

Contemporary Sociological Theory

SOCI3223

Prof. Mark COHEN

Course Description

Sociology is a discipline of fragments. Social researchers specialize in the study of particular facets of social life — for instance, education or work or families. Sociologists in each specialty propose and argue over theories to explain the puzzling phenomena they discover in the facet they are investigating. Accordingly, a course on the sociology of education would introduce students to the theories that are influential and fruitful for contemporary sociological research on education. However, *this course is different*. Here, you will learn not about theories *of* some specific sociological specialty, but instead contemporary sociological theories — period, full stop.

The rationale for a course on sociological theory is the recognition that there are perspectives on society that link together the different facets of social life. These perspectives claim that the same insights can illuminate not just, say, education *but also* work and the family. They represent lenses that can be used to view and understand these various social spheres, or they identify common trends that affect them.

The course is divided into three parts. We begin by looking at a few of the most influential general lenses for investigating society. The focus will be to elucidate key concepts including function, conflict, structure, and social construction. The second part of the course centers on concerns around domination and emancipation that have animated many theories and debates in the past half-century. The third part of the course confronts directly the question of how we should understand contemporary society. The readings of these weeks describe the dominant trends of recent history and debate their causes and consequences.

Assessment

- Tutorial Participation and Presentation 25%
- Part I Essay 25%
- Part II Take-Home Exam 25%
- Part III Take-Home Exam 25%

Syllabus

Week 1 Introduction

Part I — Theoretical Perspectives

Week 2 Functionalist and Critical Theories of Social Structure

Required

- Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, “Some Principles of Stratification” (*American Sociological Review* Vol. 10, No. 2, 1945) www.jstor.org/stable/2085643
- Samuel Bowles, “Unequal Education and the Reproduction of the Social Division of Labor” (pp. 137-153 in *Power and Ideology in Education* ed. Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977)

Recommended

- Robert Merton, “Manifest and Latent Functions” (pp. 60-69 in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Il.: Free Press, 1957)
- C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), Ch. 1, “The Promise”
- Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, “Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited” (*Sociology of Education* Vol. 75, No. 1, 2002) www.jstor.org/stable/3090251

Week 3 The Sociological Microscope: Interactionism and Analytical Sociology

Required

- Claudio E. Benzecry and Daniel Winchester, “Varieties of Microsociology” (pp. 42-74 in *Social Theory Now*, ed. Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac Ariail Reed, University of Chicago Press, 2017). **Focus on pp. 42-53 and 66-68**
- Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, “What Is Analytical Sociology All About?” (pp. 3-24 in *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, ed. Hedström and Bearman, Oxford University Press, 2009). **Skip the final section (1.5)**

Recommended

- Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), Ch. 1
- Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), Ch. 1
- James S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital” (*American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 94, Suppl., 1988) doi.org/10.1086/228943

Week 4 Social Construction

Required

- Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender” (*Gender & Society* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1987) doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002

Recommended

- Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 35-49 and 66-75

Part II – Problems of Domination and Emancipation

Week 5 Communication and Social Standpoints

Required

- Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (MIT Press, 1996), Sec. 8.3, “Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power”

- Dorothy E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (Northeastern University Press, 1990), Ch. 2

Recommended

- William Outhwaite, “Jürgen Habermas,” Ch. 14 in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (2011) doi.org/10.1002/9781444396621.ch33

Week 6 Capitalism and Its Alternatives

Required

- Erik Olin Wright, “Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias” (*American Sociological Review* Vol. 78, No. 1, 2013) doi.org/10.1177%2F0003122412468882

Recommended

- Wolfgang Streeck, “How to Study Contemporary Capitalism” (*European Journal of Sociology* Vol. 53, No. 1, 2012) www.jstor.org/stable/43282219

Week 7 Symbolic Domination

Required

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), Chs. 1-2

Recommended

- Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), Ch. 3

Week 8 Expert Knowledge as Power

Required

- Michel Foucault, selections from *Power/Knowledge and Discipline and Punish* (pp. 289-294, 305-322 in *Contemporary Social Theory Third Edition*, ed. Craig Calhoun et al, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)

Recommended

- Ian Hacking, “Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman” (*Economy and Society* Vol. 33, No. 3) doi.org/10.1080/0308514042000225671

Part III — Theorizing Contemporary Society

Week 9 Modernity and Its Classical Critique

Required

- Zygmunt Bauman, selections from *Modernity and the Holocaust* (pp. 510-530 in *Contemporary Social Theory Third Edition*, ed. Craig Calhoun et al, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)
- Nancy Fraser, “Can Society Be Commodified All the Way Down? Post-Polanyian Reflections on Capitalist Crisis” (*Economy and Society* Vol. 43, No. 4, 2014) doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2014.898822

Recommended

- Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” (*New German Critique* No. 22) www.jstor.org/stable/487859
- Jürgen Habermas, “The New Obscurity” (*Philosophy & Social Criticism* Vol. 11, No.

2) doi.org/10.1177%2F019145378601100201

Week 10 New Forms of Modernity

Required

- Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (Sage, 1992), “Preface” and pp. 19-35
- Sang-Jin Han and Young-Hee Shim, “Redefining Second Modernity for East Asia” (*British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 61, No. 3, 2010)
doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01322.x

Recommended

- Wolfgang Streeck, “How Will Capitalism End?” (*New Left Review* Ser. II, No. 87, 2014)
- Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity, 2000), pp. 22-38

Week 11 Imperialism and the Modern World

Required

- Julian Go, “Postcolonial Thought as Social Theory” (pp. 130-61 in *Social Theory Now*, ed. Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac Ariail Reed, University of Chicago Press, 2017)

Recommended

- Julian Go, “For a Postcolonial Sociology” (*Theory and Society* Vol. 42, No. 1, 2013)
doi.org/10.1007/s11186-012-9184-6
- The other articles in the *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 61, No. 3 (available at onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14684446/2010/61/3)

Week 12 Modernity’s Self-Misunderstanding?

Required

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1993), Chs. 1 and 5

Recommended

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Ch. 2 sections 1 & 8-14, Ch. 3 sections 1-2 & 11, and Ch. 4 sections 1-2 & 9-11
- Anne-Marie Mol, “Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions” (*Kolner Zeitschrift fur Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Vol. 50, 2010)
hdl.handle.net/11245/1.330874