

SOCIOLOGY 9002
Sociological Perspectives:
Social Theory for Social Science

Fall 2022

DRAFT! I REPEAT, DRAFT!!

Class times and location:

Monday 9:30am -12:30pm
SSC 5235

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The point of science is to be as simple as possible, but no simpler. -- Einstein

What's a "Sociological Perspective"? I don't know, but I suspect it's not a thing. The title is a placeholder. What we'll do instead is talk each week about social theory. What's social theory? Let's start with the word theory. This can be made overly complicated, but for me it's simple: theory is explanation. And explanation is always causal explanation; that means that if we want to explain something we want to spell out *causal relationships* and *causal mechanisms*.

Causal relationship: A factor such that change in it is associated with change in the outcome. So, X causes Y if by modifying X, one can affect Y. An explanation includes an assertion of such a causal relation. Example: Unconditional income is negatively associated with domestic violence.

Causal mechanisms: The link between the cause and the outcome. In other words, the process through which the cause leads to the outcome. Examples: Unconditional income allows people to exit unhappy marriages reducing exposure to violence; or it reduces financial stressors which lowers the risk of violence; or an exit option changes bargaining power between couples and that lowers the risk of violence.

Theory is often seen as complicated, but the point of theory is exactly the opposite. The point is to boil down, to help us sort through the big mess of real-world observations and reduce it to a handful of causal relationships linked by causal mechanisms that can explain some phenomenon of interest. Theory should tell you what parts of reality to ignore if you want to tell a generalizable causal story. Does the hair color of union members shed light on collective action struggles? If not, ignore it. The enemy of good theory is the phrase, “but isn’t it all more complicated than that?”

Social theory, then, at bottom, is an attempt to provide causal explanation for diverse types of social phenomena and social change at a range of scales, large and small. While there are differences between natural and social sciences, I don’t think there is some radical chasm separating the study of nature from the study of society. But there are some aspects that are unique to social inquiry, especially in terms of the subject matter, but also broadly speaking, the methodological approach to doing good social science. We don’t need to worry about the role of intentions when we explain questions in physics or chemistry, but they will often play a role when we want to explain anything in social life from exploitation and oppression to revolution and collective action.

We will study some of the crucial methodological and substantive issues bound up with social inquiry including concept formation, structure and agency, methodological individualism, intentional and functional explanation, rational choice explanation, evolutionary explanation, but also (time permitting) norms, emotions, culture, social change, and the causal primacy of “material” or other factors in explaining social life.

What we will not really do is humanities-style “Theory.” And we also won’t read much from the sociological canon. Arthur Stinchcombe once asked whether [sociologists should forget their mothers and fathers](#), and I mostly think they should. Or perhaps we don’t need to forget them but we could learn from the evolutionary biologists, where training doesn’t require reading Darwin. It’s often true in other fields: the economists don’t read Smith and the physicists don’t read Newton. If they do, it is in the context of the history of ideas. To put this point more softly, I think we ought to better distinguish between sociological theory and the history of sociology. Robert Merton expressed this view nicely more than 70 years ago and the situation hasn’t really changed:

Schools of medicine do not confuse the history of medicine with current theory, nor do departments of biology identify the history of biology with the viable theory now employed in guiding and interpreting research. Once said, this seems so obvious as to be embarrassing. Yet the extraordinary fact is that in sociology, this distinction between the history of theory and current viable theory has not caught hold. (Merton, 1948).

So, what we end up doing in this class is focusing on the theory rather than the theorists. One of the standard moves in sociological theory courses is to say “it’s crazy we’re not reading x”, where x is anything.¹ We’re here mostly sidestepping that complaint by ignoring *everything* in the canon. Instead, we’re going to look at the big questions we ought to keep in mind when you’re explaining social behavior, and the tools you’ll need to do so.

¹ For some other standard moves to avoid or employ, see the syllabus for Social Theory Through Complaining: <https://kieranhealy.org/files/teaching/theory-by-complaining.pdf>

My pro-forma note on reading difficult texts

Though a lot of our readings attempt to convey ideas as clearly as possible, sometimes, inevitably, the readings will be difficult. Hopefully that is because the ideas themselves are difficult, not because the writing is opaque. But for whatever reason, the readings will sometimes be challenging. I have two general pieces of advice on reading difficult theory, one pragmatic, and the other methodological.

