

SOC 5020
Contemporary Social Theory
(Basic Problems in Sociology II)
SPRING 2025

Instructor: Dan Hirschman

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Time and Location: 2:00pm-4:30pm Thursdays, Uris 360

Office Hours: Mondays, 2:00pm-3:00pm by appointment only. Meetings will be in Uris 328 or (by request) on Zoom. Sign-up for 1-2 slots using [this calendar](#).

Overview & Objectives

This course provides an overview of developments in social theory since the mid-20th century. It follows Soc 5010 and assumes familiarity with classical social theory. The course emphasizes breadth over depth, and introduces key developments including those produced by sociologists working in America and Europe as well as influential theories developed in the humanities and legal scholarship. The course includes a selection of very recent theoretical and empirical works to illustrate how social theory is “alive” in sociology today, both in the sense of having implications for empirical research and in the sense that scholars continue to produce and refine theoretical frameworks.

The learning goals for the 5010-5020 sequence, as set by the Sociology Graduate Field, are as follows:

1. Familiarize students with the historical development of social theory, including the politics of inclusion and exclusion from the historical canon.
2. Provide students with a grounding in classical and contemporary theories that inform the field of American sociology.
3. Expose students to the diversity and heterogeneity of social thought. (The range of works may include those that are influential in other disciplines, in other countries, in particular sociological subfields but ignored by others, or works that have been “forgotten,” and in so doing expose students to useful insights distinct from those available in the current canon.)
4. Encourage critical analysis of social theory.
5. Connect ideas and debates from social theory to contemporary issues or student research interests.
6. Create a supportive environment where students engage openly about ideas, build trust within their cohort, and gain confidence.

Requirements

Attendance and Participation: You are required to attend and participate in class. If you are unable to attend class (for health, family obligations, religious obligations, etc.), please let me know in advance.

Readings: This course is a doctoral seminar. As such, it carries a substantial reading load. You are expected to read all assigned material before coming to class. We will devote most of our class time to exploring the readings.

Presentations: In some weeks, one or two students will lead the class discussion, beginning with a short presentation. These presentations should be 15-20 minutes, and include a handout with a summary of key terms and claims made in the readings, but may also include activities, videos, etc. We will discuss expectations for the presentations in class.

Response Memos: Each week (other than the first), you are expected to write a structured response memo approximately 500 words long. This memo should do two things. First, it should attempt to summarize the major argument (as you see it) of one or more of the week's main readings. Second, it should identify a particular passage or topic that you would like to discuss further and offer a question or commentary about that passage or topic. Each memo is due at midnight on the day before the associated class meeting.

Respect: There are many ways to interpret the course readings and many competing views on the topics we will discuss, and I hope we will debate many contrasting viewpoints during the course of the semester. To facilitate good discussion, please keep in mind that we are debating ideas, not each other as individuals. This type of debate might take the form of "I disagree" instead of "you are wrong." Please keep the difference in mind so that we can engage in useful and vigorous discussion!

In the context of a graduate seminar, respect takes on an additional, specific meaning. In graduate seminars, there is a tendency to try to show off by "name dropping" (or, read more sympathetically, to make exciting intellectual connections to material outside of the immediate scope of the class). This tendency can lead to stifled discussions and alienation as students who are unfamiliar with a particular thinker or concept are forced out of the conversation. Thus, as a rule, if you want to introduce a term or theorist that we have not explicitly discussed in the class, you must briefly explain who the theorist is/was or the meaning of the concept, and then why that theorist or concept is relevant to our discussion. The goal here is not to prevent bringing in outside material, but to make sure that we can have a productive conversation by building a shared vocabulary — one of the central purposes of a graduate seminar.

Reflection Essay: Once during the semester, you will write a 1000 word reflection paper. This paper will build on the course readings and discussions to make an argument of your choosing that demonstrates your mastery of some portion of the course material. The ideal reflection paper brings together several readings from different weeks into a coherent argument. You may complete this essay any time between the third (2/8) and final classes (5/2).

Final Paper: For your final paper, I will ask you to write a paper in the style of a *Socio-*

logical Theory article. There are many possible topics and variations. You could offer an in-depth analysis of one theorist's writings (with an eye towards implications for contemporary sociological research). You could offer a comparison between two or more theorists or theoretical traditions (again, with an eye towards implications for contemporary research). You could offer your own novel theoretical treatment of a topic or concept. You could discuss the implications of a particular theory or theoretical tradition for an area of contemporary empirical research. Etc. Your final paper may build on your reflection paper, if you choose. We will discuss your ideas for the final paper in the second half of the course. The timeline for the paper is as follows: On 3/27, we will brainstorm topics in class. By 4/17, you will submit a short abstract of your idea for approval. The final paper itself will be due 5/15.

Grading

Your grade has five components.

