Syllabus for Contemporary Sociological Theory

SPRING 2003

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Catalog description.  SOCL 7131 Seminar: Contemporary Sociological Theory (3) Prereq: Socl. 7121 or equivalent.  Current theoretical perspectives in sociology ranging from structural-functionalism to ethnomethodology.

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THEORY IS A MEANS, NOT AN END

I feel quite strongly about this so I state it up front.  One of my oldest friends, my roommate at the time, got his Master's degree in sociology and quit.  Twenty years later he told me the reason. "I learned a lot about sociology," he said, "but I didn't learn much about society." Sadly, I knew he had a point. (I would myself like to eliminate the concept of "society" altogether, but that would be an abstract theoretical point of the kind that I am trying to avoid.)

Put it this way: sociological theory is only valuable for the purpose of helping us to understand the social world. Its development and articulation are of no value in and of themselves. Those who disagree are still welcome in the course—you have a lot of company within sociology.

This course is oriented towards several specific objectives: exposure to a wide range of texts, developing an ability to read closely, cultivating the competence to "discover" the theory in these texts and learning to discuss it coherently. Basically, it's a course about how to read, in order to gain useful ideas for your own work. Background information is helpful but not necessary.

Evaluation: Your grade will be determined by three factors: term paper (51%), class presentation(s) (24.5%), and weekly memos/class participation (24.5%). We no longer have formal examinations in theory, so a passing grade (B) in this course is our departmental certification that you are competent in the area of contemporary sociological theory at the Ph.D. level. The paper is 51% of your grade because it is important. A “B” is a good grade in this course. Don’t expect to make an “A,”—but do try!

GRADING. "Incompletes" are discouraged but you may take a grade of "I" if you are already well into your subject and need a few more days. Any final paper submitted more than one week after the last class period receives an automatic penalty of one letter grade. Incompletes must be arranged with me in advance and we will set the new deadline together. However, even if I
agree to accept a paper later than that, a penalty of one letter grade will be imposed for each month after the start of fall semester. (That is, a paper submitted in September would be docked one grade, one in October two grades, one in November three grades, and one in December four grades.) The maximum time allowed for an incomplete is the date the next semester's grades are due, after which the grad school converts the grade to an F automatically. But under my system it doesn't matter--because you'd be getting a failing grade anyway if you submit a paper in December. (This has happened several times since I instituted this system but in general it discourages extremely late submissions.). I do not consider this a 'free grade' seminar. I don't know the overall (historical) distribution of grades in the course, but in one recent semester the distribution of grades was 3 'A's', 3 'B's', 1 'C', and 1 'F', plus 3 'drops.'

The message here is not that this is a hard course, but rather, if you work at it, you will succeed. If theory is not your strength, you may need to come in and talk to me on a regular basis: every week, if necessary. But you can do it. You may not be able to write a four volume treatise on Parsons (neither can I), but you can do the kind of theory I think is important--the systematic development of ideas that help you to understand the social world. Generally speaking, my philosophy of grading is that when someone with little aptitude for a subject works extremely hard, comes to see me regularly, and does not suddenly develop an "interest" in the subject right before final grades, they deserve an A. (Knowing that someone is working extremely hard is the difficulty. It's not something you can just "claim" to be doing.)

Weekly Preparation

The assignment, with longer books, will usually be limited to 200 pages. Try to read a few pages per day, and try to read it twice. It is a terrible idea to wait until the day before class to do the reading. Reading closely is the key here. You will be able to grasp some central ideas with a once-through, and reading once is OK for many purposes, but that's not the point of this particular course. In general this is what you should do while reading:

(1) Identify and understand the important concepts used;

(2) Identify the passages that contain the central argument/s (learn to pick out what's important; distinguish relevant from irrelevant materials),

(3) Be able to defend why you think they are central (learn to construct an argument using the text; be able to distinguish metatheoretical assumptions and arguments from the core "theory"); and

(4) Be ready to discuss their plausibility and coherence.
In order to accomplish (4), follow my ‘two remarks’ rule: it is standard for people to hear a presentation and say ‘I have a question and a comment’ or ‘I have two questions’—be ready when I ‘open up the reading for discussion’ with exactly that sequence. That way if someone else uses one of your issues before you do, you have got one in reserve!

