

Contemporary Sociological Theory 476 – Spring 2007

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Office hours: Tue 13:30 – 15:30 p.m.

Course description

This course is an introduction to contemporary sociological theory. We will address three key questions: (1) What determines individual and collective preferences? (2) How do people make their decisions? (3) Which factors influence the structure and dynamic of social interactions? Each question will be examined in light of empirical and historical examples.

Prerequisites

Students need to have had an introductory course in sociological theory (for instance Soc 475). The course will be taught at an “advanced undergraduate” level. It can also be appropriate for graduate students who have little or no background in sociological Theory. This course assumes that you are interested in reading sociological material and in learning about social processes and behaviors.

Course requirements and grades

Each student may earn up to 100 points based on:

(1) Attendance and quality of participation in class discussion: 15 points possible.

The class format is centered on lectures and on in-class discussions. Regular attendance and participation are required. Students must have completed the reading(s) listed for each session before the class in which we discuss them. You should not expect to do well in the course without regular attendance and thoughtful participation in class discussion. You will lose these points if you do not fulfill these requirements. Please communicate with me if you become ill or emergencies arise so that I will be aware of your circumstances.

Discussion is intended to help you get a handle on the readings. Some weeks you will divide into small discussion groups for part of a class.

(2) Five short 2-3 page papers: 25 points possible.

For each paper, your assignment is to take one required reading in the syllabus and write a short essay engaging the central argument(s) of the reading. The paper is due at the beginning of the class in which we will discuss the reading. I will not accept papers handed in at the end of class. All the papers should be numbered (from one to five).

You may not submit more than one paper in one week. If you submit two papers the same week (that is, seven days), you will lose half of the points earned for the second paper, which means that you should not wait until the last weeks of the semester to hand in your short papers.

NOTE: I request that you submit at least two papers before the mid-term exam.

REQUIRED: Submission of an electronic copy of your paper (www.turnitin.com). In addition to the hard copy handed in at beginning of the class in which we will be discussing the reading, you will submit an electronic copy of your paper to the Turnitin web site: www.turnitin.com before class.

Instructions for submitting the electronic copy. (1) Go the Turnitin web site: www.turnitin.com. (2) Click on the New Users at the top of the homepage. The new user wizard will open and walk you through the profile creation process. (3) To create a profile, you must know the **class ID number (1790080)** and the **enrollment password (soc476)**. Once you finish creating your profile, you will be logged in to Turnitin. The name **Contemporary Sociology Theory-Spring2007** will show up on your homepage. (4) Click this name to open your portfolio for this class. (5) To submit a paper, click the *submit* button. The paper submission page will open. (6) The submission title should be the title of the reading. (7) Then click the *browse* button and locate your paper on your computer. (8) After having selected your paper, click submit to upload your paper.

For further information, please follow this link for the student quickstart:

<http://www.turnitin.com/static/training.html#quickstarts>

This quickstart will help you get started with Turnitin and will walk you through the steps for submitting your first paper.

Directions for the short papers: These papers should not exceed 3 double-spaced typewritten pages and should have three parts:

1. The first part is a summary of the argument. This part should synthesize the main arguments. Which problem is being addressed? What are the author(s)'s major theses? Which terms and concepts are central to the argument? How does the argument get supported? This summary should be short and synthetic. Long summaries are not better summaries. I encourage you to limit your summary to one page.

I will assess the quality of your summary in light of two criteria: (1) did you get the main points? and (2) How *precise and accurate* is your summary? It is crucial that you identify and clearly define key concepts. It is also crucial that you summarize the main points *in your own words*. You should not rely on quotes. The purpose of this exercise is to assess whether you clearly understood the concepts and the arguments under review. That is why quotes are not appropriate. Furthermore, your summary needs to be *precise and accurate*. If you say "According to Bourdieu, social practices reflect people's habitus," and do not specify the concept of habitus, your summary remains wanting. The same remark applies if you are making basic interpretive mistakes. A good summary is a prerequisite for a good grade since in the remaining of the paper, you will be expected to comment on the reading.

2. The second part of the paper presents the reading's contribution: How does the author(s)'s argument expand, challenge, or refine previous readings or previous theories? To what extent does this argument contribute to the theoretical and empirical understanding of the issue under consideration?

3. The third part is a critique of the reading: This part should provide a critical evaluation of the reading. What are the strengths and the weaknesses of the argument? What is left ambiguous, underdeveloped or unaddressed in the present reading? Which type of investigation could overcome these limitations?

Both your analysis of the contribution of the reading and your critique of its strengths and weaknesses are your comments proper. I will grade your comments by taking into account their relevance and the extent to which they are precise and well-informed. If you say: "this reading is important" or "Bourdieu is wrong" but do not elaborate these two assertions in light of specific points or examples, your comments do not fulfill their goal.

