the concept to examine a question or case that interests you, or it may involve an engaged critique. Just remember to keep focus on the value of the concept. For example, a solid critique does not simply say “this argument does not consider problem X” but rather considers limitations in relation to values and uses of a concept or theory.

3. Pose clear questions and issues for discussion that we should expand upon and develop in class. The questions may, for example, focus on important but difficult parts of the argument, unclear connections or implications, and/or the extensions and critiques you have developed.
On the days when you are not writing a memo, you should do two things. First, read the posted memos carefully and write a brief response to indicate which points and questions are of particular interest to you (or, you may add additional questions that you think are important but which did not get covered). Second, you should bring these up in class. Everyone is collectively responsible for building the discussion.

Memos are due without fail by 6:00 pm on the evening before a given seminar. You will have until Friday evening of the same week to amend or re-edit the memo if you wish, though please inform me if you choose to do so. Responses must be posted by noon on the seminar day. The goal is to have already have some interaction going before the session starts.

Readings

Negotiating the first year in graduate school with an orderly and calm mindset is like trying to take a careful sip from a firehose, but please make sure that you block out the time you need in the week, every week, to do the work. I have done everything I can to keep the reading focused, but it is a substantial amount and even still we will have to leave out a great deal of important work. We are reading the original texts (sometimes in edited form) but especially if you don’t have a background in sociology it may be helpful to consult secondary summaries. Overview works like George Ritzer’s Social Theory or Jonathan Turner’s The Structure of Sociological Theory can be very helpful.

Core books listed below are available at the Bookstore. If you order separately, please make sure you get the same translations and editions wherever possible, since we will do close readings and we will often need to reference particular passages and pages. I strongly suggest physical books rather than e-book editions for the same reason. Plus you can mark up your physical texts—get a good mechanical pencil while you are at it.


**Seminar schedule**

**Tues, Sept. 6**  Introduction to Sociological Theory

• Craig Calhoun, “Introduction” to *Classical Sociological Theory* [2012].

• Robert Merton, “The Uses and Abuses of Classical Theory” [1967]


**Thurs, Sept. 8**  Enlightenment Roots of Sociology

• Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” [1784].

• Adam Smith, “Wealth of Nations” [1776].

• Thomas Paine “Rights of Man” [1791] and Mary Wollstonecraft, “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” [1792]

• Alexis de Tocqueville, “Influence of Democracy on the Feelings of Americans” [1840]

• *Memos: Edgar, Brooke*

**Tues, Sept. 13**  Social Production and Alienation

• Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing” [1843].

• Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” emphasis pp. 70-105.

• *Memos: Snigdha, Nir*
Thurs, Sept. 15  Consciousness, Ideology, and Historical Materialism

- Karl Marx, “The German Ideology, Part I” [1845], emphasis on pp. 147-186.
- Memos: Edgar, Snigdha

Tues, Sept. 20  Capitalism and Labor Process

- Karl Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital” [1849].
- Memos: Snidgha, Jenn

Thurs, Sept. 22  Problematizing Production and Consumption

- George Ritzer, “Prosumer Capitalism” [2015].
- Memos: Caity, Brieanna, Nir

Tues, Sept. 27  System Crisis and Change

- Giovanni Arrighi, “Systemic and Antisystemic Crises” [2007].
- Saskia Sassen, “Reconfiguring Territory, Authority, and Rights” [2006].
- Memos: Edgar, Snigdha, Haram

Thurs, Sept. 29  Society and Social Facts

- Émile Durkheim, “Rules of Sociological Method” [1895].
- Émile Durkheim, Suicide [1897]. emphasis on Book 2.
- Memos: Amber, Aras, Nir
Tues, Oct. 4  Solidarity and Social Divisions

• Émile Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society* [1893], emphasis Books I and III.

• *Memos: Edgar, Brooke, Aimzhan*

Thurs, Oct. 6  Collective Consciousness and Social Divisions

• Émile Durkheim, “The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions” [1914].

