



The University of Western Ontario  
**SOCIOLOGY 3404F**  
Modern Sociological Theory  
Fall 2021

**Class times and mode:**

Section 001: Monday 1:30-3:30pm, Virtual synchronous on Zoom

Section 002: Tuesday 1:30-3:30pm, Virtual synchronous on Zoom

**Instructor:** David Calnitsky

Office Hours by appointment

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Email: [dcalnits@uwo.ca](mailto:dcalnits@uwo.ca)

**TA:** Spencer Kett

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TA office hours by appointment

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“There’s nothing so practical as a good theory.” — Kurt Lewin

**Technical Requirements:**



Stable internet connection



Laptop or computer



Working microphone



Working webcam

**More on Zoom mode:**

Attendance at synchronous Zoom sessions is required, and *webcams must be on*, because participation is a big part of the class.

**Zoom invite:**

**TBD**

## **Introductory hype**

Turn on your sound and hit play on these:

<https://starwarsintrocreator.kassellabs.io/?ref=redirect#!/BLTTDRqAx6FZVtKYcc0>

<https://strangerthingsintrocreator.kassellabs.io/#!/AMHI8AWYOw5leemp58pZ>

## **Course Description**

The purpose of this course is to introduce and examine some of the foundational ideas in sociological theory. Typically, courses in sociological theory focus primarily or exclusively on the writings of a small handful of thinkers who have come to form the sociological canon. In part this course does not deviate from tradition—we will still be reading some selections from famous modern theorists. It is worth noting, however, that a lot of “sociological theory” courses should really be called “sociological theorist” courses. They are about the ideas of particular thinkers and are organized accordingly around bodies of theoretical work rather than around the ideas as such, their logics and interconnections. Though we will end up reading a good amount of what’s sometimes called primary literature, we focus more closely on the specific problems, questions, and theories they’ve inspired. In addition to becoming acquainted with the work of specific thinkers, we will see how persistent theoretical issues in sociology have been explained and reformulated. This means that readings are selected on the basis of clarity of exposition rather than place in the canon. My hope is that this approach will balance the investigation into the bodies of thought of particular thinkers with the examination of particular ideas and aspects of social theory.

This course takes the Lewin quote above pretty seriously and aims to survey a wide range of *substantive* theories in sociology (and adjacent social sciences) that I believe to be interesting and challenging—we look at theories of capitalism, theories of inequality, theories of the state, theories of history, theories of collective action, theories of morality & social norms, and theories of belief & ideology. We also introduce what might be called *theoretical perspectives* in sociology; these offer different ways of looking at the social world and go about social inquiry from unique perspectives. Here we will survey rational choice theory, functionalist theories, and feminist social theory.

### ***A note on reading difficult social theory***

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 social 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 criticisms 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.

**Antirequisites:** Sociology 4404F/G

**Prerequisites:**

Sociology 2240E or both Sociology 2270A/B and 2271A/B. Enrolment in third or fourth year in a Sociology Department module on Main Campus.

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. The decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

**Required Text:**

This class uses one *edited volume*, one *course pack*, and *three pamphlets*, all available at the bookstore. The edited volume:

Michael Hechter and Christine Horne. *Theories of Social Order: A Reader* (Second Edition). Stanford University Press, 2009.

The pamphlets:

Vivek Chibber, The ABCs of Capitalism (“Understanding Capitalism”, “Capitalism and the State”, and “Capitalism and Class Struggle”).

These are available as a free ebook here: <https://jacobinmag.us14.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=b7db5951d33a061da219ae2c8&id=05656e7027>

And print copies are available for purchase here: <https://jacobinmag.com/store/product/56>

And you will be able to find the volume—called TSO below—online, just ensure you pick up the second edition, not the first. The remaining readings will be in the course pack and I will also put them up on OWL.

**Evaluation Breakdown:**

Class participation	20%
Weekly reading memos	20%
Midterm exam	20%
Compare & contrast 5-page essay (due <b>last day of classes</b> )	20%
Final exam (During final exam period, TBD)	20%

## ***Methods of Evaluation***

### *Reading*

All readings listed in the syllabus are mandatory, and they should be completed before class. Completing the readings will take time, which is sad, but they are essential to success in this class. ALSO: Have the readings with you during class time—we will be going through them.

