

HS3001
Contemporary Social Theory
Spring 2025

Lecture Time: M 1430-1620
Lecture Location: LT26
Tutorial Time: R 1330-1820
Tutorial Location: HSS-TR+5

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Office Hours: R 1030-1200

Course Description

This course provides an introduction to contemporary social theory. Contemporary social theory is ambiguously defined. For the purposes of this class, you can think of it as a toolkit of ideas from contemporary scholars (1980s, and on) with significant purchase across sociology and its sister disciplines. Some of the thinkers you'll encounter in this class include Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, Ann Swidler, Gary Becker, and Raewyn Connell, to name a few.

The course is organized around four parts: (a) theories of action that provide different, sometimes competing, explanations for why individuals behave the way they do, (b) theories relating to master status characteristics (i.e. class, race/ethnicity, gender), (c) theories relating to group life (ecological theories; network theory), (d) theory and meta-theory (e.g. what is theory, what's good/bad).

Theory can get a bad rep for abstruseness. As a class, we will try to prioritize the twinned virtues of clarity and usefulness. I'd like you and I to leave the class with clear understandings of major schools of contemporary social thought, and be able to use them in thoughtful ways to whatever desired ends of your choice. And most of all, communicate these cogently to those around you.

Prerequisites: HS1001, HS2001, HS2002.

Intended Learning Outcomes

This course will train you to become a thoughtful scholar who can communicate, apply and extend contemporary social scientific concepts and theories. By the end of the course, you should be able to:

1. To understand contemporary social theories well. You will learn about different schools of contemporary social theories, learn what distinguishes them, how and why each is useful and so on.
2. To learn to apply your understanding of these social theories in useful ways. Most often, this will involve the application and extension of these social theories to novel empirical or theoretical contexts.
3. To become effective communicators of complex ideas. Contemporary social theories have acquired a reputation for abstruseness. Communicating such ideas that in a straightforward and lucid way is non-trivial. We will, as a class, learn to discipline contemporary theories into a clearer, more digestible form.

Course Policies

Contacting me

The best way to reach me is through email. You can generally expect a response within 24 hours during the week, and by Monday morning if you email over the weekend.

Office hours

Office hours are scheduled hours where I will be in the office to answer any class-related questions you might have. It is also the primary way I get to talk to you one-on-one. You do not need to make an appointment beforehand – just stop by. I would encourage you to drop by at least *once* during the semester.

Typically, students talk about (a) class material they're wrestling with, (b) future plans or career goals, (c) ask about recommendation letters, (d) ask about graduate school/academia, or (e) just chat about college life in general. But you decide and I listen.

I am also happy to meet with you at other days or times if you can't make my scheduled office hours. In that case, please email me to set up a meeting, and include three possible times in your message.

Lateness policy

Late submissions will be penalized according to the following criteria: one letter grade (i.e. A > B) when submitted one day late, two letter grades (i.e. A > C) when submitted two to three days late. Assignments that are more than three days late will receive a o. Negotiation around deadlines are only possible under exceptional circumstances.

Accommodations

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the NTU Inclusion & Accessible Education team for help. For more information, please visit their website [here](#). You are also welcome to contact me privately to discuss your academic needs.

Social Contract Around Expectations

You are expected to come prepared for each class having read the required readings for the day.¹ What does it mean to be “prepared”? To me, it means you come ready for an energetic discussion. You should have some questions on your mind, thoughts on what you learned (or didn't learn), what you're curious to learn more about, what you were surprised by and so on. The supplementary readings are *encouraged* but not mandatory.

¹A common complaint is that there is too much to read, and it feels overwhelming. I empathize and will own up to my responsibility here: my assigned readings could be thinner, you are right. But here's also the side of things. Part of the point of classes like this *is* to train you to deal with escalating demands in both the quantity and complexity of the assigned readings. My suggestion, if you're struggling, is this: set aside six hours a week for reading the assigned materials, and try to get through as much as you can.

You may bring and use your own computers in class. But please avoid using it in disruptive fashions. Among other things, it means *not* distracting yourself with group chats, Reddit, or personal entertainment. A healthy intellectual community requires that everyone be active listeners even when they're not speaking.

