

Contemporary Sociological Theory

SOCI3223 — Fall 2020

Prof. Mark COHEN

Wednesdays 2:30 pm - 4:15 pm, LSK LT7

Link to this outline: bit.ly/2FNLYjP

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Zoom link: <https://cuhk.zoom.us/j/98111143571>

Course Description

Sociology is a discipline of fragments. Social researchers specialize in the study of particular facets of social life — for instance, education or work or families. Sociologists in each specialty propose and argue over theories to explain the puzzling phenomena they discover in the facet they are investigating. Accordingly, a course on the sociology of education would introduce students to the theories that are influential and fruitful for contemporary sociological research on education. However, *this course is different*. Here, you will learn not about theories *of* some specific sociological specialty, but instead contemporary sociological theories — period, full stop.

The rationale for a course on sociological theory is the recognition that there are perspectives on society that link together the different facets of social life. These perspectives claim that the same insights can illuminate not just, say, education *but also* work and the family. They represent lenses that can be used to view and understand these various social spheres, or they identify common trends that affect them.

The course is divided into three parts. We begin by looking at a few of the most influential general lenses for investigating society. The focus will be to elucidate key concepts including function, conflict, structure, and social construction. The second part of the course centers on the concept of power, which has been a major concern for generations of social theorists. The main lesson will be that social relations of power and domination have many more dimensions than are apparent to the naive eye. The third part of the course confronts directly the question of how we should understand contemporary society. The readings of these weeks describe the dominant trends of recent history and debate their causes and consequences.

Lectures

The lectures will elaborate on the major themes and arguments of the theories sampled in the required readings. They will provide the wider context in debates in sociology and beyond that the authors are engaging in. Points made and concepts defined in lecture will appear on the final exam, even if they are not directly represented in the required readings.

PDFs of the lecture slides will be posted on Blackboard under Course Content before each class meeting.

You are expected to attend lecture every week. However, attendance will not be checked formally to start. Nonetheless, I reserve the right to institute penalties for non-attendance if this proves to be a major problem.

Lectures will be held on campus if and when this is possible. When it is not, the lectures will be conducted over Zoom and recorded. A link is provided at the top of this outline, which will work every week. Even when lectures are held on campus, arrangements for electronic access and recordings will be made if any students require them. Please contact the tutor or me if you need such arrangements after classes have returned to campus.

Tutorials

In addition to lectures, the course includes a required tutorial, managed by the TA. The purpose of the tutorials is for you to engage with the readings and topics covered in lecture in a more hands-on way.

There will be NO meeting of the tutorials in the first week of the semester. The tutorial schedule will be set in the second week. Please sign up for the tutorial at the following link: http://www.soc.cuhk.edu.hk/Enrollment_to_Tutorial.html.

The first and second sessions of the tutorial will cover introductory organization and the first part of the course, including the midterm essay. In the remaining four tutorial sessions, each student will be responsible for presenting on one of the required readings for the course.

The presentations should first very briefly summarize the theory in general terms and then present a concrete example to illustrate it. Following each presentation, there will be time for discussion. Further details about the presentation can be found here: bit.ly/32bJDXf.

Specifics on the arrangements for tutorial, including setting up remote meetings when necessary, will be provided by the TA.

Midterm Essay

The first graded assignment for the course will be a short essay (1,400-1,800 words, before notes and references) related to the content of the first part of the course. In those weeks, we will cover four overarching perspectives: functionalism, critical sociology, interactionism, and social construction. For this essay, you will pick two of these perspectives in order to analyze the *different* ways in which they would approach a particular social phenomenon or issue.

You should pick some social issue that is familiar and interesting to you. You are not expected to do substantial outside research on this topic, but you will need to refer to some specifics about it to make your argument. For each of the two perspectives, you should first briefly summarize it in general terms, then move on to applying it to the specific topic. What are some *research questions* that sociologists of that perspective might ask about the topic? *How* might one go about seeking answers to those questions? What *hypotheses* might they propose?

Further details and guidance will be provided in the first two tutorial sessions. In addition, a rubric for the elements that will be emphasized in grading can be found here: bit.ly/3aOxjix.

The paper will be due Friday, 16 October, by the end of the day. The essay should be submitted to VeriGuide (bit.ly/2Mrt6Zh) in Microsoft Word (.docx) or OpenOffice (.odt) format under Assignment 1 for the lecture. If you will not be meeting the deadline, please inform the TA or me. Late submissions, unless with prior permission, will be penalized one fraction of a letter grade (e.g. B+ → B) per day. However, good work (original grade of B or higher) will always receive a minimum grade of C-, satisfactory work (C+ or higher) a minimum of D+, and passable work a minimum of D. In other words, if you complete the work, you will always have a route to passing the course.