### *Weekly memos*

Every week you will submit a short, paragraph long memo on the readings that week. The weekly memo—three sentences or so, and yes that means full sentences—is basically there to convince me you've done the reading. You don't have to cover each specific reading (although you can, and you can comment on differences between them), but you have to write something thoughtful about what you've just read. This can be a reflection directly on readings, an objection to a claim that is made, or something stated by the author that you agree with.

These will be graded, each week, on a very rough three point scale: 3 points means you clearly did the reading and engaged with it directly and thoughtfully in your comment, and 1 point means you wrote something down that's highly general, not specific to reading, and didn't really persuade me that you've engaged with the material. 2 points is somewhere in between.

To get marks for the memo it must be submitted in dropbox on OWL *BEFORE* class starts each week. Also note that this will help with your participation grade because I will be asking about the readings each class and you will get a chance to express some reflections verbally.

### *Attendance*

Class attendance is required for success in this course. To receive a passing grade in the course, you must attend at least 80% of the class meetings. This will only be waived in exceptional circumstances, with documentation.

Attendance is not an explicit part of the grading breakdown, but if low, will lower your final grade. If you are unable to attend a class session for medical or personal reasons, you must inform me as soon as possible. See below for UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness.

### *Participation*

Your participation grade is separate from attendance. It is always murky to assess, but you will be given a rough grade on the basis of your contributions to class discussions and level of engagement with the materials. It will be a rough five-point scale: 5 means you participated actively, consistently asking and answering questions, and reflecting directly on the readings; 3 means you opened your mouth and talked off the top of your head but didn't really convince me that you've done any serious engagement with the readings; and 1, no points, means you showed up to snooze.

### *Compare & contrast essay*

Students will write a five-page (double-spaced, 12-pt font, 1-inch margins) compare and contrast essay to be submitted in class on the last day of classes. Pick any two readings from the class and reflect on the similarities and differences in the approach to understanding some problem. It will be easiest to select two readings from the same week that approach some issue from different perspectives.

Other essay details: You don't need to cite articles other than the ones you are comparing; reference style doesn't matter, just pick one (APA, Chicago, etc) and be consistent. Mainly I'm interested in how precise your description is and how compelling your comparison is. And above all else I'm interested in the strength of your argumentation and evaluation. If you think author A is more compelling than author B, or if you think they're in fact complementary, you need to persuade me why that's the case.

### *Mid-term exam (Oct 25/26) and final exam (During final exam period, TBD)*

There will be one mid-term and one final exam at the end of the semester held during exam time. They will be open book. The exams will assess whether you have paid attention in class, and thought about the material seriously. The content will cover lecture material. Exams will not be cumulative. They will consist of longer form essay questions.

I will give you access to the exam at a pre-set time – tentatively, at 1:30pm on Oct 25 – and they will have to be completed and uploaded to OWL dropbox 26 hours later.

More information will be provided as we go along.

### **Course Schedule and Readings:**

Sept 13/14 – Introduction

Sept 20/21 – The rise of social theory; the elements of theory [25 pages]

- Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*, Chapter 1, ISBN: 9780521447805, pp. 1-12; [12 pages]
- Hechter & Horne in TSO, “The problem of social order” pp. 1-5 and “What is theory”, pp. 7-10; Hedstrom in TSO, “Dissecting the social”, pp. 12-15. [13 pages]

Sept 27/28 – Theories of capitalism [70 pages]

- V. Chibber, “Understanding Capitalism”, *Catalyst – The ABCs of Capitalism*, 2-38 (37 pages)
- Ernest Mandel, "Ch. 1 - The Theory of Value and Surplus Value" pp. 1-6 (6 pages) and "Ch. 2 - Capital and Competition", p.1-4 (4 pages) in *An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory*, Pathfinder, ISBN: 0873483154, 1973.
- “Cosmos and Taxis”, Friedrich Hayek in TSO, 140-153 [14 pages]
- “Division of Labor”, Adam Smith in TSO, 166-174 [9 pages]

Oct 4/5 – Theories of inequality [46 pages]

- Wright, E. O. (1997). *Class Counts*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 0521553873; “Ch. 1 - Class Analysis”, pp. 1-15 (15 pages)
- Wright, E. O. (1994). Interrogating inequality, Verso; ISBN: 0860914089; “Ch. 1 – Inequality”, *Interrogating Inequality*, pp. 21-31 (11 pages)
- Parkin, F. “Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique”, in Grusky, D. B. (1994). *Social stratification*. Boulder: Westview. 4<sup>th</sup> ed, ISBN: 9780813346717 pp. 193-201 (9 pages)
- Elster, J. (2007). *Explaining social behavior: More nuts and bolts for the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press, ISBN: 9781107071186; “Persons and Situations”, *Explaining Social Behavior*, 178-189 (11 pages)