I'd like you to be daring but kind in the classroom. What do I mean by this? You should feel free to ask questions, and take shots in the darks at answers. At the same time, extend kindness and grace to the questions and answers others pose.

If you foresee yourself missing an important class-date (such as those with in-class tests, or your presentation-turn), you must notify me ahead of time to discuss make-ups. Otherwise, as a general rule, I do not believe in strict attendance policies for college-aged students. If you must miss class, you do not need to provide me with an explanation. I will assume that you are serious about your commitment to this class. As such, I presume that if you miss class you have a good reason to do so (e.g., you are sick or otherwise contagious; you're caring for someone who is so). All that said, if you blow off class and do so on a regular basis, you will fall behind and find it very difficult to catch up – in that event, I'm unlikely to be sympathetic with your plight. Along the same vein, circumstances often mean that you have attend a separate tutorial session. You do not have to inform me when it comes to one-off changes. However, you must speak to me if you'd like to permanently swap to another tutorial session. Physical constraints on classroom capacity mean there is a strict limit on what I am able to accommodate.

I take integrity in scholarship seriously. Claim the ideas that are yours, acknowledge your influences freely. This includes the use of large language model AIs (e.g. ChatGPT) in your work. If you ever find yourself in ambiguous situations with respect to plagiarism, academic fraud, or cheating, please come speak to me.

Assessment Details

Assessment in this course is four-part and straightforward:

(1) Response Memos (20%): Students must post five response memos across the course. You may submit one response memo per week, starting from week 2. You submit these response memos by posting them in the appropriate discussion board thread on NTU Learn. The deadline for each weekly response memo 5pm, Wednesday (i.e. the day before the tutorial). If you're late, the memo doesn't count for credit. Each response memo should contain (1) your reflection on the readings or lecture for the week and (2) one question that's on your mind. The response memo is an opportunity for you to thoughtfully synthesize what *you* got out of the readings and the accompanying lecture: what did you take so-and-so to mean, how does it square with your understanding of the social world, and to what extent did you find it generative or useful? I encourage you to spread these out across the semester, but you can front- or backload them as you wish. Response memos should never exceed 300 words. Details on how I grade can be found in the assignment details elsewhere.

(2) Mid-term essay (in-class) (20%): The midterm assessment involves a in-class essay response to prompts that will be given during the week 7 tutorial. You may bring along one A-4 sized crib sheet, if you wish. All materials from week 6 and before may be included in this assessment.

(3) Final Exam (50%): We will also be having a final exam during the examination period. This will take place on 4/25/25, 9.00 am - 11.30 am. The exam will comprise multiple-choice questions, short answer questions and an essay prompt. It will cover all of the theories and texts we have covered across the semester.

(4) Class Participation (10%): Lastly, I must assess your class participation in lectures and tutorials. I don't like bean-counting class participation – it isn't about how many times you have spoken up in class. Rather, I'd like you think about *how* you have contributed to and improve the class as a community of learners. Be an attentive listener; ask questions; build on your classmates' perspectives; assert your own positions.

Course Outline

Theories of Action

Week 1 (1/13): What is Theory?

Required readings:

Abbott, Andrew. 2014. "Reading." Pp. 129-148. In *Digital Paper*.

Abend, Gabriel. 2008. "The Meaning of 'Theory.'" *Sociological Theory*.

Martin, John Levi. 2015. "On theory in sociology." Pp. 1-44. In *Thinking Through Theory*. Norton.

Supplementary readings:

Merton, Robert King. 1968. "On sociological theories of the middle range." In *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Pp 39-72. Simon and Schuster.

Alexander, Jeffrey. 1987. *Twenty lectures: sociological theory since World War II*. Columbia University Press.

Smelser, Neil. 1997. *Problematics of sociology: the George Simmel Lectures, 1995*. University of California Press.

Joas, Hans. 2009. *Social Theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Week 2 (1/20): Rational Choice Theories

Required readings:

Goldthorpe, John. 1998. "Rational action theory for sociology." *British Journal of Sociology*.

Boudon, Raymond. 1998. "Limitations of rational choice theory." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Manski, Charles F. 2000. "Economic analysis of social interactions." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14(3):115-36.

