

**YORK UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**SOCI 5901
KEY DEBATES IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY
FALL 2017**

Course Director: Fuyuki Kurasawa

Course Time: Tuesday 11:30-14:30
Course Location: Ross N836A

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Course Description

This course, designed for M.A. students in the Graduate Program in Sociology, consists of a survey of some of key questions, paradigms, and concepts in sociological theory, with a specific emphasis on the latter's critical iterations.

Rather than adopting a conventionally chronological structure in the mold of a history of ideas (from classical to contemporary theory), the course is designed thematically around a series of core debates, tensions, and oppositions that have defined—and continue to define—the field of sociological theory. As such, the course is organized around three central themes:

- a) *meta-theoretical debates*, about the character of theory, how to understand theoretical knowledge, and the constitution of a field or object of study known as 'sociological theory';
- b) *paradigmatic debates*, about the various theoretical paradigms, intellectual currents or schools of thought that have formed through relations of conflict and complementarity amongst each other within sociology;
- c) *conceptual debates*, about which sociological concepts and notions are suited to describe, analyze, and produce a critique of the various dimensions of the social.

At the conclusion of the course, students should be conversant with these three dimensions of sociological theory and the different debates contained within each of them. Moreover, they should be able to locate, compare, and map out a variety of positions and theorists regarding these debates, and to engage with them in both interpretive and critical ways.

Evaluation

1. Presentation: 10%
2. Written commentary: 20%
3. Participation: 20%
 - a) contribution to class discussion: 15%
 - b) discussant: 5%
4. Exam: 50%

1. Presentation: one in-class presentation on a week's assigned readings, of 10 to 15 minutes in length (time will be kept). Guided by the weekly theme and explanation of this theme provided in the syllabus (see below for each week), you are asked to present a succinct thematic and conceptual analysis of some of the major or overarching points of debate that cut across the readings. Avoid a summary or descriptive rundown of each of these readings; this is an exercise in thematic and comparative analysis, not in descriptive summarizing. Your presentation should engage with all of the assigned readings for a particular week, rather than selecting one or a few of them.

Through the Moodle site set up for this course, an outline or draft of your presentation should be posted online to all class members, including the course director, by no later than midnight on the Sunday night preceding your presentation.

2. Written Commentary: one brief written commentary, which should not exceed 10-12 double-spaced pages (in 12-point font) on the assigned readings for the weekly class during which you delivered your presentation. Your commentary should contain a comparative analysis of the major themes of debate across all the readings, while avoiding a descriptive summary of these readings. It should also include an evaluation of the readings, through questions, criticisms, new ideas or lines of thought generated, connections to other writings or theories covered in the course, and so on. In addition, the commentary should reflect on issues raised during class discussion, notably for the weekly session of your presentation.

A hard copy of your commentary is due no later than two weeks after the class during which you delivered your presentation.

3. Participation: weekly class attendance and active class participation based on the assigned readings. Each week, you are expected to have read all of the assigned readings, come to class with relevant questions and/or comments, and be prepared to contribute to discussion—by both speaking and listening to others.

In addition, each week, a student will act as discussant for another student's presentation and the weekly readings, providing a brief, 5-minute analysis of this presentation's contents and themes from the weekly readings. This should be done in the spirit of constructive and hermeneutical engagement.

4. Exam: a take-home exam, containing questions covering each of the three themes for the course. Each answer should be 8-10 double-spaced pages in length (in 12-point font), for a total of 24-30 pages.

The exam is due two weeks after the course's final class.

Overview

Part 1: Meta-Theoretical Debates

Week 1 (12 September)	Disciplinarity: What is Sociology, and What is Theory?
Week 2 (19 September)	Epistemology: Positivism and its Critics
Week 3 (26 September)	Ontology: Constituting the Social as Object

Part 2: Paradigmatic Debates

Week 4 (3 October)	Hermeneutics vs. Critical Theory
Week 5 (10 October)	Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism
Week 6 (17 October)	Modernism vs. Postmodernism
Week 7 (24 October)	Materialism vs. Culturalism
Week 8 (31 October)	Critical vs. Pragmatic Sociology

Part 3: Conceptual Debates

Week 9 (7 November)	Structure vs. Agency
Week 10 (14 November)	Micro vs. Macro
Week 11 (21 November)	Power and Its Permutations
Week 12 (28 November)	Alterity: Provincializing vs. Globalizing Theory

PART 1: META-THEORETICAL DEBATES

Week 1 (12 September)

Disciplinary: What is Sociology, and What is Theory?

