Contemporary Social Theory

This seminar is intended as a graduate level introduction to the practice of contemporary social theory. It concerns the historical production and consumption of interpretive perspectives used by twentieth and twenty-first century sociological writers to make sense of the multiple social worlds in which “we” live and die. It also concerns the ways in which social theories are themselves sociologically constructed. This occurs within complex and contradictory fields of social power and knowledge. As such, this course asks you to imagine theory as a ritual social construction of selective sense-making frameworks within and/or in resistance to the material ideological demands and institutional constraints of sex/gender, political/economic, and racial/ethnic/national hierarchies.

Seminar participants are expected to develop a working knowledge and critical evaluation of the central concepts, methodological implications, and practical-political consequences of theorizing in certain ways, but not others. What is included and what is sacrificed or silenced in the construction of particular theoretical worldviews? In exploring such issues, seminar participants are asked to reflexively analyze the advantages and limitations of their own theoretical perspectives. This course is not simply about the theories of others. It is also about how “we” as sociologists might make critical use of the conceptual tools and methods of social theorizing itself.

Course Outline.

1. January 24
   **Introduction.**

2. January 31
   **Why Theory? Power/Knowledge and the Sociological Narrative.**

Readings:


3. February 7

**Functionalism, Cybernetics, and the Middle American Range.**

Readings:

Related References:


4. Feb. 14

**Social and Behavioral Exchange: Control, Power and Structure.**

Readings:

Related References:

5. February 21

**Theories of Conflict, Power, and Hauntings.**

Readings:


Related References:


6. February 28

**Processes and Forms of Symbolic Interaction: the Self and its Others.**

Readings:


8. Kenneth Allan, Chapter 4, “Performing the Self,” in *Contemporary Social and Sociological Theory*, pp. 73-93.


Related References:


> Margaret C. Poloma, “Acting in the Play of Life: Dramaturgy as Theory” pp. 147-162 Contemporary Sociological Theory.*


**Boston College Spring Break**

7. March 14

**Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Interpretive Sociology.**

**Readings:**


Related References:


8. March 21

*Traces of Marxism: Theory and Practice.*
Readings:
1. Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” in David Morley and
Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. New York:
2. Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 75-82, 95-
100, 108-114, 122-135.*
3. Steven Seidman, “The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas,” in Contested Knowledges, pp. 121-
133.
4. Patricia Ticineto Clough, “From Gynocentrism to Standpoint Epistemologies,” in Feminist
Thought, pp. 62-186.*
6. Georg Lukacs, “The Irrational Chasm Between Subject and Object,” from History and Class
Consciousness, in Lemert, ed., Social Theory, pp. 202-204.
and “Critical Notes on an Attempt at Popular Sociology,” in Selections from Prison Notebooks,
trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, pp. 404-
407; 416-430.*
“Introduction to Section III: Modernity and Postmodernity,” and Chapter 11, “Modernity and
Reason,” in Contemporary Social and Sociological Theory, pp. 191-211, 239-262.

Related References:
>Stanley Aronowitz, The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist
>Arthur Kroker, “Streamed Capitalism, Cynical Data, and Hyper-Nihilism,“ chapter 2 in The Will to
Technology and the Culture of Nihilism: Heideger, Nietzsche, and Marx. Toronto: University of
>David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory, pp. 148-246 (on the critique of instrumental reason in
52.
>Anthony Giddens, A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, Berkeley: University of
>Paul Buhle, “Marxism in the U.S.A.,” pp. 81-104 in P. Buhle (ed), C.L.R. James: His Life and His
>Josephine Donovan, “Feminism and Marxism,” pp. 65-90 in Feminist Theory: The Intellectual
>Susan Buck-Morss, The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and


9. March 28

Social Psychoanalysis: Ritual Structures and the Unconscious.

Readings:

Related References:


10. April 4

**Subjects of Power and Knowledge: Genealogy, History, Discourse.**

Readings:

7. Steven Seidmen, Chapter 12 “Michel Foucault’s Disciplinary Society,” in *Contested Knowledge*, pp. 178-191.

Related References:


11. April 11

**Structuralism, Semiotics, Cultural Critique.**

Readings:

1. Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, “Primitive Classifications and Social Knowledge,” from *Primitive Classification* (1903), in Lemert, ed., *Social Theory*, pp. 89-94.

Related References

12. April 25

Poststructuralism and Sociological Deconstruction.

Readings

Related References


13. May 2

**Feminist Perspectives and Sex/Gendered Epistemologies.**

Readings:

Related References:
>Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, pp. 72-103*


Postmodernity, Postmodernism, and the Coloniality of Power.

Readings:


Related References:


Course Requirements:

1. This a graduate-level seminar. *All participants are expected to engage rigorously with all assigned readings and actively contribute to course discussion.* Participants are also required to rotate roles as seminar discussion leaders. Discussion leaders are expected to prepare brief “discussion-opening” remarks and questions. (10%)

2. Participants enrolled for credit are expected to complete 2 short (4-5 double-spaced page) analytic reaction papers. Each short paper is to address issues of importance in a given week’s seminar themes and readings. These short essays may reflect on the analytic advantages and problems associated with a given perspective and/or apply a theoretical perspective to interpret or explain a particular social phenomenon. After receiving feedback from the instructor, one of these papers is to be revised, distributed, and presented to the seminar. The first essay is due no later than March 14th; the second is due no later than May 9th (50%)

3. Participants enrolled for credit are also to complete one 15-20 page conference-style “theoretical” essay. This essay is to display a critical knowledge of at least two different contemporary theoretical perspectives addressed in the seminar. Essays are to demonstrate an ability to use selected theoretical frameworks to “make sense” of and/or critique a particular sociological concern or problem. Short in-class presentations on seminar papers-in-progress will be made during the month of April. Final papers are due no later than Monday, May 16th, 5 PM. (40%)