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

**Course Meetings (Hybrid):** Weds 130pm to 430pm ET (UTC -4/5), SSC 5230 and Zoom  
**Office Hours:** By appointment in person or via Zoom at [https://bit.ly/3jVwY3u](https://bit.ly/3jVwY3u)  
**Email:** scott.schaffer@uwo.ca

**Course Meetings Structure:** At the time of this writing, Wave 4 of the plague is building, and UWO has just implemented its vaccine mandate, and it is not yet clear how proof of vaccination or exemption status will be monitored or how that will impact on being in a classroom together. Thus, I am building this course with the most flexible approach I can imagine, one that, should a pivot to remote meetings be needed, will not be too terribly disruptive.

This course is built on what’s known as a *hyflex* model — namely, it is a hybrid remote/face-to-face course with maximum flexibility for how students and faculty participate in it. Generally speaking, I will be running the session from SSC 5230 (though there may be times I run it from my home in Toronto). Those who wish to meet face-to-face and are vaccinated are welcome to join me in person in the classroom; there, I will volunteer one person each week to be the conduit between the in-person attendees and those participating remotely. Those who are unable or unwilling to attend in person are welcome to participate fully via our Zoom space (linked to the OWL site). Questions, hand-raises, reactions, etc., will be conveyed to the rest of the attendees by that week’s conduit. Whiteboard work — sort of the core of our workshop approach — will be done electronically and shared with both F2F and remote participants. It is my hope that this will ensure the fullest possible participation in spite of whatever happens regarding the plague.

Class sessions will be recorded and posted on OWL for those who are unable to attend live for whatever reason or who wish to review our discussion. Whiteboards will always be posted after the class session.

**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.

The goal of this course is to enable you to link these two seemingly disparate elements of the discipline -- the abstract, almost philosophical part with the "dirty fingernails" side of measurement and analysis -- in what is the process of theorizing, or what I prefer to call "writing your theory chapter first". Our task will be to figure out how the classical sociological thinkers conceived of the sociological endeavour from start to finish, and how we can utilise those conceptions in the pursuit of our own research. And much like "arts and crafts" days back in school, this will involve playing with the ideas and texts, poking them to see where they stretch, recolouring them, and putting them together in new ways. Through the workshops in this course, you will learn the skills you will need in order to build better sociological objects and gain a deeper understanding of the social world you came here to study.

Course Requirements

Weekly Readings: As you'll see from the reading schedule below, there are a lot of readings listed for each week. Obviously, I think they're important and that you should at least get through them all. But, to bring the scandal into the light, I know you won't or can't, and that you will pick and choose among them. My hope is that you won't simply choose those that are shortest or most clear, but rather will look over them all to see which ones are most useful to you; and I also hope that among all of us, we will have covered all the readings. Choose wisely what you read; taking the easy way each week impacts on the sophistication of your work later.

Weekly Memos/Forum Contributions: Each week, you are required to submit a maximum two-page memo engaging with the course readings. These memos are meant to be interrogations of the readings -- think pieces of a sort, showing that and how you have engaged with that week's readings. They can be what you found intriguing, interesting, confusing, or downright bizarre in the readings. But most importantly, they should be what you want to discuss in that week's class session. Memos need to be posted to the Forums section on OWL by 6pm on the Monday before each week's class. Everyone needs to read through the memos before the start of class on Wednesday and should have access to them in class.

Memos will not be marked on the basis of "quality" -- they don't have to be polished arguments -- but rather on the basis of the seriousness of your engagement with the readings. They will receive full credit, half-credit, or no credit, based on the following evaluation:
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Full credit: Doesn’t simply summarize a reading, but probes an issue across readings; poses questions likely to provoke an extended discussion; integrates ideas gleaned from one set of readings with those from other weeks in this course or learning from other courses.

Half-credit: Identifies an issue, but doesn’t track that issue across readings; lies somewhere between summary of readings and integration of readings; focuses primarily on one, possibly two readings from that week; poses questions not likely to provoke an extended discussion.

No credit: Summarizes only — doesn’t identify an issue or track it across readings; doesn’t pose questions likely to lead to an interesting or engaging discussion.

Since these are intended to serve as the basis of the discussion, no late memos will be accepted after Monday at 6pm. If you have to miss a class, you are still expected to prepare a memo for that week on time.

Article Contributions: You’ll see that the reading schedule in the second half of the course is, shall we say, sparsely populated. That’s not because the reading load will be lighter then, but rather because part of your mark in this course is your contribution to that reading list.

You are tasked with finding a suitable scholarly journal article dealing with the theoretical and conceptual foundations of one of the “sociological objects” we study in this department. In addition to submitting this article to me for “approval” into the course reading pile, you will need to provide a justification for why it is that you chose that article. This justification needs to do the following:

1) Summarize the theoretically important aspects of this article as you understand them — that is, what the author(s) have done in the article to make this An Important Contribution to How We Understand X.