Supplementary readings:

Arrow, Kenneth. 1994. "Methodological individualism and social knowledge." *American Economic Review*.

Conlisk, John. 1996. "Why bounded rationality?" *Journal of Economic Literature*

Spillman, Lyn & Michael Strand. 2013. "Interest-oriented action." *Annual Review of Sociology*.

Week 3 (1/27): Theories of Practice

Required readings:

Brubaker, Rogers. 1985. "Rethinking classical theory: the sociological vision of Pierre Bourdieu." *The-*

ory & Society.

Camic, Charles. 1986. "The matter of habit." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Swartz, David. 2012. "Introducing Pierre Bourdieu." Pp. 1-14. In *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. University of Chicago Press.

Swartz, David. 2012. "Habitus: a cultural theory of action." Pp. 95-116. In *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. University of Chicago Press.

Supplementary readings:

Gartman, David. 1991. "Culture as class symbolization or mass reification? A critique of Bourdieu's Distinction." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Loic Wacquant. 1992. "The structure and logic of Bourdieu's sociology." Pp. 2-59. In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press.

Holt, Douglas. 1997. "Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's theory of tastes from its critics." *Poetics*.

Week 4 (2/3): Culture and Cognition

Required readings:

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review*.

Vaisey, Stephen. 2009. "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Lizardo, Omar. 2017. "Improving Cultural Analysis: Considering Personal Culture in Its Declarative and Nondeclarative Modes." *American Sociological Review*.

Supplementary readings:

Schudson, Michael. 1989. "How culture works." *Theory & Society*.

Patterson, Orlando. 2014. "Making Sense of Culture." *Annual Review of Sociology*.

Cerulo, Karen et al. 2021. "Rethinking culture and cognition." *Annual Review of Sociology*.

Week 5 (2/10): Pragmatist Theories of Action

Required readings:

Joas, Hans. 1993. "Pragmatism in American sociology." Pp. 14-51. In *Pragmatism and Social Theory*. University of Chicago Press.

Joas, Hans. 1996. "The emergence of the theory of action." Pp. 1-69. In *The Creativity of Action*. University of Chicago Press.

Whitford, Josh. 2002. "Pragmatism and the untenable dualism of means and ends: why rational choice theory does not deserve paradigmatic privilege." *Theory and Society*.

Gross, Neil. 2009. "A Pragmatist Theory of Social Mechanisms." *American Sociological Review*.

Supplementary readings:

Camic, Charles. 1998. "Reconstructing the theory of action." *Sociological Theory*.

Gross, et al. 2022. *The New Pragmatist Sociology: Inquiry, Agency, and Democracy*. Columbia University Press.

Theories of Social Structure

Week 6 (2/17): Ecologies and Fields

Required readings:

Wirth, Louis. 1938. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Martin, John Levi. 2003. "What is field theory?" *American Journal of Sociology*.

Hannan, Michael T. 2005. "Ecologies of Organizations: Diversity and Identity." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.

Liu, Sida, and Mustafa Emirbayer. 2016. "Field and ecology." *Sociological Theory*.

Supplementary readings:

Abbott, Andrew. 1997. "Of Time and Space: The Contemporary Relevance of the Chicago School." *Social Forces*.

Buchholz, Larissa. 2016. "What is a global field? Theorizing fields beyond the nation-state." *The Sociological Review*.

Steinmetz, George. 2017. "Field theory and interdisciplinary: history and sociology in Germany and France during the twentieth century." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.

Week 7 (2/24): Network Theory

Required readings:

Granovetter, Mark. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Chase, Ivan. 1991. "Vacancy chains." *Annual Review of Sociology*.

Stovel, Katherine, and Lynette Shaw. 2012. "Brokerage." *Annual Review of Sociology*. *Sociological Theory*.

Supplementary readings:

- Emirbayer, Mustafa & Jeff Goodwin. 1994. "Network analysis, culture, and the problem of agency." *American Journal of Sociology*.
- Burt, Ronald. 1992. *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Harvard University Press.
- Centola, Damon. 2018. *How behavior spreads: the science of complex contagions*. Princeton University Press.

