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 16
   **Introduction.**

2. January 23
   **Why Theory? Power/Knowledge and the Sociological Narrative.**

   **Readings:**


3. January 30

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

Readings:


4. Feb. 6

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

Readings:

5. February 13

Theories of Conflict, Power, and Hauntings.

Readings:

6. February 20

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

Readings:
7. February 27

Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Interpretive Sociology.

Readings:

Boston College Spring Break

8. March 13

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

(Seminar will meet from 3-4:30 PM to enable attendance at Avery Gordon’s lecture as part of the Sociology Department’s Visiting Distinguished Scholars Series. No formal discussion leaders for this week.)

Readings:

9. March 20

Traces of Marxism: Theory and Practice.

Readings:

10. March 27

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

Readings:


11. April 3

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

Readings:


11. April 10

**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.

12. April 17

**Poststructuralism and Sociological Deconstruction.**

Readings


13. April 24

Feminist Perspectives and Sex/Gendered Epistemologies.

Readings:


14. May 1

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 rotate roles as seminar discussion leaders on three separate occasions (two leaders per week). Discussion leaders are expected to meet before class sessions 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 19th; the second is due no later than May 1st (50%)

3. Participants enrolled for credit are also to complete 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 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 Wednesday, May 8th, 5 PM. (40%)