

Contemporary Sociological Theories 2022

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The structure of the course follows and reinterprets Jeffrey Alexander's conception of "mythologies" or paradigms which are at the background of particular theories. It starts with the presentation of the destruction of the "Parsonian" model of the social world in the 1960s followed by the attempts to reconstruct structural functionalism, revival of the alternative theoretical perspectives and the development of the new ones. Then we will analyze four groups of theories: (1) those which assume that "the Social" is what people think it is (Symbolic Interactionism, Phenomenological inspirations, Ethnomethodology), (2) those which assume that "the Social" is not what people think it is (Habermas and Critical Theory), (3) those which assume that "the Social is what it is (Luhmann, Münch, Alexander), and (4) those which assume that there is no "social" and proclaim the end of society and history (various branches of Postmodernism with particular reference to Baudrillard). In the end of the course we will discuss the return of "the Social" and history in various theoretical conceptualizations.

The course will be divided in seven meetings, the first one will be 2 hour long, the other – 3 hour long. Starting with the third meeting the lecture will be interwoven with students' presentations.

Requirements:

Participation in classes is mandatory. One can miss one 3 hour meeting without consequences. Absence in two 3 hour meetings will lead to writing a "penalty essay" of 1,500 words on a topic given by the lecturer, to be delivered together with course essay. Absence in three 3 hour meetings means that the absentee is not allowed to complete the course.

All those who take the course for credit will give a presentation/short lecture on a topic agreed with the lecturer. The presentation will include a review of an assigned reading.

Course essay of 3,000 words, to be delivered at the end of the first teaching period, on a topic selected from the list provided by the lecturer in one of the first meetings.

Please consult the MA Handbook regarding the submission of the course essay and any other questions you may be interested in.

Main textbooks:

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Jonathan H. Turner, *Theoretical Sociology. A Concise Introduction to Twelve Sociological Theories*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2014.

Sandro Segre, *Contemporary Sociological Thinkers and Theories*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

Seth Abrutyn (ed.) *Handbook of Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Cham: Springer, 2016.

Plan of the course:

Meeting 1.

Theorizing theory.

Introduction to the course, organization of classes. Distribution of presentations.

Social theory as a conceptualization of ‘the social.’ Social theory and modernity: four paradigms (Alexander). Historical character of theory: when does contemporary social theory begin? From the rejection of theory to the end of ‘crisis talk.’ What happened in social theory in the last thirty years. Types of theoretical reactions to the crisis of structural functionalism. ‘Four paradigms’ revisited: the matrix for contemporary social theory.

Readings:

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 1: What is theory?

Jeffrey C. Alexander, General Theory in the Postpositivist Mode: The ‘Epistemological Dilemma’ and the Search for Present Reason. In: J.C.Alexander, *Fin de Siecle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason*. London, New York: Verso, 1995.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How Intellectuals Have Coded, Narrated, and Explained the ‘New World of Our Time.’ In: J.C.Alexander, *Fin de Siecle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason*, London, New York: Verso, 1995.

Meeting 2.

The “social” is what people think it is?

Symbolic Interactionism and dramaturgical perspective in sociology. Phenomenological inspiration and Ethnomethodology. In search of subjectivity/agency. The social world as emerging out of human interactions: Herbert Blumer. The “Blumer dilemma”: “situation” between “action” and “structure/culture.” Out of dilemma: Erving Goffman and the interaction order. Recent developments: towards macrosociological interactionism -Norman Denzin, Peter Hall. Denzin’s

interpretive interactionism. Interactionism as an inspiration in Anthony Giddens' theoretical syncretism. Phenomenology as 'de-socialization' and 're-socialization.' Alfred Schutz: life-world, natural attitude, and social theory as a theory of knowledge. Ethnomethodological field of studies. Reflexive character of daily life: 'accountability' of activities. Ethnomethodology as a foundational challenge for sociology.

Readings:

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 6: Interpretive approaches (1): symbolic interactionism.

Peter M. Hall, A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Politics. In: K.Plummer (ed.), *Symbolic Interactionism, Vol. II: Contemporary Issues*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar (An Elgar Reference Collection), 1991.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 7: Interpretive approaches (2): ethnomethodology.

Steven Vaitkus, Phenomenology and Sociology. In: Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Second Edition. Malden, Massachusetts, USA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

Meeting 3.

The “social” is not what people think it is? Transformations of the revolutionary spirit: in search of the lost utopia? Jürgen Habermas and Critical Theory.

The contribution of Frankfurt School. Habermas' project: a theory with a practical intention. From a diagnosis of capitalist society to the theory of knowledge and cognitive interests. Types of action and rationality. Critical theory as a critique of distorted communication. System—Lifeworld relation. Modernity as an unfinished project. Habermas—Lyotard debate. New developments in Critical Theory. Critical theory and contemporary world: “emancipation in the age of global social movements.” Feminism and critical theory. Politics of identity, politics of difference, politics of recognition.