No profanity. No personal remarks. No jokes. Serious. Look at it as acting. Because it is.

PLAGIARISM is the act of claiming someone else's words as your own. This includes both taking passages from unattributed sources and improper attribution, in which passages are drawn from a book/article and used in your text without quotation marks or indentation. If one sentence is taken from a book/article and inserted into your work (even if you change an article or preposition), this is plagiarism. I will report it to the Dean of Students. Currently the penalty is two years out. We have had a problem in the last few years and it needs to stop. This is your warning. Of course, writing theory does require using weaving words of others into your own arguments. If you have a question about a passage, or a particular phrasing you want to use, simply ask me, or check yourself using the handy test at:

http://www.plagiarism.com

ATTENDANCE is not optional in this graduate seminar. You may miss one class during the semester. Anything more than that will result in reduction of one letter in your grade for class participation. Try not to be late to class.

PAGE MEMOS

Each week you should prepare a memo (not more than one page) summarizing the argument of the material you have just read and your critique/extension of it. This is a rather specialized form of "reaction" paper. Some will read their memo aloud and I will take note as well as critique it. Others will not have the opportunity but will turn it in. Do not write your name—write only your Social Security Number and I will grade them anonymously. I will return without letter grades but with comments. Sometimes I assign particular chapters to each person rather than a whole work. Occasionally we might write questions instead of memos.

The point of the memo is to boil down the argument to its essentials and then to react to it with another brief argument. This requires that you step back, think, and pace back and forth before writing. You will be trying to say what the main concerns of the piece were (what claims it advances) and how these were supported. You must be ruthless and edit out the chaff, the redundancies, the superfluous material. (I don't want you to just go on and on, hitting on the main points by chance. I want to know what you think the main points are.) You'll get better at this as the semester goes on. After the "boiling down" you should criticize or "react" to these claims. The reaction should be your critique and/or elaboration of the author's argument.
The key to this is the one page limit, making it a very simple assignment. To get the idea, read some abstracts from the American Journal of Sociology or the American Sociological Review. Then write two "abstracts," each one paragraph long. The first one summarizes what you read. That is an abstract the author might write. The second is the abstract of an (unwritten) article extending or criticizing these ideas. (You can turn one of these second abstracts into your final essay!)

An even more important reason for doing this is that we will be doing some "close reading" in the seminar. This is focusing on particular passages, characterizations, terms, types of claims. Individual terms will become important, but there is a danger of missing the swamp for the (cypress) knees. The best remedy for this? Each seminar participant should be prepared in two ways: for a discussion of the "text of argument" itself, and, through these memos, to understand the "gist," or overall thrust of the book. I will often begin class by asking you to identify the central focus of the theory in a sentence. “What’s the theory here?”

Note: At some point I may tell you to skip the 'summary' and proceed directly to the critique.

RULES FOR MEMOS

These constitute a kind of inductively-derived list of pointers from reading past memos. None of them are hard-and-fast, in the sense that you should never do them at all in writing your papers. But this is an exercise. Don't do them in memos.

1) Don't use the first person ("I").

2) Avoid your own general opinions like the plague. It is not that they are uninteresting but constructions such as "This article is fascinating" are irrelevant to the purpose. Constructions such as "I support X" or "I find this interesting" violate both (1) & (2). What is interesting is the next sentence: Why? Your likes and dislikes are important in informal conversation, but absolutely unimportant and distracting in scholarly writing.

3) Avoid questions. Constructions such as "Is the author suggesting that...," and "why does the author avoid" can readily be converted into simple declarative sentences.

4) Avoid extreme statements of the form "X cannot be done" because they are hard to justify. Instead substitute statements such as "is unlikely" or "difficult in practice." Also avoid extreme generalizations ("Men are aggressive"), substituting relational statements ("males are more aggressive than females"--actually, even that is so non-contextual as to be almost useless).

