

Contemporary Theory

University of Notre Dame · Instructor: Omar Lizardo

Discussion

Description

Course info, except for syllabus, is visible to the public.

Calendar

This course is a romp through the contemporary landscape of contemporary theory in sociology. After devoting some time to the vicissitudes of getting clear on what theory is in the first place, we go through certain cluster of writings that can lay claim to being theory. We evaluate their general applicability as portable frameworks to make sense of sociological phenomena, and attempt to evaluate their promise (if any) and limitations.

People

Library

Syllabus

Syllabus

Syllabus is not visible to the public.

Settings

Course website

You are in it, genius!

Contemporary theory is dead: Long live theory

This course is premised on the following set of claims, all of which I take as axiomatic and none of which I intend to defend in any serious way:

1. There is no such thing as contemporary theory (anymore).
2. There are no great contemporary theorists.
3. Most sociologists are deeply confused as to what the very notion of theory is.
4. Being literate in contemporary theory has never been more important.

Contemporary theory in American Sociology died a quiet death sometime in the summer of 1990. That year, James Coleman published a gigantic tome entitled "Foundations of Social Theory", and Polity Press (in England) and Stanford University Press (in the United States) released Richard Nice's translation of Pierre Bourdieu's rewrite of his first major theoretical volume "Outline of a Theory of Practice" re-titled "The Logic of Practice" (a slimmer but not less daunting tome). While the books themselves did not have much of an immediate (or even long-term) impact on American Sociology (very few people read them and those who read and are able to parse them are a very small group), the "model" of the type of social theorist (one American rational actor theorist and pioneer mathematical sociologist; the other a French anthropologist steeped in the continental philosophical tradition) that the books implicitly promoted did. Both Bourdieu and Coleman (and to a lesser extent the inimitable Arthur Stinchcombe) "imprinted" the role of "contemporary theorist" with an indelible mark which differed in crucial ways from the way that the position had been defined in the immediate post-functionalist period (1960s and 1970s) by, of course, Talcott Parsons and the generation of "theorists" that he either trained directly or inspired (as epigones or life-long detractors) indirectly.

While an earlier generation of American sociologists developed a notion of theory and along with an idea as to who a "theorist" was (e.g. the typical sort of writings that a "theorist" produces, the typical stance of a "theorist" towards empirical materials, and so on), in the wake of the dissolution of the Parsonian consensus (which meant that for many theory was equivalent to fundamental "worldview" modelled after functionalism) and had cut their teeth in the context of strident debates revolving around the so-called crisis of the "multi-paradigmatic" status of sociology, a new generation would grow up under what John Levi Martin has referred to as the "Pax Wisconsinana"; a Midwestern (read: nice, quiet and polite) flavored, quasi-Mertonian resolution of the theory/method wars in which we all agreed on at least two working hypotheses: (1) "grand theory" is a waste of time; (2) good theory has to be good to think with or goes in the trash bin. This is a situation in which "the world's most famous survey researcher" (Pierre Bourdieu, back-handedly complimented by Randall Collins) happened to be a French-man who wrote a dissertation on Heidegger.

At about the same time, both the "Economic Sociology," "Political Sociology," and the "Culture" sections of the American Sociological Association had already surpassed (and continue to surpass) the section on "Theory" in terms of membership (today Section on Culture and Economic Sociology are two of the largest at ASA in terms of academic and graduate student members). In addition, most research-oriented American sociology departments had begun the project of partially deinstitutionalizing the teaching of "theory" at the graduate level by, among other things, entrusting people whose primary line of work did not involve specialization in anything remotely close to "theory" (because they themselves had been trained at top departments with very little formal

Instructors



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Details

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training in theory!) as traditionally defined teach those courses (I'm a partial case in point) while restricting the theory requirement to one semester. On this score see Michele Lamont's "The Theory Section and Theory Satellites" www.csun.edu/~egodard/asatheory/newsletters/Perspectives-2004-Jan.pdf and Omar Lizardo's "What young people should know about theory and theorizing today." <http://www3.nd.edu/~olizardo/papers/theory-remarks.pdf> for an even longer screed on the state of theory and theory field today, see Lizardo's 2014 Coser Memorial Lecture, "The End of Theorists: The Relevance, Opportunities, and Pitfalls of Theorizing in Sociology Today" https://docs.google.com/document/d/1q0w_NKiDGyDVoJRj_mQO5A-pfX4yBgMLEFwuU6wxaPM/pub

The first development resulted in the unremitting exodus of most young theoretically oriented scholars into the study of culture and (economic and political) institutions (a phenomenon that continues unabated to this day) and into the waiting arms of the ever growing culture, political, and economic sociology sections (the now institutionalized "Junior Theorists Symposium" has done a lot to stem the tide, but the trend continues). The second has produced a situation where most American sociologists who receive PhDs in the discipline are woefully unfamiliar with the rich theoretical tradition that postdates the importation of the continental "classics" into Anglophone sociology in the 1930s and 1940s.