- (1) It is often the case that students spend a considerable amount of time reading, even taking detailed notes, yet they find it very difficult to absorb the central ideas in a text. In these cases re-reading is not always terribly efficient. My suggestion is as follows: Instead of delving into the reading immediately, familiarize yourself with the text first. Skim the conclusions and introduction, scan through the titles of the subsections, and try to get a sense of the subject matter. Once you start reading, if you already have a sense of what the piece is about, how it is organized, and what the main concepts are, you'll be able to identify whether or not particular passages are relevant or secondary. If you spend 15 minutes on this kind of exercise before reading you might have a relatively clear sense of what the piece is about and where the author is going. This way, you may find the reading less challenging and more productive.
- (2) Read generously. The easiest kind of criticism to make is a criticism of underlying assumptions. All theoretical work makes simplifying or seemingly unwarranted assumptions about the world. In my view this is a virtue rather than a defect in theory; assumptions and simplifications are often very useful in drawing out dynamics that are difficult to discover when we try to simultaneously incorporate multiple layers of social reality. This does not mean, however, that assumptions should never be criticized. But to be generous to a work of theory, and to get as much out of it as possible, I suggest the following three steps to reading:
 - i. *Think inside the box*: When first going through the ideas try to be as charitable as possible to the author. Instead of trying to find holes, try to see how the thinking fits together. Getting stuck on criticism too early can be a barrier to understanding the general approach and contribution of the piece.
 - ii. *Make internal criticisms*: Once you have an understanding of the approach and contribution, then you can focus on criticisms. But, not all criticisms are equal. Try to form your critique of the argumentation *given* the assumptions. That is, the author proposes a way of thinking about a particular problem—*given* that mode of understanding the problem, do the conclusions follow? (This, incidentally, is how to criticize science fiction. Don't criticize just *The Handmaid's Tale* for implausible assumptions about a fertility collapse; taking the collapse for granted, are the actions of the characters plausible?)
 - iii. *Make external criticisms*: The last step comes naturally: criticize the assumptions. Only after the first two steps should you pillory your author for faulty underlying assumptions, an indefensible mode of analysis, the unmotivated categories employed, or an incoherent conceptual apparatus. But even here, be cautious. Assumptions are rarely claims about how the world actually works; instead they often operate as useful heuristics that bring problems to light which are otherwise obscure.

Structure of the course: Each class will be divided into the first hour where I will lecture for about 20-30 minutes on the topic, and the remainder of the hour will be devoted to “stupid questions” where we will cover the basic ideas again, and people will ask stupid questions like, “Can you repeat that” and “What’s the definition of…” and “Wait, how does that argument work?”

Over the second hour we’ll go through student memos on the weekly reading. You will have a chance to elaborate on your memo comments in class. Wait, what are memos?

Each week everyone will prepare short written memos, 150-300 words long, engaging some theme or problem in the reading. These should not be summaries or exegeses of the texts, nor mini-essays with extended commentaries on the readings. The point is to pose *focused questions that will serve as the basis for the seminar discussion*. As you do the readings each week, think about an issue that you really want discussed and clarified, and then formulate your comments to set up that discussion. While you’ll describe what you see as the issues in play in the question, you do not need to stake out a position (although you can if you want). The key is to pose a clear question that you want to discuss. It is entirely appropriate for questions to focus on ideas, arguments, or passages, which you do not understand. You should come to class prepared to talk about (but not to read) your memo.

Memos must be posted in our Google doc by Saturday at 3pm. Of course, you can post before that, but I will need time to read them all before class. Late memos will receive no marks. Here’s the memo folder: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/>

Reading: Readings (apart from the supplementary/background ones) mentioned in the syllabus are mandatory, and they should be completed *before* class. The supplementary/background reading material is meant as introduction or guide to further research in specific areas and may be useful in writing your papers.

Grading: Your final grade for this course, on a scale from A to F, will be based on:

- i) Attendance and participation in class (25%)
- ii) Weekly memos (25%)
- iii) Final paper (50%) due **Dec 16**

Final paper: Students are required to write one paper for the course, meant to analyze some of the issues raised in the core readings and discussions. These papers should be around 5,000 words long. Longer papers are not better papers.

For each paper, the assignment is to take one or more of the readings in the syllabus for a section of the course, and write an essay engaging the central ideas of the reading. The precise form of this essay is up to you. It can be written as if it were designed to be a published “commentary” in a journal, or an extended book review (i.e., a review essay) or a substantive essay dealing with the issues in the reading. It can also look at how some idea in the course might generate a preliminary empirical analysis.

