

**Department of Sociology
University of Toronto
SOC6101H1S: Contemporary Sociological Theory
Winter 2024**

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Location: Tuesdays, 1-3 PM EST, Room 17146

Course Website: Quercus

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description:

This course provides a partial overview of contemporary sociological theory. I say “partial” because the discipline is too prolific and what counts as theory too broad for a course like this to feign full coverage. While most of the assigned material was authored by sociologists, not all of it was. I have tried to put together a set of readings that provides responsible attention to the range of typical works you will find in any grad-level sociology theory syllabi in Canada and the US (e.g., Goffman, Bourdieu), but also to include some more subaltern selections that have been neglected or that provide different points of departure (e.g., Fanon, Charles Mills).

There will be ample opportunity to engage important sociological topics, longstanding debates, and theoretical puzzles. Many of these topics, debates, and puzzles will recur throughout your careers. To pass this class, you will need to demonstrate an ability to accurately summarize the assigned materials both orally and in writing. That said, generative AI and large language models are getting pretty good at summaries of densely written texts. Let’s do more. As Max Weber might have put it, I am hoping to see each of you develop a sense of “musicality” with theory. Let’s put the ideas and contributions contained in these readings to good use. Let’s leave our all-too-human imprint on them. Make them our own. Show me how you theorize.

Learning by Failure

When my son was in the fourth grade, he mentioned to me that one of his teachers told him, “None of us are perfect, which is why they put erasers on pencils.” This reminded me of a quote from the economist Kenneth Boulding: “Nothing fails like success because we don’t learn from it. We learn only from failure.” Try not to get too hung up on coming to class with the “correct” or “definitive” interpretation of a particular text, concept, or theoretical insight. We all make mistakes. Also, great works are great because they evoke different interpretations from different readers. We all miss the mark from time to time. Use your eraser and get back to work. Also, please be respectful when your classmates say something that you find wrong, shortsighted, or a little dull. Since this paragraph is already filled with pithy quotes, why not one more. “Be kind to one another, for most of us are fighting a hard battle.”

Course Requirements:

In cases where there is a legitimate reason beyond your control, there will be no penalty for turning in assignments late. Please try not to abuse this, however. Turning assignments in past the deadline on the syllabus is not good for you or for me.

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION	DUE DATE	RELATIVE WEIGHT
1. Class Participation	Engage with course content, group discussions, discussion leadership, and active listening.	Ongoing	20%
2. Discussion Leadership	Lead class discussion.	Ongoing	10%
3. Position paper	Write a brief position paper focused on the week's reading when you are discussion leader	Tuesday, end of the day for the week you are a discussion leader.	10%
4. Discussion Questions	Post a discussion question based on each week's assigned readings.	Each Monday, end of the day, starting Week 2	20%
5. Application essay #1	Write an application essay that draws on readings from at least 2 of the 5 sets of assigned readings between Weeks 2 and 6	Friday, February 16, 2024, 11:59 PM EST	20%
6. Application essay #2	Write an application essay that draws on readings from at least 2 of the 5 sets of assigned readings between Weeks 8 and 12	Friday, April 5, 2024, 11:59 PM	20%

1. Class Participation

There is a tendency in graduate theory syllabi to overwhelm students with the sheer amount of reading. I too have taught theory courses this way. There are many works of great theoretical insight that we could take in. As Ludwig Fleck (1935) wrote in *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, “to recognize a certain relation, many another relation must be misunderstood, denied, or overlooked.” Nevertheless, I have tried hard not to overwhelm you with sheer volume. I want everyone to actually read and engage with the assigned materials.

This also means that I expect you to come to class having fully digested the assigned materials. While we will attempt to make sense of the readings jointly, do not rely on the discussion leaders or me to provide all the information you need to know. Due your due diligence and come prepared with your own questions and contributions in mind. Please be generous by sharing the thoughts, questions, and concerns that the works raised within you. Crystalline understanding of the material is not an expectation for participation, but a willingness to learn and engage is.