Thematic Organization ▲

So, this is the context in which this course is conceived. This is not an intellectual history or "survey of great theorists" course. Instead, the course is structured to tell the story of *American* sociological theory (this story would be different from the perspective of different national intellectual fields). The basic bet is that you can tell a fairly coherent story if you followed the breadcrumbs from Parsons onward. The first half of the course attempts to do this. The basic conceit is that Parsons opens up all of the basic problematics, but in providing his own solutions he either ignores (pragmatism), belittles (phenomenology) or arbitrarily forecloses (habit/practice theory) certain avenues. The story of post-functionalist theory (which is all contemporary theory in the United States) resolves itself either in people trying to fix the Parsonian action theoretic framework piecemeal, or blow it up once and for all by precisely drawing on the conceptual avenues that Parsons decided to ignore. We quickly realize that this purely "theoretical" efforts reaches its own (comical) limitations. We then hit the reset button and scan the field of options of *really existing* theory in American Sociology. We will see that this "really existing theory" landscape displays all of the various subproblems opened up in the action-theoretical tradition, which reappear with a vengeance. We close by examining contemporary attempts to offer "grand" (medium sized) solutions to (some of) these problems, and look forward to a move from theory to both "explanation" and "theorizing."

Because this is not a "brand name" theory course, I had to engage in some dramatic acts of exclusion. So no Foucault, no Habermas and *no Marxism*. The coverage criteria for what I consider theoretical traditions worth dealing with are as follows:

- 1) The theoretical tradition in question must be a living, relevant tradition. We will not cover traditions that at some point were alive but now are all but dead or whose main insights have already been incorporated into more relevant traditions (e.g. ethnomethodology or most forms of Western Marxism), nor theorists that at some point were thought to be pivotal but now are completely irrelevant mainly because they tried to create "grand" theory in the mold of Parsons by for instance creating name-branded "systems" that explain everything and nothing (sorry, Jurgen; I'm looking right at you, Niklas). British people (or Polish people currently residing in Great Britain) who sit around writing long, erudite books commenting on the latest version of "modernity" (whether "liquid" or in another state) or "cosmopolitanism" or whatever is the latest fad is are also out (that deals with most but not all of the Brits).
- 2) The tradition in question must actually be a multi-author tradition, *not the project of one single person* We will not cover "great" contemporary theorists. The reason for that is (see claim #2 in the previous section) that "there are no great contemporary theorists". The usual European figures who are routinely trotted out to play this role (e.g. Habermas or Foucault) are interesting and sometimes deep thinkers, but in most instances (especially in the case of Habermas) their contributions to sociological theory proper are generally minimal in comparison to their derivative re-hashing of the classics; in other instances (as in the case of Foucault) there is no actual contribution to sociology per se in contrast to other areas such as cultural history, cultural studies, historical epistemology, etc. The other contemporary suspect (Bourdieu) might have thought that he was "great" but actually vehemently denied being a theorist, so he doesn't count.
- 3) The theoretical tradition must have some relevance for contemporary empirical research in mainstream American sociology. Note the key terms: "empirical research" and "mainstream." We will not cover obscure or boutique traditions that have no value as field-specific cultural capital outside of fringe groups of aficionados who pretend to be making some sort of apocalyptic last stand against the crippling forces of the mainstream (e.g. most forms of so-called postmodern, deconstructionist or post-structuralist theory). This course is designed to make you conversant with the theoretical thinking of the people that you would meet at your average ASA meeting not those who you would meet at a faux French cafe.
- 4) The theoretical tradition must be "portable" or "transposable" across substantive areas. Most "contemporary theory" (that is not "grand" theory that is) in American sociology is area-specific theory. That is they are specialized "theories of" fill-in-the-blank (e.g. educational transitions, religious vitality, workplace gender stratification, racial segregation, etc.). In this course we will not cover those area-specific theories. Instead we will cover (after the first set of introductory classes), general theoretical approaches that have applicability in multiple substantive areas (e.g. most forms of cultural theory, interactionist theories, pragmatist, network, institutional approaches, practice theory, etc.).

To summarize: relevant, no-big-man [sic], empirically applicable and portable.

Course requirements ▲

1) Participation, participation, participation. I count any form of *public* communication from you to me and towards your classmates as "participation." This includes raising questions (or making comments) in class, and (if you are too shy) using the "Discussion" tab above to just dump your written reactions to readings after going through them. You can engage in any form of discussion that you want (some people are talkers, others are writers) but the point is that by the end of the semester I must have some memory of you saying something (expressing an opinion, asking a question, making a statement, providing the class with your written reactions to readings) multiple times during the semester. If I don't you don't get credit for participation. If you don't get credit for participation then the maximum grade that you can get in the course (regardless of the quality of your course paper) is a B+. If you don't care about grades (and you shouldn't) then I guess you can get away with not participating!

