

**ST. THOMAS UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**

Sociology 3023 – Contemporary Sociological Theory, Winter 2025

Time: Wednesdays and Fridays, 9AM-10:20AM

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Office hours: after class 10:30-11:30, or by appointment via Zoom (email to schedule a meeting)

Course Description

This class in contemporary sociological theory will explore key themes in our discipline and prepare you for more advanced study. It will also help students think about contemporary social problems from a sociological perspective. We will be picking up the key theme of modernity in classical sociological theory and reflecting on contemporary society as we see it today. The class is organized into thematic sections that build on the insights and blind spots of the classics of sociological thought.

Our class is taking place at a historically charged moment. We are faced with a litany of crises: the largest land war in Europe since 1945; the most intense and persistent military bombardment of a civilian population in history (Gaza); a new economic landscape marked by higher interest rates and greater systemic risks from over-indebted borrowers; a US President who has committed to deporting millions of migrant workers and who openly flirts with fascist movements; a global affordable housing crisis; an ecological emergency that we seem unable to address without destroying our economy; and the continuing permutations of global inequalities that warp global social relations and that pervade understandings of global society, particularly amongst relatively privileged social groups. We are living through what the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci called an ‘organic crisis,’ the complete upending of our cultural, political, economic, and even environmental ways of life. From this, something new must come, perhaps better, but maybe worse. Our class is designed deliberately to orient ourselves towards the crisis of our time.

Our main task in the class will be to acquire a greater understanding of how modern societies work, how power operates in these societies, and how to situate ourselves within them. What are the key objects we study when we study sociology? What are we supposed to pay attention to? Why is sociology also so often a normative discipline—in other words, it doesn’t just describe social reality, but also engages in debates about how society should be different than it is. This latter point is particularly important given our current historical moment. Readings for the class focus on theoretical approaches that interpret our modernity and give us a better sense of where we have come from, who we are, and where we might be going.

Learning Outcomes

After this class, you will have developed:

- Your knowledge of classical sociological themes and how they continue to shape contemporary social issues and problems;
- Your ability to use theory to conceive of empirical projects to study the society you live in;
- Your understanding of some key power dynamics that shape social change;
- An ability to explain key concepts from different theoretical traditions and connect them to contemporary events;
- An appreciation for the linkages between material changes in society and cultural changes in norms and values that shape society as a whole.

COVID and illnesses

Unfortunately, the COVID-SARS-2 continues to be a major public health issue and poses serious health issues for some students and members of our community who may be infected. My household is vulnerable to serious consequences of Covid infection. **If you are feeling unwell please do not come to class.** I can add you to the class on Teams if you are sick (but only if you are sick). If you are feeling mild cold symptoms or are recovering from a cold – **wear an N95 mask** to ensure you don't spread whatever you have to others. Wearing masks is the new hand washing!

Course Material

All other course texts are available on Moodle.

Full bibliographic information for course readings is provided below.

Assessment:

Student engagement: 30%

Expectations for engagement include but are not limited to attendance. I expect students to participate in class—it is important for everyone's learning. Most importantly, this means being ready each Wednesday to discuss the readings. If you are shy, this will be an opportunity to test your mettle, but you can also demonstrate engagement over email or in office hours.

In class mid-term, February 26th: 30%

The mid-term will be composed of three questions on material from weeks 1-6. You will be expected to complete 6-8 pages, double space, per answer. Answers must be comprehensive, and demonstrate that they draw on course readings.

Final sit-down exam, Tuesday, April 15th, 9AM: 40%

The final exam will be composed of two comparative questions on material from weeks 7-13. You will be expected to complete one exam booklet per answer, so answers must be comprehensive, and demonstrate that they draw on course readings.

No outside materials (readings or cheat sheets) will be permitted for either exam.

Academic Honesty

Please abide by St. Thomas's policy on academic honesty. In a third-year course, cases of plagiarism from the internet or from other sources will be dealt with rigorously. If you are in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me or consult the academic honesty guidelines in the STU calendar. If you need extra time to finish assignments, please contact me.

Artificial Intelligence

There will be no use AI permitted for course assignments in this class. If you need extra help understanding course material, schedule an appointment for office hours.

Outside Materials

If you are consulting additional material outside the course to help understand or contextualize course concepts (for instance, Wikipedia or on YouTube), that demonstrates additional engagement with the course material. Send me a note about what you are reading or watching and how you are making sense of it. Questions are always welcome. Reading any of the optional readings? Let me know about it! Looking for additional reading on a topic that interests you? Contact me!

Readings:

Part I: Building on the Marxist Tradition

Weeks 1 and 2: David Harvey, Culture and Capitalism (January 8, 10, 15, and 17)

Harvey, David. 1990. "The Political-economic transformation of late twentieth-century capitalism," in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, pp. 121-197.

This week we will look at Marxist structuralist explorations of cultural change through an exploration of the work of Marxist geographer David Harvey. Harvey's work will enable us also to engage with a broader literature of critical sociology, especially the French regulation school, which attempted to think through transformations of capitalism that were occurring in the 1980s and 1990s. Harvey will enable us to better understand what 'neoliberalism' is about, and how it shapes the world we live in today.