Please format the essay as follows:

- A4 size, 2.5 cm margins, body text in 12 pt, Times New Roman or Cambria font, double spaced, with no extra space between paragraphs. To confirm the formatting is correct, see the sample posted here: bit.ly/2Q8oKUY.
- Name at the top of the first page, with page numbers on subsequent pages.
- Citations in parenthetical format with a works cited list at the end, following the ASA style guide (<http://bit.ly/2KTAxB9>). You do not need to include URLs or access dates for readings downloaded from the course website.

Final Exam

A final exam, covering the required readings and lectures for the entire course, will be conducted as a take-home, open-book essay test. The exam questions will be made available through Blackboard at 8 am on Monday 7 December, and the completed exam paper will need to be submitted by 8 pm on Tuesday 8 December. Note that I expect that the essays require at most 3 hours to be completed. I am giving you 36 hours for the sake of flexibility. Time should not be a constraint.

During the exam, you may (and will need to) consult your notes, the lecture slides, and the course readings. However, you may NOT discuss the questions with anyone else or refer to any additional secondary sources, online or in print. You will be required to sign and submit a statement affirming that you have followed these requirements.

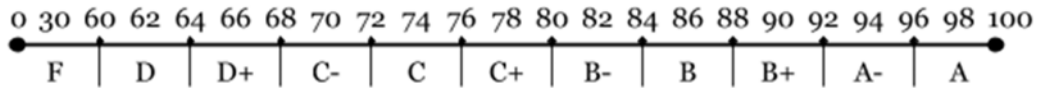
Study guides, indicating in more detail the coverage and format of the exam, will be provided later in the course.

Grading

Letter grades (A, A/A-, A-, A-/B+ ... F) will be given for the midterm essay, the final exam, and tutorial participation and presentation. To calculate the final average, the letter grades will be converted to scores according to the scale below, then combined as follows:

- Tutorial Participation and Presentation 25%
- Midterm Essay 35%
- Final Exam 40%

The resulting score will be converted back to a letter grade by the same scale (note that the bottom of any range is included in the higher grade, e.g. 88 = B+), as follows:



This is a different scale than the standard one at CUHK. The standard scale is not well-suited to the rubric-based assessment of written work used in this course. If you have questions about this, please contact me by email.

Please keep in mind the university's policy on academic honesty (bit.ly/2vRl5yb). Plagiarism in the essay and final exam will not be tolerated. The ideas and language should be your own, and any outside sources must be clearly and properly cited.

Questions

I will always leave time in my lectures for questions. It is a good rule of thumb that if there was something you found difficult to follow in the readings or lecture, there will be other students who will benefit from hearing the answer to your question. You can also bring your questions to tutorial, or feel free to email me with questions or come to my office hours — refer to the first page of the course outline for address and office hours time and location.

Schedule and Reading List

The schedule below lists the readings for each week, and the required readings should be completed *before* that week's lecture. All of the readings will be made available online as PDFs. Items marked with a * can be downloaded at the provided link, when on the University's network. Others will be uploaded to Blackboard, under the Course Content section.

In addition to the required texts, the schedule also includes recommended readings for each week. These include additional texts that elaborate on themes introduced in lecture. They can provide more depth and other perspectives to what you see in the required readings.

You will be reading theory texts, not textbook summaries of them. However, for those who want to refer to a secondary source in addition to — NOT in place of — the primary texts, I would suggest: George Ritzer, *Modern Sociological Theory* (McGraw-Hill, 5th edition, 2000). A copy will be on reserve at the Chung Chi College Library. Chapters 1 and 2 offer a useful narrative summary of the development of sociological theory (and refresher on the

classical social theorists). An “index” linking the course schedule with pages in the textbook can be found here: bit.ly/2SvJ1p1. Note that other editions of the textbook will contain most of the same material, though with different page numbers.

The required and recommended readings are chosen to be accessible and manageable, but nonetheless, theory can sometimes be challenging to read, in both style and content. With that in mind, here are a few suggestions on how to manage the reading:

- Give yourself time to focus on each specific reading — do not try to get it all done the day before lecture every week.
- Don’t sweat the references. Some theorists love to name-drop other theorists, but it is still possible to follow the argument if you are not familiar with the other authors referenced. Use the context around the reference to figure out: “What is *this* author using the referenced author *to represent*?”
- Keep a running list of terms and concepts that you do not recognize or find confusing. Often their meaning will become clear later on, but if not, ask about them during lecture or tutorial.
- If a particular passage is stubbornly opaque, make a note of it and keep reading. After you have finished going through the text once, go back and reread the part you noted. If it is still confusing, ask about it! You probably are not the only one who found it unclear.

