Contemporary Theory
University of Notre Dame · Instructor: Omar Lizardo

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

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.

Syllabus
Syllabus is not visible to the public.

Contemporary theory is dead: Long live theory
Course website
You are in it, genius!

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 Untied 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 Wisconsana”; 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 he 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
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.

Grading 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 note it and I'll 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.

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 dam 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 Al...
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.


** 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).

** Œuvres

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Topics