

## Contemporary Social Theory

Meeting Times: Monday-Wednesday 10-11:40am  
6 E 16<sup>th</sup> street, room 1008  
LSOC 3069

Instructor:  
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Office: Room 1013, 6 East 16<sup>th</sup> St.  
Office hours: Wednesday 2-4pm

### 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 10-12 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.

## **Additional Lang Policies**

Policy on Attendance and Lateness:

- Absences may justify some grade reduction and a total of four absences mandate a reduction of one letter grade for the course.
- More than four absences mandate a failing grade for the course, unless there are extenuating circumstances, such as the following
  - An extended illness requiring hospitalization or visit to a physician (with documentation)
  - A family emergency, e.g. serious illness (with written explanation)
  - Observance of a religious holiday

The attendance and lateness policies are enforced as of the first day of classes for all registered students. If registered during the first week of the add/drop period, the student is responsible for any missed assignments and coursework.

For significant lateness, the instructor may consider the tardiness as an absence for the day. Students failing a course due to attendance should consult with an academic advisor to discuss options.

## **Academic honesty and integrity**

The New School views “academic honesty and integrity” as the duty of every member of an academic community to claim authorship for his or her own work and only for that work, and to recognize the contributions of others accurately and completely. This obligation is fundamental to the integrity of intellectual debate, and creative and academic pursuits. Academic honesty and integrity includes accurate use of quotations, as well as appropriate and explicit citation of sources in instances of paraphrasing and describing ideas, or reporting on research findings or any aspect of the work of others (including that of faculty members and other students). Academic dishonesty results from infractions of this “accurate use”. The standards of academic honesty and integrity, and citation of sources, apply to all forms of academic work, including submissions of drafts of final papers or projects. All members of the University community are expected to conduct themselves in accord with the standards of academic honesty and integrity.

Students are responsible for understanding the University’s policy on academic honesty and integrity and must make use of proper citations of sources for writing papers, creating, presenting, and performing their work, taking examinations, and doing research. Through syllabi, or in assignments, faculty members are responsible for informing students of policies with respect to the limits within which they may collaborate with, or seek help from, others. Individual divisions/programs may require their students to sign an Academic Integrity Statement declaring that they understand and agree to comply with this policy.

The New School recognizes that the different nature of work across the schools of the University may require different procedures for citing sources and referring to the work of others. Particular academic procedures, however, are based in universal principles valid in all schools of The New School and institutions of higher education in general. This policy is not intended to interfere with the exercise of academic freedom and artistic expression.

Procedures concerning allegations of plagiarism and penalties are set forth here: [newschool.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=81698](https://newschool.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=81698)

## **Disabilities**

In keeping with the university’s policy of providing equal access for students with disabilities, any student with a disability who needs academic accommodations is welcome to meet with

me privately. All conversations will be kept confidential. Students requesting any accommodations will also need to contact Student Disability Service (SDS). SDS will conduct an intake and, if appropriate, the Director will provide an academic accommodation notification letter for you to bring to me. At that point, I will review the letter with you and discuss these accommodations in relation to this course. Students and faculty are expected to review the Student Disability Services webpage. The webpage can be found at [newschool.edu/student-services/student-disability-services/](http://newschool.edu/student-services/student-disability-services/) and the office is available to answer any questions or concerns.

### Reading List

Students will need to read the following three 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.

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

### Class Outline

#### **Week 1 (January 26, 28). 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.

<h3>PART I. AMERICAN TRADITIONS</h3>
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#### **Week 2 (February 2, 4). The Parsonian foundations**

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, 11). Symbolic interactionism I: Theory and applications**

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

Becker, Howard. *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press.  
"The Outside Game," January 2015 *New Yorker* article by Adam Gopnik on Becker:  
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/12/outside-game>

#### **Week 4 (February 18). Symbolic interactionism II: The production of culture**

\*\*\* No classes on February 16 (Presidents' Day) \*\*\*

Becker, Howard S. 1974. "Art as Collective Action." *American Sociological Review* 39(6):767-776.

Fine, Gary Alan. 1992. "The Culture of Production: Aesthetic Choices and Constraints in Culinary Work." *American Journal of Sociology* 97(5):1268-1294.

#### **Week 5 (February 23, 25). 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, 4). American phenomenology**

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. NY: Doubleday.

**Week 7 (March 9, 11). Garfinkel and ethnomethodology**

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><b>PART II. EUROPEAN TRADITIONS</b></p>
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**Week 8 (March 16, 18). The Frankfort school**

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. 1947. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. John Cumming, Herder and Herder. Pp.120-167

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, April 1). Habermas and communicative action**

Habermas, Jurgen. 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.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reasoning*. Boston: Beacon Press. Pp. 113-97.

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, 8). Foucault.**

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

**Week 11 (April 13, 15). Bourdieu : habitus and practice**

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

Khan, Shamus. 2012. *Privilege. The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, Princeton University Press (chapter 1 & 5).

We will also watch extracts from "Sociology is a Combat Sport," a 2001 documentary on Bourdieu directed by Pierre Carles.

**Week 12 (April 20, 22). Bourdieu: capital and fields**

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

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

<p><b>PART III: SOME CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY</b></p>
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**Week 13 (April 27, 29). Theories of gender.**

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

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

**Week 14 (May 4, 6). 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

**Week 15 (May 11, 13). 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.

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). Conclusion**

Tying it all together. Thinking about theoretical approaches in a comparative perspective (no readings required).

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