Oct 11/12 – **THANKSGIVING, NO CLASS**

Oct 18/19 – Theories of the state [58 pages]

- V. Chibber, “Capitalism and the State”, *Catalyst – The ABCs of Capitalism*, 2-38 (37 pages)
- J. Cohen & J. Rogers. (1983). *On Democracy*, Penguin; “Structure”, ISBN: 0140067817; pp. 47-67 (21 pages)

Oct 25/26 – **Mid-term exam**

Nov 1/2 – **Reading week**

Nov 8/9 – Functional explanation, explained [22 pages]

- Kanazawa in TSO, pp. 35-40 (6 pages)
- R. Merton – Manifest and Latent Functions; in Lemert, C. (Ed.). (2016). *Social theory: The multicultural, global, and classic readings*. Westview Press. ISBN: 9780813350028; pp. 242-245 (4 pages)
- Bell, D. (1979) “Talcott Parsons: Nobody's Theories Were Bigger”, May 13. *New York Times*. (2 pages)
- Gould, S. J. (1997). Evolution the Pleasures of Pluralism, *The New York Review of Books*, June 26, p. 1-6. (6 pages)
- Harris, M. (1974, 2007). “India’s Sacred Cow.” in Macionis, J & Benokraitis, N. (eds.). *Seeing Ourselves*; ISBN: 9780132819008; pp. 51-54 (4 pages).

Nov 15/16 – Rational choice theory & game theory [43 pages]

- Becker, G. S. (2008). *The economic approach to human behavior*. University of Chicago press. ISBN: 0226041123; pp. 3-14 (12 pages)
- R. Axelrod in TSO, pp. 175-184; 186-193 (18 pages)
- H. Gintis & E. Fehr in TSO, pp. 26-32 (7 pages)
- Hechter & Horne in TSO, pp. 17-22 (6 pages)

Nov 22/23 – Theories of collective action [54 pages]

- V. Chibber, “Capitalism and Class Struggle”, Catalyst – The ABCs of Capitalism, 2-31 (30 pages)
- Elster, J. (2007). *Explaining social behavior*. Cambridge University Press, ISBN: 9781107071186; “Collective action”, pp. 388-399 (12 pages)
- Schelling in TSO, pp. 154-165 (12 pages)

Nov 29/30 – Theories of norms, morality, & solidarity [48 pages]

- Du Bois, W.E.B. (2004). “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto.” In Zuckerman, P. *The social theory of W.E.B. Du Bois*. SAGE Publications. ISBN: 0761928707; pp. 45-46 (2 pages)
- Hechter in TSO, “Principles of group solidarity,” pp. 256-250 (5 pages)
- Coleman in TSO, “Emergence of norms,” pp. 261-265 (5 pages)
- Horne in TSO, “Group cohesion and metanorms,” pp. 267-274 (9 pages)
- Centola, Willer, & Macy in TSO, “The Emperor’s Dilemma,” pp. 276-9 (4 pages)
- Pinker, S. (2008). “The Moral Instinct”, *New York Times Magazine*, Jan 13. pp. 1-6 (6 pages)
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (2011). *A Cooperative Species*. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691158167. Pp. 1-17 (17 pages)

• **ESSAY DUE TODAY BEFORE MIDNIGHT (Dec 6)**

Dec 6/7 – Gender and Social Theory [35 pages]

- Beauvoir, S. "Woman as Other" in in Lemert, C. (Ed.). (2016). *Social theory: The multicultural, global, and classic readings*. Westview Press. ISBN: 9780813350028, pp. 339-341 (3 pages)
- Hartmann, H. “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in Grusky, D. B. (2001). *Social Stratification*. Boulder, Westview Press. ISBN: 0813366542. Pp 570-576 (7 pages).
- Sen, Gita. (1980). The Sexual Division of Labor and the Working-class Family. *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 12(2), 76-86 (11 pages).
- Himmelweit, S. “Domestic Labour” in Eatwell, J., Milgate, M., & Newman, P. (Eds.). (1987). *Social Economics*. ISBN: 0333495292; London: Macmillan. Pp. 35-38 (4 pages)
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Harvard University Press. ISBN: 0674896467; pp. 1-10 (10 pages).