At this stage of your career (and to the end of it, for most scholars!), the trick is to avoid falsity rather than to make extreme, bold statements (contrary to Davis). You do not have to make large claims. You have to make claims that do not seem objectionable to your audience. (In some small way, your claims must be new, as well, but that is for publishable articles.)
5) Rule (4) may be turned around to your advantage. Whenever you can identify an extreme claim or generalization, even a single counterexample constitutes the basis for an argument.

PRESENTATIONS


You must present to the class at least once, selecting from the weekly readings below. The written product should be a minimum of seven pages, typed. It should consist of a summary, your analysis, and a summary of two book reviews.

The presentation should be an "expanded," more detailed version of the memos (just as the course paper will often be an expanded version of the presentation). About half of it should be devoted to an account of the arguments of the book and how they are made. About half should be your extended reaction to it. Begin to become aware of the way arguments are phrased. Become aware of the verbs that are used to state an argument, the ways that points are put forward in sentences with phrases. Both parts are important here: your account of the argument(s) and your comments on that argument. Beware of slighting your account of the argument(s) because "we have all read it." We may move our eyes over the same words, but we do not read "the same thing." On the other hand, I don't give any credit for a simple summary, without a critique. I will time you (how many minutes did you spend summarizing? how many minutes did you spend on your own response?) and I will review your written version for balance.

Let me emphasize this again: Half of the presentation should be summary, and half should be a critique. Let me give this guideline: the critique should be at least three full double-spaced typewritten pages. If you do a "memo-length" critique you might be given a second chance to do a presentation, but not a passing grade. The oral presentation should be based on the written text, which will be handed in afterwards. Raw notes are not acceptable. (Of course, you may have departed from your prepared text to elaborate various points in the course of the oral version.)

Outside readings are allowed, but you can do the assignment without them, providing a critique from within the text itself. Exceptions to this might be (a) a work which is itself a description and comment on original materials (you might want to refer to some of the original works discussed), or (b) a theorist that might profit from having a look at some of his/her other works. This is not required though. Ask me if you need help with other materials. You may refer to readings we have already done (as a class) in your presentation.
You should include a summary of two book reviews for this assignment. It may be of interest to the class and it will help to get you oriented by reading what other reviewers have said. This should be placed at the very end of your presentation and are not a substitute for your own analysis. N.B. what the reviews say should be clearly distinguished from what you say about the book. Therefore it is a good idea to write your ideas down before hunting the reviews. Book reviews are not allowed in writing your memos. One easy way to find book reviews is to use the Web of Knowledge.

Presentations should be no longer than 15 minutes, with a 10 minute minimum. For most people reading a typed page takes more than a minute, but you need to time it yourself in order to determine this. (Last time people in the seminar told me that 7 pages of Times New Roman (12 pt) takes 15 minutes.) Whether you read it through or talk it through, I don't care. Since written material is "denser," I will insist that you read slowly. Points will be deducted if you spend more than 7 minutes simply summarizing the book.

PAPER

Your in-class presentation will be the starting point for your class paper. Additional materials, outside the scope of what we are reading in class will be necessary for the paper. You may begin this paper as soon as you submit an outline or abstract of your topic and I approve it. Deadline for abstracts is Spring Break.

If you fail to go materially beyond what you did in your presentation (or what we did as a class), I will return the paper to you ungraded. The paper must be theoretical, and it must refer substantially to one or more of the readings for this term. The paper may not be submitted (or have previously been submitted) for another class. It may not be simply an empirical analysis but it can contain empirical materials, particularly if you want to provide a theoretical treatment (referring to some of our class readings) of your own substantive field of sociology.