Keywords: regime of accumulation; mode of regulation; Fordism; Taylorism; Keynesianism; flexible accumulation

Further reading: Alberto Saad-Filho, 2021, Endgame: from crisis in neoliberalism to crises of neoliberalism, *Human Geography* 14(1): 133-137.

Week 3: Aníbal Quijano and decolonial sociology (Jan 22 and 24)

Quijano, Aníbal. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and America." *Neplanta: Views from the South* 1(3): 533-556. (Optional reading for those interested in Latin American political science, pp. 556-573, which is also part of the PDF on moodle)

(Optional) Lugones, Maria. 2007. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22(1): 186-209.

This week looks at the work of the Peruvian social theorist Anibal Quijano. Quijano draws our attention towards how modernity and the modern project of emancipation through reason were deeply affected by the European societies from which they sprung. Contemporary relations of domination are, in part, the offspring of colonial experience, and the way in which colonizers misrepresented and misunderstood the places and people they came to conquer. The structures of colonial extraction that came out of the colonial experience eventually ricocheted throughout the world, undermining previous social structures and establishing a new logic of individual orientation to the world: a Eurocentric, individualistic orientation, deprived of the insights of other worldviews.

Keywords: coloniality of power; eurocentrism; race; evolutionism and dualism

Week 4: Nancy Fraser (January 29 and 31)

Fraser, Nancy. 2016. Contradictions of Capitalism and Care. *New Left Review*, pp. 99-117.

(Optional) Fraser, Nancy. 2021. Climate of Capital: For a Trans-Environmental Eco-socialism. *New Left Review*, Special section on Green Strategy, pp. 94-127.

This week we look at the work of the Marxist feminist philosopher and sociologist Nancy Fraser, whose work attends to the shifting relations of reproduction in modern society. In addition to her analysis on how modern society exhibits a contradiction between a human need for care and a competitive labour market that seeks to commercialize it, we will reflect on where things are going in an age of Trump and the forced-birther movement that has taken away the reproductive decision-making capacity of American women. What might this mean for Canadian women?

Further reading: Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*

Part II: Sociologies of Culture and Power – Marx, Weber, Settler Colonialism, and Patriarchy

Weeks 5: Pierre Bourdieu and Field Theory (February 5 and 7)

Ritzer, George and Douglas J. Goodman. 2004. "Habitus and Field," in *Modern Sociological Theory*, 6th edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, pp. 387-398.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1986) 'The Forms of Capital' in Richardson (ed) *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241-258.

(recommended) Bourdieu (1984) 'Social Space and Its Transformation' in *Distinction*, Oxford University Press, pp. 93-108, 1 chart, and 6 photos.

-NB: the chart in this reading is not optional, and will help you understand the concept of social space

Bourdieu's work is paramount to modern sociological theory, and particularly to attempts to bridge critical sociology to empirical research on inequalities. We will study his main concepts of social field and habitus and discuss in detail how our own lives are wrapped up with economic, cultural and social capital, symbolic power, and social distance. We will also look at how the Oedipal Complex plays out in a society rapidly changing in terms of distribution of capitals and opportunities for social mobility. We will try to use these ideas to understand the contemporary social and political scene.

Keywords: field; habitus; capital; symbolic space; practice; distinction.

Week 6: Stuart Hall and Conjunctural Analysis (Feb 12 and 14)

Hall, Stuart. 1979. 'The Great Moving Right Show,' *Marxism Today* (January): 14-19.

Hall, Stuart. 2016 [1983]. 'Rethinking the Base and Superstructure,' in *Cultural Studies 1983*, Duke University Press, pp. 74-96.

Stuart Hall is British sociology's most important theorist of race and ethnicity. He is also contemporary Marxism's most important thinker of the relation between culture and economy, one of the key tensions in Marxist theory. Here, we apply Hall's work to the contemporary scene. While he was theorizing an earlier conjunctural shift in capitalist history, we are living through another one. His intellectual tools help us to understand the transformation of contemporary right-wing parties, as they move increasingly towards the far-right in response to the crisis of capital accumulation. Hall will help us understand current polarization in public life and perhaps help us diagnose some of its sources and likely directions.

Keywords: organic crisis; conjunctural crisis; hegemony; postwar settlements; base; superstructure; ideology; culture

Week 7: Colonial Recognition and Indigenous Refusal (Feb 19 and 21)

Simpson, Audra. 2017. The ruse of consent and the anatomy of 'refusal': cases from indigenous North America and Australia, *Postcolonial Studies* 20(1): 18-33.

Coultard, Glen. 2014. 'Subjects of Empire' in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1-17.

This week we will explore Canada from the vantage point of Indigenous scholars who centre the experiences and perspectives of those who have survived dispossession of their land and attempts to extinguish and assimilate them.

