

## Syllabus

### SOC 517, Contemporary Sociological Theory, Fall 2016

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Th 2:50-5:50, Wilson 201  
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**Overview of Course:** Contemporary sociological theory encapsulates a massive body of work. In building the syllabus, I have tried to strike a balance between breadth and depth and provided space for student interests. Students will find that sociological traditions differ on their views on the nature of social order (harmonious or conflictual), truth (real or constructed), power (top-down or diffuse), and so on. As a result, students of contemporary social theory (and for that matter the instructor) confront formidable tasks: 1) they need to understand various perspectives; 2) they must learn about strategies to mediate, reconcile, and apply differing viewpoints; and 3) they must critically evaluate the accuracy and value of very different theoretical approaches. This course is organized to help students take on these tasks and hopefully to allow you to begin thinking about your research interests in a theoretical way.

This course examines theories as they address central concerns of social theorists: agency, structure, power and inequality, gender, and culture. For instance, instead of presenting “critical theory” or “feminist theory” in the abstract, these theories will be discussed as they speak to core concepts of structure, agency, and power. This course serves as a foundation for graduate training in sociology and exposes students to the conceptual issues at the core of sociology. Students will be expected to gain insights into the relationship between empirical (defined broadly to include quantitative, qualitative, and historical/comparative) research and theoretical debates. How are theory and research questions related? How do theory and method relate?

Students will be expected to learn about several core sociological issues and theoretical traditions. But the fundamental objective is not to memorize key concepts and theoretical assertions – the goal is to encourage critical reflection on the theoretical assumptions that guide our thinking about sociology and social life. By self-consciously developing a theoretical stance, students will become better able to pose and execute theoretically-informed empirical research and will become “critical consumers” of the theoretical and empirical works of others.

**Goals of the course:** As your central theory course, the goal is to familiarize everyone with a small sample of contemporary sociological theory. You all come to this course with areas of interest and some background in theory. In the course we will enhance your knowledge of theory to help you to begin thinking about your theses and to establish your identities as sociologists. In these respects, this course meets some of the goals of the Sociology Graduate Program:

*1: To enable students to conduct original, empirical research;*

- Understanding the fit between methodology and theory

*2: To prepare students to contribute to scholarly dialogue about their area of expertise;*

- Developing skills to be conversant in sociological theory
- Participating in classroom discussions
- Writing scholarly work

**Readings:** The following books are available at the Bookstore:

- *Required:* Joas and Knobl. 2009. *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge University Press.

- *Required:* Charles Lemert. 2008. *Social Things*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- *Required:* John Levi Martin. 2014. *The Explanation of Social Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- *Not required:* Bent Flyvberg. 2001. *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge University Press.
- *Not required:* Foucault, Michel. Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978.
- *Not required:* Donald McQuarie, (ed.). 1995. *Readings in Contemporary Sociological Theory: From Modernity to Post-Modernity*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

*Class format:* I will make presentations each week for the first several weeks to frame the issues and ensure that important points are covered. We will usually take a brief break after that, and the remainder of class will be structured around your previously prepared questions (or comments, or some combination thereof). We will proceed around the room to address everyone’s comments during the remainder of class. After this, each student will select a lecture to lead. The student-led classes will follow the same format but with the student-lead conducting the introductory lecture and preparing several discussion questions. When leading class, you may select additional readings, prepare a 20-minute lecture on the topic, and prepare several discussion questions to facilitate a roundtable discussion. Students are expected to complete assigned readings in advance of class, attend class on a regular basis, and contribute carefully-considered questions / comments. The participation mark emphasizes the quality – not the quantity – of student participation.

*Grading procedures:* The following measures will be used to calculate the final grade. Each assessment item has been selected to reflect the expectations of an academic, focusing on the ability to read texts critically, write clearly, and infer your own conclusions from the observations and conclusions of other scholars. Measures are also designed to motivate students to actively and constructively contribute to the class.

*Description of Assignments:*

<b>Conceptual Reviews (3)</b>	30%	Each student should submit a 500 to 800-word document defining key sociological concepts. These reviews should provide a brief definition of the concept in the student’s own words, relate to literature read in class and supplementary literature, and apply the concept in an area of interest to the student. <b>Terms:</b> theory, agency, structure, culture, power. The top three of five marks will be used..
<b>Class Lead</b>	25%	When leading class, please type up (and turn in) notes that state the learning objectives of the lecture and provide bullet point notes of the content, lecture for roughly 20 minutes on your reading, and facilitate a 25-minute question-and-answer period afterward. You will be graded on the quality of your lecture, the clarity of your notes, the critical capacity of your questions, and your ability to facilitate an intellectually stimulating class discussion. The lecture should not repeat what was stated in the reading but should draw out key concepts and discuss these, possibly relating these to other topics discussed in the class.
<b>Final Exam</b>	30%	The final exam will be held in the last week of class (in lieu of last class) and will be an oral exam format. Each student will book a time to

		come for a one-on-one, 30-45 minute oral examination. A list of topics will be given out in advance. I will use your conceptual reviews as a base for some of the exam questions (much as your thesis serves in a defense).
<b>Class participation</b>	15%	Class participation involves more than attendance. This mark will reflect the quality and care demonstrated by your questions and comments on the readings and your ability to foster an enjoyable learning environment. You are expected to contribute productively to discussions in this course.

**Assignments may be evaluated in percentages. The letter grades associated are as follows:**

A: 94-100%	C+: 77-79%	F: 59% and below
A-: 90-93%	C: 74-76%	
B+: 87-89%	C-: 69-73%	
B: 84-86%	D+: 67-68%	
B-: 80-83%	D: 60-66%	

*Late Assignments:* I strongly encourage you to turn in your work on time, which means **in class** on the due date. Work turned in within 24 hours after the due date will be reduced one letter grade. After 48 hours I will not accept assignments.