Each paper will be worth up to 5 points: 2 points for the summary, 2 points for your comments (presentation of the reading's contribution and critique), and 1 point for clarity.

(3) A mid-term examination: 20 points possible.

This mid-term examination will be in the form of an in-class short answer and essay examination. This exam will be held on **March 22**.

(4) A final examination (an in-class short answer and essay examination on the date indicated in the University Timetable): 40 points possible. The actual content of both the midterm and the final exams will be announced in class before the exams.

Graduate students may choose between taking the final examination or writing a 20 page research paper. The term paper should be a research paper: I expect you to go beyond the readings studied in class. Graduate students who decide to write a research paper are requested to submit a one-page prospectus by the end of the sixth week (**March 1**). This prospectus should indicate the topic and central theme of the paper with an accompanying bibliography. The paper is due on the last day of class (**May 10**). This deadline is imperative. No late paper will be accepted.

The final grade will be based on total number of points accumulated during the semester and will depend on the overall class distribution. Initially, I will assume that 100-91 points is an A, 90-86 an AB, 85-81 a B, 80-76 a BC, etc. The curve may be adjusted downwards, but it will not be adjusted upwards.

The following books are available at the **Rainbow Book Store Co-operative** (one block from State St, on West Gilman). You are not expected to buy all of them, but may wish to add some to your personal library.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Blumer, Herbert. 1986 [1969]. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Coleman, James. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press. **Volume I**.

Hechter, Michael. 1987. *Principles of Group Solidarity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schelling, Thomas. 1980 [1963]. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Tsebelis, George. 1990. *Nested Games. Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

We will also use a course pack available at the Social Center Copy Center (6120 Social Science Building).

Both the required and the recommended readings are available on reserve at the College Library.

Jan 23: Introduction

Part I. Preferences

1. Culture and Ideology

Jan 26:

Sartori, Giovanni. 1969. "Politics, Ideology, and Belief Systems," *American Political Science Review*, 63:398-411. [Coursepack]

Jan 30:

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books. **Chapter 8 ("Ideology as a cultural System"), pp. 87-101 in chapter 4.**

Recommended readings:

Laitin, David and Aaron Wildavsky. 1988. "Political Culture and Political Preference," *American Political Science Review*, 589-96.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books. Chapter 1.

2. Norms, dispositions, habitus

Feb 1:

DiMaggio, Paul and Michael Useem. 1978. "Social Class and Arts Consumption: The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America," *Theory and Society*, 5: 141-161. [Coursepack]

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984 [1979] *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. **Pp. 175-225** (starting with "The Homology between the Spaces").

Feb 6:

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984 [1979] *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. **Preface to the English-Language edition, Introduction (pp. 1-7), pp. 99-125, pp. 169-175.**

Recommended readings:

DiMaggio, Paul. 1987. "Classification in Art," *American Sociological Review* 52: 440-455.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Chapter 3.

3. Utility and self-interest

Feb 8:

Hamilton, Richard. F. 1982. *Who Voted for Hitler?* Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press. Appendix A (“The Reichstag elections 1919-1933”). [Coursepack]

Brustein, William. 1996. *The Logic of Evil. The Social Origins of the Nazi Party, 1925-1933.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press. **Chapters 1 & 5, Conclusion.** [Coursepack]

Feb 13:

Hechter, Michael. 1987. *Principles of Group Solidarity.* Berkeley: University of California Press. **Chapter 2 & 3.**

Recommended readings:

Becker, Gary. 1976. *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1.

Coleman, James. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Chapter XIX (“The Self”).

4. Preference shift

Feb 15:

Elster, Jon. 1983. *Sour Grapes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. **Chapter III (“Sour Grapes”).**[Coursepack]

Feb 20:

Kuran, Timur. 1996. “Social Mechanisms of dissonance reduction,” pp. 147-171 in *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, edited by Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Coursepack]

Tackett, Timothy. 1996. *Becoming a Revolutionary. The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790).* Princeton: Princeton University Press. **Introduction (pp. 3-15), chapters 1.** [Coursepack]

Feb 22:

Tackett, Timothy. 1996. *Becoming a Revolutionary. The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790).* Princeton: Princeton University Press. **Chapters 4 & 5.** [Coursepack]

Recommended readings:

Laitin, David. 1986. *Hegemony and Culture. Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1 & 7.

Part II. Choice

5. Rational Choice

Feb 27:

Gambetta, Diego. 1987. *Were they pushed or did they jump? Individual decision mechanisms in education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. **Chapter 1**. [Coursepack]

Elster, Jon. 1983. *Sour Grapes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. **(pp. 1-26 in Chapter 1)**. [Coursepack]

Mar 1:

Tsebelis, George. 1990. *Nested Games. Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press. **Chapter 2**.

Recommended readings:

Simon, Herbert A. 1955. "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 69: 99-118.

Sen, Amartya. 1977. "Rational fools: A critique of the behavioral foundations of economic theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6:317-344.

