

Contemporary Social Theory, 1867-2019

SOC 614 • Fall 2019 • Tu 5:30-8:20 • Graham 310
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Office hours Th 10-12 (<https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/xpakt>)

“The question is not *whether* we need abstraction, but *which* abstractions we can live with, and how we can prevent them from being turned into devices of domination and dispossession.”

—Alberto Toscano, “The Violence of Abstraction” (2019)



Welcome to Contemporary Social Theory. As the title indicates, we will begin with mid-19th century modernist thinkers and work toward more contemporary writing. At the most general level, this is a course about concept-formation. When we want to explain a social phenomenon – and this is really the root of the sociological enterprise – we need to develop concepts adequate to capturing and making sense of our social reality. Note that these are two distinct moves: first, a moment in which we capture this reality, *describing* its essential components; and second, a moment in which we *explain* how this reality came to be.

Take our first reading, for example. Before Marx wrote *Capital*, no one had ever deployed the term “capitalism” before. He wanted to figure out how it was possible that workers were remunerated for their labor, but factory owners still managed to make a profit. In order to do this, as we’ll soon see, he developed concepts like “labor-power,” “labor,” “surplus labor time,” and “necessary labor time,” and used them to build a social system he called “capitalism,” or sometimes just “capital.” He then gives us an account of where capitalism came from and where it is headed.

Or take Durkheim. In the beginning there was no advanced division of labor, but now we have one. How did that come about, and what were the forces that propelled it? As we’ll see, whereas Marx focuses on relations between surplus producers and appropriators in the workplace, Durkheim develops moral concepts like “solidarity” and “collective consciousness” for explaining this genesis. Which explanation, socio-economic or moral, is more compelling? That is precisely what we will be discussing.

The goal of this class is to get us thinking about concept-formation in social theory, up to the very present, when we will be examining questions related to the way that race, class, gender, and sex are often articulated in complicated matrices facilitating the reproduction of the status quo.

And why do empirical sociologists need social theory? All good sociological research requires adequately developed concepts. Whether you are working with a dataset, doing archival research, or conducting ethnographic fieldwork or interviews, your data cannot speak for itself. Like our social reality, it overwhelms us. Even if we could describe every aspect of this reality, where would this get us? It does nothing in terms of *explaining* it, which, I will argue in this class, is the goal of all good sociological research. In other words, we don’t just want to identify *that* a problem exists; we want to explain *why* and *how* it came to be.

Nothing is more important in this class than the readings, and I expect every one of you to come to seminar having completed all of it. It is tough going for the most part, but please be persistent and disciplined. The only way it will get easier is – like all things in life – if you practice. And the way to practice is by immersing yourself. Please note that it’s quite a bit of reading, usually about 100 pages per class, so do not attempt to do all of it in a single night.

Please give yourself ample time to read, and in some cases reread, these texts. This will also help you develop notetaking strategies that help you retain information. Above all, I recommend

marking up the text, writing notes in the margins, etc. These are all classics and with the exception of the Cox and Hall readings, are widely available online. However, I will make all of them available as PDFs on Canvas for those who prefer to save money. I do expect you to print them out at the very least, though I suppose you could use a tablet if you would like. *But it is a requirement that you bring your annotated course readings to every single class without exception.*

The requirements for this course are as follows:

- 1. Reading responses (25 %):** Before every class, you must submit a one-page, single-spaced reading response via Canvas. These are due before I wake up on the day of class, i.e. the night before. Late assignments will not be graded. These should do two main things. First, you need to provide an *analytic synopsis* of the reading, which is quite different from simply summarizing it. What is the author trying to do? How do they do it? What is their central argument, and what key concepts do they develop in the service of that argument? Second, you should develop a set of *critical questions* for discussion. This means interrogating the assumptions of the theorist, pointing to weak points in their argument, and posing questions that either extend their theory, or else suggest an alternative.
- 2. Presentation (25 %):** Each one of you will lead discussion during one of our meetings. Leading discussion requires three components. *First*, you should prepare a 7-10 minute presentation on the reading. Think of this as an extended version of your analytic synopsis. You can read from a script if you would like, or else you can work through PowerPoint slides if you would prefer. This presentation should give your *reading* of the text, i.e. what you think the main argument is, how the author constructs it, and which key concepts they develop in the service of that argument. It should also conclude by raising issues with or even critiquing the reading. *Second*, you should prepare a set of discussion questions for guiding the class through key issues in the text. While your presentation will serve as a provocation, you still need to develop discussion questions. You can end your presentation with some of these questions if you'd like, but you should develop enough to keep us going for the next couple of hours. And *third*, you should use these questions to moderate this discussion. This is your seminar, and you're not here to just listen to me lecture. This is your chance to run a seminar the way you would like it to be run.
- 3. Final paper (40 %):** This is your chance to put all of this theory to work. Your paper should be roughly 15-20 pages (double-spaced) and can be on the topic of your choice. You should think of this as a chance to explore some of the broader questions related to your Masters thesis research. Or if you still are not sure what your thesis will be about, this is your chance to reflect on questions that particularly interest you at some length. I expect each of you to meet with me in office hours at some point to discuss the paper – the sooner the better. It will be due on the final day of class (December 3) and should be turned in in class. No late papers will be accepted without prior written permission from me. We will be devoting a bit of class time to talking about paper topics and

workshopping your ideas in class. I strongly suggest that you try to develop a topic during the first five weeks or so of class, as this will make your life easier down the line.