2) Lay out the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the author(s)’ sociological object as you understand them — the theoretical or epistemological tradition from which it springs; the ontological delineations of where this object lies; the axiological implications of defining the concept in the particular way that the author(s) have; and any conceptual criteria the author(s) provide for recognizing this object “in the wild.”

3) Discuss what you think will be the contributions of this article to our larger workshop discussion.

Sign-ups for this will take place in the first class session. Your article and the write-up are due no less than three weeks before the week you have signed up for. This will allow me time to review the article, review your analysis of it and its potential contribution, and distribute it for the class.

Midterm Assignment: You will have a take-home assignment due on Sat Oct 23/2021 at 11:55pm EDT (UTC -4). This assignment will be distributed at least two weeks before the due date, and will be somewhere between a short-answer exam and something enjoyable.
Class Discussion and Engagement: This course is a workshop course — a version of a seminar — meaning that the course will rely a great deal on your participation and your contributions to the discussion, as well as your responses to questions and challenges posed to you by me and your colleagues. As well, discussion forums will be created on OWL, enabling you to continue the discussions with your colleagues even outside of class time, and your contributions to these discussion forums will also factor into your participation mark. You should note that merely being physically present in class for every class session is only worth about 50% of the participation mark (“showing up is half the job” — so perfect attendance and perfect silence will lead to a 50% for engagement); and talking off the top of your head without being prepared or engaging with the texts is not regarded as “discussion.” You should come prepared with notes, page references, highlights, thoughts, insights, and questions, and be ready to share them with others. Even "I don't understand..." — especially “I've done this particular work to figure this out and I still don't understand” — is a valuable starting point for our discussions.

End-of-course Assignment: This, unfortunately, will be less enjoyable than the midterm assignment, being a take-home essay examination due on Dec 22/2021 at 1155pm EST (UTC -5). Questions will be distributed in the last session of the course (though if you’re paying attention, you’ll know what will be asked well before that).

Grade Breakdown and Guidelines: Evaluation guidelines for written work are listed in the Course FAQ handout, which is available on OWL. You should read them thoroughly, both at the start of the term and prior to submitting assignments as they will provide you with a comprehensive checklist for your work.

I do my best to ensure that the evaluation of your work is as impartial as possible and reflects the quality of what you submit at the due date and time as measured against the evaluation guidelines. Marks are assigned to your written work based on how it stacks up to standard academic expectations of students at your academic level, which are provided for you on OWL. Thus, it is entirely possible that marks on written work here will be lower than in other courses. I have designed this course to ensure that as a general rule, if a student completes all of the elements of this course with the seriousness appropriate to a graduate seminar, they will pass the course with at least a B+ (78%).

If you have issues with the evaluation of your work, you may submit to me a one-page statement of how it is that you think your work as submitted was wrongly evaluated no sooner than 24 hours after I return the work to you. We will then meet to discuss the issue. Please note that I reserve the right to elevate your mark, maintain the mark as applied, or to lower the mark depending on that re-evaluation.

Grade breakdown:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly memos/forum contributions</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article contributions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-course assignment</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course engagement</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>End-of-course assignment</td>
<td>35%</td>
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Weekly work before our time together
Occasional work to find related theory readings
Due on Oct 23
Overall evaluation of your engagement
Due on Dec 22
Principles for Workshop Discussions and Professional Success (in this course and the rest of your graduate study)

The idea behind the workshop model for the course is a simple one: To turn our examination of the theoretical underpinnings of sociology into a collective and collaborative learning endeavour. However, this simple idea, as past experience has shown, requires that a few basic principles be made explicit. It is my hope that respecting these principles will ensure that our time together is productive, inclusive, and respectful.

1. Readings. There is often a tendency in seminars to turn every seminar into a general “bull session” where people talk off the top of their head about what they think the texts are about. This is not acceptable in this course. The focus of our work is the readings and your interrogations of them, as well as bringing these to the point of my pedagogical agenda. This is not to say that general discussions of the readings or other materials or issues cannot be brought to bear on our discussions. It is to say that we will constantly be moving back to the texts, so you need to be prepared for that move.

2. Listen. Good discussions pick up trains of thought in the room; unsatisfying discussions are collections of things people want to say without reference to anything else said in the class. Be less concerned with figuring out what your brilliant comment will be, and focus more on the collaborative aspect of our learning environment.

3. Brevity. Keep your interventions focussed on the issues and texts at hand. Long, meandering, overblown speeches rarely contribute as much as one thinks.