Keywords: Refusal; settler colonialism; recognition; dispossession

Week 8: In-class exam: February 26th

Week 8: Raewyn Connell, Gender (February 28th)

Connell, Raewyn. 2009. Gender relations, in *Gender: Short Introductions*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, pp. 72-93.

This week we will be looking at Connell's work on gender orders in global perspective, looking at how organizations, but also global politics, are shaped by particular discourses and practices that perform a gendered social order.

Keywords: gender patterns; gender regime; gender order

March 3-7, Reading Break

CAUTION: heavy reading ahead! Weeks 10 and 12 have 45 pages of reading per week! Use reading week to catch up to things you have missed and/or pre-read in weeks you know you are going to be jammed. Pro-tip: Organize your time in advance. Use a calendar to tell you what to do and when to do it. Then, execute, execute, execute! It takes discipline, and discipline is a practice.

Part III: Building on the Durkheimian Tradition - Cultural Sociology

Week 9: Cultural Sociology and Civil Religion (March 12 and 14)

Bellah, Robert. 2005 [1967]. Civil Religion in American Life. *Daedalus*, 134(4) pp. 40-55.

We will be exploring some key building blocks of contemporary work on the civil sphere, looking at the appropriation of key concepts in Durkheim's later work (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*) which have become foundational to a growing body of work in cultural sociology, which attends to the sacred, and sacred/profane or pure/impure boundaries in everyday political life. This is the oldest text offered in this version of the course, but in many ways, it is the most critical and contemporary. It will help us approach sharp binaries that exist in contemporary culture and that are cleaving our social world apart.

Week 10: Jeff Alexander, Cultural Sociology and Cultural Trauma (March 19 and 21)

Alexander, Jeff. 2004. Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. Smelser and P. Sztompka. University of California Press, pp. 1-30.

Alexander, Jeff. 2016. Cultural trauma, morality and solidarity: The social construction of the 'Holocaust' and other mass murders. *Thesis Eleven* 132(1): 3-16.

Jeff Alexander is the leading theorist of cultural sociology, an approach that builds on Emile Durkheim's key concepts of solidarity and collective effervescence. We will be thinking about Alexander's work on the cultural understandings of the Holocaust and their importance to post-World War II international human rights regimes and global societal democratization. We will also explore how his cultural sociology might help us understand the trauma process that Canada is now entering, or the one now facing Israel as it reckons (or not) with what it has done in Gaza.

Keywords: Cultural trauma; trauma process; solidarity; radical evil; inclusion/exclusion; responsibility; circle of the we

Week 11: Michèle Lamont and Moral Boundaries (March 26 and 28)

Lamont, Michèle. 2000. 'The World in Moral Order' in *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. New York: Russell Sage, pp. 17-54.

(Optional) Hyland, M., Mascherini, M., & Lamont, M. 2024. Feeling overlooked: A rural-urban divide in recognition. *Global Policy* 15(5): 807-822.

Michèle Lamont is one of the most important Canadian sociologists of her generation, whose work attempted to build linkages between Weberian/Bourdieusian sociology and Jeffrey Alexander's Durkheimian 'Strong Program' in cultural sociology. Here, we read about her ethnography of working class masculinity—a comparison of French and American workers. We will use it to think about similar archetypes and patterns in New Brunswick and beyond.

Keywords: moral boundary; boundary work

Part IV: Global Ambitions and Imperial Blind-Spots

Week 12: Cosmopolitanism and Transnationalism (April 2)

Beck, Ulrich. (2011). We do not live in an age of cosmopolitanism but in an age of cosmopolitisation: The 'global other' is in our midst. *Irish Journal of Sociology* 19(1): 16-34.

In this lecture, we will explore the growing interest in cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, sociology's companion concepts to "globalization." We will learn to distinguish these and explore key ideas that have developed in sociology over the last two decades to encounter our increasingly globalized and interconnected societies, marked by the emergence of new geopolitical tensions and new economic and political powers at regional and global scales.

Keywords: transnationalism; migration; cosmopolitanism; cosmopolitization

Week 12: Sociology and Post-Colonial Thought (April 4)

Go, Julian. 2013. For a postcolonial sociology, *Theory and Society* 42: 25-50.

Julian Go's work is an ambitious attempt to integrate ideas from the humanities into a social science research project that accounts for our globally shared history of empire and colonialism. The week explores relational theories of modernity, and how they present solutions to our tendency to bifurcate our analysis between Global North and Global South—an inheritance of imperial ways of looking at societies.

Keywords: analytical bifurcation; relational sociology; standpoint theory; industrial revolution; French revolution

Week 13: Gurinder Bhambra and Connected Sociologies (April 9)

Bhambra, Gurinder. 2014. 'Sociology for an "Always Already" Global Age' in *Connected Sociologies*, Bloomsbury Press, pp. 141-156.

Bhambra is a major contributor to sociological debates that have forced the discipline to reconceptualize itself in light of empire and colonialism—largely taboo topics in the canon of sociological theory. In doing so, we uncover a different narrative of sociology and the societies and social relations we are trying to uncover.

Keywords: Connected histories; modernity