The paper can bring in material from outside the readings for the course, but it’s also not necessary. It’s important, however, that the essay not be a summary/exegesis of the readings. It

should be “critical,” meaning that you should engage the arguments under review, evaluating them empirically or theoretically. In general, in a paper of this sort no more than a quarter should be directly summarizing the reading itself.

The papers are due on **December 16**. If you wish I’m happy to meet in advance to go over plans and ideas for organizing the paper.

Academic Honesty: If you are unclear how to cite properly, please consult me or a tutor at the writing center. Plagiarism carries severe consequences including, but not limited to, failure from the course.

Recommended texts that we’ll read a lot from:

Cartwright, Nancy, and Eleonora Montuschi, eds. *Philosophy of social science: A new introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Elster, Jon. *Explaining social behavior: More nuts and bolts for the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

*Note: The reading list is still in flux, a number of these will change or be cut.

1. Sept 12 – Organizational session

Background:

- Blaug, M. 1992. *The Methodology of Economics*. “What you always wanted to know about the philosophy of science but were afraid to ask,” pp. 3-47.
- Eleonora Montuschi, Scientific Objectivity, p. 123, in N. Cartwright, *Philosophy of Social Science*

2. Sept 19 – Philosophy of social science I: Relativism and explanation

Required:

- Fay, B. *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, Ch. 1, 4, 5, 6. pp. 9-27 & 72-135.
- Sokal, A and Bricmont, J. *Fashionable Non-sense*, “Epistemic relativism in the philosophy of science,” 50-104

Background:

- Heather D., “Values in Social Science” p. 162, in Cartwright - *Philosophy of Social Science*
- Reiss, J and J. Sprenger. “Scientific Objectivity”. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2017). Ed. by Edward N. Zalta
- Enoch, D. (2014). Why I am an objectivist about ethics (and why you are, too). *The ethical life*, 192-205.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. "Uses of value judgments in science: A general argument, with lessons from a case study of feminist research on divorce." *Hypatia* 19.1 (2004): 1-24.
- Chibber Postcolonial theory, “Culture, interests and agency”, pp. 152-177

- Little, D. “Relativism”, in *Varieties of Social Explanation*, p. 202-221.

3. Sept 26 – Philosophy of social science II: Explanation and causality

*Note: Students will think of something they are interested in explaining (e.g. domestic violence falls when couples have more income, one country has more suicide than another, one has more youth unemployment than another) and provide a possible explanation, without worrying whether it is right or wrong

Required:

- Elster, J. Ch. 1-3, pp. 1-54.
- Okasha, S. “Explanation in Science” and “Realism and anti-realism,” in *Philosophy of Science*, p. 40-76.
- Cartwright, N. Ch. 16. Causal Inference 308-25, in Cartwright - *Philosophy of Social Science*
- Pearl, Judea, and Dana Mackenzie. “The Search for a Mechanism” in *The Book of Why*. Basic books, 2018.

4. Oct 3 – Concepts [??]

Required:

- Wright, EO. 1997. “Biography of Concept” in *Classes*, p. 19-57.
- Cartwright, Nancy, and Rosa Runhardt. "Measurement." *Philosophy of Social Science: A New Introduction* (2014): 265-286.
- Udehn, L, and P. Hedström, “Analytical sociology and theories of the middle range”, *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2011. 25-42

OR

Causal primacy [??]

Required:

- Wright, EO. Levine, A. and E. Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, ch. 7, “Causal Asymmetries.”
- Little, D. “Materialism” in *Varieties of Social Explanation*, pp. 114-34.
- Morris, I. *Hunters, Foragers, and Fossil Fuels*. 2015. “Each age gets the thought it needs,” pp. 1-24.
- Chibber, V. “Class Structure”, *The Class Matrix*. Pp. 22-45.

5. Oct 10 – WESTERN CLOSED

6. Oct 17 – Methodological individualism I

Required:

- Elster, J. “Explanation and Dialectics”, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 3-27.
- Wright, EO. Levine, A. and E. Sober, “Marxism and Methodological Individualism,” chapter 6 in *Reconstructing Marxism*

- Hedström, P. and P. Bearman, 'What is Analytical Sociology All About? An Introductory Essay', P. Bearman and P. Hedström (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2011.
- Zahle, Julie. "Holism, emergence, and the crucial distinction." *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*. Springer, Cham, 2014. 177-196.

