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 social theorists to make sense of the multiple social worlds in which “we” live and die. It also concerns the ways in which theories are themselves constructed within complex and contradictory fields of social power and knowledge. This is to view 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.

Participants in the seminar 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, 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 use of theory as tool for critically analyzing the social worlds to which we belong.

Course Outline.

1. January 18  
   Introduction.

2. January 25  

Readings:


3. February 1
Functionalism, Cybernetics, and the Middle American Range.

Readings:

4. February 8
Social and Behavioral Exchange: Control, Power and Structure.

Readings:

5. February 15
**Theories of Conflict, Power, and Hauntings.**

Readings:

6. February 22
**Processes and Forms of Symbolic Interaction: the Self and its Others.**

Readings:


7. March 1

**Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Interpretive Sociology.**

Readings:


**Boston College Spring Break**

8. March 15

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

Readings:


9. March 22

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

Readings:

10. March 29

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

Readings:

11. April 5

**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.

12. April 12

**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 19

Poststructuralism and Sociological Deconstruction.

Readings:

14. April 26

Feminist Perspectives and Sex/Gendered Epistemologies.

Readings:
6. Kenneth Allen, Chapter 17, “Exposing Sex: Judith Butler,” in Contemporary Social and
Sociological Theory, pp. 380-400.

15. May 3
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 addressing a given week’s themes and readings. These short essays may reflect on the strengths and weaknesses 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 22nd; the second is due no later than May 3rd. (50%)

3. Participants are also to write one 15 page double spaced- conference-style “theoretical” essay. This essay is to make use of at least two of the theoretical perspectives addressed during 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 by Wednesday, May 10th, 5 PM. (40%)