Assignments:

- Midterm essay (in-class)

----- RECESS WEEK -----

Master Status Characteristics

Week 8 (3/10): Class

Required readings:

- Wright, Erik Olin. 1996. "The Continuing Relevance of Class Analysis — Comments." *Theory and Society*.
- Bowles, Samuel & Herbert Gintis. 2002. "The inheritance of inequality." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.
- Sampson, Robert J., Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Thomas Gannon-Rowley. 2002. "Assessing 'Neighborhood Effects': Social Processes and New Directions in Research." *Annual Review of Sociology*.

Supplementary readings:

- Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. 1976. *Schooling In Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. Haymarket Books.
- Chan, Tak Wing, and John H. Goldthorpe. 2007. "Class and Status: The Conceptual Distinction and Its Empirical Relevance." *American Sociological Review*.
- Weeden, Kim A., and David B. Grusky. 2012. "The Three Worlds of Inequality." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Week 9 (3/17): Gender

Required readings:

- Smith, Dorothy E. 1987 [2012]. "The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Methodology." Pp. 105-145. In *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Northeastern.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society*.
- Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 2011. "The puzzle of persistence." In *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press.

Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 2011. "Cultural beliefs and the gendering of social relations." In *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press.

Supplementary readings:

Ridgeway, Cecilia L., and Kristan Glasgow Erickson. 2000. "Creating and Spreading Status Beliefs." *American Journal of Sociology*.

Ashwin, Sarah and Olga Isupova. 2014. "Behind Every Great Man...': The Male Marriage Wage Premium Examined Qualitatively." *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Week 10 (3/24): Race

Required readings:

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903 [2007]. "Introduction." Pp. vii-xxiii. In *Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903 [2007]. "Of our spirit strivings." Pp. 7-15. In *Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant. 1986 [2014]. "The theory of racial formation." Pp. 105-136. In *Racial Formations in the United States*.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*.

Supplementary readings:

Morris, Aldon. 2015. *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. University of California Press.

Week 11 (3/31): Colonialism

Required readings:

Edward Said. 1978. "Introduction." Pp. 1-28. In *Orientalism*. Penguin.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Loic Wacquant. 1999. "On the cunning of imperialist reason." *Theory, Culture & Society*.

Connell, Raewyn. 1997. "Why Is Classical Theory Classical?" *American Journal of Sociology*.

Go, Julian. 2016. "Waves of Postcolonial Thought?" Pp. 18-63. In *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. Oxford.

Supplementary readings:

Connell, Raewyn. 2007. "The Northern theory of globalization." *Sociological Theory*.
Go, Julian. 2020. "Race, empire, and epistemic exclusion: or the structures of sociological thought." *Sociological Theory*.

Meta-Theory

Week 12 (4/7): Methodological Pluralism

Required readings:

Levine, Donald. 1989. "Simmel as a resource for sociological meta theory." *Sociological Theory*.
Stinchcombe, Arthur. 1994. "Disintegrated disciplines and the future of sociology." *Sociological Forum*.
Abbott, Andrew. 2006. "Reconceptualizing knowledge accumulation in sociology." *The American Sociologist*.
Abbott, Andrew. 2018. "Varieties of normative inquiry." *American Sociologist*.

Supplementary readings:

Gallie, W.B. 1956. "Essentially contested concepts." *Meeting of the Aristotelian Society*.
Riggs, Fred. 1979. "The importance of concepts: some considerations on how they might be designated less ambiguously." *The American Sociologist*.

Week 13 (4/14): Evaluating Theories

Required readings:

Davis, Murray. 1971. "That's interesting! Toward a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology." *Philosophy of Social Science*.
Abbott, Andrew. 2007. "Against narrative: a preface to lyrical sociology." *Sociological Theory*.
Watts, Duncan. 2014. "Common sense and sociological explanations." *American Journal of Sociology*.
Healy, Kieran. 2016. "Fuck nuance." *Sociological Theory*.

Supplementary readings:

Blumer, Herbert. 1954. "What Is Wrong with Social Theory?" *American Sociological Review*.
Swedberg, Richard. 2015. "The pragmatic maxim." *Perspectives*.
Turco, Catherine & Ezra Zuckerman. 2017. "Verstehen for sociology: comment on Watts." *American Journal of Sociology*.

----- FINAL EXAM (4/25, 9.00am – 11.30am) -----