Contemporary Social Theory

This seminar is a graduate-level introduction to the practice of contemporary social theory. It concerns the historical production and use 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 20
   Introduction.

2. January 27

   Readings:

3. February 3

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

Readings:

4. February 10

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

Readings:

5. February 17
Theories of Conflict, Power, and Hauntings.

Readings:


6. February 24

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

Readings:

7. March 2
Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Interpretive Sociology.

Readings:

Boston College Spring Break

8. March 16
Structuring Structures: Fields, Habitus, Bio-media, and Bodies

Readings:

9. March 23
Traces of Marxism: Theory and Practice.

Readings:

10. March 30
Social Psychoanalysis: Ritual Structures and the Unconscious.

Readings:

11. April 6
Subjects of Power and Knowledge: Genealogy, History, Discourse.

Readings:


12. April 13

**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.


13. April 20

**Poststructuralism and Sociological Deconstruction.**

Readings:


14. April 27

Feminist Perspectives and Sex/Gendered Epistemologies.

Readings:


15. May 4

Postmodernity, Postmodernism, and the Coloniality of Power.

Readings:


**Course Requirements:**

1. This a graduate-level seminar. *All participants are expected to engage rigorously with 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 pertinent issues and prepare brief “discussion-opening” remarks and questions. (10%)

2. Seminar members are expected to complete 2 short (5 double-spaced page) analytic reaction papers. Each short paper is to address issues of importance to a given week’s themes and readings. These short essays may reflect on the analytic advantages and problems of a given theoretical perspective and/or apply the perspective to interpret a particular social phenomenon. After receiving feedback from the instructor, one of these short papers is to be revised, disseminated, and presented to the seminar. The first essay is due no later than March 23rd; the second is due no later than May 4th (50%)

3. Participants are also to write one 15 page conference-style “theoretical” essay. This essay is to display critical knowledge of at least two different theoretical perspectives addressed over the course of the semester. Essays are to use theory to interpret a particular social 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 Wednesday, May 11th, 5 PM. (40%)