

Spring 2024  
Th 10 am-12 pm  
402 Social Science Building

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## **SOC 201B MODERN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY**

“Theory” is a big, fancy, abstract, and misleading word. The way it is generally used, it implies either big ideas divorced from research and everyday practice, or untested hypothesis. This course is built on the premise that theory guides, and is in turn shaped by, both research and practice, whether these interactions are acknowledged or not. Every person is a theorist. The goal of the course is rendering theorization explicit, reflexive, and self-reflexive.

The course starts with the hegemonic theory of the early postwar era (functionalism) and one of the main challenges against it (Weberian Marxism). It then shifts to two theories that come closest to constituting an integrated paradigm for sociology today: institutionalism and practice theory. These two are themselves rooted partially in functionalism, partially in a variety of earlier problematizations of functionalism (e.g. phenomenology and social constructionism). Unlike functionalism, they are far from being recognized as the hegemonic theory in the discipline. We then cover a set of challenges to these aspiring hegemonies: some that appear to challenge the very necessity of a guiding paradigm (post-structuralism) and others that question established links between theory, research, and practice, while still insisting on the necessity of paradigms (Gramscian Marxism) and yet others in between (race theory, feminism, post-colonialism).

With this broader map in mind, we will focus on and discuss the works of some of the major theorists of the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, their analyses, the methodologies they use and their social prescriptions. How do they study social processes? What are their major findings and arguments? How does the social world work? How can society be improved? We will also discuss why some social theorists reject the premises of some of these questions.

I) First, there are certain substantive issues most social theorists engage in one way or another. Thinking systematically about these issues will constitute the core of the course.

1) At the most abstract level, social theory is about society and the social. How do these theorists define society, i.e. the proper domain of sociology? How do they break it into its constitutive parts (the economy, the family, civil society, the state, etc.)? Notice that there is unending polemic about what these parts are, how sociologists are supposed to know what they are, and how they have changed over history (e.g. some argue that the category “the economy” cannot be applied to non-capitalist societies). How do theorists

use modern (or postmodern) capitalist society as a reference point to understand other societies?

2) Second, most social theories tackle questions of reproduction and transformation. How does society operate or “work”? How does it change?

3) Then there are the slippery concepts of structure and agency. What is the relationship between structure and agency? What is the role of actors in social theory? How do modern social thinkers analyze human action (and the constitution of actors)? Do these theorists mean different things by structure, or is there an overarching common conception?

4) Especially poststructuralism has introduced novel ways of thinking about power. But sociology has been concerned with power differentials from the very beginning. How does power work? Are there distinct sources of power throughout human history? Are any of these more important than the others? Is power centralized and structured or diffuse in modern society? What is the relationship between power and domination?

5) At least some sociologists think that it is the study of inequality that unifies sociology as a discipline. Indeed, inequality is a recurrent theme throughout our readings. Has the analysis of inequality and stratification changed in modern social theory? Have relations between classes and status groups fundamentally changed in the 20th century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are categories and methodologies developed through the analysis of wealth/income/class inequalities applicable to the analysis of sexual, gender, racial, and ethnic inequalities?

6) Causality and determination have always bedeviled social thinkers. Is there an overriding motor of social change in human history (such as class struggle, rationalization, centralization of power, or differentiation)? Or is it more helpful to think of shifting causes and combinations of causes? Are there plausible alternative ways of thinking about links between events other than causality and determination?

7) What tools do different theories provide for the study of culture? There is a huge sociological vocabulary connected to the study of culture (norms, toolkits, hegemony, habitus, everyday life, the life world, discourse, and so on). What do these different concepts imply about the way culture is constituted by and constitutive of society?

II) Our second concern is related to the relationship of these texts with each other and with classical theory. How does each theorist speak to the others? Which classical theorists have they neglected, and how will the redefinition of classical theory (to include Du Bois, de Beauvoir, and others) transform our reading of contemporary theory? We can read each of these texts as ways of grappling with the heritage of the so-called founders of sociological theory (Marx, Weber, Durkheim; secondarily Simmel, Mead, and Freud ... while not neglecting the ultimate anti-sociologist, Nietzsche). Some of them have synthesized the founders; others have revised one or two of them. Even when there is no explicit engagement with any of the founders (as in the case of Foucault), we can still

trace significant parallels and continuities with at least one of them. In some cases, the revision takes the form of focusing on issues that have been neglected or underexplored by classical theory. In other cases, the very mode of classical thinking is fundamentally questioned. So, one set of questions in this course will revolve around the relation between these more contemporary theorists and classical theory. How does modern social theory build on classical theory? How does it extend and transform classical theory? How does social theory develop and improve? After the calls for decolonization, should we redefine the canon, or abandon the idea of canonical texts altogether?

III) We will also look at how these theorists support their claims. What are the methodologies they use? Do different methodological choices result in different analyses of the social? What are the implicit or explicit epistemological assumptions behind each methodology?

IV) Another point of concern will be the social and political agendas of each theorist. We will discuss whether different choices of methodology and theory result in conflicting agendas (or vice versa). How much does political context (the ideological atmosphere of the times, the citizenship/race/gender/class of the theorist, their political links and engagement) influence theorization?