2. Discussion Leadership

Each of you will serve as a discussion leader for at least one class between weeks 2 and 12. This should work out so that there are two discussion leaders each week. Discussion leaders should be prepared to give a very short (5-10 minute) oral primer that highlights key issues or themes in the readings of the week. You might include a little bit of biographical information on the author(s), historical or social context from which the work emerged, or its broader significance to sociological theory and scholarship. This doesn’t have to involve extensive background research. Just see what you can easily find through the internet or secondary readings.

Focus your preparation on developing questions and lines of inquiry that you would like to discuss with the rest of the class. While you should not rely only on discussion board questions, please do draw from the discussion board when developing questions and lines of inquiry. The main responsibility of discussion leaders will be promote and guide our discussion and debate. Think of yourselves as the catcher in the rye, steering us back toward the center of the field when we get a little too close to the cliff’s edge. How you go about leading our discussions will largely be up to you and your partner, although the emphasis should be placed on class engagement and collaboration.

3. Position Paper

Everyone will write one brief position paper based on the assigned readings for the week you are discussion leader. The position paper should be between 800- 1000 words, roughly 3 double-spaced pages. In addition to an accurate if brief summary of the readings, this essay should propose a relevant argument, position, or critical appraisal. Think about ways you might extend the ideas or frameworks offered. Where do you locate the most surprising conceptual convergences and divergences in the work? You might point out consequential silences within the texts. Or, consider drawing out some promising new lines of inquiry that the works inspire.

4. Discussion Questions

Everyone will submit at least one (1) discussion board question to Quercus each week. Feel free to post more than one if you feel compelled. Please post your discussion question(s) no later than the end of the day on Monday, so we have time to read them before class. To avoid last minute technical glitches, posting ahead of time is always a good idea. Consider making a back-up copy of what you write in case it does not upload properly.

Discussion questions are a good way to raise issues that you find puzzling, would like to discuss more in class, raise applications, extensions, or criticisms, or in general provide content that can help to structure our open discussions in class. Try not to get discouraged if we don't address your question(s) in class. We will simply not be able to cover everything. If there is an issue raised in your discussion question that you want addressed, please be proactive in figuring out how to bring it up.

TIP: Try to avoid discussion questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Questions that begin with the adverbs “how” or “why” (e.g. “How do new information technologies shape interpersonal communication?”) are usually better than questions that start with “have” or “do” (e.g. “Do new information technologies impact interpersonal communication?”).

5. Application essay #1

Write an essay that draws on readings from at least 2 of the 5 sets of assigned readings between Weeks 2 and 6. You should apply the insights of these readings to a contemporary social problem of your choice. The paper should move beyond a summary register by developing a standalone theoretical argument that is interesting, important, and relevant to contemporary sociological research. This argument might address how the key ideas, concepts, or frameworks from the readings reveal new, notable, or hidden features of the social problem. How does the theoretical work enable us to see this problem in a different light? How might it open up new lines of inquiry? What features does it draw into focus? What does it obscure? You might pit one theorist against another. Or, synthesize across theorists in ways that might not seem obvious but forges novel insight. The goal here is to demonstrate your musicality with theory, applied to a specific area of sociological inquiry.

This essay should be about 1500 words, or roughly 5 double-spaced pages, not including title page and references. It is fine if it is a little shorter or a little longer than this, but only by a few hundred words please. You are not required to do additional research to excel on this assignment, but it never hurts to know a lot about your topic before writing on it. Be sure to use proper citation and back up your empirical assertions with evidence and logical inference. This should be written in a scholarly, social scientific register, broadly construed. But try to find your own writer's voice too.

6. Application essay #2

Write an essay that draws on readings from at least 2 of the 5 sets of assigned readings between Weeks 8 and 12. Just like application essay #1, you will apply the insights of these readings to a contemporary social problem of your choice. Everything else about the assignment is the same as what is described for application essay #1. You can analyze the same social problem if you like, but probably best to find a new twist on it or focus on different aspects of the same general problem.

