

# Theorizing the Social/Social Theory (with a Dash of Ethnography)<sup>1</sup>

## 97z Sophomore Tutorial

“Theory is always a detour on the way to something more important” Stuart Hall, Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities

Professor Gabriella Coleman

Office Hours: Tuesday from 12-1 and by appointment (Peabody 567)

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Class Time: Tu/Th 10:30-11:45

Class Place: Peabody 12

### Section

Tuesday 4:30-5:45pm

Thursday 6:00-7:15pm



### Overview

This course is designed to introduce undergraduate students to social/cultural theory in light of anthropological methods, arguments, concerns, and writing. As a discipline anthropology is rooted in conveying and theorizing the particularities of lived social realities—which are often messy, complex, and unruly. Social theory, on the other hand, tends to provide more abstract, though still empirically grounded, analytical framework, concepts, and theories about the nature of social life, the body, power, the economy, etc. While this class will introduce students to bodies of theory that have been particularly influential in anthropology, this course does not offer a general survey of social theory. The course seeks primarily to train students to learn how to read and write about theory in light of anthropological concerns, writing, and ethnography that you will come across in your concentration.

(figure: Hilma af Klint - The Ten Largest No. 8 - Adulthood – 1907)

Nevertheless, as we think through particular arguments and learn how to read and grapple with theory, we will cover some dominant paradigms in social theory and anthropological thinking from within the US and Europe but also pay attention to more subaltern voices, and modes of critique. We will finish the course exploring the how theory feeds into political change. We will do so by examining theoretical work around norms, publics, sexuality/sex and the body in light

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Steve Caton, Malavika Reddy, Paul Clarke and Ashwin Subramanian, for their help and/or influence in creating this syllabus. I've drawn directly from Dr. Caton and Dr. Reddy's prior syllabi for this course and have consulted with Paul Clarke, our teaching fellow on course material and design.

of queer and disability movements whose politics are predicated on destabilizing the concept of norms/the normal and making public queer/crip bodies and practices.

I expect students to come fully prepared to discuss all the readings critically but constructively and engage with fellow students in a respectful fashion. We will cultivate directed and serious discussion that meaningfully engages with the texts and issues at hand. To facilitate our seminar, come prepared to discuss arguments and key passages in the texts with a copy of the reading.

### **Learner Objectives**

By the end of the course, students should be able to 1) Comprehend and explain the theoretical paradigms and particular concepts in social theory covered in our readings, lectures and discussions. 2.) Engage with and convey basic arguments in our written texts through close reading. 3) Tease out and identify how ethnographers deploy, apply, and complicate social theory. 4) Apply social theory to an empirical question, case, setting or example. Our writing and reading assignments, listed below in brief and expanded in the assignment booklet, will help to fulfill these four learner objectives.

### **Requirements, Method of Evaluation, And Assignments**

#### **Attendance**

Attendance is mandatory with the exception of absence for reasons of illness, religious holiday or official university business. To notify me of the absence, please email me at least 2 hours before class begins, documenting the reason for the absence to the best of your ability. If you are feeling sick, I encourage students to take a Covid test and if they test positive, to remain home. I am happy to fire up zoom for those that are sick and cannot make it to class. If you miss class, you are responsible to contact a classmate to obtain notes on the materials covered. If you have two unexcused absences, your final grade will be reduced a full letter (A to B, A- to B-, etc).

#### **Class Participation (20%)**

Close reading of our texts, respectful commentary and demonstrable engagement in class are expected and will count towards a student participation grade. Active participation in class requires that you are also ready to ask and answer questions and be ready to discuss particular quotes and passages from our assigned readings. To aid class discussion, please come to class ready to discuss at least one quote or passage from the reading that caught your attention. Given the importance of being present for discussion and lecture, I will be banning laptops in class. What this means is you will need to either bring a paper copy of the readings or have some other device to access them. I am happy to facilitate securing print copies in order to ensure everyone has the readings and if there are disability issues requiring a specific technology or accommodation please contact me directly.

#### **Reading Journal (25%)**

This course aims to help students think about theory, ethnography, their relationships, and the political impacts of both. As a way to foster active discussion in class and a method to gauge the learning process, students will keep track of their progress in the form of a learning journal/micro-responses on a google doc that will be provided by the teaching fellow. If you would like to keep a hand-written journal, we can discuss this option (as I believe there are ways to turn in the material via digital scans).

For these journal entries, which must be submitted 12 hours before our class meeting, students can reflect on course readings, the things they do and do not understand, how their learning has taken shape over the course, the connections they find among different readings (or concepts), and/or the relevance of their readings to the life around them. More details and guiding questions will be provided in the assignment booklet. The entries should be roughly between 300-500 words. The TF and I will be reading your material before class and bringing in some of your thoughts and questions.

You can miss three entries with no excuse, and do not need to post in the first week of class. Writing consistently in your learning journal will help you prepare for class and will build towards your other three writing assignments as you practice writing about, writing against, and thinking with theory.

