Sociology 8701: Sociological Theory

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Fall 2020; 4 Credits

Class: Tues/Thurs 2:30-3:45, Canvas & Zoom
Office hours: Thurs., 10:00-12:00 or appt., on Zoom

Course overview

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

My central goal is to help you understand both the divisions and the unifying threads of our discipline. To that end, we cover the work that is the basis for every professional sociologist’s toolbox, from the classical “core” theorists to the modern paradigms that are widely influential. I want to foster the view that theories are not static things to be read and worshipped, but rather tools to be used in the important work we have yet to do. For this class, it is deeply important that we all adopt (and help foster) an understanding that none of us knows everything, but also that we are all smart enough to engage these readings and each other.
Course instruction and communication

For fall 2020, the course will be completely online in a synchronous format. Course materials can be found on our Canvas site (login via http://canvas.umn.edu) and there you will also find the link to our Zoom meetings during regular course times. Our meeting schedule thus retains the same instructional time as it would be for an in-person semester. Class meetings are seminar format, with an expectation of high levels of involvement from all of us each day. In addition to class meeting time, you will have to budget substantial time for reading and preparation.

For the course meetings, you will need a computer with a web camera and microphone and adequate internet connectivity for accessing Canvas, the University library, and our Zoom meetings. A phone will work as a backup but not as a main point of access. In case of difficult connections we may all have to occasionally turn cameras off, but please default to having them on – it’s much more difficult to converse in a small group otherwise. Assessments for the course are outlined below.

Because the memos are important for preparation of class discussion, it is important to stick to the schedule we create for the initial posting, and especially the discussion questions. If you need to switch days with someone, please arrange to do so. I aim to get the final memo submissions graded and back to you with comments within the week, but I can be more flexible with the final submission deadlines if you don't mind that it takes more time for me to return them to you. I strongly counsel against taking incompletes for the course as it is very difficult to catch up. We will have several opportunities for one-on-one discussions of the final paper.

During this COVID era, email is the best way to get in touch with me. I will have regular office hours on Zoom (access via our Canvas site) with waiting lists to allow for one-on-one discussion. If you need to arrange a one-on-one Zoom meeting outside of regular office hours, please let me know. In a normal semester conversations often happen informally, just walking down the hall or in the department common spaces. We will all have to work harder to make those connections happen this semester.

Requirements

Engagement memos and discussion leadership (40% of course grade). Everyone will write six short, focused memos of around 1200 words. Please see below for details.

Attendance and participation (30% of course grade). I expect everyone to attend class and talk each seminar day. Some of us have familiarity with this material and some do not. But everyone is smart, and has something to say. Please let me know in advance if you plan to miss class. Emergencies are sometimes unavoidable, but catch up with me as soon as possible—ideally the day of seminar.
Final paper (30% of course grade). We do not have a final exam in this class. Rather, there will be a longer paper (about 12 pages) which prompts you to consider the connections between theoretical tradition and to locate your own position in relation to them. We will discuss the specifics of the paper topic later in class.

Memos and discussion

The memos help you to engage the readings, and memo authors will also work with me to help lead the discussion. We will set the schedule for memos, which will be then posted before class. Remember that the memos are short and focused (about 1200 words) rather than sprawling; they require 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 compare or contrast with other traditions we have seen. I will try to talk briefly with memo authors about key points for upcoming sessions. This should be about half of the memo.

2. **Evaluate and engage with the concept or argument.** You can and should take a position on the points you raise! But also try to specify whether the author’s argument is analytic or normative, and whether your reaction to it is based on analytic or normative positions. Just remember that a helpful response 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. This should be about a quarter of the memo.

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, or the implications of key ideas. This should be about a quarter of the memo.

On the days when you are not writing a memo, you should be ready to engage the issues and questions that the memo authors raise, and to raise your own. For class periods when you are scheduled to do a memo, you should first write a draft memo that emphasizes the identification of key arguments and the questions for discussion. These must be posted to the Canvas discussion forum by 10pm the night before class (others – please feel free to comment!). In class, the memo authors and I will work together to guide and direct the discussion based on drafts and our conversation about them. Final drafts should be turned in by the end of Friday in the Canvas assignment portal.
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. It won’t happen. Still, please make sure that you block out the time you need to do the work, each week. I have done everything I can to keep the reading focused but it is still a substantial amount. We are reading the original texts (sometimes in edited form) but it can be hard and it can take time. If you don’t have a background in sociology or if you find yourself struggling to make sense of the readings or their context, it can be immensely helpful to consult secondary sources on the theories. Overview works like George Ritzer’s *Social Theory* or Jonathan Turner’s *The Structure of Sociological Theory* can be very helpful – don’t feel bad about using them.

Below are the core books for the course, along with the ISBNs for the editions you should ideally look for. I typically encourage physical copies, and all of these are available on Amazon. However, this year is, uh, “different.” Do what works for you. In many cases, there are online versions available from the University library, and often Kindle versions, and sometimes you can find PDFs online (dubious in legal terms, but this year we do what we have to do.) I will share a Google Doc with you which outlines all of this so you can make your decisions.

• Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*. The Free Press.
• Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*. The Free Press.
Seminar schedule

Please note that all readings with authors listed in regular type are required, core readings. Those listed in italics are suggested and supplemental – they are not required but you may be important or useful. You should absolutely feel free to refer to them in class, and I will also try to do so in my orienting remarks. Please also note that we may collectively decide to shift some of the reading assignments during the course of the semester. I will announce any changes well ahead of time.

Tues., Sept. 8  Introduction to Sociological Theory

- Craig Calhoun, “Introduction” to *Classical Sociological Theory* [2012].
- *J*ulian Go, “Race, Empire, and Epistemic Exclusion.” [2020].

Thurs., Sept. 10  Enlightenment Precursors to Sociology

- Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” [1784].
- Adam Smith, “Wealth of Nations” [1776].
- Alexis de Tocqueville, “Influence of Democracy on the Feelings of Americans” [1840]
- *Thomas Paine* “Rights of Man” [1791] and *Mary Wollstonecraft*, “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” [1792]
- *Michel Foucault*, “What is Enlightenment?” [1972].

Tues., Sept. 15  Karl Marx: Class, Power, History

- Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing” [1843].
- Karl Marx, “The German Ideology, Part I” [1845], emphasis on pp. 147-186.
- *Frantz Fanon*, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961].
Thurs., Sept. 17  Karl Marx: Social Production and Alienation

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

Tues., Sept. 22  Karl Marx: Labor, Capital and Exploitation

- Karl Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital” [1849].
- George Ritzer, “Prosumer Capitalism” [2015].

Thurs., Sept. 24  Émile Durkheim: Society and Social Facts

- Émile Durkheim, “Rules of Sociological Method” [1895].
- Émile Durkheim, Suicide [1897], emphasis on Book 2.

Tues., Sept. 29  Émile Durkheim: Solidarity and Social Divisions

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

Thurs., Oct. 1  Émile Durkheim: Collective Consciousness and Ritual

Tues., Oct. 6  Max Weber: Social Action and Ideal Types

- Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ and the Social Sciences” [1904].
- Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” [1921] and “Politics as a Vocation” [1922].

Thurs., Oct. 8  Max Weber: Religion and Rationality


- Max Weber, “Distribution of Power Within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party” [1914].
- Max Weber, “Types of Legitimate Domination” [1914].
- Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited” [1985].

Thurs., Oct. 15  Self & Society: The Social Self

- George Herbert Mead, “The Self” [1934].
- W.I. Thomas, “The Regulation of the Wishes” [1931].

Tues., Oct. 20  Self & Society: Context and Social Types

- Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” [1908].
- Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” [1908].

Thurs., Oct. 22  Self & Society: Effects of Size and Number

- Georg Simmel, “The Dyad and the Triad” [1908].
- Georg Simmel, “Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality” [1908].
- Peter Blau and Joseph Schwartz, “Size Distributions” [1984].
Tues., Oct. 27  Self & Society: Insiders and Outsiders

- Aldon Morris, “Intellectual Schools and the Atlanta School” [2015].
- *W. E. B. Du Bois, “Souls of White Folk” from Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil [1920].*

Thurs., Oct. 29  Politics & Power: Trust and Transformation

- Jürgen Habermas, “The Rationalization of the Lifeworld” [1981].
- Evan Stewart and Douglas Hartmann, “New Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere” [2020].

Tues., Nov. 3  ELECTION DAY

Thurs., Nov. 5  Politics & Power: Belonging

- Bart Bonikowski, “Nationalism in Settled Times” [2016].

Tues., Nov. 10  Structure, Power, Action: Foucault and Discourse

- Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality” [1976].
- Michel Foucault, “Discipline and Punish” [1975].
- Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” [1977].
- *David Theo Goldberg, “Racialized Discourse” [1993].*
Thurs., Nov. 12  Structure, Power, Action: Cooperative Action and Presentation of Self


Tues., Nov. 17  Structure, Power, Action: Fields and Habitus


Thurs., Nov. 19  Difference: Developing Structures of Race and Gender

- *Saher Selod and David G. Embrick “Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship”* [2013].
- *Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression”* [1990].

Thurs., Nov. 26  THANKSGIVING; NO CLASS

Tues., Dec. 1  Difference: Difference, Standpoint, Self

- Frantz Fanon, “Black Skin, White Masks” [1952].
Thurs., Dec. 3  Difference: Intersectionality and Matrix of Oppression

- Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Feminist Epistemology” [1990].
- Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” [1989].
- Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Shiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity [2004].

Tues., Dec 8  Rethinking Epistemic Modes: Realism


Thurs., Dec 10  Rethinking Epistemic Modes: Normative, Interpretive

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

Tues., Dec 16  Sign up for individual consultations on papers.

Mon., Dec 21  Final papers due by 6 pm. (You may turn them in earlier!)