Because of our focus on very recent (not just "contemporary") theory, the paper should be on a publishable topic. Let's say it's a "first draft" of a publishable paper. Although you may not have time before getting your Ph.D., it is beneficial to have a couple of papers which serve as drafts to be worked into shape later. It will not be acceptable simply to use the course readings for the paper--you must go beyond this. Make use of footnotes. Not many grad students do--it will improve your paper by allowing you to take nonessential material out of the text & give a better flow.

Length & References. In terms of length, the final product should be no less than 4000 and no more than 6000 words of text. Since you will submit the final version electronically (in Word) I will do a word count, excluding references & front matter. There is no way to fudge this, so you should check as you are writing the paper (this is easy in Word—don’t include references in your count). Use Times New Roman 12 pt (the standard font used here in this syllabus) with one inch (left justified) margins all around. 4000 words is about twelve double-spaced pages of type—so
you may find that you need between 12 and 20 pages (not including references). Reduction of one letter grade will apply to papers with fewer pages or nonsense like wide margins and large fonts. The format for references is what we call "ASA" (American Sociological Association) format. You can find a PDF version at http://www.asanet.org/pubs/asaguidelinesnew.pdf

**ASSESSMENT**

Just to give you an idea of how the study will be graded, I reproduce here the form I sometimes use for myself when I grade. It is not necessarily what I will use when I begin marking the essays (reserve the right of improvement when you can!). People who followed the directions closely generally received high marks.

___ Statement of the general argument of paper
___ Outline (roadmap to the paper) in the introduction
___ Clarity in presentation of other’s work
___ Critique and/elaboration of work
___ Conclusion
___ Outline compatibility (degree to which paper follows approved / suggested outline)
___ Readability
___ Selection & use of references

**Perspective**

Medieval Arabic authors loved parody, even sacred writing. One famous comic author, Ashab was asked why he did not tell ‘haditz’ (traditions of the prophet) as a good Muslim should? In the traditional fashion, this telling is through the chain of tellers, so Ashab began “I was told by Nafi, who was told by ibn Umar, that the apostle of God said, ‘there are two qualities such that a man who has them both is one of God’s chosen friends.’” When asked what these two qualities were, Ashab said: ‘Nafi forgot one. And I have forgotten the other.’

Consider the following quotations to get an idea what we are dealing with in contemporary sociological theory.

we take it that a relentless articulation of aimless, pointless, absurd, fragmentary, passionate, unique, playful, and transgressive discourses is valuable in its own right
Lynch and Bogen, "In Defense of Dada-Driven Analysis" 1991: 269

This book exemplifies why no one in sociology reads theory except for self-proclaimed theorists, and many of them will find little of interest here.
Chafetz, review of Current Perspectives in Social Theory, in Contemporary Sociology 1992: 275
Social theory’s problem today is not the proliferation of theory; it is not the absence of models or unifying principles that specify causal links, within and between levels. Theory is the problem of social theory today; that is, theory as it has fallen into the hands of theorists who think in terms of models and unified theories.

Denzin, review of *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, in Contemporary Sociology 2002: 261

You may as well know now that this course is approached from a (not "the") sociology of science perspective (call it a kind of skeptical pragmatism combined with social epistemology). My view of the matter?

(1) There is no such thing as a consensual view of the meaning of "theory," nor is there ever likely to be such a consensus in sociology.

(2) Hence, "theory" can be defined in practice as what people called "theorists" do, but is as well or better defined as the guiding ideas used by practicing sociologists to understand the world. It is never justifiable to argue against someone by saying "What is being done here is just not theory." When you hear someone say this, it is primarily a rhetorical and strategic move.

(3) Our task is to figure out the ways in which these works are theory, or, put differently, what are the theoretical elements therein.

