SOC6101HS: GRADUATE SEMINAR
CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY
Professor Vanina Leschziner
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto
Winter 2019

Location and Time: Sociology Department, Room 240, Tuesday 12-2pm
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Course Description and Objectives
This is a course on contemporary sociological theory. What this actually entails, however, is less clear than it might appear at first glance. For some, contemporary sociological theory is simply the theory that begins just where classical sociological theory ends. When did the transition happen? It is thought to fall anywhere from what came after Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel, to the new path that began with Parsons. For others, contemporary sociological theory is the kind of theory that is most relevant to today’s sociological scholarship, whether it is work that was published seventy years ago, or yesterday. Still for others, contemporary sociological theory refers strictly to what is being produced at the present moment. Just as there is no consensus on what is “contemporary,” neither is there consensus on what is distinctly sociological about social theory, or even on what “theory” really is.

The professorial complaint that no course can do justice to a whole sub-discipline in one semester is not uncommon, but it is acutely true in the case of contemporary sociological theory. In this way, syllabi in this area all too frequently lead to the complaintive “how is it possible that x is not in the reading list?” This syllabus will surely be no exception. It takes a necessarily partial stab at the wide and messy world of contemporary sociological theory. It does so by combining an overview of the major perspectives developed after 1920, and the theoretically inclined scholarship that is most influential on current sociological research (whether the influence is positive or negative, explicit or implicit, well-informed or misguided). This is the kind of literature that will best prepare you to engage in your own sociological research and develop your research agenda as you move forward in the graduate program.

This course has several goals. First, to acquaint you with a wide range of knowledge that is foundational to current sociological research. This means leaving aside -- for the most part -- theoretical work specific to sub-disciplines (i.e., theories that are fundamental to political sociology, gender, or the sociology of culture). It is understood that you will learn the theories relevant to your area(s) of specialization in the courses specific to such area(s). Reading literature that is at the foundation of current sociological research will enable you to think about your dissertation project more broadly and creatively, regardless of your area of interest and empirical approach. Even the most purely empirical research requires a theoretical contribution (at least for publication in the better sociology journals), so all of you, including the least theoretically inclined, will benefit from gaining knowledge of the important theoretical debates that have shaped sociology in the past century. Thus, an important goal of this course is to
provide you with theoretical and analytical tools that you will be able to use as you engage in your own research.

Expectations
As a graduate seminar, I assume you are invested in learning, and eager to participate in class discussion. This means that I take it as a given that you will attend every class meeting, do all the required readings thoroughly and deeply in advance of every class, and come to class well prepared to actively participate in discussions. My role will be to provide background (when needed), try to clarify and explain issues that are unclear, and help to make connections among readings. Each class will be largely devoted to critical discussion and assessment of the material. I expect you to come with an open mind (i.e., not letting your prior theoretical and substantive preferences color your assessment of readings), and provide constructive contributions to the discussion.

Course Requirements and Grading
1. class participation ......................... 10%
2. class presentation on assigned date ....... 20%
3. six (6) short memos ....................... 30%
4. paper ........................................... 40%

1. Given that you are expected to do all the readings before the class for which they are assigned, and to participate actively in class, you will be evaluated not on the quantity of your participation, but on quality. Your goal is to engage the main arguments of the readings, and demonstrate critical thinking in your comments. Original thinking is even better. Important questions and concerns are more than welcome.

2. You are expected to present the required readings and lead discussion on an assigned date. Plan on about 30 minutes for your presentation, and be prepared to jumpstart and lead discussion after your presentation. Your presentation should have an analytical focus on the main arguments presented in the readings, and critical assessments of those arguments. You will be evaluated mostly on your ability to critically engage with the readings, and on your ability to facilitate discussion and respond to your classmates comments. You are expected to circulate a handout with a summary of the readings, and a few questions to jumpstart discussion, by 5pm on the Monday prior to the day on which you are scheduled to present. This is a hard deadline; late submission will incur a late penalty.

3. You are responsible for submitting six (6) short memos (2 pp., single-spaced, 12 point type, maximum) on a class’ readings at the beginning of the class that deals with those readings. View these as “reaction papers,” neither a summary of the texts, nor final masterpieces. Your reaction papers should identify important themes, draw connections, and/or point to analytical problems. The papers should raise issues that should be part of the seminar discussion. These memos need not be perfectly polished essays, but a critical response to the key points and implications of the readings. Importantly, they should engage more than one point, and more than one of the class’ readings. You should consider them as a platform from where to improve your argument-
building skills, and gradually develop your own positions. Each memo is worth 5% of the final grade.

4. You are required to submit a paper at the end of the term. The ideal choice would be for you to write a paper that can serve as the theoretical foundation for your dissertation project, the theoretical component of your research practicum project, or a possible publication. Think of the paper as a chance for you to take stock of what you have learned so far and lay the groundwork for an original theoretical contribution to your area of specialization, whether in your dissertation or a publication. The paper should be about 20 pages double-spaced. We will discuss more details about the paper during the semester.

Readings
Book selections will be available on the Quercus course website, under “Modules.” Journal articles are available through the University of Toronto Libraries website.

Class Schedule

Week 1
January 8
WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?
And Why Should We Care?

Readings


Supplemental
Week 2
January 15
THE BIRTH OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: ACTION THEORY
Sociology’s Most Popular Straw Man

Readings


Supplemental


Week 3
January 22
NEO-UTILITARIANISM AND RATIONAL CHOICE
Sociology’s Most Popular Straw Man has Good Company

Readings


Supplemental

**Week 4**
**January 29**

**PRAGMATISM**

*The First Introduction of Creativity into Habitual Action*

**Readings**


Supplemental

Week 5  
February 5  
INTERACTIONISM, SYMBOLIC AND OTHERWISE  
Life’s a Theater

Readings  


Supplemental  


Week 6  
February 12  
ETHNOMETHODOLOGY  
Life’s a Theater, and a Comedy Club

Readings  


Supplemental

Week 7
February 19
HAPPY READING WEEK!

Week 8
February 26
STRUCTURALISM
The Appeal and Perils of Reified Structures

Readings

Supplemental


**Week 9**

**March 5**

AGENCY, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, POWER

*Masterful Syntheses or Further Confusion?*

**Readings**


**Supplemental**


Week 10  
March 12  
FIELD THEORY  
The Épîtome of a Masterful Synthesis (or Confusion), French Style

Readings  


Supplemental  


Week 11  
March 19  
STRUCTURES, NETWORKS, INSTITUTIONS  
The Last Theoretical Developments of the 20th Century

Readings  


**Supplemental**

**Week 12**
**March 26**
CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY
*The Current State of Affairs: Where has all this theory led us?*

**Readings**

Selections from recent issues of social theory journals and books. Suggestions welcome.

**Week 13**
**April 2**
CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY
*The Current State of Affairs: Enlightenment or Confusion?*

**Readings**
Selections from recent issues of social theory journals and books. Suggestions welcome.