

Sociology 203: Current Issues in Social Theory
Spring term, 2001 Wednesdays 9-11:50, Hamilton Hall 151

Topic for this year: *Polarities and Linkages: Action and structure, individual and society, micro and macro*

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This course will explore three related polarities in social theory, all dealing with the how to theorize the relationships and linkages of individuals in society. These are the polarity, 'action-structure', the polarity 'individual-society', and the polarity 'micro-macro'. Specific theoretical approaches, and in some cases theorists, can be placed in terms of whether they emphasize micro one or the other pole and how, if at all, they seek to link these two poles. These polarities related to several main currents and debates in classical and contemporary theory. If one accepts C. Wright Mills' view, in **The Sociological Imagination** (1959) that the sociologist seeks to understand the relationship of personal troubles and public issues, and the intersection of biography and history, then these polarities, and the ways in which sociologists address them, define the central problems of social theory. Classical issues such as the ways in which individuals come together in societies through a 'social contract', or the ways in which 'social facts' may determine individual behavior, continue to be debated along with newer concerns with levels of analysis, freedom and determinism, and the very possibility of meaningful theorizing.

Evaluation

Two brief papers (25% each) examining a specific theorist and how he or she enters the debates about these polarities, and one term paper (40%) developing a specific theoretical argument in this area.. In addition, students will be expected to contribute actively to seminar discussion based on the readings which will be set prior to individual sessions (10%).

Structure of the Course

The precise organization of the course will unfold partially in relation to student input. However, the initial few weeks of seminar discussions will focus on overview readings that pose the problematics of understanding the three polarities of action and structure, individual and society, micro and macro, as these have formed part of the history of social theory. After that, I anticipate a rough ordering as follows: The second set of seminar discussions will focus on the conceptualization of action, agency, voluntarism, rational choice, and related constructs dealing with the individual. The third set of meetings will deal with the conceptualization of structure. The fourth set will focus on linking these polarities. The organizational dilemma is that it is difficult to discuss conceptualizations of action, etc., without discussing structure, etc. Thus, it may not be possible to sustain this general outline. The course will therefore be partially improvisational, especially after the first two sessions, with directions shaped by student-faculty interaction

The course will be anchored on the four books listed below by Barnes, Berger & Luckmann, Elster, and Layder (students are advised to purchase these), but requires extensive reading from other sources on the Reading List below and elsewhere-especially for the major course paper.

Schedule of classes:

- 10 January NO CLASS (but start reading as the next two weeks are heavy)
- 17 January General discussion of the polarities. Students should have read the following sources prior to the seminar: Layder, chapters 1-3; Barnes, chapters 1 and 2; Berger and Luckmann, Introduction and Part I (pp. 1-46). Chapters 1-3; Randall Collins (1992); Mills (1959), the first five pages or so.
- Form a general view of the polarities.
- 24 January Focusing on action/individual/micro. Read Layder, chapters 4 and 5, Barnes, chapters 3-5;
- 31 January The social construction of reality. Read the remainder (Parts II and III) of Berger and Luckmann; and Blumer, "Society as symbolic interaction".
- 7 February Topic and readings to be decided
- 14 February Topic and readings to be decided
- 21 February Topic and readings to be decided
- 28 February Topic and readings to be decided
- 7 March Topic and readings to be decided
- 14 March NO CLASS: Spring Break
- 21 March Topic and readings to be decided
- 28 March Topic and readings to be decided
- 4 April CLASS TO BE RESCHEDULED
- 11 April Topic and readings to be decided
- 18 April Topic and readings to be decided
- 25 April Topic and readings to be decided
- 2 May LAST SESSION

Reading List, Sociology 203: Current Issues in Sociological Theory

The reading sources which will support our seminar discussions include:

Major readings

Margaret S. Archer (1995). **Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 3, Pp. 65-92, "Taking time to link structure and agency".

Barry Barnes (2000). **Understanding agency: Social theory and responsible action**. London: Sage.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967). **The social construction of reality**. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Herbert Blumer (1969). Society as symbolic interaction. Ch. 2, pp. 78-89 in Herbert Blumer, **Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method**. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Collin Campbell (1996, paperback 1998). **The myth of social action**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Randall Collins (1992). The romanticism of agency/structure versus the analysis of micro/macro. **Current Sociology 40**: 77-97.

Jon Elster (1989). **Nuts and bolts for the social sciences**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Anthony Giddens (1993). **New rules of sociological method: A positive critique of interpretative sociologies, 2nd edition**. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Anthony Giddens (1984). **The constitution of society**. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Derek Layder (1994). **Understanding social theory**. London: Sage.

Richard Lichtman (1970). Symbolic interactionism and social reality: Some Marxist queries. **Berkeley Journal of Sociology 15**: pp. 75-94.

Victor W. Marshall (2000). Agency, structure, and the life course in the era of reflexive modernization. Paper presented in a symposium on "The Life Course in the 21st Century", American Sociological Association meetings, Washington DC, August 2000.

C. Wright Mills (1959). **The sociological imagination**. New York: Oxford University Press. (Ch. 1, especially the first five pages)

David Sallach (1973). Class consciousness and the everyday world in the work of Marx and Schutz. **The Insurgent Sociologist** 3 (4), pp. 27-37.

Additional Recommended readings:

Jeffrey C. Alexander (1998). Structure, value, action: What did the early Parsons mean and what should he have said instead? Ch. 7, Pp. 147-160, in Jeffrey C. Alexander, **Neofunctionalism and after**. Oxford: Blackwell.

Barry Barnes (1995). **The elements of social theory**. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

James S. Coleman (1990). **Foundations of Social Theory**. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Ian Craib (1984). **Modern social theory: From Parsons to Habermas**. Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.

Julie McMullin and Victor W. Marshall (1999). Structure and agency in the retirement process: A case study of Montreal garment workers. Ch. 11, Pp. 305-338 in C. Ryff and V.W. Marshall (Eds.), **The Self and Society in Aging Processes**. New York: Springer.

Nicos Mouzelis (1995). **Sociological theory: What went wrong? Diagnosis and remedies**. London: Routledge.

Talcott Parsons (1937). **The structure of social action: A study in social theory with special reference to a group of recent European writers**. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Talcott Parsons (1951). **The social system**. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press of Glencoe.

John K. Rhoads (1991). **Critical issues in social theory**. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press. Especially Part Two: The Basic Units of Social Theory.

Carol D. Ryff and Victor W. Marshall (Eds.), **The self and society in aging processes**. New York: Springer.

Gregory C. Smith, Steven J. Kohn, Susan E. Savage-Stevens, Julie J. Finch, Randall Ingate, and Yeono-Ok Lim (2000). The effects of interpersonal and personal agency on perceived control and psychological well-being in adulthood. **The Gerontologist** 40 (4): 458-468.

Alain Touraine (1974). Towards a sociology of action. Ch. 4, pp. 75-100, and Jean-Daniel Reynaud and Pierre Bourdieu, Is a sociology of action possible?, ch. 5, pp. 101-113, and Alain Touraine, "The raison d'Être of a Sociology of Action, Ch. 6, pp. 115-127, in Anthony Giddens (Ed.), **Positivism and Sociology**. London: Heinemann.