General Guidelines for all essays:

- 12 point font, double spaced.
- At least 1" margins on all sides.
- Check spelling and read your work before turning it in.
- Use proper citation conventions. See <https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/sociology/media/1413/download?inline>
- Avoid totalizing terms such as “always,” “never,” “totally,” and “completely,” or phrases like “since the beginning of time...”, which lead to weak theorizing because they tend to oversimplify history and social conditions.

Academic Integrity

The University of Toronto is committed to the values of independent inquiry and to the free and open exchange of ideas. Academic integrity underpins these values and is a core part of the University’s commitment to intellectual life.

Copying, plagiarizing, falsifying medical certificates, or other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Any student caught engaging in such activities will be referred to the Dean’s office for adjudication. Any student abetting or otherwise assisting in such misconduct will also be subject to academic penalties. Students are expected to cite sources in all written work and presentations. See this link for tips for how to use sources well:

(<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize>).

According to Section B.I.1.(e) of the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters it is an offence “*to submit, without the knowledge and approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere.*”

By enrolling in this course, you agree to abide by the university’s rules regarding academic conduct, as outlined in the Calendar. You are expected to be familiar with the *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (<https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/code-behaviour-academic-matters-july-1-2019>) and *Code of Student Conduct* (<http://www.viceprovoststudents.utoronto.ca/publicationsandpolicies/codeofstudentconduct.htm>) which spell out your rights, your duties and provide all the details on grading regulations and academic offences at the University of Toronto.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to www.ouriginal.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the www.ouriginal.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to

the University's use of the www.ouriginal.com service are described on the www.ouriginal.com web site.

Accessibility Services

It is the University of Toronto's goal to create a community that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner. In creating such a community, the University aims to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all persons. Please see the University of Toronto Governing Council "Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities" at

<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppnov012004.pdf>.

In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community. We take seriously our obligation to make this course as welcoming and accessible as feasible for students with diverse needs. We also understand that disabilities can change over time and will do our best to accommodate you. Students seeking support must have an intake interview with a disability advisor to discuss their individual needs. In many instances it is easier to arrange certain accommodations with more advance notice, so we strongly encourage you to act as quickly as possible. To schedule a registration appointment with a disability advisor, please visit Accessibility Services at <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>, call at 416-978-8060, or email at: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca. The office is located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400.

Additional student resources for distressed or emergency situations can be located at distressedstudent.utoronto.ca; Health & Wellness Centre, 416-978-8030, <http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc>, or Student Crisis Response, 416-946-7111.

Equity and Diversity

The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As a course instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated.

Additional information and reports on Equity and Diversity at the University of Toronto is available at <http://equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca>.

Copyright Statement

Lectures and course materials prepared by the instructor are considered by the University to be an instructor's intellectual property covered by the *Copyright Act*, RSC 1985, c C-42. Course materials such as PowerPoint slides and lecture recordings are made available to you for your

own study purposes. These materials cannot be shared outside of the class or “published” in any way. Posting recordings or slides to other websites without the express permission of the instructor will constitute copyright infringement.

Procedures and Rules for Using Generative AI in Assignments

Large Language Models (LLM), Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), and related machine learning systems have been proliferating. Some of these systems automatically generate essays, computer code, or images using minimal human prompting. This includes various versions of ChatGPT as well as many other writing and research assistants. Students are ultimately accountable for the work they submit. Here is some general information and resources on generative AI provided by the School of Graduate Studies: [ChatGPT and Generative AI in the Classroom – Office of the Vice-Provost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education \(utoronto.ca\)](https://utoronto.ca/innovation/undergraduate-education)

In this class, students *may use* AI tools for conducting background research, asking questions about course themes, assimilating information for general understanding, refining language or grammar (i.e., ESL purposes), identifying secondary literature, or generating computer code that aids in data or thematic analysis.

In this class, students *may not* use artificial intelligence tools to automatically generate essay assignments, discussion questions, or answers.