Background:

- Elster, J. (1985), "Class consciousness", in *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 344-371.
- Elster, J. "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory: The Case for Methodological Individualism", *Theory and Society*, 11." (1982).
- Cohen, GA. "Reply to Elster on Marxism, functionalism and game theory." *Theory and Society* 11, 4 (1982): 483-495.
- Wright, E.O. "A General Framework for Studying Class Consciousness and Class Formation", ch. 10 in *Class Counts*

7. Oct 24 – Methodological individualism II

Required:

- Deborah Tollefsen. Ch 5. Social Ontology 85-101, in Cartwright - *Philosophy of Social Science*
- Helen Longino. Ch. 6. Individuals or Populations? 102-120, in Cartwright - *Philosophy of Social Science*
- Elster - Ch . 4-5, pp. 55-98.
- Heath, Joseph, "Methodological Individualism", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/methodological-individualism/>

Background:

- Udehn, L. 2002. "The Changing Face of Methodological Individualism," *Annual Review of Sociology*. 479–507.
- Heckman, J.J., 2005. The scientific model of causality. *Sociological methodology*, 35(1), pp.1-9.
- Jackson, Michelle. "Order from chaos: sociology as a population science." *Handbook of Sociological Science*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022. 21-37.

8. Oct 31 – Reading week

9. Nov 7 – How to make a structural argument

Required:

- Calnitsky, D., 2018. Structural and individualistic theories of poverty. *Sociology Compass*, 12(12). 1-14.
- Erik Olin Wright. 1997. "Class Analysis" in *Class Counts*, p. 1-14.

- Elster, J. Ch. 10 – “Constraints: opportunities and abilities,” pp. 189-203. & Ch. 12 – “Persons and situations,” pp 223-234.
- Chibber, V. “Agency, Contingency, and all That”, *The Class Matrix*. Pp. 117-153.

Background:

- Garfinkel, A. 1981. *Forms of Explanation: Rethinking the Questions in Social Theory*. New Haven: Yale UP. Ch. 2, “Reductionism,” pp. 49–74.

10. Nov 14 – How to make a functionalist argument

Required:

- Calnitsky, D. and Martinez, M. (2022). A class functionalist theory of race. *Du Bois Review*, forthcoming.
- Bright, Liam Kofi; Nathan Gabriel; Cailin O'Connor; Olufemi Taiwo. 2022. “On the Stability of Racial Capitalism”. Pp. 1-28. osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/syk4m/
- Elster, J. “Explanation and Dialectics”, 28-48. *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- Elster, J. Ch. 11 – “Reinforcement and selection,” pp. 205-221.

11. Nov 21 – How to make a rational choice argument

Required:

- Elster - Ch. 13-15 & 18
- Steele, Katie. "Choice models." *Philosophy of social science* (2014): 185-207.
- Oliver, Pamela E. "Rational action." *The Oxford handbook of social movements* (2015): 246-263.

Background:

- Green, D., & Shapiro, I. (1996). *Pathologies of rational choice theory: A critique of applications in political science*. Yale University Press.
- Baldassarri, Delia. “Collective action.” *The Oxford handbook of analytical sociology*. Oxford University Press, 2017. 391-418.
- Calnitsky, D. 2022. “The Revolution Betrayed.” Unpublished.
- Elster. J. 1984. “Class struggle” pp. 371-397. *Making Sense of Marx*

12. Nov 28 – How to make an evolutionary argument

Required:

- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (2011). *A Cooperative Species*. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691158167. Pp. 1-17 (17 pages)
- J. Freese. 2002. “Evolutionary Psychology: ‘New Science’ or the Same Old Storytelling?” *Contexts* 1(3) 44-49.
- Wilson, D. S., & Wilson, E. O. (2007). Rethinking the theoretical foundation of sociobiology. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 82(4), 327-348.

Background:

- J. Freese, Jui-Chung Allen Li, and Lisa D. Wade, ‘The Potential Relevance of Biology to Social Inquiry’, ARS, 2003.
- Conley, D., Lancaster, R.N., Nelson, A., Springer, K. and Bryant, K., What’s Biology Got to do With It? *Contexts*. 2014;13(4):14-23.
- Hopcroft, Rosemary L., et al. "Evolution, biology, and society." *Handbook of Sociological Science*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022. 232-249.
- Tooby, John, and Leda Cosmides. "Conceptual foundations of evolutionary psychology." *The handbook of evolutionary psychology* (2015): 5-67.