Readings:

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 9: Habermas and critical theory. Chapter 10: Habermas' 'theory of communicative action'.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 17: Feminist social theories.

Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell 1995. Chapters 6 and 7.

Mauro Basaure, Continuity through rupture with the Frankfurt school: Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. In: G. Delanty, S.P. Turner (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Clare Colebrook, Feminist social and political theory. In: G. Delanty, S.P. Turner (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Meeting 4.

The “social” is what it is? From Functionalism to Neofunctionalism. Jeffrey Alexander, Paul Colomy. The “German Branch”: Niklas Luhmann, Richard Münch.

Post-Parsonian period in sociology. Fields of reconstruction and continuation (action, order, equilibrium, ideology). Neofunctionalist research programs in sociology of culture (Alexander) and in sociology of social change (Colomy). Luhmann: types of systems and their modes of reproduction; temporality of social systems; communication as an elementary unit of sociological analysis. Richard Münch: structure—action dilemma. General theory of action: symbolic complexity and action contingency.

Readings:

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 13: The renewal of Parsonianism and modernization theory.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 11: Niklas Luhmann's radicalization of functionalism.

Richard Münch, *Sociological Theory*. Vol. 3: Development Since the 1960s. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1994. Chapter 16: Communication as Systemic Information Processing: Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, General Theory in the Postpositivist Mode: The 'Epistemological Dilemma' and the Search for Present Reason. In: J.C.Alexander, *Fin de Siecle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason*. London, New York: Verso, 1995.

Meeting 5.

There is no “social”? Postmodernism and social theory.

Postmodernism as a way out, as an attitude, as a transition. Postmodernism and modernity. Postmodernism and ambivalence. Deconstructing narratives in the era of simulation (Derrida—Lyotard—Baudrillard). Postmodern conceptions of social sciences: discontinuity and dissemination. Postmodern deconstruction of “society”: the end of agency, the end of resistance, the end of history.

Readings:

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 14: Structuralism and poststructuralism.

Richard Münch, *Sociological Theory*. Vol. 3: Development Since the 1960s. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1994. Chapter 1: The Social and Cultural World as a Structure: Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Development from Structuralism to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism; Chapter 2: The Reproduction of Power Structures: The Post-Structuralism of Michel Foucault.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 7.

Barry Smart, Postmodern Social Theory. In: Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Second Edition. Malden, Massachusetts, USA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

Meeting 6

The return of history and of the social in social theory.

Does history come to an end? Historicity and conceptualization of change in postmodern debate and beyond. The problem of technology and the new world order: Derrida, Fukuyama, Jameson, Latour. Towards reflexive modernization? Beck and the risk society. Giddens and the reflexivity of late modernity.

Readings:

Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, Oxford, UK, Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1995: Chapter 4: *Postmodernism as Pseudohistory: The Trivialization of Epochal Change*.

Gerard Delanty, *Social Theory in a Changing World*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1999. Chapter 6.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 18: A crisis of modernity? New diagnoses.

Peter Wagner, Modernity: From convergence and stability to plurality and transformation. In: G. Delanty, S.P. Turner (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Amelia Arsenault, Networks: The technological and the social. In: G. Delanty, S.P. Turner (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.

Meeting 7

Evolution of the postmodernist debate: from deconstruction to social constructivism?

Is society more than a “text”? Bauman and the ethical components of social life. Touraine: the return of social agency. Luhmann: society as the (im)possibility of communication. Bourdieu: self-perpetuation of society through culture. Towards a theoretical approach to culture in contemporary sociology. Culture and identity. Castells: network society and identities of resistance. Appadurai: ethnoscaples and deterritorialization of identity. Bauman: liquid modernity and fragmentation of identities. Bhabha: postcolonial theory and hybridization of identities. Outhwaite and Ray: convergence and postcommunism. Krastev and Holmes: anti-liberal backlash in Eastern Europe.

Readings:

William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. Chapter 10: Refiguring the “Social” in Social Science: An Interpretivist Manifesto.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 15: Between structuralism and theory of practice. The cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 16: French anti-structuralists (Cornelius Castoriadis, Alain Touraine and Paul Ricoeur).

Richard Münch, *Sociological Theory*. Vol. 3: Development Since the 1960s. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1994. Chapter 9: Action, Movement, and the Self-Production of Society: Alain Touraine’s Theory of Social Movements.

Gerard Delanty, *Social Theory in a Changing World*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1999. Chapters 4 and 5.

Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Chapter 20: How things stand.

William Outhwaite and Larry Ray, *Social Theory and Postcommunism*. Malden, MA, USA, Oxford, UK, and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Zygmunt Bauman, *From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity*. In: Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996.

Plus a selection from:

Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Manuel Castells, *The Information Age. Economy, Society and Culture*. Volume II: The Power of Identity. Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997.