We begin with a consideration of the context in which sociology was created and established as a discipline, its relation to other disciplines in the human sciences, the specificity of sociological understanding, as well as the nature of theoretical knowledge within sociology.

Wallerstein, Immanuel, ed. 1996. *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*, 1-32. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kurasawa, Fuyuki. 2012. "The Relational Position of Sociology within the Human Sciences" and "Two Models of the Discipline-Object Pairing." Presented at the Annual Workshop of the Canadian Network for Critical Sociology.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1990. "Sociology: What For?" In *Thinking Sociologically*, 1–18. Oxford: Blackwell.

Joas, Hans, and Wolfgang Knöbl. 2009. "What Is Theory?" In *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*, trans. Alex Skinner, 1–19. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Week 2 (19 September)

Epistemology: Positivism and its Critics

How do sociologists and theorists know what they know about the social world, and what should be the objectives of theoretical analysis? Are sociology and sociological theory nomothetic or idiographic sciences, and thus is objectivity possible and/or desirable?

Turner, J. H. 1985. "In Defense of Positivism." *Sociological Theory* 3 (2): 24–30.

Harding, Sandra. 2005. "Negotiating with the Positivist Legacy: New Social Justice Movements and a Standpoint Politics of Method." In *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz, 346–365. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. "Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective." In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 301–317. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 2004. *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, 71-94. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Week 3 (26 September)
Ontology: Constituting the Social as Object

Rather than taking ‘society’ or ‘the social’ for granted, we examine how they are constituted as objects of sociological investigation, what their features are, and how sociology has relied upon the notion of social construction to analyze everything from situations and relations to institutions and structures.

Hacking, Ian. 1999. “Why Ask What?” In *The Social Construction of What?*, 1–34. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wagner, Peter. 2000. “‘An Entirely New Object of Consciousness, of Volition, of Thought’: The Coming into Being and (Almost) Passing of ‘Society’ as a Scientific Object.” In *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston, 132–157. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, 169-182. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Dorothy E. 2005. “Designing an Ontology for Institutional Ethnography.” In *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*, 49–73. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

PART 2: PARADIGMATIC DEBATES

Week 4 (3 October)
Hermeneutics vs. Critical Theory

Crystallized in the Gadamer-Habermas debate, critical modes of theorizing have been torn between two rival objectives: interpretation (understood as the act of reconstruction or recovery of meaning of what was or is) and critique (understood as the exposure of what lies invisible or denunciation of what is). What are the various dimensions of this debate pitting hermeneutics to critical theory, and can they be reconciled?

Ricoeur, Paul. 1970. “The Conflict of Interpretations.” In *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, 20–36. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1988. *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, 171-175. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. “Hermeneutics’ Claim to Universality.” In *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, 312–319. New York: Continuum.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1976. “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection.” In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 18–43. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1981. "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology." In *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 87–100. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Week 5 (10 October) **Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism**

Structuralist theory established a break with humanism's focus on the human subject and diachronic analysis, in favour of formal, synchronic analysis of structural patterns and abstract models derived from social phenomena (Lévi-Strauss, Godelier). In turn, poststructuralism created a rupture with structuralism, whether in the form of the Derridean destabilization of meaning or the Foucaultian program of study of that which is excluded and marginalized.

Godelier, Maurice. 1978. "Infrastructures, Societies, and History." *Current Anthropology* 19 (4): 763–768.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1983. *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques, Volume 1*, 1-14, 30-32. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1978. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In *Writing and Difference*, 278–293. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. 1981. "The Order of Discourse." In *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, 51–78. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Week 6 (17 October) **Modernism vs. Postmodernism**

Sociology is centrally preoccupied with the nature of and tensions of modern society, which is shaped by the dialectic between liberty and discipline, or autonomy and heteronomy. In aesthetic terms, this dialectic takes the form of the opposition between modernism and postmodernism, the latter of which itself overlaps with poststructuralist principles; the most sophisticated manifestations of this debate are found in feminist theory.

Wagner, Peter. 1994. *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline*, 3-15. London and New York: Routledge.

