Theory, then, is more than a description of, or generalization about, the empirical world. Rather, it consists of abstract and systematically ordered understandings and models that can be used to account for what actually goes on in the world.


This course is an introduction to some major themes and thinkers in contemporary sociological theory. It does not purport to be exhaustive or complete, and indeed no semester-length course could possibly be as there is too much going on in the realm of theory to cover it all. It is necessary for you to know some basics about sociological theory if you want to know anything at all about sociology and society. Some of you may be inclined to think that theory is something of an abstract and unnecessary aside to or distraction from the empirically-based stuff in the discipline that you are really interested in (e.g., race relations, poverty, gender, politics), but this perspective is quite mistaken. In fact, theory is essential to any sophisticated knowledge about those empirical topics, as I trust will be demonstrated by the books we are reading this term.
A central theoretical problem in sociology has to do with the precise relationship of the individual to social facts that pre-exist her. *When individuals act, what determines their action?* Are they free? *If so, in what precise sense?* If they are not wholly free, *what conditions their action?* If culture and social structures affect individuals, *precisely how do they do so?* *How can we identify and describe these structures?* This central theoretical problem (frequently referred to as the “agency/structure” problem or debate) is at the root of all the books we are reading. Each author offers a slightly different perspective on the questions; on some points, they may not be very distant from one another, but on others, they may be in conflict.

Your task throughout the term is

1) to endeavor to fully understand the arguments and theories being presented in the books;
2) to comparatively evaluate them; and
3) to arrive at a point of competence and confidence in taking your own intellectual stances *vis-à-vis* these arguments.

The three tasks are of course related, but they are also distinct to some degree, and each one depends on the accomplishment of the previous one. So, in order to effectively evaluate the theories in comparative fashion (e.g., to determine where and how Bourdieu and Baudrillard differ and where and how their arguments coincide), you must first understand them. If you misunderstand them, you cannot accurately compare them. Likewise, you cannot legitimately and intelligently take positions among the various theories (e.g., “I prefer Sartre’s vision of the individual to Bourdieu’s, and for the following reasons”) if you have not understood them or been able to effectively and accurately compare them.

**Class Requirements:**

1. Attendance is essential in this course, and 10% of your final grade is based solely on coming to class. The only excused absences are those caused by serious documented illness (i.e., visit to a doctor) or a documented death in immediate family; all other absences (including those caused by participation in sporting events) are unexcused. The attendance grade (like the overall course grade) is calculated according to this formula:

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<tr>
<th>Grade Range</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>93% and up</td>
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<tr>
<td>90%-92%</td>
<td>A- (3.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>87%-89%</td>
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<td>83%-86%</td>
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<td>80%-82%</td>
<td>B- (2.7)</td>
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<td>77%-79%</td>
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<td>73%-76%</td>
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<tr>
<td>70%-72%</td>
<td>C- (1.7)</td>
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<td>60%-69%</td>
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<td>59% and under</td>
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The reading load is considerable and much of the material is weighty and requires real attention. Class meetings are basically efforts in collective close reading of the texts; any and all lecture material I add to that process emerges explicitly from the text we are reading on a particular day. **It is absolutely imperative that you do the reading (and all of it) before class meetings, or your understanding of the material is bound to be deficient.** If I do not have volunteers, or if the same three people are the only ones talking, I will call on people randomly, so be prepared. For obvious reasons, you MUST bring the relevant text with you to class every day.

2. For each class meeting, one of you will be given formal responsibility for taking notes and posting them to Blackboard. On these notes, I expect a polished and elaborated document, not simply an outline or collection of bullet points, so you will have to be prepared to record a lot of information and also make some of your own elaborations and observations. Your class notes from your assigned day are worth 5% of your final grade.

3. No laptops or other such communicative devices may be used during class. Cell phones are also to be turned off or, better yet, left at home. If a special request is made to me, I will permit you to use a laptop on the day/s when you are the assigned class notetaker, but only then.

4. There will be frequent in-class quizzes on the reading. If you miss a quiz for reasons having to do with documented illness (i.e., you must produce official information indicating that you were in the care of a doctor, in the hospital, or otherwise engaged with medical professionals) or documented death in the immediate family, I will schedule an alternative quiz for you. **If you miss a quiz for any non-approved reason, you will not be allowed to make it up and you will have a zero on that quiz.** On a case by case basis, I will permit students to take one quiz in advance of the quiz date if they have what I consider a legitimate reason for missing the scheduled quiz date; in such cases, it is the responsibility of the student to contact me about this within the first week of classes so we can make arrangements well in advance. Together, the quizzes make up 25% of your final grade.