The line between appropriate and inappropriate use can get fuzzy if you use an AI tool to generate an early draft and then re-work it into your own language. In general, I do not think this is a very effective way to keep your writing and thinking skills sharp. More on this below. However, if you find that you are starting to use sentences or passages generated by an AI and then representing it as your own, the following conditions must be met:

1. Students must submit, as an appendix with their assignments, any content produced by an AI tool, and the prompts used to generate the content. This documentation should include what tool(s) were used, how they were used, and how the results from the AI were incorporated into the submitted work.
2. Any content produced by an AI tool must be cited appropriately. Many organizations that publish standard citation formats are now providing information on citing generative AI (e.g., MLA: <https://style.mla.org/citing-generative-ai/>).

If you have any questions about the use of AI applications for course work, please bring it up with me I will be happy to discuss it.

A few more thoughts on using AI, so you know where I am coming from...

The results of LLMs and generative AI can be impressive and quite human-like. Systems like ChatGPT can automatically produce essays, computer code, lesson plans, poems, reports, letters, and the like. They are likely to keep getting better, at least for the next few years. Already, these tools offer access to automated essays and analysis of reasonable quality. However, I do not think they process language, relate to queries, or “learn” in a way that is all that similar to what humans do. This raises several important philosophical and practical questions about intelligence, meaning, learning, writing, and, yes, academic integrity. I am happy to talk about these questions going forward.

These systems are pre-trained on very large swaths of text, images, and other forms of data. Text generators then run probabilities on the word or word strings most frequently associated with the last one, a weighted system of word prediction. I find it helpful to keep it in mind that outputs are driven by probability, not semantics. As such, these systems have no clear sense of regret or remorse if they respond with inaccurate information. While their accuracy and “alignment” can improve as humans inform them of mistakes through a “tuning process,” they do not seem to have an internalized sense of humility. While this raises interesting possibilities, and even some advantages over human reasoning, it is also why generative AI can be “confidently” wrong. We can be easily deceived by their confident delivery. Yet we know that they can “hallucinate” in odd, funny, and sometimes obvious ways, although some mistakes will be hard to recognize without domain knowledge. We should treat the information they share with a lot of skeptical caution.

My belief is that we need to learn how to work with these systems in effective ways that accord to generally agreed upon standards of academic integrity. The procedures laid out earlier are an attempt to capture these standards, as best as I can assess the current situation. That said, I also think there are many creative uses in the offering. LLMs and generative AI will get used in creative ways and they will be abused in stupid ways. Regardless, I find their ability to theorize pretty weak, at least up to now. In addition, they are not very good at explaining how or why they came up with the answers they have provided. Neither are their designers. Despite attempts to eliminate various forms of bias in AI outputs, social scientists have repeatedly shown that algorithmic systems can perpetuate the race, gender, sexualities, and class biases derived from training data. Furthermore, the widespread usage of AI systems in workplaces, schools, social service provision, and criminal justice has tended to amplify pre-existing discrimination and inequality. Using technology for ill is not inevitable, of course, but I encourage everyone to approach systems with their critical mind.

Finally, AI is being pushed by tech companies motivated by a strong profit motive. These companies are trying to infiltrate their products into as many user contexts as possible. Access, which can take many forms including pay-to-play or exposure to advertisement, is mostly getting organized around profit generation. These companies and their promotional agents are very savvy at justifying this push in lofty terms that appeal to your needs and your insecurities. Technological determinism and notions of “inevitability” loom large in their future imaginary. However, the bottom-line is that most tech firms want you to become dependent on their systems. User beware!

I will leave it up to your discretion, but I discourage you from developing a reliance on AI systems for paper outlines or early drafts. Writing and thinking are closely related processes. Drafting an outline for an essay, if this is a typical step in your writing practice, is part and parcel to your craft. It is a creative first step toward organizing, conceptualizing, and theorizing. All of this involves acquired skills that require regular maintenance, as keeping a knife sharp needs a honing rod and whetstone. I worry that automating acquired skills with predictive systems will compromise our writing, critical thinking, and creativity down the road, leaving us more and more dependent on automated systems, their for-profit access models, and their mediocre outputs.

