Contemporary Social Theory

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

Instructor:
Angèle Christin
(christa@newschool.edu)
Office: Room 1013, 6 East 16th 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

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/ and the office is available to answer any questions or concerns.

**Reading List**

Students will need to read the following three 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

Class Outline

Week 1 (January 26, 28). Introduction. What is theory?

PART I. AMERICAN TRADITIONS

Week 2 (February 2, 4). The Parsonian foundations

Week 3 (February 9, 11). Symbolic interactionism I: Theory and applications

Week 4 (February 18). Symbolic interactionism II: The production of culture
*** No classes on February 16 (Presidents’ Day) ***

Week 5 (February 23, 25). Goffman and the study of everyday life
Week 6 (March 2, 4). American phenomenology

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

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

PART II. EUROPEAN TRADITIONS

Week 8 (March 16, 18). The Frankfort school

*** Spring Break (March 23 – 29) ***

Week 9 (March 30, April 1). Habermas and communicative action

Week 10 (April 6, 8). Foucault.

Week 11 (April 13, 15). 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, 22). Bourdieu: capital and fields**

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

---

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

**Week 13 (April 27, 29). Theories of gender.**

**Week 14 (May 4, 6). Classification, rituals and cognition**

**Week 15 (May 11, 13). Latour, STS, and actor-network theory**

**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)***