- 4. Participation (10 %):** I am not the type of professor who is planning to put a check mark next to your name every time you speak. However, I do expect that you take this class seriously. First and foremost, this is graduate school, and I expect you to make it to every single class. If you miss one, I am not going to deduct points from your grade, but beyond that I may. I expect you to engage in discussion during class. If you tend to be shy or quiet, you can supplement your grade by chatting with me in office hours. I don't expect you to be constantly speaking, but I do expect every one of you to engage in every single session. Some weeks you might speak a lot, other weeks not at all. That's fine. But you do need to be engaged at all times, which means active listening and above all, critically interrogating and/or building upon each others' contributions



Week 1 (August 20): What is *social* about social theory?

Week 2 (August 27): What is capitalism and where did it come from?

Karl Marx. 1976 [1867]. *Capital, Volume I*, Pp. 340-416, 896-926. New York: Penguin.

Week 3 (September 3): What roles did ideas play in the development of capitalism?

Max Weber. 1992 [1930]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Pp. xxviii-xlii, 1-50, 102-25. London: Routledge.

Week 4 (September 10): How and why did a division of labor develop?

Émile Durkheim. 1997 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*, Pp. xxv-lix, 1-72, 77-87, 118-23, 149-75, 200-25, 291-341. New York: Free Press.

Week 5 (September 17): How is racism involved in the consolidation of capitalist rule?

W. E. B. Du Bois. 1962 [1935]. Pp. 1-83, 670-709 in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. New York: Free Press.

Week 6 (September 24): What is civil society and how does it defend the status quo? How is it simultaneously a terrain for contesting the capitalist order?

Antonio Gramsci. 1971 [1929-35]. *Selections from the Prison Notebook*, Pp. 206-76. New York: International.

Week 7 (October 1): How do sex and gender facilitate domination?

Simone de Beauvoir. 2009 [1949]. *The Second Sex*. Pp. 3-18, 62-68, 283-340, 721-66. New York: Vintage.

Week 8 (October 8): If stigma is symbolic, then why does it have such real material effects?

Oliver Cromwell Cox. 1959 [1948]. *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, Pp. ix-xvii, 3-35, 82-119, 298-315, 423-53. New York: Monthly Review.

B. R. Ambedkar. 2014 [1936]. *The Annihilation of Caste*, Pp. XX-XX. New York: Verso.

[October 15: Fall break]

Week 9 (October 22): How are racialization and colonization related? What is specific and what is generalizable about the colonial situation?

Frantz Fanon. 2008 [1952]. "The Lived Experience of the Black Man." Pp. 89-119 in *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove.

Frantz Fanon. 2004 [1961]. "On Violence." Pp. 1-62 in *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.

Week 10 (October 29): If power is everywhere, how might we contest it?

Michel Foucault. 1982. "The Subject and Power." Pp. 208-28 in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Michel Foucault. 1990 [1976]. Pp. 1-50, 133-59 in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage.

Week 11 (November 5): What does it mean to conceive of the state as a social relation?

Nicos Poulantzas. 1978. Pp. 7-48, 123-62. *State, Power, Socialism*. New York: Verso.

Week 12 (November 12): How is articulation different from intersectionality?

Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. 2013 [1978]. "The Politics of 'Mugging'." Pp. 321-89 in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State, and Law & Order*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stuart Hall. 1980. "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance." Pp. 305-45 in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. Paris: UNESCO.

Patricia Hill Collins. 2019. "Relationality within Intersectionality." Pp. 225-53 in *Intersectionality as Critical Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Week 13 (November 19): How is class struggle racialized and gendered?

Angela Y. Davis. 1983. *Women, Race, and Class*, Pp. 3-69. New York: Vintage.

Combahee River Collective. 2017 [1977]. "Combahee River Collective Statement." Pp. 15-27 in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. Chicago: Haymarket.

Week 14 (November 26): What are the political implications of thinking about both gender and sex as social constructs?

Judith Butler. 2007 [1990]. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Pp. vii-xxix, 3-44, 141-90. London: Routledge.

Week 15 (December 3): Are Marxism and feminism reconcilable as theoretical enterprises?

Lise Vogel. 2013 [1983]. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, Pp. 1-12, 133-82. Chicago: Haymarket.

Tithi Bhattacharya. 2017. "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory." Pp. 1-20 in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya. London: Pluto.

David McNally. "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory." Pp. 94-111 in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya. London: Pluto.