V) We will also discuss the purpose of theory. Some sociologists argue that scientific knowledge develops through the construction and reconstruction of theories. Others might disagree. Is sociology necessarily a theoretical enterprise? Can the core tenets of a theory be falsified? How do we know that one theory of society is better or more developed than another? What do we mean when we say a theory is weak? How do we choose which theory we want to work with?

### **Assignments:**

**1) Response memos.** To both keep up with the reading and prepare for class discussion, you are expected to post a 300-word response memo each week (max. 500 words). These will be posted at least 24 hours before the class.

**2) Paper.** For your final paper, you will put one paradigm in the center and discuss how one theorist seeks to reconstruct or dismantle that paradigm. (If you do not enjoy thinking in terms of paradigms, you can instead compare two theorists). You will evaluate the merits of the proposed reconstruction. You should discuss this reconstruction not abstractly, but based on one (or two) of the guiding questions for the course I have provided above. You can also come up with your own questions. The goal is not summarizing the readings, but thinking systematically and theoretically about sociological issues. In this final paper, I expect more of your voice when compared to the memos. Having taken the theory sequence, you should slowly start thinking about how you are going to contribute to social theory in the long run. This final paper will give you a chance to start thinking more systematically about this issue. (15-20 pages, due on May 10).

## **Functionalism**

Parsons, Talcott. 1951. *The Social System*. New York: Free Press. Pp. 26-36.

Merton, Robert. "Manifest and Latent Functions." Pp. 328-334 in Charles Lemert (ed.) *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*.

Gouldner, Alvin. 1970. *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. Read pp. 1-19; skim 20-45; read 46-60; read 138-163; read 488-512. New York: Basic Books.

## **The Weberian-Marxist Challenge to Functionalism: rationalization and reification**

Lukács, György. 1971 [1923]. "The Phenomenon of Reification." Pp. 83-110 in *History and Class Consciousness*. MIT Press.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. "The New Forms of Control." Pp. 1-18 in *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1985 [1981]. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason, Vol. 2*. Boston: Beacon Press. Selections. Pp. 301-403.

## **Social Constructionism and New Institutionalism**

Schütz, Alfred. 1944. "The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology." *American Journal of Sociology* 49(6): 499-507

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Pp. 284-296 in *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era*, edited by Scott Appelrouth and Laura D. Edles. Los Angeles: Sage.

DiMaggio, Paul J. and Walter W. Powell. 1991. *New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 1-82, 143-163, 267-292.

## **Practice and Reproduction (2 weeks)**

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990 [1979]. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press. Selections.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987 [1980]. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Selections.

## **Poststructuralism**

Foucault, Michel. 1980 [1976]. "Two Lectures" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*. Brighton: Harvester. Pp. 78-108.

Foucault, Michel. 1995 [1975]. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel. 2008 [2004]. *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 1-50, 317-324.

## **Gramscian Sociology**

Gramsci, Antonio. "Some Aspects of the Southern Question." Pp. 441-462 in *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926*. New York: International Publishers.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

Burawoy, Michael. 2003. "For a Sociological Marxism: The Complementary Convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi," *Politics and Society* 31/2: 193-261.

## **Race (2 weeks)**

Fanon, Frantz. 2008 [1952]. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pp. vii-23, 89-119, 185-197.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 2014. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Third edition. London: Routledge.

Robinson, Cedric. 2020. *Black marxism: the making of the Black radical tradition*. 3rd edition. University of North Carolina Press.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2023. "The Trap of "Racial Capitalism"." *European Journal of Sociology* 64(2):153-162.

## **Gender and feminism**

Chodorow, Nancy J. 1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Pp. 3-10, 40-54, 159-209.

bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice" *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4:1, 1991-1992.

Butler, Judith. 1998. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 519-531.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs* 7/3: 515-544.

Watkins, Susan. 2018. "Which Feminisms?" *New Left Review* 109: 5-76.

### **Post-Colonialism**

Mohanty, Chandra. (1988 [1984]). "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review* 30: 61-88.

Magubane, Zine. 2013. "Common skies and divided horizons? Sociology, race, and postcolonial studies." *Political Power and Social Theory* 24: 81-116.

Guhin, Jeffrey and Jonathan Wyrzten. "The Violences of Knowledge: Edward Said, Sociology, and Post-Oriental Reflexivity." *Political Power and Social Theory* 24: 231-262.

Decoteau, Claire Laurier 2013. "Hybrid Habitus: Toward a Post-Colonial Theory of Practice." *Political Power and Social Theory* 24: 263-93.

Santos BS. 2012. "Public sphere and epistemologies of the South." *Africa Development* 37/1: 43-67.

Sabbagh-Khoury, Areej. 2022. "Citizenship as Accumulation by Dispossession: The Paradox of Settler Colonial Citizenship." *Sociological Theory* 40/2: 151-178.

### **Ecology, Race/Nation, and Feminism**

Fraser, Nancy. 2022. *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It*. London: Verso.