6. Bounded rationality

Mar 6:

March, James G. 1986 [1978]. "Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice," Pp. 142-170 in *Rational Choice*, edited by Jon Elster, Oxford Basil Blackwell. [originally published in the *Bell Journal of Economics*] [Coursepack]

Simon, Herbert A. 1985. "Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political Science," *American Political Science Review*, 79 (2): 293-304. [Coursepack]

Mar 8:

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press. **Volume I, pp. 1-42**.

Recommended readings:

Ainslie, George. 1992. *Picoeconomics. The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States within the Person*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Preface and Chapter 1.

Simon, Herbert A. 1986. "Rationality in Psychology and Economics," *Journal of Business*, 59(4): S209-S234.

7. The framing of decisions

Mar 13:

Tversky, Amos and Daniel Kahneman. 1986. "Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions," *Journal of Business*, 59(4): S251-S278. [Coursepack]

Elster, Jon. 1983. *Sour Grapes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. **(Chapter IV)**. [Coursepack]

Mar 15:

Boudon, Raymond. 1996. "The 'Cognitivist Model'. A generalized rational choice model." *Rationality and Society*, 8(2): 123-150. [Coursepack]

Recommended readings:

Kahneman, Daniel, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky (eds.). 1983. *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter I.

Fillieule, Renaud. 1996. "Frames, Inferences and Rationality. Some light on the controversies about rationality." *Rationality and Society*, 8(2): 151-165.

Mar 20:

Revision for the Midterm Exam

Mar 22: Midterm Exam

Part III. Interactions

8. Collective Behavior

Mar 27:

Blumer, Herbert. 1939. "Collective Behavior." Pp. 220-232 in *An Outline of the Principles of Sociology*, edited by Robert E. Park. New York: Barnes. [Coursepack]

Zolberg, Aristide R. 1972. "Moments of Madness," *Politics and Society* 2(2): 183-208. [Coursepack]

Berk, Richard A. 1974. "A Gaming Approach to Crowd Behavior," *American Sociological Review*, 39: 355-373. [Coursepack]

Mar 29:

Coleman, James. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. **Chapters IX ("Collective Behavior")**.

Recommended readings:

Turner, Ralph H. 1964. "Collective Behavior," pp. 382-425 in *Handbook of Modern Sociology*, edited by Robert E. L. Faris. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Tsebelis, George. 1990. *Nested Games. Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press. **Chapter 3**.

Apr. 3-5: Spring recess

9. Strategic Interactions

Apr 10:

Schelling, Thomas. 1980 [1963]. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. **Chapter 3 + pp. 89-118**.

Apr 12:

Granovetter, Mark. 1978. "Threshold Models of Collective Behavior." *American Journal of Sociology* 83(6): 1420-1443. [**Coursepack**]

Recommended readings:

Tsebelis, George. 1990. *Nested Games. Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Chapter 5.

Harsanyi, John C. 1986 [1977]. "Advances in Understanding Rational Behavior," Pp. 82-107 in *Rational Choice*, edited by Jon Elster, Oxford Basil Blackwell.

10. Symbolic Interactions and Communicative Action

Apr 17:

Blumer, Herbert. 1986 [1969]. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. **Chapter III (pp. 78-89), pp. 1-20 and 47-60 in chapter I**.

Apr 19:

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor. **Pp. 1-57**.

Apr 24:

Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press. **Pp. 85-141**.

11. Social influence

Apr 26:

Katz, Elihu and Paul F. Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal Influence*. Glencoe: The Free Press. **Chapters 4 & 5**. [Coursepack]

May 1:

Shils, Edward A. and Morris Janowitz. 1948. "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12(2): 280-315. [Coursepack]

Recommended readings:

Lewin, Kurt, and Paul Grabbe. 1945. "Conduct, Knowledge, and Acceptance of New Values," pp. 56-68 in Gertrud Weiss Lewin (ed.): *Resolving Social Conflicts. Selected Papers on Group Dynamics by Kurt Lewin*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers.

Berelson, Bernard R., Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William Mc Phee. 1954. *Voting: A Study in Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Chapter 6.

12. Norm and norm emergence

May 3:

Ullmann-Margalit, Edna. 1977. *The Emergence of Norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. **Chapter 1 & chapter 2 (pp. 18-48)**. [Coursepack]

May 8:

Coleman, James. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. **Chapters X & XI**.

Recommended readings:

Sugden, Robert. 1989. "Spontaneous Order," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 3(4): 85-97

Ermakoff, Ivan. 1997. "Prelates and Princes: Aristocratic Marriages, Canon Law Prohibitions and Shifts in Norms and Patterns of Domination in the Central Middle Ages." *American Sociological Review*. 62:405-422.

May 10:

Recapitulation and Revision for the Final Examination. Last date to turn in the research papers for graduate students.