

Social Theory¹
Spring 2017
Sociology 156b

Department of Sociology
Brandeis University

Class Time: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday 12:00-12:50pm
Location: Mandel Center, Room G12

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 1:00-2:00pm

1. Course description; or, what exactly is social theory?

The point of this course is simple: to introduce you to what is known across the social sciences and humanities as “social theory.” Basic enough, but the problem is that “social theory” is a bit unruly and hard to get a handle on. Trust me, I’ve been reading/writing this stuff for more than a decade now and it still baffles me about what social theory is and is *not*.

Nevertheless, there are some basic features that all social theory has in common and that, hopefully, will give you some sense for what (in the world) you are getting yourself into. Social theory consists of often badly written, speculative

¹ I (as instructor) reserve the right to change this syllabus at anytime (and I probably will). Any changes will be announced in class and via Latte. I also realize this isn’t the official title of the course you signed up for (e.g. Introduction to Sociological Theory). I’ll try my best to explain why “Social Theory” is in fact more suitable for what we’ll be doing this semester.

ideas, that claim some sort of knowledge, about how society works. Let's break this down:

(1) *often badly written ...*

Unfortunately the people we will read this semester don't always write well. But two things are worth pointing out here: (a) good writing is, at least partially, a subjective judgment, and as you read more of this stuff you inevitably find a certain elegance and poetic beauty (imho) in even the "worst written" stuff; (b) social theorists try to use language (e.g. written prose) to essentially blow our minds when it comes to what we have lots and lots of accumulated (though implicit) knowledge about: how society works and how we fit into it. This means theorists get a bit of a break when it comes to being "bad writers."

(2) *... speculative ideas ...*

That's right. What we'll be reading this semester is most often not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth kind of stuff, but rather "speculations" about what could *possibly* be true but could also be totally false. If nothing else, the ideas we encounter this semester are imaginative, and deal with *big (really big) questions*, which for a whole bunch of reasons that we'll discuss, is somehow more important than *merely* being true.

(3) *... that claim some sort of knowledge ...*

And yet, social scientists and humanities scholars (historians, philosophers, literature scholars) rely on social theories to do their good work producing trustworthy knowledge about all kinds of stuff. As we'll discuss early on this semester, all sciences (even "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" sciences like physics or biology) are based on theories that are also speculative but absolutely necessary for those sciences to do what they do.

(4) *... about how society works.*

What makes social theories different than (say) quantum mechanics in physics or the theory of evolution in biology is that social theories are about how "society" works. This means that, unlike theories in physics and biology, social theories often directly contradict our common sense. This is an important part of social theory, as we'll see this semester, because it means that social theories can make you see yourself and your

place in the world very differently. Yep, this can make a difference in your everyday life.

Not surprisingly, social theories often motivate social movements that try to change society. Very surprisingly, though, is that you are actually already quite *well versed* in social theory. You've been using it for most of your (adult) life, even if you never knew it before (ever used a word like "culture"? Then, yes, you too have been shaped by social theory).

So the working definition of social theory that we'll be using this semester is: often badly written, speculative ideas, that claim some sort of knowledge, about how society works. That in itself might make you get up out of your seat, right now, and flee the classroom! But there are some good (indeed, *very good*) reasons for staying.

To introduce you to social theory, this course is structured *thematically*. Every few weeks or so we'll read a gaggle of social theorists as they collectively grapple with a common topic (like agency, power, culture, social structure). This way of organizing the course is intended to give you (especially the **sociology majors** among you) a basic familiarity with the social theorists who have proven to be **particularly influential in sociology**.

More broadly and for the **non-sociology majors** in the room, these themes were also chosen because they all demonstrate ways that social theory has impacted society in some way. The strange stuff that social theorists have thought up about power or culture, for example, have seeped into public understanding/discourse about those topics, which is trafficked in by peeps that have no idea that social theory even exists. Indeed, you have already encountered (some of) these themes already and so your thinking about them has, in some sense, already been shaped by social theory, even if you never knew it before.

This course will therefore give you the **opportunity for self-clarification** in your understanding of them, which will hopefully pay dividends for you (consciousness-wise probably not money-wise) regardless of whether you ever set foot in another sociology class or not.

2. Learning Goals

Structurally, this course is meant to be a *reading/writing/discussion forum* that will help you think better, understand concepts more clearly (and write your

required papers more easily) than a prof-led lecture that feeds you necessary information (and very likely puts you to sleep and/or *forces* you to watch Netflix during class) and tests how well you regurgitate it for me (double yuck).

That said, keep the following point in mind: the overall goal of this course is not to provide you with facts or a method or a skill. I won't be giving you indubitable, must-memorize truths about social theory (as if that were possible), or telling you what you should think (sorry). The **overall goal of this course** is instead to give you a basic understanding of that genre of writing known as social theory; an understanding of some of its core themes; an understanding of the purpose of social theory; and an understanding of why it is important for the social sciences and humanities, politics, society at large, and quite possibly your own life.

With (all of) this in mind the **learning goals** for this course are as follows:

1. To develop an elementary grasp of important social-theoretical themes and principles.
2. To understand (at least a little bit) the role that theory plays in science, social science and the humanities.
3. To gain a better understanding of how American and global society works (not to mention an understanding of what exactly "society" might be... not a whole lot of agreement about this).
4. To develop and hone argumentative and writing skills (not to mention the ability to read and evaluative arguments).
5. To use social theory to challenge your own common sense preconceptions and (perhaps) help you and others live your life differently (no joke, this might happen).

3. Requirements²

² You might ask yourself "Why all this writing? Doesn't this guy realize that writing is very rapidly being replaced by TwitterSpeak and that we are wasting valuable time honing what will soon be an antiquated skill equivalent to horse/buggy repair?" Let me explain my reasons. Famous study by sociologists Arum and Roska entitled *Academically Adrift* (2011). Findings: college students learn *surprisingly little* during their undergrad careers, regardless of what college they are at. *However*, students do learn stuff in a class (*any* class) when said class requires two things of them: "more than 40 pages of reading per week and more than 20 pages of writing per

And now for what you've all been waiting for: Here is what will be required of you in this class:

(1) Four (of six) section papers

The class is divided into six sections, each engaging with a specific theme in social theory. After each section (on Thursday) I will post a writing prompt to Latte and ask you to write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) paper to answer the prompt. This will be due the following Tuesday.

You will be required to submit 4 of these papers for the 6 sections for which they will be assigned (you can miss one). If you submit less than 4, each missing paper will count as a zero.

The average score on your 4 section papers is worth **40% of your final grade**

(2) Midterm and Final Essay Exams

Twice during the semester (on October 6 and December 7) we will distribute essay questions designed to tie together broad sets of ideas from the readings *and* class discussions. Approximately one week after you receive each set of questions, you will need to submit written responses not exceeding ten double-spaced pages.

The midterm and final essay "exams" are worth **25% of your final grade each**.

(3) Participation and Attendance

Ok, so as a *reading/writing/discussion forum* style class, stuff like participation and attendance is absolutely essential. To help motivate you to do this, I will quantify your level of participation in the following way: Did I normally see your smiling face in class? Did you sometimes talk in class when the opportunity arose? Did you submit the homework assignments I periodically assign? Did I have to ask you more than once to put away smartphone, laptop, or other *illegal* (in this classroom MWTh from 10-10:50am) tech device during class?

If I can answer "yes" to the first three questions, and "no" to the last question, you will get 100% participation grade. If I can't answer yes to them, or if I can answer yes to the last question, then you will get something lower than a

semester" (pp. 70-71 of study). We're actually exceeding those numbers a bit in this class. Hence, my hope is that requiring that you do this old-fashioned writing thing will actually help you in ways you might not expect at first.

100% participation grade. Wow, that was more complicated than it needed to be.

Really the idea here is to show that you *care* about what we do in the class. It's that simple. I realize in a class of this size it can be hard to talk *during* class, so you can "participate" in different ways as well: asking questions and/or suggesting ideas, possible topics of discussion, connections between class topics and current events, etc *outside* of class (before or after class, through email, during office hours). This also shows that you care, which is the point.

I also reserve the right to assign the class "Reading Response Forms" if it seems like nobody or just a few people are doing the readings.

Your participation is worth **10% of your final grade**.

(4) Theory in public option

If you want to only write three section papers instead of four, here is a (fun!) option. Pick one of our readings, go to a public place (tell me first where; I might show up!), and start reading it aloud (for at least 5 minutes!) to the astonished onlookers. Please record the proceedings and send said recording to me. We will watch it in class. Write a brief report about the kind of reaction you got by giving social theory to the people.

This fits with the claim (mentioned above) that social theory challenges common sense.

Other points to mention about grading

Late/Makeup Work: It is your responsibility to make sure that all assignments are turned in on time. With the exception of previously approved absences, late assignments will never be accepted for full credit. Grades will be marked down one percentage point for each hour the assignment is late. If you know that you cannot make a certain deadline, please contact me beforehand so that we can work together (assuming you have good reason to miss the original deadline) to consider alternative options for completion.

Disputed Grades: Contact me in writing if you feel that you have been incorrectly awarded a particular grade on a class assignment. Include a paragraph describing: (a) how your work fulfills the course objectives outlined in the syllabus; (b) why your work is deserving of a higher grade; (c) what texts and page numbers in the required readings you based your paper's content and argument on; (d) what you think your grade should be. If I think your request has merit, then we can meet in person to further review your assignment and

discuss the validity of your current grade. However, this meeting will come only after my reevaluation of the assignment in question.

Extra-Credit: In rare situations there might be opportunities for extra-credit. I must approve each individual request, so you should contact me well before the end of the semester if you think you might need extra-credit.

4. Other Course Policies

1. Code of Academic Conduct

All students are responsible for compliance with the Brandeis Student Rights and Responsibilities circa 2016-17. You can access that here:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/2016-17%20RR%20.pdf>.

Academic honesty violations include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating academic dishonesty.

2. Academic Honesty

Let's spend a little time with this since you will be writing so much for this class... All of the work you submit for a grade must be your own. Claiming someone else's work as your own is a violation of academic honesty. Duh. We all know this. Please *do not do it*. The penalties for this (at the university level) are not good. If I suspect academic dishonesty, you will automatically fail the assignment. If it happens again, you will fail the course. Trust me, these assignments aren't that difficult anyway.

3. Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets and other tech stuff in class

Per *de facto* Department of Sociology policy, use of laptop computers, cell phones and other "tech stuff" is *strictly forbidden* during class meetings, unless they are involved in an in-class assignment. If you have a medical excuse to use one of these devices, please bring the excuse to me so I can verify it. *Otherwise, no student should use a laptop, phone, tablet, or other tech thing in class.* This might sound brutal, harsh, medieval (etc, etc), but please keep in mind this class is only 50 min long, which means there is plenty of time before and after our (brief, short, not long) class meetings to Snapchat, Facebook and/or Netflix.

4. Disability Statement

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services (brodgers@brandeis.edu). Letters of

accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations, and absolutely before the day of an exam or test. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

5. To Do Well in This Course...

Here are a few tips to help you do well in this course:

- You have to have a **tolerant attitude** toward what we will read and talk about. It is all controversial in some way. But the answers it gives and the facts it provides about these topics can often be interpreted as supporting one political point of view instead of another. Given the potentially controversial material we will be reading and discussing, I ask that you to be tolerant of the opinions of others during our class discussions.
- You have to be prepared to **change your mind** and to **listen** to what sociology has to say. Even if you already have strong opinions about any or all of these topics, this course will still be (very) interesting for you if you are willing to change your mind and/or seek to more effectively defend and understand your own (pre-established) beliefs.
- That said, in order for this to work you need to have some **openness** about arguments that might not conform to what you already believe.
- Finally, you have to dedicate some **perspiration** (sweat, effort, work) to this course. This seems obvious, but really it is the most essential key to success. And why? Because the entire course is based on reading

Therefore, in order to be successful in this class ... You should, like, *read*. You should *take notes as you read*. You should be prepared to *talk in class and ask questions about what you've read*. As noted above, we will be reading bad writing this semester. Nobody is quite sure what the authors meant and, indeed, there is a social theory (thanks Roland Barthes!) that says we should have no expectation that even *the authors* know what their words mean. So it is all up to *interpretation*. But to interpret first you must *read*.

Please note here that all of these “keys to success” involve **reading**. The main point I want get across is very easily stated: **if you do the required reading, you will be successful in this class**. You should be prepared to set aside **at least 5-6 hours of work** (that’s reading and writing) for this course every week.

Given that the two essay “exams” are take-home/open-note, an obvious tip for success (at least final grade wise) is that you **show up to class** and **take notes**. This is not to mention that your participation in class is also part of your final grade. You should also come to class ready to engage with (having read and thought about... at least a little bit) the required material during the in-class discussions and lecture. My educational psychologist friends tell me that this is by far the best way to prep for exams.

6. Course resources

No books required! The readings will be available on Latte as PDFs or weblinks.

However, if we decide to go the book option, there may at least one book required. We’ll get this resolved early in the semester.

7. Course Schedule

Jan 18 - Course Introduction

Section 1: What is theory?

Jan 19 – *Exit the cave: an allegory of theorizing*

Reading:

- Plato, “Allegory of the Cave”

Jan 23 – *Theory writ large*

Reading:

- Joas and Knobl, “What is theory?”

Jan 25 – *Social theory: exhibit A*

Reading:

- Tilly, "State-making and war-making as organized crime"

Jan 26 – *Social theory vs. common sense*

Reading:

- Durkheim, "Preface to the second edition"
- Freeman, "The tyranny of structurelessness"

Jan 30 – *Can social theory change the world?*

Reading:

- Marx, "For a ruthless criticism of everything existing"
- Marcuse, "Repressive tolerance"

Feb 1 – *The limits of social theory?*

Reading:

- Weber, "Objectivity in social science and social policy"
- Hochschild, "Empathy maps"

Feb 2 – *Where do we theorize from?*

Reading:

- Du Bois, "The souls of white folk"
- Collins, "Black feminist epistemology"
- Smith, "The conceptual practices of power"

Section 2: Agency

Feb 6 – *Cutting to the chase... free will or determinism?*

Reading:

- Swidler, "Voluntarism in American culture"

Feb 8 – *The experience of duality*

Reading:

- Du Bois, “Of our spiritual strivings”
- Durkheim, “The dualism of human nature and its social conditions”

Feb 9 – *Agency and social structure*

Reading:

- Stones, “Structure and agency”

Feb 13 – *Agency and intentionality*

Reading:

- Elder-Vass, “Agency”

Feb 15 – *Consumerism and agency I*

Reading:

- Campbell, “Consuming goods and the good of consuming”

Feb 16 – *Consumerism and agency II*

Reading:

- Bauman, “Consuming life”
- Galbreath, “The dependence effect”
- Sahlins, “The original affluent society” (optional)

Feb 20 - No class (Midterm recess)

Feb 22 - No class (Midterm recess)

Feb 23 - No class (Midterm recess)

Section 3: Social Structure

Feb 27 – *Capitalism as a social structure*

Reading:

- Marx, “The general formula for capital
- Wright, “Class counts”
- Marx, “Letter to Kugelmann in Hanover” (optional)

Mar 2 – *Race as a social structure*

Reading:

- Bonilla-Silva, “The strange enigma of race in contemporary America”

Mar 2 – *Gender as a social structure*

Reading:

- Risman, “Gender as structure”

Mar 6 – *Rationalization*

Reading:

- Ritzer, “The McDonaldization of society”

Mar 8 – *Debating intersectionality I*

Reading:

- Crenshaw, “Mapping the margins”

Mar 9 – *Debating intersectionality II*

Reading:

- Walby, Armstrong and Strid, "Intersectionality: multiple inequalities in social theory"

Section 4: Culture

Mar 13 – *The "thickness" of culture*

Reading:

- Geertz, "Thick description"

Mar 15 – *Varieties of culture*

Reading:

- Swidler, "Cultural power and social movements"

Mar 16 – *Embodied culture*

Reading:

- Bourdieu, "The forms of capital"

Mar 20 – *Matters of capital: debating institutionalized culture I*

Reading:

- Lareau, "Unequal childhoods: class, race and family life"

Mar 22 – *Matters of capital: debating institutionalized culture II*

Readings:

- Carter, "Black cultural capital"
- Olneck, "Can multicultural education change what counts as cultural capital?" (optional)

Mar 23 – *Matters of love: debating institutionalized culture III*

Readings:

- Bourdieu, "Elective affinities"
- Swidler, "Love & marriage"
- Illouz, "Love and its discontents" (optional)

Section 5: Power

Mar 27 - *Introducing power*

Readings:

- Lukes, "Power"

Mar 29 – *Hegemony*

Readings:

- Gramsci, selections from *The Prison Notebooks*

Mar 30 – *Against the "repressive hypothesis"*

Readings:

- Foucault, "Panopticism"
- Foucault, selection from *The Birth of Biopolitics*

April 3 – *Foucault (continued)*

Readings:

- Foucault, selection from *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*

April 5 – *Resisting power I*

Reading:

- Butler, "Imitation and gender insubordination"
- Nussbaum, "The professor of parody"

- NY Mag profile of Judith Butler (optional)

April 6 – *Resisting power II*

Reading:

- hooks, “Changing perspectives on power”
- Piven, “Disruptive power”

April 10 - No class

April 12 - No class

April 13 - No class

April 17 - No class

April 19 - No class

Section 6: Social Change

April 20 – *Revolutionary change I*

Reading:

- Du Bois, “The general strike”

April 24 – *Revolutionary change II*

Reading:

- Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the communist party”

April 26 – *Social structure and social change*

Reading:

- Fanon, “Concerning violence”

- Johnson, "To remake the world: slavery, racial capitalism and justice" (optional)

April 27 – *Morphological change; or, chasing degrees*

Reading:

- Collins, "Credential inflation and the future of universities"
- Collins, "Millennials rise up! College is a scam. You have nothing to lose but student debt"
- Labaree, "The winning ways of a losing strategy: educationalizing social problems in the United States" (optional)

May 1 – *Debating social collapse*

Reading:

- Ehrlich and Ehrlich, "Can a collapse of global civilization be avoided?"
- Kelly, "Why a collapse of global civilization will be avoided"
- Klein, "One way or another, everything changes"
- Diamond, "Ecological collapse of pre-industrial societies" (optional)

May 3 – *Into the future ...*

Reading:

- Frase, "Four futures"
- Moore, "The end of cheap nature" (optional)