Contemporary Social Theory

Meeting Times: Monday, 4-5:50pm
6 E. 16th street, room 910
GSOC 5061

Instructor:
Angèle Christin
(christa@newschool.edu)
Office: Room 1013, 6 East 16th St.
Office hours: Wednesday, 2-4pm

Teaching Assistant:
Guillermina Altomonte
(altog301@newschool.edu)
Office: Room 1013, 6 East 16th St.
Office hours: Thursday 3-5pm

Course description
This course presents some influential ways of thinking about the social world. It is organized around different traditions of sociological thought and covers American and Continental (mostly German and French) social theory. In addition to careful exegesis of the theories in question, this course intends to provide students with the building blocks needed to produce their own sociological theories. Paraphrasing Marx, one might say that living theoretical labor is as important as dead theoretical labor in order to grasp the meaning of sociological theory.

Requirements
There will be three writing assignments during the semester:
- One paper covering the “American directions” segment of the course (due March 13)
- One paper covering the “Continental directions” segment of the course (due April 24)
- A final paper on a topic approved by the instructor (due date TBD)

The first two papers will be 5-7 pages double-spaced. The final paper will be 12-15 pages double-spaced.

The overall level and interest of the class will largely depend on the quality of the discussions. Therefore, there will be oral assignments: 1) you will do the readings carefully and come prepared to class, 2) you will sign up for one week of the course during which you will propose three questions for the class to discuss and lead the class discussion.

Grades will be determined based on the written assignments and course participation. Each of the first two papers will determine 20% of your grade, the final paper will be 40%, and class participation will determine 20% of your grade. If you plagiarize, you will fail the class.

*Do not come to class if you haven’t read and thought carefully about the readings*

Courses in contemporary theory are riddled with difficult choices. Here are some influential theoretical directions that are not covered in this course: neo-marxism and post-marxism (Laclau, Mouffe), post-modern theory (Lyotard, Baudrillard, Derrida), Elias (a school in
himself), rational choice theory (Coleman), post-colonialism (Said, Fanon), structuralism and its variants (White, Blau, Nadel, Giddens, Levi-Strauss), conflict theory (Lukes, Braverman, Wright), repertoire theory (Swidler), and evolutionary theory (Carroll, Hannan, Aldrich, Abbott). Although I will not cover these theorists and directions, I will be happy to recommend readings for students interested in these theorists and theorizations.

**Reading List**
Students will need to read the following five books for class:

You will need to buy the books for Week 3, which should give you ample time to find them. All of these books are classics and you can buy cheap paperback versions online.
Contemporary Social Theory

Syllabus

Week 1 (January 26). Introduction. What is theory?

**PART I. AMERICAN TRADITIONS**

Week 2 (February 2). The Parsonian foundations

Week 3 (February 9). Symbolic interactionism: Theory and applications
“The Outside Game,” Adam Gopnik, 2015 *New Yorker* article on Becker:
[http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/12/outside-game](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/12/outside-game)

Week 4. ***No classes on February 16 (Presidents’ Day)***

Week 5 (February 23). Goffman and the study of everyday life
**Week 6 (March 2). American phenomenology**

**Week 7 (March 9). Garfinkel and ethnomethodology**

***First paper due on March 13***

---

**PART II. EUROPEAN TRADITIONS**

---

**Week 8 (March 16). The Frankfort school**

***Spring Break (March 23 – 29)***

**Week 9 (March 30). Habermas and communicative action**
Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere." *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80
Week 10 (April 6). Foucault.

Week 11 (April 13). Bourdieu: habitus and practice
We will also watch extracts from “Sociology is a Combat Sport,” a 2001 documentary on Bourdieu directed by Pierre Carles.

Week 12 (April 20). Bourdieu: capital and fields

***Second paper due on April 24***

**PART III: SOME CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY**


Week 14 (May 4). Classification, rituals and cognition


Week 15 (May 11). Latour, STS, and actor-network theory


Week 16 (May 18). Evaluation and justification


***Final paper due (date TBD)***