

# Topics in Contemporary Theory

St. Francis Xavier University

Winter Term 2021

Mondays 9:45—11:00, Wednesdays 8:15—9:30

Schwarz 215

Instructor: Peter Lenco

○ Nicholson Tower 615 | T 4876 | E plenco@sfx.ca

Office hours: Mondays 12:00—14:00, Wednesdays 11:00—13:00 and Fridays 10:00—12:00

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## Course Description

The aim of this course is to engage students with some of the most important contemporary sociological thinkers through the analysis of original texts. This will take a more or less survey approach, with special attention to three of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, Foucault, Bourdieu and Habermas. Some of these thinkers work off each other, others work against each other. But in either case one goal of the course is for students to come to understand the connections (Foucault and Butler, for example). Also, many of the ideas and themes of this course are particularly relevant to current events and movements. For example: Black Lives Matter (Patterson), colonialism (Said), accountability/cancel culture (Habermas), and gender issues (Smith). This course may support and stimulate some of the students' beliefs about social structure, identity, power and change. But it also might challenge some of those beliefs in surprising ways.

By the end of this course students will have a firm working foundation of some of the most important strands of contemporary sociological thought. Students will have read original works by the most relevant social theorists of the last decades which can serve as a solid foundation as they go on to further pursuits. Participants will develop their ability to read and discuss difficult, theoretical literature and improve their group work skills.

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## Course Form

The sessions will consist of informal introductory lectures with room for questions and open discussion. Note that the lectures will not be summaries of the texts, but are rather meant to supplement the texts and initiate analysis. Indeed, the goal of the classes will be to critically analyse the texts considerably. We will also make use of group discussions and problem-based learning. Please note that all aspects of this course adhere to the principle of equitable learning. Therefore I invite each member of the class to strive to promote a respectful, safe and equitable learning environment, free from discrimination and harassment, both in person and online. Feel free to discuss

any questions or concerns regarding our learning environment with me, either in or before/after class or during office hours.

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## Texts

There is one reader available for purchase through the Campus Store:

Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff and Indermohan Virk, eds. 2012.  
*Contemporary Sociology Theory*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

All other materials are available via Moodle.

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## Evaluation

Attendance/Participation—10%

Memos—15%

Short Paper (due 22 February)—15%

Long Paper (due 5 April)—30%

Final Exam—30%

Attendance for the course is mandatory. Be sure to contact me in advance if you are going to be absent for any length of time (see Accommodation below). Participation is an important element of the course (not just for your participation mark), and students should make every effort to ask questions and to engage in discussions and group work.

For the memos, students are asked to write two pages on the reading for any five of the sessions. These are due before Monday's class for that session (i.e. when we begin the topic). These need not be formally structured; reflections on the readings are what I am looking for. What caught your interest in the readings? Why is it important? How does it relate to other sociological themes and other readings? Avoid summaries or "rehearsals". I am interested here in what you can do with the content, not with your ability to describe it. Important note: you can only submit one memo per session so my advice is to start early and get them out of the way.

The shorter essay (about 2000 words) should critically assess one of the topics/thinkers covered by the course. This would mean assessing how a writer's position on a topic holds up in practice (i.e. how well does it do what it is meant to do?), or in its own internal consistency. Likewise two theories could be critically compared – or even three.

Ideally, the longer paper should deploy one of our authors/topics (one author/one of the readings – which must be different from the first paper) to a contemporary aspect of sociological study, in effect connecting the selected author to sociology today. How does the theorist or theory determine or change our way of thinking about sociology? What sorts of foundational discussions does it imply; what does it preclude? Is the continued influence warranted or even welcome? There is considerable leeway here and students may develop their own topics. You may check with me for help with this. In all cases be sure to have a clear thesis statement and do not forget that papers that argue or try to establish a point are easier to write and easier to read. I am looking more for clarity and quality rather than quantity (of pages, of material covered). The long papers should be approximately 2500 words in length.

A closed-book, essay-style exam will be scheduled during the regular examination period. In the case of pandemic restrictions, this will be a take-home assignment.

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## Guidelines for Submission

All written assignments must be submitted in electronic copy only via Moodle fifteen minutes before class on the due date. Late assignments without valid (e.g. verified medical) excuse will be penalized five percentage points per business day. Follow the layout guidelines on the department website (under “Current Students”) and as per department guidelines, I urge you to use the American Sociological Association's citation and referencing system. Otherwise use one clear referencing system consistently, but I insist that you include page numbers when citing sources. It is up to you to track your own grades; they will not be posted electronically nor will I respond to email queries regarding them.

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## Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of *any* source without acknowledging its author/creator and will not be tolerated in this course. Not only is it a serious breach of academic integrity, but it undermines the efforts of other course participants. Cases of plagiarism will be dealt with in the strictest possible manner and the instructor reserves the right to use all available technical assistance to discover plagiarists. You can read more about academic integrity in the current academic calendar in section 3.8. If you are unsure of anything, please ask see me about it. Remember: there is no justification for plagiarism.

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## Contact

Please only email me (with “SOCl 301” in the subject line) if I can quickly read your email and then answer with a word or two. For any communication more complex, students are welcome to phone or MS Teams during office hours. Generally no appointment is necessary. If you have difficulty with these times, simply contact me to set up an alternative arrangement.

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## Accommodation

Any student that requires accommodation of any kind should contact me at the earliest opportunity so that the appropriate arrangements can be made. Also, please contact me at the outset of any prolonged illness or personal matter that might detract from your performance in the course. My goal is to help students navigate this course to a successful conclusion but you are responsible for communicating any potential challenges to me. I am here to support you but I cannot advocate for you if I do not have all the information in a timely manner.

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## Copyright

There will potentially be considerable online content for this course. I remind you that course materials are designed exclusively for use in SOCl 302 at StFX University only and are the property of the instructor, unless otherwise stated by the instructor. Copying any material for distribution, online posting, or selling of this material to third parties without permission is strictly prohibited subject to Canadian copyright law.

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## Outline

Session One (13 January) – **Introduction, What is “contemporary” theory anyway?**

Calhoun et al., *Introduction*.

Session Two (18, 20 January) – **Power and Inequality**

Calhoun et al., Chapters 15, 16 and 18.

Session Three (25, 27 January) – **Foucault**

Calhoun et al., Chapters 19, 20 and 21.

Session Four: (1, 3 February) – **Bourdieu**

Calhoun et al., Chapters 22, 23 and 25

Session Five (8, 10 February) – **Habermas**

Calhoun et al., Chapters 30, 31 and 32.

Session Six (17 February) – **Non-representational sociology**

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. “Introduction: Rhizome” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Translated by B. Massumi. London: Verso.

Session Seven (22, 24 February) – **Race**

Calhoun et al., Chapters 27, 28 and 29.

► Attention: Short paper due on 22 February

Session Eight (1, 3 March) – **Gender**

Calhoun et al., Chapter 26

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40(4):519–31.

Session Nine (8, 10 March) – **Risk**

Beck, Ulrich. 1989. "On the Way to the Industrial Risk-Society? Outline of an Argument." *Thesis Eleven* 23:86–103.

Session Ten (15, 17 March) – **Modernity**

Calhoun et al., Chapters 33, 34.

Session Eleven (22, 24 March) – **Postmodernity**

Calhoun et al., Chapter 36

Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity; An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell. Chapter 3.

Session Twelve (29, 31 March) – **Post-colonialism**

Said, Edward. 1994. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage. pp. 31-72.

Session Thirteen (5, 7 April) – **Conclusion**

*No reading*

► Attention: Paper due on 5 April