2. Paper, paper, paper. This is the main set of writing assignments for the course. You will write three "short" (minimum 2500 words) papers, dealing with the set of topics that we will cover in each "third" (more or less) of the course. The three general topics will be:

- a) The Theory of Action
- b) Problems of structure/agency/systems/micro and macro
- c) Theory streams

The papers must draw on the class material as well as any outside sources of your choice. They will be graded according to the extent that they demonstrate both a high-level command of the material as well as a capacity to synthesize or generate creative insights. The due dates for the papers, as well as any additional prompts/instructions, will be posted on the course calendar.

Class Meetings ▲

Standard graduate seminar rules apply. I can talk theory until the cows come home, but it would be nice to not just sit here and lecture. So please interject, ask questions, etc. My pet peeve is people walking out to go to the bathroom, so take care of business before class. If you are incontinent, I need to see a doctor's note.

Attendance Policy ▲

Attendance is not required (we are all adults here), but I'll take attendance for the first few class meetings until I learn your names. Note however, that if you just stop coming to class, are disruptive, make lame comments, or give no indication that you are actually doing the reading I will certainly notice and will say really bad things to the DGS (who I happen to live with) about you when the time comes. Your free ride will then end, the bubble will burst, and you will be thrown back, with teeth gnashing, into the real world.

Grading Policy ▲

The first rule of grad school: you do NOT talk about grad school. The second rule of grad school: grades don't freggin' matter. "I'm going to immediately offer this dutiful graduate student our highly coveted Assistant Professor position on the strength of her perfect grad school GPA." Said nobody. Therefore the issue of grades should take not a single metaphorical inch of cognitive space in your head. I mean if you are worried about getting an A in the class, you are doing it wrong.

The way that it will work is that if you do well on all three of the course requirements (you contribute to class, you send in your questions, you write a good paper) then you will get an A. If you take a vow of silence in class you will not get A, regardless of how great your paper is. Obviously you won't get a good grade if you don't write a good paper.

This arrangement is inherently unfair, simply because the material may be intimidating and some of you that already have the appropriate background, requisite linguistic capital and will be more comfortable speaking in class than others. However I am comfortable with this unfairness, for the simple reason that this course (like all courses in grad school) is also meant to be a professionalization tool. Sociologists (however awkwardly) have to be able to speak in public. This is a requirement of the formal structure of the discipline, since you have to present at conferences, and if you want to get a job, you have to give a job-talk. So, if you are shy, I would recommend that you begin to practice talking in front of the mirror and leave the shyness at home (for instance you can repeat to yourself:

I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and gosh darn it: people like me!

For those of you who may have a leg up on things theoretical, I ask that you give your fellow classmates a chance to have their say, even if it is about something that you consider elementary. Sometimes theory is *actually* elementary.

Personal Profile ▲

I'm an Associate Professor** in the sociology department at the University of Notre Dame. I was born in New York City, spent the better part of the first years of my life in a small coastal city called La Romana (i.e. "The Roman" with feminine inflection) on the Southeast corner of Dominican Republic [1], and moved back to New York City on my 17th birthday. I received my B.A. in Psychology from from Brooklyn College [2], but decided that psychology was boring and Sociology was more fun when I took an elective on my senior year. So I decided to take the GRE and apply to grad school in Sociology. Looking back, I can now appreciate that this was an insane decision, but I'm glad that I was foolish enough to make it. I was fortunate enough to earn my PhD in sociology at the University of Arizona [3] under the supervision and mentorship of Ron Breiger [4] and AI

Bergesen [5]. My webpage [6] and vita [7] has more detailed information on what my (current and past) research is on.

My areas of research interest are cultural sociology and cultural theory, network analysis and network science, social psychology and micro-sociology, and culture and cognition studies. (Most) of my published papers are available on my webpage as well some teaching materials (old syllabi, etc.). You can reach me at olizardo@nd.edu.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Romana,_La_Romana

[2] <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu>

[3] <http://sociology.arizona.edu>

[4] <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~breiger/Welcome.html>

[5] <http://sociology.arizona.edu/albert>

[6] <http://www3.nd.edu/~olizardo>

[7] <http://www3.nd.edu/~olizardo/papers/vita.pdf>

** Associate Professor does not mean that I associate with Professors (although that's actually descriptive of my social life). It means that I've been promoted from an Assistant Professor with a terminal six-year contract—really two three year contracts with the first renewal being pro-forma—and now have tenure at Notre Dame. Tenure means that the university has decided to renew my contract until the Provost forces me to retire, or until I die (whichever comes first). Tenure also means that neither Father Jenkins nor Tom Burish can't get rid of me unless I do something really, really bad (and by really bad, I mean Anthony Weiner bad; not Manti Te'o bad).

Topics

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