**Tentative Course Schedule**

Lecture 1, August 25: Introduction: the birth and evolution of sociology

- The Triple Crisis of US Sociology: <http://isa-global-dialogue.net/the-triple-crisis-of-us-sociology/>
- Abend, Gabriel. 2008. The meaning of theory. *Sociological Theory* 26(2): 176-199.
- Syllabus review
- *Pick lecture leads*

Lecture 2, September 1: Classical sociology and its connections to contemporary sociology

- Lemert, Chapters 1-6
- How to write a critical review / reaction paper
- Additional readings:*
- Jeffrey Alexander. 1987. "The Centrality of the Classics." Pp. 11-57 in *Social Theory Today*. Edited by Anthony Giddens & Jonathan Turner.

Lecture 3, September 8: What is theory? Why do we use theory?

- Joas and Knöbl, Chapter 1
- Lemert, Chapters 7-12
- Additional readings:*
- Heiskala, R., 2014. Evidence and interest in social theory: An ontological-practical approach. *Acta Sociologica*, 57(4), pp.279–292.
- Selg, P., 2013. The Politics of Theory and the Constitution of Meaning. *Sociological Theory*, 31(1), pp.1–23.

**Due: Conceptual review #1 (theory)**

Lecture 4, September 15: Best of ASA 2016

- Readings TBA

Lecture 5, September 22: How are theories constructed?

- Morrow, handout from last class
- Additional readings:*
- Gibbs, Jack P. 1972. *Sociological Theory Construction*. Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press.
- Hage, Jerald. 1994. *Formal Theory in Sociology: Opportunity or Pitfall?* Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Reynolds, Paul D. 1971. *A Primer in Theory Construction*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

Lecture 6, September 29: How do we explain social action (I)?

- John Levi Martin, Chapters 1-5
- Additional readings:*
- Bradford, J.H. 2013. Explaining explanation: A critical review of John Levi Martin's 'The Explanation of Social Action', in Harry F. Dahms (ed.) *Social Theories of History and Histories of Social Theory (Current Perspectives in Social Theory, Volume 31)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.309 - 332.
- Martin, J.L. 2002. Power, Authority, and the Constraint of Belief Systems. *American Journal of Sociology* 107(4): 861-904.

Lecture 7, October 6: How do we explain social action (II)?

- John Levi Martin, Chapters 6-9

Lecture 8, October 13: What power do individuals have? (Agency)

- Joas and Knöbl, Chapters 6 and 7
- Emirbayer, M. and A. Mische. 1998. What is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4): 962-1023.
- Additional reading:*
- Hitlin, Steven and Monica Johnson. 2015. Reconceptualizing Agency within the Life Course: The Power of Looking Ahead. *American Journal of Sociology*: 1429-1472.

**Due: Conceptual review #2 (agency)**

Lecture 9, October 20: What are the structures that shape social life? (Structure)

- Joas and Knöbl, Chapters 8-10
- Sewell, William H., Jr. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *American Journal of Sociology* 98(1):1-29.
- Additional reading:*
- Vaisey, S. & Lizardo, O., 2010. Can Cultural Worldviews Influence Network Composition? *Social Forces*, 88(4), pp.1595–1618.

**Due: Conceptual review #3 (structure)**

Lecture 10, October 27: Practice I

- Joas and Knöbl, Chapter 15.

- Bourdieu handout provided last class.
- Lamont, M. and A. Lareau. 1988. Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments. *Sociological Theory* 6(2): 153-168.  
*Additional reading:*
- Lizardo, O. 2010. Pierre Bourdieu as a Post-cultural Theorist. *Cultural Sociology* 5(1): 1–22.
- Lizardo, O., 2004. The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu’s Habitus. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 34(4), pp.375–401.

Lecture 11, November 3: Practice II

- Excerpt from *Constitution of Society* by Anthony Giddens
- Joas and Knöbl, Chapter 12  
*Additional reading:*
- King, A., 2000. The Accidental Derogation of the Lay Actor: A Critique of Giddens’s Concept of Structure. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 30(3), pp.362–383.
- Turner, J. 1985. The Structuration Theory of Anthony Giddens, review essay, *American Journal of Sociology* 90: 969-977.

Lecture 12, November 10: What is power?

- Joas and Knöbl, Chapter 16 and 17
- Foucault handout from last class, *Security, Territory, Population* \*student lead (2)  
*Additional reading:*
- Heiskala, R., 2001. Theorizing power: Weber, Parsons, Foucault and neostructuralism. *Social Science Information*, 40(2), pp.241–264.
- Reed, I.A., 2013. Power: Relational, Discursive, and Performative Dimensions. *Sociological Theory*, 31(3), pp.193–218.

**Due: Conceptual review #4 (power)**

Lecture 13, November 17: What is culture?

- Patterson, O. (2014). Making sense of culture. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 40, 1-30.  
*Additional reading:*
- Joas and Knöbl, Chapters 19 and 20
- Emirbayer, M., & Goldberg, C. A. (2005). Pragmatism, Bourdieu, and collective emotions in contentious politics. *Theory and Society*, 34(5-6), 469-518.

**Due: Conceptual review #5 (culture)**

BREAK: November 21-25

Week 14, No lecture, final exams (November 28-December 2).

Last lecture, December 8: Making social science matter

- Selected readings from Bent Flyvberg. 2001. *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge University Press.