9 September Introduction

Part I – Theory and Society

16 September Functionalism and Critical Sociology

Required

- *Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, “Some Principles of Stratification” (*American Sociological Review* Vol. 10, No. 2, 1945) www.jstor.org/stable/2085643
- Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010) pp. 10-11, 25-29, 274-278

Recommended

- Theodor Adorno, “Society” (pp. 267-75 in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner, Routledge, 1989)

23 September Sociological Telescopes and Microscopes

Required

- Claudio E. Benzecry and Daniel Winchester, “Varieties of Microsociology” (pp. 42-74 in *Social Theory Now*, ed. Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, and Isaac Ariail Reed, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). **Focus on pp. 42-53 and 66-68**

Recommended

- Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), Ch. 1
- Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), Ch. 1

30 September Social Construction

Required

- *Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender” (*Gender & Society* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1987) doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002
- *Dorothy E. Smith, “Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology” (*Sociological Inquiry* Vol. 44, No. 1, 1974) doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1974.tb00718.x

Recommended

- Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 35-49 and 66-75

Part II – Problems with Power

7 October Society as Conversation

Required

- Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), Sec. 8.3, “Civil Society, Public Opinion, and Communicative Power”

Recommended

- *William Outhwaite, “Jürgen Habermas,” Ch. 14 in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (2011) doi.org/10.1002/9781444396621.ch33

14 October Visible and Invisible Dimensions of Power

Required

- Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View, 2nd ed.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Ch. 1, sections 1-4, 7

Recommended

- The rest of that chapter

16 October Midterm essay due

21 October Economic Power in Capitalism

Required

- Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political” (*New Left Review* no. 127, 1981). **Read only pp. 78-82, 88-95**
- Fred Block, “The Ruling Class Does not Rule” (pp. 51-68 in *Revising State Theory*, Temple University Press, 1987)

Recommended

- *Wolfgang Streeck, “How to Study Contemporary Capitalism” (*European Journal of Sociology* Vol. 53, No. 1, 2012) www.jstor.org/stable/43282219

28 October Hidden Structures of Inequality

Required

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), Chs. 1-2

Recommended

- Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), Ch. 3

4 November Expert Knowledge as Power

Required

- Michel Foucault, selections from *Power/Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish* (pp. 289-294, 305-322 in *Contemporary Social Theory Third Edition*, ed. Craig Calhoun et al, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)

Recommended

- *Ian Hacking, “Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman” (*Economy and Society* Vol. 33, No. 3) doi.org/10.1080/0308514042000225671

Part III – Troubling Trends

11 November Modernity and Its Classical Critique

Required

- Zygmunt Bauman, selections from *Modernity and the Holocaust* (pp. 510-530 in *Contemporary Social Theory Third Edition*, ed. Craig Calhoun et al, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)
- *Nancy Fraser, “Can Society Be Commodified All the Way Down? Post-Polanyian Reflections on Capitalist Crisis” (*Economy and Society* Vol. 43, No. 4, 2014) doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2014.898822

Recommended

- *Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” (*New German Critique* No. 22) www.jstor.org/stable/487859
- *Jürgen Habermas, “The New Obscurity” (*Philosophy & Social Criticism* Vol. 11, No. 2) doi.org/10.1177%2F019145378601100201

18 November New Problems Facing Contemporary Society

Required

- Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (Sage, 1992), “Preface” and pp. 19-35
- Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity, 2000), pp. 22-38

Recommended

- Streeck, “How Will Capitalism End?” (*New Left Review* Ser. II, No. 87, 2014)

25 April Difficulties for the Latecomers

Required

- *Sang-Jin Han and Young-Hee Shim, “Redefining Second Modernity for East Asia” (*British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 61, No. 3, 2010) doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01322.x

Recommended

- *Julian Go, “For a Postcolonial Sociology” (*Theory and Society* Vol. 42, No. 1, 2013) doi.org/10.1007/s11186-012-9184-6
- *The other articles in the *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 61, No. 3 (available at onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14684446/2010/61/3)

2 December Modernity’s Self-Misunderstanding?

Required

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1993), Chs. 1 and 5

Recommended

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Ch. 2 sections 1 & 8-14, Ch. 3 sections

1-2 & 11, and Ch. 4 sections 1-2 & 9-11

- *Anne-Marie Mol, “Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions” (*Kolner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* Vol. 50, 2010)
hdl.handle.net/11245/1.330874

7 - 8 December Take-home final exam