• Émile Durkheim, “Origin of the Idea of the Totemic Principle or Mana” [1912].

• *Memos: Caity, Gunercindo, Haram*

Tues, Oct. 11  Micro and Macro Solidarity

• Randall Collins, “Interaction Ritual Chains” [2004].


• Mancur Olson, “The Logic of Collective Action” [1965].

• *Memos: Edgar, Brooke, Michael*

Thurs, Oct. 13  Multiculturalism and Diversity

• Rogers Brubaker, “Difference and Inequality” [2015].

• Jeffrey Alexander, “Theorizing the ‘Modes of Incorporation’” [2001].


• *Memos: Heidi, Amber, Aimzhan*

Tues, Oct. 18  Weberian Social Science

• Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ and the Social Sciences” [1904].

• Max Weber, “Basic Sociological Terms” [1914].

• Suggested to skim: Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” [1921] and “Politics as a Vocation” [1922].

• *Memos: Nir, Brieanna*
Thurs, Oct. 20  Religion and Rationality


• Suggested to skim: Max Weber, “Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism” [1904].

• *Memos: Caity, Michael, Gunercindo*

Tues, Oct. 25  Distinctions of Power

• Max Weber, “Distribution of Power Within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party” [1914].

• Max Weber, “Types of Legitimate Domination” [1914].

• Max Weber, “Bureaucracy” [1914].

• *Memos: Brooke, Heidi, Jenn*

Thurs, Oct. 27  Is a Robust Democratic Life Possible?

• Hannah Arendt, “Action” [1958].

• Jürgen Habermas, “Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere” [1996].

• Michael Walzer, “The Civil Society Argument” [1992].

• Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community” [1992].

• *Memos: Heidi, Snigdha, Haram*

Tues, Nov. 1  The Self, the Other, and Society

• George Herbert Mead, “The Self” [1934].

• Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” [1908].


• *Memos: Brooke, Aras, Michael*
Thurs, Nov. 3  Individuals and Institutions

- Skim: Jürgen Habermas, “The Rationalization of the Lifeworld” [1981].
- Memos: Caity, Gunercindo, Heidi

Tues, Nov. 8  Making “Self” Work

- Memos: Aimzhan, Brieanna, Jenn

Thurs, Nov. 10  Gaps in Presentation of Self

  item Memos: Amber, Michael

Tues, Nov. 15  Social Structural Constraints on Individuals

- Georg Simmel, “Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality” [1908].
- Harrison White, “Catnets” [1966].
- Memos: Gunercindo, Heidi, Michael

Thurs, Nov. 17  Difference and Standpoint

- Frantz Fanon, “Black Skin, White Masks” [1952].
- Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology” [1990].
- Memos: Amber, Aras, Jenn
Tues, Nov. 22  Subjectivity and Discourse

• Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality” [1976].
• Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” [1977].
• Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish” [1975].
• Memos: Gunercindo, Aimzhan

Thurs, Nov. 24  THANKSGIVING; NO CLASS

Tues, Nov. 29  Fields and Symbolic Space

• John Levi Martin, “What is Field Theory?” [2003].
• Pierre Bourdieu, “Social Space and Symbolic Space” [1994].
• Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed” [1993].
• Memos: Caity, Brieanna

Thurs, Dec. 6  Habitus, Structure, Practice

• Memos: Amber, Nir

Tues, Dec. 8  Practice, Capital, Domination

• Pierre Bourdieu, Logic of Practice [1980], Chapters 5-9.
• Memos: Haram, Jenn
Thurs, Dec. 13  Rethinking Epistemic Modes: Realism

- *Memos: Aras, Snigdha*

Tues, Dec 15  Rethinking Epistemic Modes: Normative, Interpretive

- Isaac Ariail Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* [2011], Chapters 3-5.
- *Memos: Aimzhan, Haram*

Thurs, Dec 22  Final papers due by 12:30 pm. (You may turn them in earlier!)