

Sociology 6101H-F Contemporary Social Theory Winter 2021

INSTRUCTOR:	Professor Erik Schneiderhan
CLASS HOURS AND LOCATION:	Tuesdays 12:10 to 14:00, Room 240
OFFICE HOURS:	By appointment
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Course Description and Structure

This is a contemporary theory course. I take “contemporary” to indicate anything that is influential or “used” today. Think of theory as a set of principles, which may or not be pertinent when trying to make sense of a given situation or social phenomenon. In this class, you will engage with a number of different thinkers, all of whom tried to make sense of the social world in some way or another. By the end of the course, I hope that you will have at your disposal a set of theories, or principles, which will help *you* as you make your way in the world.

I have two main objectives in teaching this course: First, I want each of you to develop a theory “toolkit” you can use as you engage in your own original scholarship, whether it be theoretical, empirical, or a combination of the two. Second, I want you to garner some sense of what kind of theory sociologists are using today. As a corollary to this (and in more instrumental terms), I hope that upon completion of this class you will feel somewhat prepared for the contemporary portion of the theory comprehensive exam, should you need to take it.

Despite the fact that the course title includes the word “theory” this is not necessarily a theory course. The work of most of the “great” sociologists we study today addresses empirical, normative, methodological, and theoretical issues in the discipline of sociology. The sociologists whose works are included in my reading list are not here simply because they were theorists, but because they had some effect on how we think about and do sociology. I follow the idea that theory courses are the general rubric under which, at least in Canadian and American Sociology as presently constituted, key writings by the great sociologists of the past (or near-past) are included in the curriculum. Erving Goffman, Patricia Hill Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, and the like—these are *sociologists* plain and simple, and their work spanned (or spans), not only the theoretical, but also the empirical, methodological, and normative dimensions of sociology. They are included here, not because they were/are “pure theorists,” but because the theoretical aspect of their work happens to be innovative or profound.

Selection of Readings

I have tried to achieve several objectives simultaneously in my choice of readings for this course. As you know, this is one of the few required courses in the program. I have selected readings that are likely to be useful and important for all the graduate students in our department as they move into the discipline of Sociology. I have tried to achieve a balance between breadth and depth, which I acknowledge has entailed a few difficult judgment calls. Finally, I have selected readings that reflect some of my own intellectual concerns. Needless to

say, one cannot make everybody happy in a required service course of this nature. Nor can one select everything that it is important and useful to read. There is enough foundational material, in fact, easily to fill out an additional two or more semesters.

All readings will be on the course's host site. I will likely make changes to the reading list as we go so please check regularly the dynamic syllabus on Quercus.

Assignments and Grading

Weekly Discussion Postings

I require you to write ten discussion posts on Quercus during the course of the semester. (You get two weeks off—Weeks 1 and 10.) There will be two kinds of postings, and you will do five of each during the term. I will announce who is going to be in each group during the first class, and on Quercus.

(1) Each week, half the class will post reactions (as text, NOT as an attached file) that discuss topics or questions arising from the week's readings. Use them to raise questions about confusing passages, criticize controversial claims, make connections across readings, highlight important themes, or to develop new ideas. Think of these posts as writing and thinking exercises rather than as finished products. I do not expect them to be polished, but I will be looking for evidence of actual thinking by you—your reactions should be at least 400 words in length. They will also get you in the habit of writing and provide a record of your thoughts about the readings. You must post your reactions by 5pm the Monday before class. This is a hard deadline, because the other half of the class needs a day to read your posts. You will not get credit for posts uploaded after the deadline.

(2) The other half of the class will read that week's posts, choose at least one, and post a brief response to it. This response can be short, around 250 words – it may be longer as well – but it should make some substantive engagement with at least one of your classmate's statements. These should be posted by 5pm on Tuesdays, the day before class. You will not get credit for posts uploaded after the deadline, because I need time to read them before class the next morning.

In total, your posts will be worth 30 percent of your total mark (3 marks each). I will mark each one individually on a pass/fail basis. If your post is not up to par (i.e. way too short, or lacking any substance at all), you will receive a zero. I will divide up the class and tell you who is going to do what and when—this will happen on day one.

Class Discussion and Engagement

Your class participation and engagement is worth 10 percent of your total mark. This is not about who talks the most in class; I value quality over quantity, particularly when students make comments that stay close to the text. I understand that some of you may be reluctant to talk during class, particularly early on in the course. Feel free to come to my office and talk over any of the readings or your assignments. I consider that “engagement” with the course and will take it into consideration when determining this part of your grade. I am happy to talk with you at any point in the term to give you my thoughts on your course engagement. As a final point, you can't participate and engage if you are not present. Students who miss more than 1 class during the term will lose one mark per additional class missed.

Class Presentations

In addition to your essays, each week one student will make an in-class presentation about that week's readings, raise critical questions, and set forth topics for discussion. Plan for roughly 45 minutes as the length for your presentation, and be ready to facilitate discussion after the presentation. You may wish to use the postings on Quercus as a starting point. We will then gather additional comments about the presentation and reaction posts from other class participants as a catalyst for further discussion. Your presentation is worth thirty percent of your final mark. I will mark your presentation primarily on your ability to critically engage with the readings (and your classmates' reactions) and set the stage for a quality discussion.

