



DRAFT: This draft is subject to change. The final version of the course outline will be posted on the course Brightspace page prior to the first class.

**SOCIOLOGY 9005
Contemporary Social Theory**

Graduate Seminar

Fall 2025

In-person

Instructor: Professor Edward Bell

Or by appointment

Enrollment Restrictions

Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in Sociology.

Course Description

This graduate seminar explores key issues in contemporary social theory by examining a range of perspectives from diverse and, at times, competing theoretical traditions. Building on students' prior knowledge of classical and modern sociological theory, the course focuses on how different theoretical frameworks engage with a variety of important societal issues, such as power and domination, various forms of inequality, capitalism and its iterations and alternatives, modernity, and colonialism. The seminar format emphasizes discussion, reflection, and respectful debate.

Learning Outcomes

This course is designed to enhance your ability to:

- Appreciate, evaluate, critique, and construct social theory, not just understand it.
- View theory as an evolving, contested field, not a fixed canon.
- Develop the ability to use social theory analytically: to apply it to your own area of research, to empirical questions, and to current issues.
- See theory as a form of social action that takes place in an environment of disciplinary norms, social contexts, historical developments, and power relations.
- Develop your own theoretical voice, to prepare you for research, publishing, and teaching.

Communication:

Students are responsible for checking the course [OWL Brightspace](#) site on a regular basis for news and updates. This is the primary method by which information will be disseminated to all students in the class.

How to contact the instructor:

By email: eabell@uwo.ca, and in-person during office hours.

I will endeavour to answer emails within 48 business hours. It is unlikely that you will receive a response during the evening or on a weekend. Generally, email is not suitable for questions requiring more than two or three sentences to answer. Questions requiring longer answers should be asked in person, during office hours or by appointment.

Evaluation of Students' Work

1. Analytic Memos – 40% (8 memos × 5%)

You will submit 9 analytic memos over the course of the term. For flexibility, only your best 8 memo grades will count toward your final grade. This means that, although not recommended, if you skip one memo there is no penalty.

Due dates: 11:59 pm on the day before the class to which the memo pertains.

Late Policy: Memos submitted after the deadline will be penalized 10% of their value per day or partial day late (e.g., a 5% memo loses 0.5% of the final grade per day or partial day late).

Total value: 40% of final grade

Because the submission of analytic memos already includes flexibility in that not submitting one memo can be done without penalty, the instructor reserves the right to deny academic consideration for the remaining 8 memos.

2. In-class Presentations of Analytic Memos – 20% (2 x 10%)

Each student will deliver two in-class presentations over the course of the term that are based on the analytic memos they have prepared for two pre-arranged class dates. Each presentation should be 10–15 minutes long and will take place during our regular seminar meetings.

Each week, one or two students will present. If there is more than one reading for a particular week and two presenters, one student will focus on the first reading listed, the other student on the second.

These presentations give you an opportunity to highlight the key points you believe are most important or provocative, and that you would like the class to engage with in discussion. ***Memo presentations will serve as the launching point for that day's seminar.***

The presentations should follow the structure outlined in the document *Preparing Analytic Memos* (available on the course Brightspace page), which provides a template for writing your analytic memos. ***As you develop your presentation, think about which questions or issues you would most like the class to consider or debate during the seminar.***

Each memo presentation is worth 10% of your final grade.

Total value: 20%

3. Final Paper (Written Version) – 25%

In the final paper, you will apply one or more of the theoretical approaches discussed in class to a topic of your own choosing, ideally one that is related to your own research interests. See the document *Guidelines for the Final Paper* (available on the course Brightspace page) for suggestions on writing your final paper.

Due date: November 26, 11:59 pm.

Note: You are expected to submit the final paper by the deadline listed. Should illness or extenuating circumstances arise, students are permitted to submit them up to 72 hours past the deadline without academic penalty. Should students submit their work more than 72 hours past the deadline, a late penalty of 10% of the value of the paper per day will be subtracted from the assessed grade.

Because the submission deadline for the final paper already includes flexibility in the form of a 72-hour submission window, the instructor reserves the right to deny academic consideration for work submitted after the end of the 72-hour period.

Total value: 25%

4. Final Paper Presentation – 15%

You will present your final paper to the class during one of the final two weeks of the course. This is an opportunity to explain how you've applied course themes to your own research interests, and to receive feedback from the instructor and from your peers.

Duration: Maximum 15 minutes

Total value: 15%

Presentation Sign-Ups:

Sign-up sheets for all in-class presentations (memos and final paper) will be distributed early in the term.

Course Schedule and Readings

Note: Each week will feature one or two required readings that we will discuss in our seminar. For the weeks with two required readings, **pick one of the readings for your analytic memo**, but keep in mind that you are required to **read both**.

Week 1: September 11 First Class

Introductions and icebreaker to explore students' current orientations toward social theory

A tour of the course outline: goals, structure, and expectations for the course

Establishment of *Community Agreement for Class Discussions*

Week 2: September 18

Issue of the day: *What is a social theory? What are its components and purposes?*

Required Reading:

Abend, G. (2008). The meaning of 'theory'. *Sociological Theory*, 26(2), 173–199.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00324.x>

Note: For this reading, the document *Preparing Analytic Memos* is not particularly useful. Instead, consider structuring your memo as follows:

Part A: Summary of the article's key points What is the author's core argument and typology? This discussion should clarify key distinctions (e.g., Theory1 vs. Theory2, etc.), explain the rationale for the typology, and discuss why Abend thinks it matters for sociology.

Part B: Critical analysis Evaluate the usefulness of the typology. Identify its ambiguities, overlaps, or omissions. Reflect on the practical implications of the article for theory-building and for theoretical analysis in general.