**OR**

Theories of future societies [52 pages]

- Keynes, J.M. (1930). “Economic prospects for our grandchildren,” *Essays in Persuasion*. Springer. ISBN: 9781349590728. Pp. 1-4 (4 pages).
- Frase, P. (2012). “Four Futures,” *Jacobin*, Winter. Pp. 27-34 (8 pages)

- Cohen, G.A. (2009) "The Camping Trip" (3-11) and "Is the ideal feasible" (53-79), in *Why not socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691143613; (36 pages).
- Fromm, E. (1965). "The Psychology of Basic Income", *The Nation*, Dec 6. Pp. 439-442 (4 pages).

### **Learning Outcomes:**

Upon successful completion of this course, students should improve their ability to:

- Understand key theoretical concepts in contemporary social theory.
- Understand the role of sociological theory both within the research process and the discipline more broadly
- Compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of various theoretical perspectives for particular kinds of sociological research.
- Apply social-theoretical ideas and concepts to current social issues and problems, and evaluate their success and failure.
- Identify a sociological topic of interest, and use scholarly sources to construct an essay contrasting ideas we discuss.
- Give an in-depth oral presentation analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of a particular theoretical contribution.

### **How to Contact Me:**

Email is best. But we can also set up zoom office hours.

### **Important Policies**

#### ***A Note on Plagiarism:***

Students must write their assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major scholastic offence (the Scholastic Offence Policy can be viewed in the Western Academic Calendar).

#### ***Plagiarism Checking:***

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com ([www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com)).

### ***Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness***

Western's policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness can be found at [www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/accommodation\\_medical.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf).

Students must see the Academic Counsellor and submit all required documentation in order to be approved for certain accommodation:

[https://counselling.ssc.uwo.ca/procedures/academic\\_consideration.html](https://counselling.ssc.uwo.ca/procedures/academic_consideration.html)

### ***Accessibility Options:***

Please contact the course instructor if you require material in an alternate format or if you require any other arrangements to make this course more accessible to you. You may also wish to contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at 519 661-2111 x 82147 for any specific question regarding an accommodation. Information regarding accommodation of exams is available on the Registrar's website:

[www.registrar.uwo.ca/examinations/accommodated\\_exams.html](http://www.registrar.uwo.ca/examinations/accommodated_exams.html)

### ***Scholastic Offences***

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following web site:

[www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf)

### ***Mental Health***

Students who are in **emotional/mental distress** should refer to Mental Health@Western ([http://uwo.ca/health/mental\\_wellbeing/index.html](http://uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/index.html)) for a complete list of options how to obtain help.

### ***Copyright***

Lectures and course materials, including power point presentations, outlines, and similar materials, are protected by copyright. You may take notes and make copies of course materials for your own educational use. You may not record lectures, reproduce (or allow others to reproduce), post or distribute lecture notes, wiki material, and other course materials publicly and/or for commercial purposes without my written consent.

### ***Academic Consideration for Missed Work***

Students who are seeking academic consideration for missed work during the semester may submit a self-reported absence form online provided that the absence is **48 hours or less** and the other conditions specified in the [Senate policy](#) are met. Two important exceptions to this rule: SRAs will not be allowed for final examinations or assessments worth more than 30% of a given course.

Students whose absences are expected to last **longer than 48 hours**, or where the other conditions detailed in the policy are not met (e.g., work is worth more than 30% of the final grade, the student has already used 2 self-reported absences, the absence is during the final exam

period), may receive academic consideration by submitting a [Student Medical Certificate](#) (for illness) or other appropriate documentation (for compassionate grounds).

All students pursuing academic consideration, regardless of type, must **contact their instructors no less than 24 hours following the end of the period of absence** to clarify how they will be expected to fulfill the academic responsibilities missed during their absence. Students are reminded that they should consider carefully the implications of postponing tests or midterm exams or delaying submission of work, and are encouraged to make appropriate decisions based on their specific circumstances.

[https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/accommodation\\_illness.pdf](https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_illness.pdf)

### ***Compassionate Grounds***

Serious illness of a family member – Inform your instructor as soon as possible and submit a medical certificate from the family member’s physician to your home faculty’s Academic Counseling office.

In case of a death – Inform your instructor as soon as possible and submit a copy of the newspaper notice, death certificate or documentation provided by the funeral director to your home faculty’s Academic Counseling office.