Final Project

As your final project, I want you to write the theoretical component of your practicum project. It will be roughly 5000 words in length. I will provide you with a detailed assignment sheet later in the term, but for now, here's the basic idea: I want you to use Richard Swedberg's ideas on theoretical "discovery" as the inspiration for the effort. In this assignment you will identify the theoretical and/or empirical problem or question you plan to engage. You will introduce and explain the theory you plan to use in doing this work. (You are welcome to use a theorist we have not covered in class, but please talk to me in advance before moving ahead.) The idea here is that you will lay the groundwork for your practicum project or some other possible publication. I will provide you with more details on this assignment later in the semester, posted on Quercus. **This assignment will be due (uploaded on Quercus) Friday April 16 no later than 5pm.** Late papers will be marked down five percent for each day past the deadline.

Grading

So, the grading allocation looks like this:

Discussion Posts	30% of your total mark (4 marks per post)
Final Assignment	30% of your total mark (30 marks)
Class presentation	30% of your total mark (20 marks)
Class Participation	<u>10% of your total mark (10 marks)</u>
Total	100%

I will mark your class participation and engagement within these ranges: Exceptional (9-10 marks), Outstanding (7-8 marks), good (5-6 marks), limited or no participation (0-4 marks). All essays, your presentation, and your final assignment will be marked based on percentage of total marks possible. **Your final letter grade will be determined using the following grading scheme** (based on your total marks/percentage):
A+ 90 – 100; A 85 – 89; A- 80 – 84; B+ 77 – 79; B 73 – 76; B- 70 – 72; C+ 67-69; C 63 – 66; D+ 57-59; D 53 – 56; D- 50 – 52; F 0-49.

Course Outline

Week One, January 12: Course Overview. What is Theory? What is it for and how do we do it?

- "What is Theory?" pp. 1-19, in *Social Theory* (ST), Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl
- "Social Theory as a Vocation," Donald N. Levine.

- “Theorizing in Sociology and Social Science: Turning to the Context of Discovery,” Richard Swedberg.

Week Two, January 19: Neo-Utilitarianism and Rational Choice

- Becker, G. 1976. "The Economic Approach to Human Behavior." Pp. 3-14 in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mancur Olson. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Pp. 5-52 (skip math parts, if you want).
- James Coleman. “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” [Check]
- Somers, Margaret, Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter. 1998. "Selections from 'Symposium on Historical Sociology and Rational Choice Theory'." *American Journal of Sociology* 104:722-816. [2 units]

Week Three, January 26: Pragmatism & Relational Sociology

- James, William. 1981 [1907]. "What Pragmatism Means."
- Jane Addams, selections from *Democracy and Social Ethics*
- Gross, N. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review* 74:358-79.
- Joas, H. 1996. "Situation--Corporeality--Sociality. The Fundamentals of a Theory of Action." Pp. 145-95 in *The Creativity of Action*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa. 1997. "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology."

Week Four, February 2: Symbolic Interactionism

- Blumer, Herbert (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Selections
- Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: xi-xii; 1-76; 106-40; 238-55.
- Erving Goffman, “Introduction” in *Interaction Ritual*.
- Erving Goffman. 1983. "The Interaction Order. American Sociological Association 1982 Presidential Address." *American Sociological Review* 48:1-17.
- Erving Goffman, “Frame Analysis,” in *The Goffman Reader*, 149-166.

Week Five, February 9: Ethnomethodology

- Harold Garfinkel, “The Origins of the Term ‘Ethnomethodology.’”
- Harold Garfinkel, “Preface” and “Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person, Part I,” in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.
- Dorothy Smith, “The Everyday World as Problematic” and “Institutional Ethnography” from *The Everyday World as Problematic*.

Week Six, February 16: NO CLASS

Week Seven, February 23: Bourdieu I & Bourdieu II

- Bourdieu, "Some Properties of Fields"
- Bourdieu 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241-57 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press. [1 unit]
- Bourdieu 1990. "Book 1: Critique of Theoretical Reason." Pp. 52-70 in *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1988. Pp. 1-193, *Homo Academicus*.
- Bourdieu, *Distinction*, chs. 5-8; conclusion. (Skip portions of text in tiny font.)
- Bourdieu 1993. "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed." Pp. 29-73 in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by R. Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pierre Bourdieu, "For a Scholarship with Commitment."
- Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, "A Margin of Freedom," Pp. 234-236.

Week Eight, March 2: Agency, Power, and Social Structure

- Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, selections.
- Sewell, William F. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation". *The American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 98, Number 1 (Jul., 1992), 1-29.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische. 1998. What is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103, pp. 962-1023
- Fuchs, Stephan. 2001. "Beyond Agency" *Sociological Theory* 19: 24-40.

Week Nine, March 9: Post-Structuralism

- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality*, selections.
- Patricia Hill Collins (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, selections.
- Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes."
- Hall, "The West and the Rest."

Week Ten, March 16: Theorizing Projects

- No group class meeting—you will have one-on-one meetings at some point with me on your papers. I will set up a schedule on Quercus.

Week Eleven, March 23: Communication and the Public Sphere

- Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: xv-xix; 1- 88.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006. "Selections." Pp. 3-67; 193-209; 549-53 in *The Civil Sphere*.
- Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," and "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere."

***We will also do 5 minute presentations on your paper topics and progress.**

Week Twelve, March 30: The Current Scene

- Charles Camic and Neil Gross. 1998. "Contemporary Developments in Sociological Theory: Current Projects and Possibilities." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 24: 453-476.
- Selections from recent issues of social theory journals and books. Feel free to make suggestions.

Final Paper is due Friday April 16 by 5pm on Quercus.