(4) Because of (2) above I cannot argue that the something is "not theory." But because of my personal experiences doing sociology and because it will not help you in pursuing a Ph.D. in this department, we will not read much of the type of theory that might more accurately be called "commentary" on the works of others. To illustrate, the following is taken from an abstract from the lead article of a recent issue of *Sociological Theory*:

Marcuse's *Reason & Revolution* was the first Hegelian Marxist text to appear in English, the first systematic study of Hegel by a Marxist, and the first work in English to discuss the young Marx seriously. It introduced Hegelian and Marxist concepts such as alienation...When the book first appeared, it was attacked sharply from the standpoint of empiricism and positivism by Sidney Hook, among others...Marxist Lucio Colletti, the critical theorist Douglas Kellner, and the Marxist humanist Raya Dunayevskaya. From the postmodernist camp, Jacques Derrida has discussed some the same themes as did Marcuse, especially around the issues of negativity and difference. It is argued, however, that Derrida's reading of Hegel is more problematic than Marcuse's, especially with regard to the project of constructing a critical social theory.

You will appreciate that this kind of writing, if it is of use to anyone, is of little value to research sociologists.

As Douglas Chadwick had it in a review of a nameless book on language use by primates:

> The more the authors explain the less we understand. Apes certainly seem capable of using language to communicate. Whether scientists are remains doubtful.
One editor of *Sociological Theory* agreed in an editorial with this view of what has happened in theory. But after publishing this editorial, nothing changed. Sociological theorists remain committed to studying each other, rather than the subject for which they signed up: the social world.

We need to focus on

**WHY WE'RE DOING SOCIOLOGY**

&

**HOW WE'RE GOING TO USE THEORY**

We don't need to focus on who said what.
INTRODUCTIONS

(1) What theory courses have you had before?

(2) Which post-classic theorists did you read?

(3) What other courses are you taking right now?

CONSIDERATIONS

(4) Where will you read? space & context

(5) How will you read? tools & technique

(6) When will you read? time & energy

(7) What are your objectives? use & purpose

Jan. 30


Ritual incorporation of the classics.

Feb 6

Analysis of article texts. For this assignment you will need to select an article from ASR/AJS/Social Forces and get it approved by Jan. 30. You will do a by-paragraph analysis. The article must come from a major sociological journal.

Feb 13


"Culture and Cognition,"*Annual Review of Sociology* (1997), by Paul Dimaggio, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University. 2001 Theory Prize


Feb 20


Feb 27
Ritual Disrobement at Mardi Gras. Shrum. Two versions.


March 5


March 12


March 19


March 26


April 2

(Order: Cambridge University Press, 110 Midland Ave, Port Chester, NY 10573-4930)

April 9 SPRING BREAK

April 16

April 23


April 30


May 7 LAST CLASS. PAPERS DUE.

Agre, Philip. Networking on the Net.

Shrum, W. “Ten Commandments for Academic Life.”
HISTORY OF READINGS, SOCIOLOGY 7131

The following books and articles have been used and dropped (though they may have been picked up again) in Contemporary Sociological Theory since I first taught it in 1991. I am not a theorist and would not have one as my friend. Working sociologists are exactly the people who should teach theory.

1991
Thomas Scheff. Microsociology.
Amos Hawley. Human Ecology.
Niklas Luhman. The Differentiation of Society.
William Wilson. The Truly Disadvantaged.
Peter Ekeh. Social Exchange Theory.

1992
Ernst Haas. When Knowledge Is Power.
Anthony Giddens. The Consequences of Modernity.

W Shrum. "Network Approaches to the Micro-Macro Problem", unpublished manuscript.
Edward O. Laumann & David Knoke. The Organizational State. Pages 1-35.
Recommended:

1993
Peter Blau. 1964 (1986). Exchange and Power in Social Life. Transaction. (Intro, Chapters Intro, 1, 3-6, 10 (171 pages))
2nd week of Coleman--Chapters 10-12,17,19,20,21,24 (190 pages)
(See also Iannaccone "Why Strict Churches Are Strong?" AJS 1994: 99, pp.1180-1211)

1995
Dorothy Smith. 1988. The Everyday World as Problematic. Northeastern Univ Pr. (225 pages)


1996


1997


Recommended:

1992 critique by Brint in Sociological Theory with reply & rejoinder


1998


Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern.*


Recommended:

1999


Recommended:


2001

2002
Hacking, Ian. The Social Construction of What?