13. Dec 5 – Norms and culture – OR, one of the supplementary topics

Required:

- Bicchieri, C. (2014). Norms, conventions, and the power of expectations. *Philosophy of social science: A new introduction*, 208-229.
- Elster, Ch 20 – “Trust” pp 335-346 & “Social norms”, pp 347-364.
- Horne, Christine, and Stefanie Mollborn. "Norms: An integrated framework." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (2020): 467-487.

SUPPLEMENTARY TOPICS

Emotion and action

Required:

- Flam, Helena. "Micromobilization and emotions." *The Oxford handbook of social movements* (2015): 264-276.
- Wood, Elisabeth Jean. "Social mobilization and violence in civil war and their social legacies." *The Oxford handbook of social movements* (2015): 452-466.
- Elster, Ch. 8 + 9
- Feldman Barrett, Lisa. 2017. *How Emotions are Made*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, ch. 1 & 3.

Social change I

Required:

- Trejo, Guillermo. "Why and When Do Peasants Rebel?." *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty*. 2016.
- Elster, J. 1984. “Capitalism, communism and revolution” pp. 513-531. *Making Sense of Marx*
- Calnitsky, D. (2022). The Policy Road to Socialism. *Critical Sociology*, 48(3), 397-422.

Social change II

- Wright, Erik Olin. (2019). “Ch. 6 Agents of Transformation,” *How to be an anticapitalist in the twenty-first century*. Verso Books.

- Wright, Erik Olin. (2011). “Chapter 8. Elements of a Theory of Transformation” *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Verso.
- Sally Haslanger (2022). *How to Change a Social Structure*: ucl.ac.uk/laws/sites/laws/files/haslanger_how_to_change_a_social_structure_ucl.pdf
- Roemer, J. *Free to lose*, Harvard University Press, 2009. ch. 3 & 8

What is culture?

Required:

- Risjord, M. (2012). Models of culture. In *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of social science* (pp. 387-408). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, M. (1989). “Pig haters and cow lovers”, “Origins of Male Supremacy,” & “Mother Cow,” in *Cows, pigs, wars & witches: The riddles of culture*. Vintage.
- Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural Evolution*. Selections.
- Laitin, David, and Barry Weingast. 2006. “An Equilibrium Alternative to the Study of Culture.” *Good Society* 15(1):15–20.
- Sperber, D. “How to be a true materialist in Anthropology,” in *Explaining Culture*. Pp. 9-30.

Individuals and Inevitability

Required:

- G.A. Cohen, “Forces and Relations of Production” in Roemer, John, ed. *Analytical Marxism*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Theda Skocpol, “France, Russia and China: A structural analysis of social revolutions”, *CSSH*, 18:2, 1976, pp. 175-210
- Morris, I. Ch. 5. How the West Rules.
- E. Mandel, ‘The Role of the Individual in History: The Case of World War Two’, *New Left Review*, 157 (1986).
- Hook, S. 1943. “The Russian Revolution: A Test Case” in *The Hero in History. A Study in Limitation and Possibility*

Interaction

Required:

- Wright, E. O. “Conceptualizing the interaction of class and gender”, ch.6 in *Class Counts*
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Harvard University Press. pp. 1-10 (10 pages). Sexuality, p. 126-154
- Leslie McCall. The Complexity of Intersectionality. *Signs*
- Martinez, M and Calnitsky, D. *Five interconnections of race and class*. Unpublished.
- O'Connor, Cailin. *The origins of unfairness: Social categories and cultural evolution*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2019.

The future of social science

Required:

- Elster, “Conclusion: Is social science possible?”, pp. 452-491.
- Gintis, H. (2016).” The Future of the Behavioral Sciences”. In *Individuality and Entanglement*. Princeton University Press, pp. 267-278.
- Little, D. “Toward Methodological Pluralism”, in *Varieties of Social Explanation*, p. 222-238.
- Wright, E. O. (2007). “The tasks of emancipatory social science,” in *Envisioning Real Utopias*, pp. 11-29.
- Wright, E. O. 1989. “Reflections on *Classes*; section 3. Role of the Scientist”, in Wright, E. O., et. al. *The Debate on Classes*. London: Verso, 1989, pp. 76-77.