4. Equity and Respect. I acknowledge and appreciate that some members of our workshop will have different personalities and different degrees of exposure to the material, and that these will lead to different levels of active participation. However, individually and as a group, we should be aware of these factors and work to ensure as equitable participation as possible and to work to create a classroom environment where all members feel enabled to participate. Course participants need to be attentive to this and to curtail speeches by people who have dominated the discussion if need be.

5. Types of interventions. Not every contribution in class needs to be a brilliant insight. No intervention should be regarded as "too simple" as long as it reflects an attempt to seriously engage with the material and a preparation to do so. It is appropriate to ask for clarifications of readings or previous comments, as well as to make substantive points on the topics at hand. Sometimes, the best contribution is a question. And it is perfectly acceptable to ask for a brief pause or a slow-down in order to catch up. The point of these workshops is for you to learn, which requires a degree of vulnerability on all our parts.

6. Discussion tone. The workshop model is one that has its heart a notion of what I would call cooperative, collaborative conflict. That is, it is perfectly acceptable to have disagreements about the materials or course issues, as they can often highlight differences in interpretation that can productively lead to theoretical advances and improvements in our understanding. Those differences, as well as the ways in which they are stated, should be oriented to this goal at all
times. Participants should be attentive to the ways in which discussions are conducted in order to ensure that the discussion is not marked by aggressiveness, competitiveness, or other tricks in what Erik Olin Wright calls "the repertoire of male verbal domination" or Pierre Bourdieu calls "linguistic violence."

7. Preparation for discussions. Good seminars depend on serious preparation by students. This means the following:

   a. Doing the readings carefully -- not reading every word necessarily, but studying the readings.
   b. Reading the memos written by other students, as well as writing down any reactions to any you find interesting. This kind of "virtual dialogue" can be very productive for our collective workshop.
   c. Try to discuss the material with at least one other student before each class session, whether in person or online.

8. Professionalism. Graduate school is very often the first step in the development of your professional lives and personas. My expectation is that you will by now be aware of the professional norms of academia and the UWO Department of Sociology and will act accordingly. If not, please ask me. This includes the following:

   a. working to meet the expectations and requirements of the course and the instructor;
   b. pursuing your own work following the principles of academic honesty and that your work will reflect your best effort;
   c. conducting yourself professionally both in the department and outside of it; and,
   d. remembering that graduate study involves a significant amount of training in areas that students may not see at the time are important to your professional development, but that those with expertise in the field recognise as being important for one’s intellectual development.

The full UWO Student Code of Conduct can be found at [https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/board/code.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/board/code.pdf); I would advise everyone to be aware of it.

Course Outline: Below is the preliminary schedule of readings and workshops/discussions for the course. Generally speaking, we will endeavour to hold to this schedule, so you should plan your time accordingly. Workshops will generally be directed by me; discussions will be less directed — but every week requires your participation. **Important Note:** This is a graduate-level course. You are responsible for your own learning, as well as recognising and addressing any gaps in your previous education. As you are at UWO to learn to be an independent researcher, if you recognise now or come to see that there are gaps in your preparation for this course, you need to take the initiative to fill those gaps. I am more than happy to provide you with resources so that you can do that. My responsibility is to take your previous experience and education and extend, further, and develop that knowledge — not to remediate.
As you are reading, be sure that you do not attempt to simply turn pages or skim to get through the texts as quickly as possible. “The answers” are “not there”; they require careful reading, careful thinking, note-taking, idea-jotting, mind-mapping, doodles, and any other number of possible ways for you to sort out your ideas about them. They are here to provoke you, to get inside your head and rattle around until they mesh together with some other thing to create A New Idea. Let that happen.

Please note that the workshop model will result in some flexibility in the readings as they are listed below. Some readings may be moved from optional to required and vice versa. Some may be left on the “cutting room” floor. Depending on current events, other readings may be introduced. What is listed below is the map of the course as it stands at the start of the term, and you should prepare for it as such. I will always let you know at least a week in advance if our readings for a class session will change. Please make sure that you have the readings and your notes on them with you in class. Hard copies are preferred for important pedagogical reasons. And finally, please recognize that I know the difficulty of getting through all of each week’s readings — choose wisely, dig as deeply as you are able, and trust that collectively we will cover everything.

All readings are posted on OWL. Readings listed below in boldface are the core readings that you need to complete at a minimum, as they will serve as the base material for our discussions and workshopping. All readings are listed in alphabetical order as they are all equally important to my mind.

W1  W Sep 15.  “Doing” “Theory”.

Abend, “The Meaning of ‘Theory’”
Blalock, “The Real and Unrealized Contributions of Quantitative Sociology”
Lizardo, “The End of Theorists: The Relevance, Opportunities, and Pitfalls of Theorizing in Sociology Today”

Rojas, A Primer in Theory Construction, Introduction

Reynolds, Theory for the Working Sociologist, chapter 1

W2  W Sep 22.  Paradigms and frameworks.