5. Each of you will be involved in a group project with fellow classmates that will require you to do some research on one of the theorists we will be reading and present and write up a discussion of that research. Once you are assigned a group project and a date, you have a week to notify me if you want to change your group. **If you do not do so within that time and you do not fully participate in your group project, you will receive a zero for the project, whatever the reason for your failure to fulfill your duties.** Late group assignments are unacceptable; if your group does not turn in the assignment on time, expect that everyone in the group will receive a zero. Thus, it is important that the group contact me very quickly if they experience any problems getting particular members to participate appropriately in the project. The group projects are worth 30% of your final grade.
6. The final 30% of the course grade is made up by a cumulative final exam, held during the time scheduled by the registrar. The format is short answer and multiple-choice. You will be permitted to use all of your class notes and all of the books during the exam.

Here then is a brief summary of the grade breakdown:

1. **Attendance** = 10%
2. **Class notes** = 5%
3. **Quizzes** = 25%
4. **Group project (presentation and paper)** = 30%
5. **Cumulative final exam** = 30%

**Required Texts:**

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*
4. Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*

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**Class Schedule**

*(all readings to be completed *before* the class meeting indicated)*

August 26: Introductory notes on the various faces of the structure/agency dilemma in philosophy and social science (emphasizing Sartre's combination of existentialism and Marxism)

August 28: Marxism, Existentialism, and Sociological Theory
Reading: Search for a Method, chapter 1

August 31: The Problem of Mediations

Reading: Search for a Method, chapter 2

September 2: The Progressive-Regressive Method

Reading: Search for a Method, chapter 3

September 4: Group Presentation 1 on Sartre

Some Recommended Sources: Jean-Paul Sartre, The Words; Simone De Beauvoir, A Farewell to Sartre; Dominick La Capra, A Preface to Sartre

September 7: The Progressive-Regressive Method continued

Reading: Search for a Method, conclusion

September 9: Quiz 1

September 11: NO CLASS MEETING

September 14: Group Presentation 2 on Bourdieu

Some Recommended Sources: Pierre Bourdieu, Sketch for a Self-Analysis; Michael Grenfell, Pierre Bourdieu: Agent Provocateur

September 16: Bourdieu and French structuralism

Reading: Distinction, introduction

September 18: The Aristocracy of Culture

Reading: Distinction, chapter 1

September 21: The Social Space and its Transformations

Reading: Distinction, chapter 2

September 23: The Habitus and the Space of Life-Styles

Reading: Distinction, chapter 3

September 25: Quiz 2

September 28: The Dynamics of the Fields
Reading: Distinction, chapter 4

September 30: The Sense of Distinction: The Dominant Classes

Reading: Distinction, chapter 5

October 2: Cultural Goodwill: The Petite Bourgeoisie

Reading: Distinction, chapter 6

October 5: The Choice of the Necessary: The Dominated Classes

Reading: Distinction, chapter 7

October 7: Culture and Politics

Reading: Distinction, chapter 8

October 9: Classes and Classifications

Reading: Distinction, conclusion and postscript

October 14: Quiz 3

October 16: Structural Dominance and the Gendered Body

Reading: Masculine Domination, chapter 1

October 19: The Unconscious and Gender Dominance

Reading: Masculine Domination, chapter 2

October 21: Change in Gender Structures?

Reading: Masculine Domination, chapter 3

October 23: Change in Gender Structures? continued

Masculine Domination, postscript, conclusion, and appendix

October 26: Quiz 4

October 28: Group Presentation 3 on Baudrillard

Some Recommended Sources: Jean Baudrillard and Mike Gane, Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews; Mike Gane, Jean Baudrillard: In Radical Uncertainty
October 30: The Formal Liturgy of the Object

Reading: Consumer Society, chapters 1-3

November 2: The Theory of Consumption

Reading: Consumer Society, chapters 4-6

November 4: Mass Media, Sex, and Leisure

Reading: Consumer Society, chapters 7-8

November 6: Mass Media, Sex, and Leisure continued

Reading: Consumer Society, chapters 9-10

November 9: Anomie and Alienation in Consumer Society

Reading: Consumer Society, chapter 11 and conclusion

November 11: Quiz 5

November 13: Group Presentation 4 on Collins

Some Recommended Sources: Randall Collins, “In His Own Words” (http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Collins/Interview%20with%20Randall%20Collins.htm); Michael Burawoy and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, “Berkeley Sociology: Past, Present, and Future” (Blackboard)

November 16: The Nature of Deference and Demeanor and Interaction Ritual Theory

Reading: Interaction Ritual Chains, pp. 3-46

November 18: Mutual Focus/Entrainment

Reading: Interaction Ritual Chains, pp. 47-101

November 20: Emotional Energy

Reading: Interaction Ritual Chains, pp. 102-140

November 23: Interaction Markets and Material Markets

Reading: Interaction Ritual Chains, pp. 141-182

November 30: A Theory of Sexual Interaction
Reading: *Interaction Ritual Chains*, pp. 223-257

December 2: Situational Stratification

Reading: *Interaction Ritual Chains*, pp. 258-296

December 4: Tobacco Ritual and Anti-Ritual

Reading: *Interaction Ritual Chains*, pp. 297-344

December 7: Quiz 6

*Final exam on scheduled date during finals week.*

City Scene (photo: ATR)