Flax, Jane. 1990. "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory." In *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson, 39–62. London and New York: Routledge.

Benhabib, Seyla. 1994. "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance." In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, and Seyla Benhabib, 17–34. New York and London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1994. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'." In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, 35–57. New York and London: Routledge.

Week 7 (24 October) **Materialism vs. Culturalism**

A recurring dispute within sociological theory is organized around approaches that place analytical primacy and causal determinacy onto economic factors (materialism), which confront approaches that do the same for cultural and symbolic forces (culturalism). Can this reductive opposition be overcome, and if so, how?

Hall, Stuart. 1996. "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, 25–46. London and New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1992. "Symbolic Capital." In *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, 112–121. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51 (2): 273–286.

Alexander, Jeffrey C., and Philip Smith. 2003. "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics." In *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander, 11–26. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Week 8 (31 October) **Critical vs. Pragmatic Sociology**

The most fruitful recent paradigmatic dispute in sociological theory sets Bourdieusian sociology (understood as 'critical sociology' in France) against its pragmatic counterpart (Boltanski and Thévenot, Latour, etc.). We will study the main areas of contention between these two schools of thought, as well as the possibilities of carving out an intermediary position between them.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." In *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, 123–139. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Boltanski, Luc, and Laurent Thévenot. 1999. "The Sociology of Critical Capacity." *European Journal of Social Theory* 2 (3): 359–377.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, 247–262. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boltanski, Luc. 2011. *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, 18–49. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

PART 3: CONCEPTUAL DEBATES

Week 9 (7 November)

Structure vs. Agency

The first conceptual dichotomy that defines sociology, and sociological theory, is that found in the structure-agency debate. Should sociologists grant structures the power to shape, and even control and determine, agents (structural determinism) or, conversely, should they insist on the capacity of agents to change existing structures, resist them, or invent new structures (agentic voluntarism)? Are theoretical frameworks proposing to overcome this opposition convincing?

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 181-190. London and New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. "Structures, Habitus, Practices." In *The Logic of Practice*, 52–65. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1986. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 1-3, 14-34. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Archer, Margaret S. 1995. *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, 65-66, 75-92. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Week 10 (14 November)

Micro vs. Macro

In addition to the structure-agency debate, sociology's other distinctive conceptual binary opposition is that between micro and macro scales of analysis. Is social life defined by everyday, contingent interactions and situations through which actors engage with each other, or on the contrary, by overarching, large-scale processes, institutions, and structures?

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1974. "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16 (4): 387–415.

Callon, Michel, and Bruno Latour. 1981. "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So." In *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology Toward an Integration of Micro and Macro-sociologies*, ed. K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel, 277–303. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Collins, Randall. 2005. *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 3-9, 40-46, 141-158. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Week 11 (21 November)
Power and its Permutations

Sociological theories of various kinds have debated the nature of power, where it is located, and what perspectives enable us to understand and resist it most convincingly. Is power an institutional resource unevenly distributed across the social fabric, a set of techniques and devices that are exercised, a constellation of overlapping forms of domination, or something else altogether?

Lukes, Steven. 2004. *Power: A Radical View* 25-37, 69-74, 85-88, 144-151. 2nd ed. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mann, Michael. 1986. *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* 1-11, 22-33. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1999. "Towards a Politics of Empowerment." In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 273–290. 2nd ed. Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, 92-102. New York: Vintage.

Foucault, Michel. 1983. "The Subject and Power (How Is Power Exercised?)." In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, 2nd Ed.*, by Hubert L Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 216–226. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Week 12 (28 November)
Alterity: Provincializing vs. Globalizing Theory

Although created largely in the Euro-American world, is sociological theory condemned to either ethnocentric particularism or acultural universalism? If certain theories can avoid both of these problems, what other perils await their provincialization or globalization?

Burawoy, Michael. 2010. "Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for a Global Sociology." In *Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for a Global Sociology*, ed. Michael Burawoy, Mau-kuei Chang, and Michelle Fei-yu Hsieh, 3–27. Taipei: Academia Sinica.

Sztompka, Piotr. 2011. "Another Sociological Utopia." *Contemporary Sociology* 40 (4): 388–396.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History." In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 27–46. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Narayan, Uma. 1998. "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism." *Hypatia* 13 (2): 86–106.