Participation: 20%

Attending class is a necessary but insufficient condition for full participation. You must also engage with the readings and your colleagues, and do so respectfully. This is not the same as talking a lot — for example, you might make only occasional interventions into the conversation, but ones that show clear engagement with the readings and the flow of discussion. And one of the most important forms of participation is asking basic clarification questions, especially as we begin our discussion. If you have concerns about your participation, please raise them with me in office hours before the end of the term.

Presentation: 10%

We will discuss expectations for presentations in the first week. Presentations will be graded on clarity, but I do not expect you to be comprehensive (which would not be possible in 15-20 minutes) nor to necessarily get every detail correct.

Response Memos: 20%

Each of the memos will be graded out of 10 points. You will be graded on your best ten memos (which means you can skip up to three weeks as long as you are satisfied with your grade on the ones you turn in).

Reflection Paper: 10%

The reflection paper is worth 10% of your grade.

Final Paper: 40%

The final paper is worth 40% of your grade.

Grade Appeals: If you feel that an *error* has been made, you may appeal your grade to me within *one week* of receiving your grade. To appeal your grade, you must provide a written explanation of the error you believe has been made, and I will re-grade the assignment. Please be advised that there is no guarantee that I will raise your grade; in fact, it is possible

that I may lower it. For this reason, you should appeal a grade as a last resort when you feel *certain* that you have been graded unfairly.

Administrative Issues

Academic Integrity: Students in the course are encouraged to discuss course material and assignments with each other. However, anything you submit for credit should represent your own work. Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct are unacceptable. Information on the University's academic code is available [here](#). Any student who plagiarizes will fail the course and may face other sanctions imposed by the University. Students agree that by taking this course, all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to the Usage Policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.¹

To ensure development and mastery of the foundational concepts and skills, the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT is prohibited in this course. If you are unsure of any policy or any assignment-specific directions — including whether or not a particular tool is considered generative AI — please consult with me prior to using the technology or completing your assignment.²

Accommodations for Learning: Cornell University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class, by email, or during office hours. For more information, please contact [Student Disability Services](#) (phone: 607-254-4545, email: sds_cu@cornell.edu).

General Advice

PhD programs can be overwhelming. For two very useful perspectives, I recommend Fabio Rojas' [Grad Skool Rulz](#) (an ebook based on blog posts) and Jessica Calarco's [A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum](#) (a traditionally-published book).

Required Texts

The following are books you might want to own, and which we will read substantial portions from.

- Meadow, Tey. 2018. *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century*.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline & Punish*.

¹This paragraph adopts language from Erin York Cornwell's 5010 syllabus, as well as language provided by Cornell for discussing Turnitin.

²This paragraph adopts language from Cornell's [guidance](#) on the use of Generative AI in courses.

- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*.
- Go, Julian. 2016. *Postcolonial Thought & Social Theory*

The rest of the readings will be available on the course Canvas site as pdfs and/or as links. The readings for each week are listed in the order you might want to read them.

Course Outline

Class 1: What is theory? Who is a theorist? What is theory for?

(1/23)

- hooks, bell. 1991. "Theory as Liberatory Practice." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4:1-12.
- Lizardo, Omar. 2014. "The End of Theorists." Available at <http://akgerber.com/OpenBook010.pdf>.
- Healy, Kieran. 2017. "Fuck Nuance." *Sociological Theory* 35(2):118-27.

Class 2: Micro Sociology & Gender (1/30)

- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Introduction and Chapter 1 ("Performances") (Pp. 1-76).
- Goffman, Erving. 1977. "The Arrangement between the Sexes." *Theory and Society* 4(3):301-31.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Chapter 5 ("Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person, Part 1") and Appendix to Chapter 5.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1(2):125-51.
- Crawley, S. L. 2022. "Queering Doing Gender: The Curious Absence of Ethnomethodology in Gender Studies and in Sociology." *Sociological Theory* 40(4):366-92.

Class 3: Hegemony & Ideology (2/6)

- Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Pp 127-184 in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers. Read: "Problems of Marxism: Economy and Ideology" (pp. 407-409); "The Formation of Intellectuals" (pp. 5-14); "Political Struggle and Military War" and "The Transition from the War Of Maneuvre to War of Position" (pp. 229-239).
- Hall, Stuart. 1986. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10(2):5-27.

- Connell, R. W. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Pp. 183-190 (“Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.”)
- Yang, Yuchen. 2020. “What’s Hegemonic about Hegemonic Masculinity? Legitimation and Beyond.” *Sociological Theory* 38(4):318-33.

Class 4: Queer Theory (2/13)

- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. Preface, Chapter 1, Chapter 3 Part IV (“Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions”), and Conclusion.
- Martin, Karin A. 1991. “Review of Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.” *Gender and Society* 5(3):420-21.
- Butler, Judith. 1994. “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Post-modernism.’” Pp. 153-70 in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, edited by S. Seidman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stein, Arlene, and Ken Plummer. 1994. “‘I Can’t Even Think Straight’ ‘Queer’ Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology.” *Sociological Theory* 12(2):178-87.

