Sociology 9005a: Contemporary Social Theory
Fall 2021
Dr Scott Schaffer

Course Meetings: Weds 130pm to 430pm ET (UTC -4/5)
Office Hours: By appointment in person or via Zoom
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Course Description: This course is intended to provide students with an overview of the theoretical issues facing contemporary sociological analysts.

As we’ll see in this course, there are a few ways in which we can think about social or sociological theory and its role in sociology today. In some approaches, we take an intellectual history approach in order to lay out the conceptual and historical foundations of the discipline. Here, though, my concern — and the focus of our time together — is on developing your ability to do theoretically-sophisticated sociological research. I borrow here from Theodor Adorno in his Introduction to Sociology:

If I might mention a few rules of thumb relating to these questions of empirical sociology, one such rule - and I emphasize that this is a general rule which has its exceptions - is that no more will come out of an empirical study in terms of results than has been put into it in terms of ideas. (Adorno, 90)

Or I could borrow from Bourdieu. Or Durkheim. Or, or, or. The point is this: At the heart of our sociological endeavour is the tension between ideas and evidence, validity and reliability, mathematics and intuition, and the people we study and how we study them.

Given that we are a department that specializes in the study of inequalities of various forms, I believe that it is important to engage with all aspects of that endeavour. Thus, this course will have a bit of philosophy of social science, a bit of meta-theory (don’t freak out about the term), and a bit of theoretical examination of more rooted or grounded concepts.

There is, of course, no way that we could cover the entirety of Contemporary Social Theory in a single term. Our task, then, will be to build up the sociological “objects” — ideas, concepts, paradigms — in theoretical terms in order to deploy them more fully and fruitfully in your own research. Part of your work will be making linkages between the things we study here and the larger fields of social theory and sociological thought as well. If our goal is to identify insights into the social world and understand their importance and meaning for our everyday lives, then we will need to have the help of theory.

Course Requirements: Assignments are currently in development. They will be somewhere between exams, papers, and something enjoyable. There is no paper for this course.

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<td>Weekly memos/forum contributions</td>
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Readings: Readings will be available through the course OWL site, which is also where your article contributions will be posted. You are not required to purchase any books for this course.

Course Outline: Readings will be made available on OWL in early August, if not before. A fuller course outline including those readings will appear then.

W1 W Sep 8. “Doing” “Theory”.
W2 W Sep 15. Paradigms and frameworks.
W3 W Sep 22. Concept formation.
W4 W Sep 29. Institutions, individuals, and actors.
W5 W Oct 6. Intersectionality

Mid-course assignment due here.

W8 W Oct 27. Observing power.
RW W Nov 3. Reading week — no class.

End-of-course assignment due here.