

Contemporary Sociological Theory

SOC 251H1 L5101/L6101

Fall 2020

Schedule: Thursdays, 6-9 pm

DELIVERY/Venue: Online via *Quercus BB Collaborate*

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Office Hours: by arrangement

Teaching Assistant: Olimpia Bidian & Lance Stewart

*** Students will need a computer with microphone and camera in order to participate in synchronous online activities; lectures will not be recorded. Posting course materials or lecture recordings you may make for private study to other websites without permission from the Instructor will constitute Copyright infringement.

* The prerequisite to take SOC251H is completion of SOC201H1; Exclusion: SOC376H1, SOC389Y1, SOC232H5. University policy mandates that Students without this requirement will be removed upon discovery.

No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their interconnections within a society has completed its intellectual journey. C. Wright Mills (1959)

COURSE SYNOPSIS:

“Contemporary Theory” is a designation commonly used to reference sociological theories that, in various ways, build upon the analytical foundations established by the so-called “Classic Thinkers,” such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others. It is thus less of a “temporal” signification than a recognition that all subsequent theorizing represents a *dialogue*—constructive as well as critical—with important thinkers of the past (some famous in their lifetimes, others posthumously acclaimed). Within that continuing process of debate and dispute, earlier theories and traditions are selectively revised, extended, challenged, and rejected, with the result that new theoretical perspectives and conceptual categories are regularly added to our expanding base of knowledge. In this course we will focus on the two broad theoretical orientations in social science: approaches that place explanatory emphasis on the macro-structural aspects of social life, and those that place greater weight on the micro-dynamics of social interaction. The longstanding tension or rivalry between these two orientations is commonly styled the “Structure-Agency” debate, and much work in the field of Theory is dedicated to formulating more coherent and precise synthesizing accounts of the complex interrelations between the so-called “macro & micro” dimensions of social reality. This central issue—of properly integrating structure & agency, macro & micro—will serve as the organizing basis for our weekly engagements. C. Wright Mills’ programmatic advocacy for a “Sociological Imagination” that attends to the intersections of Biography, Social Structure, and History will provide the touchstone for our deliberations.

TEXTS: Selected Readings, to be placed as Modules on Quercus

REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:

ten Reading Reflections (~200 words each) on the Assigned Weekly Texts (3% each = 30%);
one Research Essay, approximately 1200 to 1500 words in length, due Nov.19 (30%);
two Timed Online Tests (Oct.22 & Dec.3), form to be determined (15% + 15% = 30% total);
one Critical Reflection Commentary (~800 words), due on Dec. 8 (10%)

Academic Integrity is fundamental to learning at UofT. Familiarize yourself with the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters*, at <http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>. It is the University rule book for academic behaviour, and students are expected to know those rules.

Plagiarism Policy: Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to *Turnitin.com*, for the detection of possible plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. Should you decline to submit a paper upon request, you will be required to provide sufficient secondary material (e.g., reading notes, outlines of the paper, rough drafts of the final draft, etc.) to establish that the paper submitted is truly your own work.

Email policy: Owing to the large number of suspect/junk mailings I receive, I do not favor using this medium for class communication, other than for emergencies. My email address and home phone number are in the public domain, but my preference is for you to contact me in class for all course-related matters. *NOTE: The TAs should be contacted first regarding all routine course matters.*

Missed Tests: Owing to the large enrolment, no “make-up” tests will be offered. For students with officially legitimate reasons and documentable proof for absences on test days, the policy will be to average the scores on the other assignments and tests to provide for the legitimately missed exam. **Missed Lectures:** *Students who miss classes are expected to obtain lecture notes from classmates.*

Policy on Extension Requests: Extensions for completing course assignments can only be given in accordance with university rules, which are limited to medical situations or family emergencies.

*** If you miss a test or a written assignment deadline for medical reasons, you will need to email me regarding the circumstances and officially declare your absence on the system (ACORN). For family or other personal reasons, you are required to contact your College Registrar, who should email me directly.

Accessibility Services: If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please visit <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility> as soon as possible.

WRITING ASSISTANCE Students can find information about college writing centres at <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/writing-centres/arts-and-science>. It is recommended that you *book appointments well in advance*, as the Writing Centres are commonly very busy. See also the website Writing at the University of Toronto at www.writing.utoronto.ca. For numerous practical advice files, see www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice. Information about the English Language Learning program (ELL) is available at <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell>. There is also Reading eWriting, an online program that helps students engage course readings more effectively. For group instruction on writing and study skills, please refer students to the Writing Plus workshop series, described at <http://writing.utoronto.ca/writing-plus>. In 2020-21, workshops will be conducted as Bb Collaborate webinars. Students can join the webinars on Quercus using the following link: <https://uoft.me/writingplus>.

Publius Terentius Afer (c.195-160 BC) Roman comedic playwright from North Africa, Libyan Berber descent, purchased slave of a Roman senator, educated and freed; six plays survive. Terence gives us a wonderful and inspiring motto for the social sciences (and life in general):

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto. “Being human, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.”

FALL TERM

1. Sept. 10 *What is Theory? And What is it Ultimately About?*

Musical prelude: “Riders on the Storm” by *The Doors*: <https://youtu.be/IS-af9Q-zvQ>
[if that sounds too “old school” for you, there’s a more recent remake: https://youtu.be/y_z-adsJjmE]
Readings: Simon Critchley blog post on Heidegger’s ‘*Being and Time*’ (3 pgs) on Quercus;
J.M. Bryant, “Sociological Theory, Part One: Getting One’s Bearings” (10 pgs)

2. Sept. 17 *C. Wright Mills and the “Sociological Imagination”*

Readings: “Part Two: Theories of Structure and Agency” (28 pgs total, begin reading);
C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, chapter 1, “The Promise” (5 pgs);
Thomas Kuhn, “On Objectivity and Theory Choice” (3 pgs, summary)

3. Sept. 24 *The Marxist Tradition*

Readings: “Sociological Theory, Part Two: Marx” (4 pgs);
Leon Trotsky, “Marxism in Our Time” (first 7 pgs; 19 pgs abridged total)

4. Oct. 1 *The Marxist Tradition*

Reading: Leon Trotsky, “Marxism in Our Time” (pgs. 7-19)
*** **Essay Assignment provided** after the lecture, on Quercus***

5. Oct. 8 *The Marxist Tradition*

Readings: Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*: Chapter One & 1966 Political Preface (10 pgs)

6. Oct. 15 *A Globalizing Neo-Marxist Contribution: World Systems Theory*

Readings: Paul Halsall, “World Systems Theory: Overview” (6 pgs);
Immanuel Wallerstein, “Structural Crises,” *New Left Review*, 2010 (8 pgs)
Tutorial Session (after lecture): Review in Preparation of Test # 1, and Essay Assignment

7. Oct. 22 *Fanon on Imperialism and Colonialism: The Forms and Consequences of Violence*

Reading: Frantz Fanon, “Concerning Violence” from *The Wretched of the Earth* (17 abridged pgs)
*** **Test # 1** *** [covering readings and lectures from weeks 1-6]

8. Oct. 29 *Fanon on Imperialism and Colonialism (cont.)*

Reading: Fanon, “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders” (excerpts 11 pgs) [*disturbing material];
Tutorial Session (after lecture): On the Essay Assignment

9. Nov. 5 *Symbolic Interactionism: Exploring the Agency-Structure Dialectic*

Reading: “Sociological Theory, Part Two: Mead and Goffman” (pp.12-17)
*** **Early Essay Submission Option: 3 points Bonus** ***

**** November 9-13 READING WEEK

“Theory is only one moment of elucidation, and always lacunary and fragmentary.”
Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1978)

10. Nov. 19 *Symbolic Interactionism: Goffman’s Dramaturgical Sociology*

Reading: Erving Goffman, “On Face Work” (7 pgs)
** ESSAY ASSIGNMENT DUE **

11. Nov. 26 *Phenomenology and the Social Construction of Reality*

Readings: “Sociological Theory, Part Two: Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology” (pp.17-19)
Pierre Bourdieu & Loic Waquant, “NewLiberalSpeak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate” (4 pgs)

12. Dec. 3 *Mills Revisited: Towards an Integrative Synthesis of Biography, Social Structure, and History*

*** **Test # 2** *** [covering readings and lectures from weeks 6/7-11]

*** **Critical Reflection Commentary** *** [Quercus submission due Dec. 8]

“It is not sufficient for a theory to affirm no false relations; it must not hide true relations.”
Henri Poincaré, *The Foundations of Science* (1913)

“It distresses me, this failure to keep up with the leaders of thought as they pass into oblivion.”
Max Beerbohm (1921)