

COGNITIVE SOCIOLOGY
Spring Semester 2012
Class Number: **SOC 63917**

Prof. Omar Lizardo

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Time: **12:30-1:45p**

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1 The sociological study of cognition: A depressing tale

The classical theorists were nearly unanimous in proposing that thinking was shaped by society. Some of them—such as Marx and Durkheim—proposed explicit mechanisms through which this shaping was accomplished, while others—such as Weber—operated with a largely implicit model of the actor which nonetheless privileged the cognitive component (under the banner of “ideas”) over other factors in the determination of action. In spite of the central role that cognition and cognitive models of the actor played in the classical tradition, post-classical sociology did not follow through with this concern. It is not that post-classical sociologists abandoned any concern with cognition. Instead, slowly but surely post-classical theorists—under the constraints of knowledge production in the context of now institutionalized “disciplines”—went on to develop explicitly anti-psychological models of the actor, under the mistaken impressions that *sociological=non-psychological*.

As a result, questions that were central in the classical tradition, such as the relationship between thought and activity or the nature of representation were displaced in favor of a bland concern with “interpretation” and “meaning” couched using (explicitly non-scientific) language borrowed from Philosophy and the Humanities. Under this conceptualization, processes that should have been explicitly discussed in terms of human cognitive *capacities* (e.g. conceptualization) were instead framed as depending on ontologically problematic entities such as “cultures” and “collectivities.” As such, the

contemporary situation is one characterized by both ontological incoherence at the level of explanation coupled to the replacement of interest in the more substantive classical question of the relationship between social context and *cognitive process* by the (bland, routinized, repetitive and trivial) description of the diversity of cultural contents across groups. Even the recent revival of so-called “cognitive sociology” (with a few notable exceptions) operates within the misguided parameters in which a (psychological) “cognitive universalism” or “cognitive individualism” is contrasted with a (pseudo-sociological) recognition of “cognitive diversity.”

This course is meant as an exercise on blowing this whole thing up and starting over again. The basic premise here is that a sociological concern with cognition can be healthy and productive but that that marriage cannot occur under the (largely parochial) contemporary parameters under which (American) sociology defines itself as a discipline. To that end, we review and revisit the classical legacy of thinking of the society-cognition linkage and attempt to salvage what was valuable here (which is a relative lot). We then move on to critically inspect (and thumb our noses at) the (largely misguided) post-classical concern with questions of cognition; this review is our version of exorcism; once we expel the ghosts that continue to haunt us, we will see that there is relatively little that is of value here. We then go on to examine a more promising development: the recent “return” and “revival” of concerns with cognition that has occurred in the United States (under the banner of the recent rise of Cultural Sociology) and in France (under the practice-theoretical turn initiated by Merleau-Ponty and continued by Pierre Bourdieu). Finally, we explode the boundary of disciplinary sociology (with its speculative superstructure of fictions as to how cognition *might* work) to learn about how cognition *really* works in human agents. We will see that the new discoveries of cognitive science provide surprising support to certain strands of the classical legacy and some recent revivals thereof, while consigning a good chunk of post-classical developments—still largely hegemonic within the discipline—to a deserved place in the dustbin of really bad ideas that somehow manage to seduce entire disciplinary collectives (e.g. like the notion that psychological traits have “dimensions” that can be “measured” in the same way that we measure length).

So the tale that we will tell is indeed depressing, but the good thing it is an *ongoing* story so that you can help to write a happy ending.

2 Course Requirements

2.1 Attendance and active participation in class discussions

An important part of class discussions involves raising questions about the readings. Don’t be shy to ask a question or say “I didn’t understand what Bourdieu meant by...” most of your classmates are probably as clueless as you are.

2.2 Reading reactions

Each student will be required to submit a short reaction (e.g. 500 words) to one of the readings that will be doing in class for each class meeting. The reaction can be submitted via the “blog post” tool on Coursekit before class meets for that session (no later than 10:00am on the day of class; this deadline will be inflexible since it will be set by the electronic submission system on Coursekit). The reaction can be a critique of the reading, a series of questions, or even a larger reflection on some imponderable issue in life (but avoid rants please). The reaction should be a genuine query to clarify something or an attempt to raise a conceptual issue related to one of the readings.

2.3 Paper assignment

This is the main assignment for the course. You will be asked to write a 6,000-14,000 words paper. There are no constraints on the topic or kind of paper (proposal, theory paper, empirical paper, methodology paper) other than the fact that its *central* empirical or conceptual focus or its key theoretical motivation should be some issue at the intersection of the study of culture, cognition and action (I think this should give you plenty of leeway).

You will write the paper in “stages” first writing a short (500–1000 words) **proposal** for an idea, then a **short draft** of the main argument (ideally an introduction plus an outline, no longer than 3000 Words), and finally a **preliminary draft of the final paper**. Check the reading schedule for the due dates of each of these three assignments. Remember: this paper is not meant to be a final or polished product. It will ultimately be a draft (even the “final” version that you submit for the course) one that you will hopefully be able to continue to work on in the future and possibly either present at a conference or submit to a journal.

2.4 Grading policy

The first rule of grad school: **you do NOT talk about grad school** (with your parents and friends back home). The second rule of grad school: **grades don’t bloody matter**. Nobody ever looks at, or cares about your grades in grad school classes. Therefore the issue of grades should take not a single metaphorical inch of cognitive space in your head. The way that it will work is that if you do well on all three of the course requirements (you contribute to class, you write in your reading reactions, 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!”*).