Contemporary Social Theory

This seminar is 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 invites you to imagine social theory as a ritual construction of power-charged interpretive frameworks within or against the 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 in particular theoretical worldviews and what is sacrificed, silenced, or exiled to the margins? In exploring such issues, members of the seminar 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 14
   Introduction.

2. January 21

Readings:


3. January 28

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

Readings:

4. Feb. 4

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

Readings:

5. February 11
Theories of Conflict, Power, and Hauntings.

Readings:

6. February 18

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

Readings:
7. February 25

**Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Interpretive Sociology.**

Readings:

**Boston College Spring Break**

8. March 11

**Structuring Structures: Fields, Habitus, Bio-media, and Bodies**

Readings:

9. March 18

**Traces of Marxism: Theory and Practice.**

Readings:

10. March 25

**Social Psychoanalysis: Ritual Structures and the Unconscious.**

Readings:


11. April 1

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

Readings:


7. Steven Seidman, Chapter 12, “Michel Foucault’s Disciplinary Society,” in *Contested Knowledge*, pp. 175-187.


11. April 8

**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.


8. Steven Seidman, Chapter 9, “Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies,” in *Contested Knowledge*, pp. 132-139.


12. April 15

**Poststructuralism and Sociological Deconstruction.**

Readings


13. April 22

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

Readings:


14. April 29

**Postmodernity, Postmodernism, and the Coloniality of Power.**

Readings:


**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 take turns in serving as seminar discussion leaders on three separate occasions (if possible, two leaders per week). Discussion leaders are expected to meet outside of class to discuss issues pertinent to a given week’s themes and to prepare brief “discussion-opening” remarks and questions. (10%)

2. Participants enrolled for credit are expected to complete 2 short (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, disseminated and presented to the seminar. The first essay is due no later than March 18th; the second is due no later than April 29th (50%)

3. Participants enrolled for credit are also to write one 15 page professional 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 theory to “make sense” of 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 Thursday, May 8th, 11 AM. (40%)