Bourdieu, The Craft of Sociology, introduction and chapter 1
Merleau-Ponty, “The philosopher and sociology,” from Philosophies of Social Science
Nagel, “Methodological problems of the social sciences,” from Philosophies of Social Science

Rojas, Theory for the Working Sociologist, chapter 4

Swedberg, “Before theory comes theorizing; or, how to make social science more interesting”
Timmermans and Tavory, “Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis”

Walsh, “Idealism/Materialism,” from Core Sociological Dichotomies
W3 W Sep 29. Concept formation.

Bourdieu, et al., *The Craft of Sociology*, Part II
Collins, “On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology”
Fine, “On the Macrofoundations of Microsociology”
Healy, “Fuck Nuance”

*Nisbet, “The Unit-Ideas of Sociology,” from The Sociological Tradition
Reynolds, *A Primer in Theory Construction*, chapter 3*

W4 W Oct 6. Institutions, individuals, and actors.


*Miller, “Social Institutions,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*


*Tonkiss, “Continuity/Change,” from Core Sociological Dichotomies
Walsh, “Structure/Agency,” from Core Sociological Dichotomies*

Zahle, “Methodological Holism in the Social Sciences,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

W5 W Oct 13. Intersectionality


*Cooper, “Intersectionality,” from The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory


*Walsh, “Subject/Object,” from Core Sociological Dichotomies*

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Mid-course assignment due Oct 23/2021 1155pm EDT (UTC -4).

Readings from this point forward will be determined in part by me and in part by your article contributions. They will be posted on OWL at least one week before the assigned date.

W8  W Nov 3.  Observing power.
RW  W Nov 10.  Reading week — no class.
W11 W Dec 1.  Gender, sexuality, and their components.

End-of-course assignment due Dec 22/2021 1155pm EST (UTC -5).

Course Policies, the shortened edition. Fuller descriptions of these policies is available on the course OWL web site.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism. Don’t cheat. I take it way too seriously and get the same rush a hunter gets when stalking their prey. If you don’t understand what cheating is in the academic context or in the North American context, ask me before it’s too late. (Short version: put everything in your own words, but tell your reader where you got the idea.)

Accommodations. All students should avail themselves of the services on campus to ensure they have the fullest opportunity to learn. Should anyone need additional supports or accommodations, please discuss this with me sooner rather than later.

Attendance. Be there, unless you really can’t.

Communications. Email, email, email, and be professional. I will generally respond within one business day. If it gets to three business days (i.e., not including holidays or weekends), please nag me.

Completion of Course Requirements. You should do your best to complete the work for this course in a timely manner. Should that be problematic for whatever reason, please come see me to figure out how we can ensure you earn credit for this course.
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Health and Wellness: My primary concern is with your physical and mental health and well-being. Take care of yourself, and avail yourself of whatever services on campus and in the community you need (listed on OWL). Schaffer will still be here.

Technology: Be adult about your use of technology in the classroom or during class sessions.

Pedagogical Approach: I take the work we are able to do individually and together very seriously with a ridiculously humorous approach to that seriousness. I don’t go in for typical academic BS of any stripe, nor do I have much tolerance for not taking graduate study seriously. I will fight tooth and nail to ensure that each participant in my workshop becomes as sophisticated a sociological analyst as is possible. Sometimes, that may require leaving things on the cutting-room floor, shifting readings or assignments around, or restructuring elements of the course in order to attend to any issues that come up in class. Sometimes, it will require some tough love. But it will always be pursued in your best interests and with your consent.

Learning Outcomes: If you engage with and meet these expectations, you can expect that by the end of this term, you will be able to do the following (among other things that you’ll be surprised you’ve learned how to do and discovered about yourself):

- Engage in a thoughtful manner with the key concepts, theoretical positions, and arguments of the theorists who developed the discipline of sociology;
- Develop clear, well-thought, and increasingly sophisticated responses to questions, and the capacity to construct refined sociological questions;
- Display facility in and fluency with sociological and theoretical concepts and utilise them in the development of oral and written arguments;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which theory is constructed, operates as a basis for sociological analysis, is refined, and relates to the research process;
- Build the skills associated with sociological thinking and the deployment of the "sociological imagination";
- Develop and demonstrate the skills required to do advanced sociological research, both the “hard skills” of theoretical facility and fluency, a willingness to independently seek out knowledge to answer questions, and a work ethic consistent with your level of expertise, as well as the soft skills associated with professional conduct;
- And understand and discuss the continuing relevance of sociological theory for the future of Canadian sociological research and thereby Canadian society.