### **Two Short Writing Exercises (30%)**

#### **1. First Writing Exercise (15%) [Due on March 8 by 5 PM]**

Take a theory/social concept of your choice from those we have covered in class and explicate it and its significance in your own words and please assume your reader has not read the same piece. As you review the concept, please contextualize it, explicate its value, importance and limits. While part of the exercise is to narrate the concept in your own words, you should include some quotes from the text. You will be paired with another student and you will work together to provide feedback on each other's pieces before you turn in the final piece.

#### **2. Second Writing Exercise (15%) [Due April 12 by 5 pm]**

Take a theory/social concept (or two) of your choice from those we have or will cover and apply to a particular social setting, phenomenon or current issue that you have researched or are otherwise familiar with and do so in an essay that is between 800-1200 words long. Do not presume your reader has read the theorist/s you are drawing from and so you must take care to make it intelligible to your reader. This exercise is similar to the first one in so far as you need to bring it to life through narration and explication but by applying it to a situation. You will be paired with another student and you will work together to provide feedback on each other's pieces before you turn in the final piece.

### **Final Book Review (25%) [Due May April 29 by 5 pm]**

The final assignment—a detailed book review covering an ethnography—allows you to demonstrate how you conceive of the relationship/s between ethnography and theory. The book review will cover one single full length ethnographic monograph of your choosing and you must put this material in conversation with at least two theoretical questions, arguments, or concepts from our readings/course. As you critically review and assess the book, you should offer a novel argument that is rooted partly in the application of social theory to the material and your critical take. A list of suggested ethnographies, a rubric, a detailed overview of the assignment and timeline will be provided the first day in our assignment booklet.

### **Policies and Other Material**

**Non-discrimination Statement:** In my class I work to create a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, civil status,

familial status, sexual orientation, or disability. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, I do not discriminate on the basis of political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with me in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material and an ability to work with it analytically, you are under no obligation to agree with it.

**Accommodations and Mental Health:** Any student needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to present their letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although AEO may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation. For mental health services, please consult <https://camhs.huhs.harvard.edu/>

**Academic Integrity:** Academic work and life at Harvard University is predicated on academic integrity and honesty. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism, and other academic offenses and uphold the Harvard Honor Code, which is available to read here: <https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code>

**Readings:**

Readings are either provided below via link or on our course website.

**Course Schedule:**

The following is a sample of a “working schedule.” Class materials are subject to change based on the interests, understanding, and general pace of the class.

**Introductions and Foundations**

**Week 1, 1/23: Introduction/s**

Kathleen Stewart, 2008. “Weak Theory in an Unfinished World.” *Journal of Folklore Research*, voi. 45, no. 1, (71-82) [12]

**Week 1, 1/25: Stakes and Orientations**

Anand Pandian. 2019. “The World at Hand.” *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (15-43) [28] [read first]

Bronislaw Malinowski. The Subject, Method, and Scope of this Inquiry. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1-25) [25]

**Week 2, 1/30: The Sociological Imagination in Context**

Stuart Hall. 1987. “Variants of Liberalism,” *Politics and Ideology*. 1987, 34-69. [35]

Emile Durkheim. 1982. “What Is a Social Fact?” *The Rules of Sociological Method* (20-28) [9]

**Week 2, 2/1: Organic and Mechanical Solidarity**

Emile Durkheim. 1893. "Chapter II Mechanical Solidarity, or Solidarity by Similarities." *The Division of Labor* [selections]

Emile Durkheim. 1893 "Ch. III Solidarity Arising from the Division of Labor, or Organic Solidarity." *The Division of Labor* [selections]

### **Week 3, 2/6: The Intimacy of Secrecy and the Freedom of Urban Anonymity**

Georg Simmel. 1906. "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." *American Journal of Sociology* (464-498) [20]

Georg Simmel. 1903. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *The Blackwell City Reader* (11-19) [9]

### **Week 3, 2/8: Ethnographic Interlude: Secrecy and Security in the City**

Kevin O'Neil. 2020. "Building Trust, Mobilizing Security: The Making and Selling of Armoured Cars in Guatemala City." *Economy and Society* 49(3): 474-492

## **Culture and Race, and the Turn Away from Evolutionary Theory**

### **Week 4, 2/13: Public Anthropology and The Reconfiguration of Race and Gender**

Louis Menard. 2019. "How Cultural Anthropologists Redefined Humanity." *The New Yorker* (np) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/26/how-cultural-anthropologists-redefined-humanity>

Franz Boas. 1938. "Introduction." *The Mind of Primitive Man* (3-18) [16]

Franz Boas. 1982. "The Aims of Anthropological Research." *Race, Language, and Culture* (243-259, 270-280) [28]

Watch before class: Movie: Glynis Whiting. 1996. "The Sterilization of Leilani Muir"

<https://www.nfb.ca/m/playlists/a71fcceb66eed4f60b3041adead5608b7/playback/#1>

### **Week 4, 2/15: Race, Two Perspectives Past and Present**

W.E.B. Du Bois. 2007. "The Concept of Race." *Dusk of Dawn* (49-67) [18]

Barbara Fields. 1990. "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States." *New Left Review*. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii81/articles/barbara-jeanne-fields-slavery-race-and-ideology-in-the-united-states-of-america> [np]

### **Week 5, 2/20: Revisiting Culture and Race, 2 Contrasting Takes**

Michel Rolph Trouillot. 2003. "Adieu Culture: A New Duty Arises." In *Global Transformations* (97-116) [19]

Marshal Sahlins. 2000. "Sentimental Pessimism" and Ethnographic Experience: Or, Why Culture Is Not a Disappearing "Object." *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (158-171) [13]

#### **Week 5, 2/22: The "irrationality" of Rationality**

E. E. Evans-Pritchard. 1935/1976. Chapter 1 "Witchcraft is an organic and hereditary phenomenon," Chapter 2 "The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events" and Chapter IV "Are Witches Conscious Agents?" The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* [40]

#### **Optional but highly recommended:**

Eva Gillies. 1976. "Introduction." *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*.

#### **On Authority and Interpretation: Max Weber and his Legacy**

#### **Week 6, 2/27: Different forms of Authority and Legitimacy**

Max Weber. 1946. The Sociology of Charismatic Authority. *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (245-252) [8]

Max Weber. 1946. Bureaucracy. *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (196-235, 240-244) [45]\*

Michael Herzfeld. 2023. "Can the bureaucratization of research ethics be ethical." *Anthropology Today* (3-6) [3]

\*sections

#### **Week 6, 2/29: On Interpretation**

Max Weber. 1949. *On the Methodology of Social Sciences*. (76-85) [9]

Clifford Geertz. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." *The Interpretation of Cultures* (3-30) [27]

#### **Exchange, Reciprocity and Reproduction**

#### **Week 7, 3/5: Mauss: Gifting and the Bonds of Reciprocity**

David Graeber. 2008. *Give it Away*. Free Words. <http://www.freewords.org/graeber.html> and <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-give-it-away>

Marcel Mauss. 1990. Introduction, The Exchange of Gifts and the Obligation to Reciprocate, & Conclusion. *The Gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies* (1-23, 65-83) [48]

## Week 7, 3/7: Reproduction vs Reciprocity

Annette Weiner. 1980. Reproduction: a replacement for reciprocity. *American Ethnologist*, vol. 7, no. 1, (71-85) [15]

Writing Assignment One due Friday March 8 at 5 PM

## Week 8: Spring Break

No class

### Labor and Historical Materialism

## Week 9, 3/19: Historical Materialism

Karl Marx. 1978. "The German Ideology" The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed Robert Tucker, ed. (146-200) [50]\*

\*selections

## Week 9, 3/21: Labor and Exploitation

Karl Marx. 1867. "The Working Day" *Capital* 340-416 [77]\*

\*selections

## Week 10, 3/26: Sweetness and Power/Marx in Context

Sidney Mintz. 1985. Introduction, Chapter 1 "Food, Sociality, and Sugar" and Chapter 2 "Production" *Sweetness and Power* [79]

### Truth, Power, and Deconstructing the Natural Body/Gender/Sex

## Week 10, 3/28: On Truth and Knowledge

Stanley Fish, 2016. "Don't Blame Nietzsche for Donald Trump." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/09/dont-blame-nietzsche-for-donald-trump/>

Friedrich Nietzsche. 1893. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." (1-8) [8] <https://www.austincc.edu/adechene/Nietzsche%20on%20truth%20and%20lies.pdf>

Donna Haraway. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of patrial perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (575-599) [25]

## Week 11, 4/2: On Language, Power, and Reality

George Lakoff & Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. (excerpts)

Carol Cohn. 1987. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals." *Signs*.

## Week 11, 4/4: On the West and the Rest and On Discourse and Power

Stuart Hall. 1992. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." (185-225) [40]

## Week 12, 4/9: The Body and Discipline

Marcel Mauss. 1935. Techniques of the Body. *Beyond the Body Proper* (50-68) [19] \*

Michel Foucault. 1975. "Docile Bodies." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* (135-170) [25]

\*selections

## Week 12, 4/11: Habitus, Bodily Capital and Labor

Loic Waquant. 1995. "Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour among Professional Boxers." *Body & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (65-93) [29]

Paper Two due Friday April 12 at 5 pm.

## Week 13, 4/16: Gender Politics and Public Assembly

Joan Scott. 1986. Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis. *The American Historical Review* (1053-1075) [23]

Judith Butler. 2015. Gender Politics and the Right to Appear. *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly* (24-65) [41]\*

Or

Jane Collier and Michelle Z. Rosaldo. 1980. "Politics and Gender in Simple Societies." *Politics and Gender in Simple Societies.* (275-325) [50]\*

\*selections (and I will be picking one of the two at least 2-3 weeks before class)

## Week 13, 4/18: Publics and Counterpublics

Movie: Nicole Newnham and James LeBrecht. 2020. *Crip Camp*

Nancy Fraser. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* (56-80) [25]

## Week 14, 4/23: Wrap up

Last Class.