Class 5: Bringing It All Together 1: Meadow’s *Trans Kids* (2/20)

- Meadow, Tey. 2018. *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century*.
- Meadow, Tey. 2023. “Transgender Youth Are Under Attack: The Work of Response.” *Sociological Forum* 38(4):1486-93.

Class 6: Foucault: Power, Discipline (2/27)

- Lukes, Steven. 2004 (1974). *Power: A Radical View*. Chapter 1.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline & Punish*. Read the whole book, but you can skim Part 1 Chapter 2, Part 2, and Part 4 Chapter 1 (read the rest more carefully).
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *October* 59:3-7.

Class 7: Bourdieu: Field, Capital, Habitus (3/6)

- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Pp. 94-140.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction*. Introduction, Ch. 1 (Intro only), Chs. 2-3, Ch 5 (Intro only), Chapter 7, & Conclusion.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “Forms of Capital.” Pp. 241–58 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for Sociology and Education*, edited by J. J. Richardson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

- Desan, Mathieu Hikaru. 2013. "Bourdieu, Marx, and Capital: A Critique of the Extension Model." *Sociological Theory* 31(4):318-42.

Class 8: Postcolonial Theory (3/13)

Note: Class will be held on Zoom!

- Bhabra, Gurinder K. 2007. "Sociology and Postcolonialism: Another 'Missing' Revolution?" *Sociology* 41(5):871-84.
- Fanon, Franz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Introduction, Chapters 4 & 5.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. Introduction and Chapter 1 Part I (pp. 1-49).
- Bhabra, Gurinder K. 2022. "Relations of Extraction, Relations of Redistribution: Empire, Nation, and the Construction of the British Welfare State." *The British Journal of Sociology* 73(1):4-15.

Class 9: Standpoint Theory (3/20)

- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1986. "Learning from the Outsider within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33(6):s14-32.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575-99.
- Scott, Joan W. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17(4):773-97.
- Harding, Sandra. 1992. "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?'" *The Centennial Review* 36(3):437-70.
- Táíwò, Olúfémi. 2022. "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference." *The Philosopher*. Available at <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/being-in-the-room-privilege-elite-capture-and-epistemic-deference>.

Class 10: Intersectionality (3/27)

- Combahee River Collective. 1977. "Combahee River Collective Statement."
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 43:139-168.
- McCall, Leslie. 2005. "The Complexity of Intersectionality." *Signs* 30(3):1771-1800.
- Patil, Vrushali. 2013. "From Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We've Really Come." *Signs* 38(4):847-67.
- Hamilton, Laura T., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, J. Lotus Seeley, and Elizabeth M. Armstrong. 2019. "Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination." *Sociological Theory* 37(4):315-41.

Brainstorm final paper in class.

Spring Break: No class on 4/3!

Class 11: Actor-Network Theory (4/10)

- Callon, Michel, and Bruno Latour. 1981. "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So." *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro-and Macro-Sociologies*, Pp. 277-303.
- Latour, Bruno. 1983. "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World." *Science Observed*. Pp. 141-70.
- Latour, Bruno. 1990. "Technology Is Society Made Durable." *The Sociological Review* 38:103-31.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2002. *Rule of Experts*. Chapter 1 ("Can the Mosquito Speak?").
- Sayes, Edwin. 2014. "Actor-Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does It Mean to Say That Nonhumans Have Agency?" *Social Studies of Science* 44(1):134-49.

Class 12: Theorizing the World (4/17)

- Meyer, John W., John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez. 1997. "World Society and the Nation-State." *American Journal of Sociology* 103(1):144-81.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*.
- Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8(4):387-409.
- McKay, Dwanna L., Kirsten Vinyeta, and Kari Marie Norgaard. 2020. "Theorizing Race and Settler Colonialism within U.S. Sociology." *Sociology Compass* 14(9):e12821.

Final Paper topic & abstract due by 4/24.

Class 13: Bringing It All Together 2: Go's *Postcolonial Thought & Social Theory* (4/24)

Note: Class will be held on Zoom!

- Go, Julian. 2016. *Postcolonial Thought & Social Theory*
- Go, Julian. 2020. "The Imperial Origins of American Policing: Militarization and Imperial Feedback in the Early 20th Century." *American Journal of Sociology* 125(5):1193-1254. (Skim empirics.)

Reflection Paper due by 5/1.

Class 14: Methodological Implications of Contemporary Social Theory (5/1)

- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and Tukufu Zuberi. 2008. "Toward a Definition of White Logic and White Methods." Pp. 3-30 in *White Logic, White Methods*.
- Schilt, Kristen, Tey Meadow, and D'Lane Compton. 2018. "Introduction: Queer Work in a Straight Discipline." Pp. 1-34 in *Other, Please Specify*.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2021. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 3rd edition. Introduction (Pp. 1-20).

Final Paper due 5/15.