

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:

Becker, Howard. 1963. *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press.

Berger Peter L., & Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.

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?

Abend, Gabriel. 2006. "Styles of Sociological Thought: Sociologies, Epistemologies, and the Mexican and U.S. Quest for Truth." *Sociological Theory* 24:1-41.

PART I. AMERICAN TRADITIONS

Week 2 (February 2). The Parsonian foundations

Parsons, Talcott. 1949 [1937]. *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*. NY: Free Press. Part I, pp. 3-20, 27-41, 43-74; pp. 451-70.

Parsons, Talcott and Edward A. Shils. 1951. "Values, Motives and Systems of Action." Pp. 47-109 in *Toward a General Theory of Action*, edited by Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wrong, Dennis H. 1961. "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology." *American Sociological Review*, 26 (2): 183-193.

Week 3 (February 9). Symbolic interactionism: Theory and applications

Mead, George Herbert. 1967 [1934]. *Mind, Self and Society*. 117-125 ("The Mind"); 135-227 ("The Self"), 273-281, 303-310 ("Society").

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. "Society as Symbolic Interaction." Pp. 78-89, in Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interaction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Becker, Howard. *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press. "The Outside Game," Adam Gopnik, 2015 *New Yorker* article on Becker:

<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

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Pp1-76 ("Introduction," "Performance"), 208-237 ("The Arts of Impression Management"), 252-255 ("Staging and the Self.")

Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. NY: Pantheon, pp. 1-95.

Week 6 (March 2). American phenomenology

Schutz, Alfred. 1970. "The Lifeworld" and "The Phenomenological Baseline." In Helmut Wagner (ed.) *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*.
Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. NY: Doubleday.

Week 7 (March 9). Garfinkel and ethnomethodology

Garfinkel, Harold. 1974. "The Origin of the Term 'Ethnomethodology.'" Pp. 15-18 in Roy Turner (ed.), *Ethnomethodology*. NY: Penguin.
Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Chapter 1, "Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities," and Chapter 5, "Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an intersexed person."

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

<p>PART II. EUROPEAN TRADITIONS</p>
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Week 8 (March 16). The Frankfurt school

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. 1947. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. John Cumming, Herder and Herder. Pp.120-167
Horkheimer, Max. 1972. "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, Max Horkheimer Trans. Matthew O'Connell and Others, Herder and Herder.
Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* by Walter Benjamin, Ed. and Intro. Hannah Arendt.

*** *Spring Break (March 23 – 29)* ***

Week 9 (March 30). Habermas and communicative action

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge MA: MIT Press. Pp. 1-56, 73-88, 236-50.
Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reasoning*. Boston: Beacon Press. Pp. 113-97.
Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere." *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80
Schudson, Michael. 1995. "Was There Ever a Public Sphere?" Pp. 189-203 in *The Power of News*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Week 10 (April 6). Foucault.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. "The Body of the Condemned" and "Panopticism." New York: Random House.

Foucault, Michel. 1966. "Las Meninas" in *The Order of Things*.

Michel Foucault. 1976. "We Other Victorians" and "Right of Death and Power over Life." Pp. 1-13 and 135-159 in *History of Sexuality*. Volume I.

Week 11 (April 13). Bourdieu : habitus and practice

Wacquant, Loïc. "The Sociological Life of Pierre Bourdieu." *International Sociology* 2002 17(4): 549-556.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. "The Habitus and the Space of Lifestyles." In *Distinction*, pp. 169-225.

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

Bourdieu, Pierre. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." In *In Other Words*. Pp. 123-139.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1983. "The Field of Cultural Production, or the Economic World Reversed." *Poetics*, 12(4-5), 311-356.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The forms of capital". In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood, 241-258.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Scholastic Point of View." In *Practical Reason*, pp. 127-140.

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

<p>PART III: SOME CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY</p>

Week 13 (April 27). Theories of gender. Guest lecturer: G. Altomonte.

West, Candace and Don Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing gender." *Gender & Society* 1:125-151.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.

Ferree, Myra Marx. 1990. "Beyond Separate Spheres: Feminism and Family Research." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52: 866-884.

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

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 94-128.

Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pp. 3-46.

- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1991. *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*. New York: Free Press. Pp. 5-32.
- DiMaggio, Paul. 1997. "Culture and Cognition." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23, pp. 263-287.

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

- Callon, Michel. 1986. "Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St. Briec Bay," in John Law (ed.) *Power, Action, and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, 196-223. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Latour, Bruno. 2013. *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*. Harvard University Press, Chapter 1.
- Levi, Ron and Mariana Valverde. 2008. "Studying Law by Association: Bruno Latour Goes to the Conseil d'État." *Law & Social Inquiry*, 33(3): 805-825.
- Hennion, Antoine and Emilie Gomart. 1999. "A Sociology of attachment: music amateurs, drug users." *The Sociological Review*, 47(1), 220-247.

Week 16 (May 18). Evaluation and justification

- Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot. 2006. *On Justification*, Princeton University Press, selected chapters.
- Fourcade, Marion. 2011. "Cents and Sensibility: Economic Values and the Nature of 'Nature.'" *American Journal of Sociology*, 116 (6): 1721 – 77.
- Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder. 2007. "Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds." *American Journal of Sociology*, 113 (1):1-40.

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