Session Topics and Readings

Most, if not all, readings will be posted to Quercus. If they are not, you should be able to access them through the university library. Or, support academic publications and buy some books for your bookshelves!

Week 1, January 9: Introductions

- Abend, Gabriel. 2008. "The Meaning of 'Theory'." *Sociological Theory*. 26, 2: 173-199.

Week 2, January 16: Settler Colonialism and Decolonization

- Frantz Fanon. 1963. "On Violence" (incl. "On violence in the international context") from *The Wretched of the Earth*.
- Magubane, Zine. 2016. "American Sociology's Racial Ontology: Remembering Slavery, Deconstructing Modernity, and Charting the Future of Global Historical Sociology." *Cultural Sociology* 10, 3: 369-384.

Week 3, January 23: Order, Control, and Disillusion

- Mills, C. Wright. 1963. "Culture and Politics: The Fourth Epoch." from *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*. Edited by Irving Louis Horowitz. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. "The New Forms of Control." from *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1988. "Sociology after the Holocaust." *The British Journal of Sociology*. 39, 4: 469-497.

Week 4, January 30: Microsociology

- Erving Goffman. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: xi-xii; 1-76; 106-40; 238-55.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1962. "Society as Symbolic Interaction" from *Human Behavior and Social Processes*. Edited by Arnold Rose. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. "Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities" pp. 35-42 in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice Hall, Inc.

Week 5, Feb. 6: Habitus, Capitals, and Fields (aka a week with Monsieur Bourdieu)

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984 "The Habitus and the Space of Life-Styles." Pp. 169-225 from *Distinction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." from *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Edited by J. Richardson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1992. "The Logic of Fields." Pp. 94-115 in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Week 6, February 13: Relationalisms

- Emirbayer, Mustafa. 1997. "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology."
- Go, Julian. 2018. "Relational Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Sketches of a "Postcolonial Relationalism" Pp. 357-373 in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*. Edited by François Dépelteau. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Latour, Bruno. 1999. "Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world." Pgs. 258-275 in *The Science Studies Reader*. Edited by Mario Biagioli. New York, NY: Routledge.

PAPER 1 DUE FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Week 7, February 20: READING WEEK, NO CLASS

Week 8: February 27: Modernity and the Carceral (aka a week w/ Monsieur Foucault)

- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish*. Pt. I, Ch. 1: The Body of the Condemned); Pt. II, Ch. 2: The Gentle Way in Punishment; Pt. III, Ch. 3: Panopticism; Pt. IV, Ch. 3: The Carceral.

Week 9. March 5: Modernity and Risk

- Ulrich Beck. 2006. "Living in the World Risk Society." *Economy and Society*. 35, 3: 329-345.
- Scott, James C. 1999. "Geographies of trust, geographies of hierarchy." From *Democracy and Trust*. Edited by M. E. Warren: Cambridge University Press.

Week 10, March 12: Modernity and Racism

- Mills, Charles. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Seamster, Louise and Victor Ray. 2018. "Against Teleology in the Study of Race: Toward the Abolition of the Progress Paradigm." *Sociological Theory*. 36, 4: 315-342.

Week 11, March 19: Modernity, Knowledge, and Feminist Theory

- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" *Feminist Studies*. 14, 3: 575-599.
- Smith, Dorothy. 1999. "Exploring the Social Relations of Discourse: Sociological Theory and the Dialogic of Sociology." from *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Week 12, March 26: Modernity and Non-humans

- Latour, Bruno. 1993. "Ch. 1 Crisis" & "Ch. 4: Relativism" from *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Foster, John Bellamy. 1999. "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2): 366–401.
- Watts, Vanessa. 2013. "Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (2)1, pp. 20-34.

Week 13, April 2: Open Topic

PAPER 2 DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 5.