Optional Reading:

Healy, K. (2017). Fuck nuance. *Sociological Theory*, 35(2), 118–127.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275117709046>

Week 3: September 25

Issue of the day: *Theories and methods: Do we need separate theoretical paradigms for qualitative vs quantitative research?*

This is an issue that is often neglected in discussions of social theory, despite some key differences between qualitative and quantitative research in contemporary sociology.

Required Reading:

Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Kleinknecht, S. (2023). Bridging the quantitative/qualitative divide. In *Social Research Methods (6th Canadian Edition)*, pp. 361–378. Oxford University Press.

Note: For this reading, the document *Preparing Analytic Memos* is not particularly useful. Instead, consider adopting the following framework for your memo for this week:

Part A: Methodological and Theoretical Framing Briefly outline the main arguments of the chapter. Be sure to explain the chapter's epistemological stance and its position on the theory–method relationship. Identify any explicit or implicit theoretical assumptions the authors make.

Part B: Critical Assessment and Implications for Social Theory Critically evaluate the chapter's main arguments. What are the implications of those arguments for social theory? **Most importantly:** Do we need separate theoretical paradigms for qualitative vs quantitative research?

Week 4: October 2

Issue of the day: *Theorizing Contemporary Power and Domination (Part 1)*

Required Readings

1) Lukes, S. (2021). *Power: A radical view (3rd ed.)*, Chapter 3: Three-Dimensional Power, pp. 113–156. Red Globe Press.

- 2) Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Part 5: Right of Death and Power over Life, pp. 133–159. New York: Pantheon Books.

Week 5: October 9

Issue of the day: *Theorizing Contemporary Power and Domination (Part 2): The role of “race,” gender, and intersectionality in contemporary social theory*

Required Readings

- 1) Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039>

- 2) Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review*, 10(2), 405–424.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000283>

Week 6: October 16

Issue of the day: *Theorizing modernity, coloniality, and global entanglements*

Required Readings

- 1) Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition* (pp. 1–24). University of Minnesota Press.

- 2) Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>

Week 7: October 23

Issue of the day: *Structure vs Agency: Enduring Tensions*

Required Readings:

- 1) Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*, Chapter 1: Elements of the theory of structuration, pp. 1–40. University of California Press.

- 2) Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*, Chapters 3 and 4, (pp. 52–79). Stanford University Press.

Week 8: October 30

Issue of the day: *Theorizing contemporary capitalism and its futures*

Required Reading

Fraser, N. (2014). Behind Marx's hidden abode: For an expanded conception of capitalism. *New Left Review*, 86, 55–72. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii86/articles/nancy-fraser-behind-marx-s-hidden-abode>

November 6: No class. Reading week.

Week 9: November 13

Issue of the day: *Are humans rational? Rational choice theory and its critics*

Required Readings

- 1) Boudon, R. (2003). Beyond Rational Choice Theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100213>
- 2) Sen, A. (1977). Rational fools: A critique of the behavioral foundations of economic theory. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 6(4), 317–344. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2264946.pdf>

Week 10: November 20

Issue of the day: *Contemporary Evolutionary Social Theory: Neo-Darwinism and Beyond*

Required Readings

- 1) Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*, Chapter 9, Why are we so groupish? (pp. 189–222). Pantheon Books.
- 2) Smaldino, P. E. (2014). The cultural evolution of emergent group-level traits. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 37(3), pp. 243 - 254 only. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behavioral-and-brain-sciences/article/cultural-evolution-of-emergent-group-level-traits/A4263DFE161A1084A602ACF845F6E73D>

Week 11: November 27

Student presentations of their papers (first group)

Week 12: December 4

Student presentations of their papers (second group)

Important Course Policies

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

In this course, students are permitted to use AI tools only for information gathering and preliminary research purposes. These tools are intended to enhance the learning experience by providing access to diverse information sources. However, it is essential that students critically evaluate the obtained information, exercise independent thinking, and engage in original research to synthesize and develop their own ideas, arguments and perspectives. Students must produce original written contributions, i.e., they must write their assignments in their own words. The use of AI tools can serve as a starting point for exploring a topic, but students are expected to uphold academic integrity by appropriately attributing all sources of information and avoiding plagiarism. Materials submitted for assessment must reflect the student's own thoughts and independent written work. By adhering to these guidelines, students contribute to a responsible and effective learning environment that promotes critical thinking and independent inquiry. The same principles also apply to the use of translation software to support the writing of essays and other written assessments.

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism-detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

Completion of Course Requirements

Course requirements must be completed by the end of the term in which the course is offered (in this case, December 31). Only in exceptional circumstances may a student take additional time to complete the course requirements. In such a case, the student must first meet with the Graduate Chair to request permission to carry the incomplete. Medical documentation, where required, will be kept on file in the Sociology graduate program office. More details regarding incompletes are outlined in the Graduate Handbook:

http://www.sociology.uwo.ca/graduate_handbook/course_information.html

Standards of Professional Behaviour

It is the responsibility of all members of the Department of Sociology to adhere to and promote standards of professional behaviour that support an effective learning environment. These include:

- **respect for others** both in and out of the classroom through words and actions (be professional, fair, and respectful in interactions with people on-line and in-person; understand and respect differences among classmates and colleagues; avoid disrupting the learning environment; respect others' expectations of confidentiality and privacy)
- **active engagement in learning** and commitment to quality (being prepared for classes; participating and listening actively to others; using technology and social media appropriately, striving to do your best)
- **personal integrity** (following through on commitments; doing your own work)

Students should also be aware of the **UWO Student Code of Conduct** found at <https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/board/code.pdf>

Accessible Education Western (AEW)

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program.

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education Western (AEW), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

Health/Wellness Services

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence:

Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website:

https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html

To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca.