Contemporary Theory
University of Notre Dame · Instructor: Omar Lizardo

Tuesday - August 26, 2014

Class: What are we doing here?
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:
stx.sagepub.com/content/26/2/173.short


Excerpt from Martin, J. L. (2013) 'On Theory in Sociology.' Draft chapter from: Thinking Through Theory* Or Philosophy of Social Science for Dummies (This means you!). Forthcoming from W. W. Norton (Library)

Recommended:


Thursday - August 28, 2014

Class: Let's begin at the beginning: Action Theory
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For Class Discussion:


Recommended:


The story of contemporary theory begins with the invention of classical theory. Contemporary theory is thus the theory that comes after the classics. The person most responsible for the creation of the classics (and by implication contemporary theory) is Talcott Parsons. Parsons introduction of "action" as the central analytic category of social theory essentially imposes the agenda for (almost) everything that has come after. Our journey begins here.

Tuesday - September 2, 2014

Class: From Action Theory, to Functionalism, to Theoretical Disintegration
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
Required:


Recommended:


Barnes, B. (1995) 'Functionalism.' The Elements of Social Theory. University College
The publication of Structure in 1937 was the foundation of what was to become the massive edifice of the most influential system of post-classical theory (so-called structural-functionalism) during the 1940s and 1950s. No sooner was the last brick laid out, that the whole thing came crashing down. The story of post-functionalist theory is thus a story of critique, fragmentation and (for some) pessimism accompanied by bouts of despair, followed by attempts to put Humpty Dumpty together again (“synthesis”). In the following meetings, we examine some of the major reasons why classical action theory failed, leaving in its wake most of the major unresolved problems of contemporary social theory.

Thursday - September 4, 2014

Class: The Action Theory Legacy I: The (Unsolved) Problem(s) of (Social) Action
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Silver Diagram:
docs.google.com/presentation/d/1FxwKu6OYomCXgTlMrhbcHfTDL_WCKsm_BuOuZ2KlUVK/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000

Recommended:


Tuesday - September 9, 2014

Class: The Action Theory Legacy II: The Phenomenological Critique
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Thursday - September 11, 2014

Class: Structure Enters the Social Sciences I:
Sociological Structuralism
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:

www3.nd.edu/~olizardo/papers/sociologica-martin-review.pdf


The conceptual metaphor of "social structure" or, in its most ambitious guise, just "structure" is without a doubt the most influential, seductive, misleading and indispensable one in social theory. It became fully established in the field sometime during the interwar period (mostly via the importation of a functionalist Durkheim into British Social Anthropology) and it, like those uninvited house-guests who never leave (with its problems, prospects and confusions) is still with us today. For the next couple of weeks, we examine the conceptual repercussions that the introduction of this "essentially contested concept" had for contemporary theorizing in sociology.

Tuesday - September 16, 2014

Class: Structure Enters the Social Sciences II: Linguistic
("French") Structuralism
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Thursday - September 18, 2014

Class: The problem(s) of Structure I: The Theory of
Structuration
11:00am - 12:06pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:
pos.sagepub.com/content/30/3/362.short


Anthony Giddens' theory of "structuration" is by far the most influential post-functionalist attempt to marry structure and action, continuing to inform (in various guises) contemporary theory and research across a wide range of fields. Giddens' effort is equal parts brilliant synthesis, maddening confusion and verbal sleight-of-hand. Here we evaluate in detail Giddens' attempt to solve the structure/action problem and other people's attempt to fix Giddens' fixing.

Assignment: First paper due
Due: September 19, 2014
So far we have examined several "post-classical" attempts to make sense of the problematic of "action" in social theory. These include Parsonian (action as the deployment of normatively endorsed means for the achievement of ultimate values), pragmatist (action as the creative engagement with problem situations with emergent goals) and phenomenological (action as the routine activity of sense-making). In this paper, I want you to critically review these perspectives on action, show how they link activity to the larger social order (systems, institutions) and argue for the advantage of one conception over the others, or alternatively argue for the advantage of some synthetic conception that incorporates the strengths of each position. Make sure to engage the arguments of each approach seriously and to draw on the class readings.


www.mirror.asanet.org/images/journals/docs/pdf/Sept11STFeature.pdf

Silver diagram:
https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1FxwKu6OYomCXYTLMhbcHjTDL_WCKsm_BuOuZ
Alexander diagram:
docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Q5OLgGYefw53xWBTQqtX9d5xElE3adshn1YpcULj6W1sAY/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000

Specs: Minimum 2500 words; double-spaced, Times New Roman, 1-inch margins, name in header not body of the paper.

No submissions

Tuesday - September 23, 2014

Class: The Problem(s) of Structure II: Structuration, Duality, Conflation
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Thursday - September 25, 2014
Class: The Problem(s) of Structure III: After Realism
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture

For class discussion:


Recommended:
link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-010-9125-1

onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jtsb.12011/full


Tuesday - September 30, 2014

Class: After structuration: The new sociology of power
11:50am - 12:50pm · Lecture


Recommended:
Mann, M. (1986) Societies as organized power networks. In the sources of social

Thursday - October 2, 2014

Class: The Action/Structure Legacy I: Macro and Micro
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture


Recommended:


Parson's coupling of a "theory of action" at the level of the agent with a functionalist "systems theory" at the macro-level (and a theory of socialization by way of the internalization of normative imperatives and role-expectations as a way of linking the two) did well for as long as functionalism lasted (which wasn't that long). The dissolution of the Parsonian synthesis also entailed the fragmentation of these two levels of analysis followed by imperialist claims that one of the two wasn't really necessary or was reducible to the other. One of the most stubborn problematics inherited from functionalism is therefore the problem of levels; both the issue of where the locus of the social is (macro or micro) or if we agree that the social is contained in both, then the problem of how the two levels are linked. Here we review some post-functionalist attempt to make the whole thing work.

Thursday - October 9, 2014
**Class: The Action/Structure Legacy II: The Problem with System/Action Theories**  
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture  
For class discussion:  


Recommended:  


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**Tuesday - October 14, 2014**

**Class: The Cultural Turn and the Rediscovery of the Action/Cognition Link in American Sociology**  
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture  
For class discussion:  


The so-called "cultural turn" in American Sociology can be interpreted in a simple way: "cultural theory" is simply the form that "theory" takes when it is required that we confront substantive empirical problems. Thus, the cultural turn is both a "turn" towards culture and a turn away from the abstract, analytical approach to the conceptualization of the key analytic issues typical of post-functionalist theory. It is no wonder that one of the founding documents of the cultural turn (Swidler, 1986), consists of a reconsideration of Parsonian action-theory and the other (Sewell, 1992) consists of a reconstruction of structuration theory. Thus, some of the biggest problematics of analytical action theory and structuralism are given a workable, pre-emptive "resolution" in cultural sociology: (1) action is less the predictable consequence of the pursuit of ultimate ends than the consequence of the capacities of actors to situationally draw from a toolkit of skills and heuristics; (2) culture and society are less macro-level "systems" that constrain activity than a set of loose, provisional congeries of negotiated parts that actors navigate, construct and reconstruct in their everyday activity, and (3) culture merges into structure in the form of "schemas" that recover the cognitive component of action and mute its normative undertones.
Thursday - October 16, 2014

Class: The Cultural Turn and the Rediscovery of the Structure/Action Problem in American Sociology
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Friday - October 24, 2014

Assignment: Second Paper Due
Due: October 24, 2014

No submissions

Tuesday - October 28, 2014

Class: Institutional Theory I: Linking action and institutions
12:45pm - 1:45pm · Lecture


Recommended:
The emergence and consolidation of a "sociological" institutionalism is arguably (along with the emergence of cultural and economic sociology) the most important development in post-functionalist sociology in the United States, with the institutional approach in organizational theory being the most influential and most fruitful empirical programme of post-War social science. While no empirical subfield has been left untouched by it, institutionalism has a natural home in the study of organizations (organizational theory) and the economy (economic sociology). In the next couple of weeks we will examine the development of institutional theory in the United States. We will see that precisely because of the theoretical ambition of the approach, essentially all of the basic analytical issues that have bedeviled post-functionalist theorizing re-emerge within institutional theory with renewed force.

Thursday - October 30, 2014

Class: Institutional theory II: The macro-dynamics of rationalization
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Tuesday - November 4, 2014

Class: Whatever happened to social structure?

Structural relationism
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


The empirical translation of the metaphor of "social structure" (using the mathematical tools of graph theory) as "social networks" is one of the signal developments in post-functionalist sociology. No area of sociological inquiry has been left untouched by the emergence of network theory and by the application of network methods to concretize and "reveal" social structure for empirical analysis. Along with the emergence of the notion of social structure as networks, there came a theoretically ambitious call to take this effort to its logical conclusion and re-conceive the entire subject matter of the discipline in terms of relations rather than in terms of self-subsisting essences endowed with intrinsic attributes. Here we review the promises and limits of network relationism, its somewhat strained and conflictual relationship to "culture" and the "cultural turn" as well as recent attempts to make networks culture and culture relational. Today the intersection of the study of networks and culture is one of the "hottest" (e.g. attracting the attention of some of the discipline's most creative young minds) and most promising areas of inquiry. Not surprisingly, it is here that some of post-functionalist theory's most stubborn analytical problems are receiving renewed empirical and analytic treatment.

Thursday - November 6, 2014

Class: Class cancelled (on the road)
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture

Tuesday - November 11, 2014

Class: Where does social structure come from?

Networks, meaning, and institutions
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Thursday - November 13, 2014

Class: (Micro)Interactionist theory
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture

Harrington, B., & Fine, G. A. (2006). Where the action is small groups and recent developments in sociological theory. Small group research, 37(1), 4-19. sgr.sagepub.com/content/37/1/4.short


Recommended:


Tuesday - November 18, 2014

**Class: Neo-pragmatist action theory**
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


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Thursday - November 20, 2014

**Class: The practice turn in cultural analysis**
1:45pm - 2:45pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:

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sociological-review-3-2014/3426


One important theoretical development in recent sociological theory has resulted in a dramatic shift in how sociologists think about the “social”: the emergence of what is now referred to as "practice theory.” As we have seen, for Parsons (1937), the social "sui generis" that is, what clearly distinguished sociological analysis from psychological, economic or other types of scientific considerations of human behavior was a concern with values and normative justifications for action. Values were important for Parsons, because he thought they were a special type of goal and motivation for action that could not analytically be reduced to other forms of goal-like objects such as physiological or psychological needs (the realm of psychology) or purely instrumental pursuits for material gain (the putative realm of economics). With the dissolution of the Parsonian consensus, there came a dissatisfaction with the way in which Parsons conceptualized action, a key motivation for the "cultural turn" (Swidler, 1986). Today, an influential group of analysts is pushing the proposal that practices, not values, are one of the primary loci of the social. It can be said without much danger of exaggeration that practices now play as central a role in post-functionalist thinking regarding the conceptualization of action as values and normative patterns did during the functionalist period. Here we examine the origins and conceptual resources offered by the "practice turn" in social theory. We will see that while advantageous, this turn is not free of predictable analytic and conceptual pitfalls.

Tuesday - November 25, 2014

Class: The "new" Sociology of Morality
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


Recommended:


Tuesday - December 2, 2014

Class: Dual Process, Cognition, and Action
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture


Leschziner, V., & Green, A. I. (2013). Thinking about Food and Sex Deliberate Cognition in the Routine Practices of a Field. Sociological Theory, 31(2), 116-144. stx.sagepub.com/content/31/2/116.short


Recommended:


Thursday - December 4, 2014

Class: A Theory of Fields or a Field Theory?
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture


Recommended:
www3.nd.edu/~olizardo/papers/sexual-fields-foreword.pdf

www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0304422X83900128


As we have seen, the metaphor of "structure" emerged and became fully established as the dominant way to conceptualize the external sources of macro-level order in the post-classical period. It is clear that at this point the conceptual and inferential value of this metaphor is pretty close to exhausted. Here we examine a different set of analytic resources useful for the conceptualization of the emergence of predictable organization at the level of collectivities: the notion of field. We will see that field theory can be thought of as a plausible competitor (and in some settings) as a fully effective substitute for theorization of the mechanisms of promoting order and change that we get from structural relationism, while avoiding some of the predictable pitfalls (e.g. its problematic relation to culture and action) of the latter. One particular advantage of eld theory is its obvious elective affinity with the notion of action as practice. Thus, field theory and practice theory emerge as natural allies against alternative conceptualizations of action and order and as the most promising resolution to the structure/action problematic in recent social theory.

Tuesday - December 9, 2014

Class: Taking stock: Explanation in contemporary social science
11:00am - 12:15pm · Lecture


Thursday - December 11, 2014

**Class: Taking Stock: From Theory to Theorizing**
2:06pm - 3:06pm · Lecture
For class discussion:


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Saturday - December 20, 2014

**Assignment: Final Paper Due**
Due: December 20, 2014

- No submissions