

Sociology 6101H-S
Contemporary Sociological Theory

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Course Description and Objectives

This course provides an introduction to contemporary sociological theory. In this course, you will grapple with a number of theoretical approaches that have provided and continue to provide influential and fruitful tools for understanding the social world. By the end of the course, you will have these tools at your disposal, and you will – I hope – be in a position to become not only a consumer of sociological theory but also a producer.

I have four main goals in teaching this course. First, I want you to have a basic facility with core theoretical concepts and approaches that you can bring to bear on your own work. Second, I want you to be familiar with the sort of theory sociologists are making and using today. Third, I want you to try your hands at doing original theory work yourself. Fourth, I want you to be in a position to hit the ground running on the contemporary theory portion of the theory comprehensive exam, should you choose to take it.

Readings

You should acquire *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*, by Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl. It should be available at the U of T bookstore. All of the other required readings will be posted in the course folder.

Expectations, Assignments and Grading

In addition to attendance, participation, and reading, four other kinds of work are required:

1. *Reaction Posts*. Each week, half the class will post a brief response to that week's reading on the discussion board in the course Quercus page. Posts should be roughly 500-750 words, more or less. You must post them by 7 PM the before class. This is a hard deadline.

The posts should 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. They will also get you in the habit of writing and provide a record of your thoughts about the readings.

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 fellow seminar participant's statements. These should be posted by 11 AM on the day of class.

2. *Presentations.* Each week, one student will make an in-class presentation about that week's readings, raise critical questions, and set forth topics for discussion. You may wish to use the postings as a starting point. We will then gather further comments about the presentation and reaction posts from seminar participants as a catalyst for further discussion.
3. *Theory Work Assignments.* During the course, there will be four required exercises in theory work. These will invite you to do original theorizing yourself, using your own research area as a source of material. The first assignment will be an exercise in exegesis and interpretation, the second will be an exercise in conceptual critique and analysis, the third will be an exercise in conceptual synthesis, combination, and construction, and the fourth will be an exercise in formulating various types of causal propositions about social phenomena. I will provide more details about and models for the assignments during the course of the semester.

Exercise must be submitted at the beginning of the class on the date they are due.

4. *Final Paper.* Your final paper will combine your four theory work assignments into one integrated whole. It will be an opportunity for you to revise your work based on feedback received throughout the semester and to synthesize your ideas. Think of the paper as a chance for you to take stock of what you have done and to lay the groundwork for an original theoretical contribution to your area, whether in a dissertation proposal or publication. We will discuss more details about the paper during the semester.

Grading

These assignments will be weighted according to the following scheme in order to determine your final grade:

Theory Work Assignments.....	60%
Final Paper.....	20%
Presentation.....	10%
Reaction Posts.....	10%

Grades will reflect the standard outlined by the University of Toronto.

Truncated Refined Letter Grade Scale	Numerical Scale of Marks
A+	90 - 100%
A	85 - 89%
A-	80 - 84%
B+	77 - 79%
B	73 - 76%
B-	70 - 72%
FZ**	0 - 69%

Course Outline

1. What is sociological theory and how do you do it?

Readings:

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

Supplemental:

- Gabriel Abend, “What is Theory?”

2. The Parsonian Backdrop to Contemporary Sociological Theory

Required Readings:

- Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*. 1937, pp. 3-15, 87-125.
- Talcott Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, chs. 1-2.
- ST, pp. 20-93

Supplemental Readings:

- Jeffrey Alexander, *Twenty Lectures*, ch.7

3. Neo-Utilitarianism

Required Readings:

- Gary Becker. 1976. "The Economic Approach to Human Behavior." Pp. 3-14 in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago.
- Mancur Olson. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Pp. 5-52 (skip math parts if you want).
- Peter Blau. *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, selections.
- Thomas Schelling (1978). *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. Norton, Excerpts.
- ST, pp. 94-122.

Supplemental:

- Amartya Sen. 1977. "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6: 317-344.
- James Coleman. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology*. 94, supplement, pp. S95-S120.
- Jeremy Freese. "Preferences and the Explanation of Social Behavior."

4. Symbolic Interactionism

Theory Work Assignment #1 due at the beginning of class.

Required Readings:

- Blumer, Herbert (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Selections
- Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Frame Analysis, and The Interaction Order*, selections.
- ST, pp. 123-149.

5. Ethnomethodology

- Harold Garfinkel, Preface to *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, "What is Ethnomethodology?" "Studies in the routine grounds of everyday interaction," and "The Origins of the term 'Ethnomethodology'."
- Dorothy Smith, "The Everyday World as Problematic," and "Institutional Ethnography."
- ST, pp. pp 150-173.
- ST, on Kessler and McKenna

Supplemental:

- Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna. 1978. *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

6. Communicative Action and the Public Sphere

- Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, selections.
- Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, selections.
- Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere” and “Transnationalization the Public Sphere.”
- ST, pp. 199-248.
- ST, on Fraser

7. Agency, Power, and Social Structure

Theory Work Assignment #2 due at the beginning of class.

- Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, selections.
- 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.
- ST, pp. 281-307.

Supplemental:

- Bachrach and Baratz, “The Two Faces of Power.”
- Parsons on power
- Lukes on power

8. Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

- Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structuralist Anthropology*, selections
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality*, selections.
- Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes.”
- Selections from Patricia Hill Collins (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, selections.
- ST, pp. 339-370.

Supplemental:

- Hall, “The West and the Rest.”
- David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, selection
- Habermas, “Modernity and Postmodernity”

9. Bourdieu

Theory Work Assignment #3 due at the beginning of class.

- Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” “The Forms of Capital,” “From Ruling Class to Field of Power,” “The Power of Journalism,” “Some Properties of Fields,” “On Symbolic Power.”
- ST, pp. 371-400.

Supplemental

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, chs 5-8, conclusion
- Wacquant, “Habitus,” “Everything is Social.”
- Jon Elster (1981). “Snobs.” in: *London Review of Books* 3.20, pp. 10–12.
- Dreyfus and Rabinow on Bourdieu

10. Neo-pragmatism

- Joas, H. 1993. "Pragmatism in American Sociology." Pp. 14-51 in *Pragmatism and Social Theory* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gross, N. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological*. 74:358-79.
- Joas, H. 1996. "Situation--Corporeality--Sociality. The Fundamentals of a Theory of Action."
- ST, pp. 500-528.

11. March 28: The Current Scene I

- Charles Camic and Neil Gross. 1998. “Contemporary Developments in Sociological Theory: Current Projects and Possibilities.” *Annual Review of Sociology*. 24: 453-476.
- ST, pp. 529-560
- Selected recent articles from theory journals, TBD. Selections from statements about state of “theory” in recent *Qualitative Sociology*?

12. April 4: The Current Scene II

- Selected recent articles from theory journals. Selections by seminar participants?

Theory Work Assignment #4 due at the beginning of class.

**readings are subject to change

IMPORTANT ITEMS

Email communication: In accordance with the University of Toronto's suggested practices – and due to email security issues – I will only respond to emails sent from a University of Toronto email account (i.e., utoronto.ca, chass.utoronto.ca; utsc.utoronto.ca, etc.)

At times you may have to wait a minimum of 48 hours (2 days) for a reply to an email inquiry. Please do not send multiple emails within a 48 hour period. I do not respond to email during the weekend. So, if you send an email on a Thursday or a Friday you will likely have to wait until Monday for a response.

Late Assignments: To request accommodation for a missed assignment **you must present your case to the instructor, via email: dan.silver@utoronto.ca**

- You are expected to complete assignments on time.
- An assignment is considered late if it is not submitted by the announced due date and time. After this time, late penalties apply. You are expected to keep a back-up copy of your assignment in case it is lost.
- Late assignments for reasons that are *within your control* will be penalized 5% per day (i.e.: 24 hours). The penalty period includes weekends and holidays.
- For lateness *beyond your control*, you must provide documentation to indicate that you were unable to engage in school work during the period of the assignment.
- Assignments more than 7 days late will be accepted but will not receive credit unless they are accompanied by valid documentation of circumstances beyond the student's control.

Accessibility Statement: Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the AccessAbility Services Office as soon as possible. I will work with you and

AccessAbility Services to ensure you can achieve your learning goals in this course. Enquiries are confidential.

Plagiarism & Cheating: Misrepresentation and cheating will not be tolerated. Please see the University of Toronto's "Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters" to read about the penalties and risks.

Academic Integrity: Academic integrity is essential to the pursuit of learning and scholarship in a university, and to ensuring that a degree from the University of Toronto is a strong signal of each student's individual academic achievement. As a result, the University treats cases of cheating and plagiarism very seriously. The University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>) outlines the behaviours that constitute academic dishonesty and the processes for addressing academic offences. Potential offences include, but are not limited to:

In papers and assignments: Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgement. Submitting your own work in more than one course without the permission of the instructor. Making up sources or facts. Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment.

On tests and exams: Using or possessing unauthorized aids. Looking at someone else's answers during an exam or test. Misrepresenting your identity.

In academic work: Falsifying institutional documents or grades. Falsifying or altering any documentation required by the University, including (but not limited to) doctor's notes.

All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from your instructor or from other institutional resources (see <http://www.utoronto.ca/academicintegrity/resourcesforstudents.html>).

