

## **SOCI 3223 Contemporary Sociological Theory**

**First Term 2024-25**

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Time: 4:30-6:15pm Wednesday  
Venue: ARC G03

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### **1. Course Overview**

The Classical Age of European Sociology ended at around the 1920's. By this time all the three alleged founding fathers of Sociology— Marx, Weber, Durkheim— were dead. And European culture, with the impending onslaught of the WWII, would dwindle into trajectories of anxiety, extremism, and despair. Amidst this historical setting, European Sociology suffered with the marginalised academic world in general, and with its own loss of societal relevance in particular.

It is therefore not surprising that the rise of 'post-Classical', Contemporary Sociology shifted its focus onto the North American terrain, where the Western intellectual tradition at large would undergo redemptive transformations in many directions. Against this backdrop, American Sociology, and Sociological Theory in particular, were seen as imperative in staging a renaissance of the Sociological discourse, over and above the cultural and intellectual debris of post-War Europe.

The present course on Contemporary Social Theory will hence start with the case of the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, commonly seen as the foremost groundbreaking Sociological theorist of his time. Parsons assimilated European Classical Sociology on the one hand, and built his own framework of Structural-Functionalism on the other. His endeavours would mark the high-tide of the

development of American Sociology. The legacy of Talcott Parsons was however hotly debated after his death in 1979. And while the worldwide prominence of American Sociology was largely unquestioned, it undertook a somewhat empiricist turn after Parsons. Insofar as the development of Sociological Theory was concerned, American Sociology became increasingly technical and 'middle-ranged' from the 1970's onward.

The predominance of American Sociological Theory lasted from around the mid-Twentieth century— from the 1950's— down to the 1980's, again amidst dramatic changes in both the social and the intellectual worlds. This would be the era when the discipline of Sociology became highly influential both in the academic world and beyond. This would also be the time when Sociology came close to a Golden Age of its own. After Parsons, and after the downfall of Structural Functionalism in American Sociology, the zeal for social theorising would again reemerge in the alleged 'Postmodern' Europe. But Parsons' quest for Sociological Theory was played down by the Continental social thinkers, who generally invoked 'Social Theory' or 'Social Thought', as their intellectual focal subjects. After Parsons, prominent social theorists like Michel Foucault in France and Jurgen Habermas in Germany would develop their theories from outside the disciplinary boundary of Sociology as such. How their ideas and perspectives may yet prove relevant and fertile for the development of the Sociological field, is a theme that will preoccupy the post-Parsonsian development of Sociological Theory, and will be discussed in the latter parts of this course.

If time allows, the course would end with some forays into the Post-Millennial social world, which is as yet under-theorised because of its dramatic novelties and enigmatic proximities. But some contrasts of the Post-Millennial social world with the hitherto trajectories of modern society would be certainly helpful in the deepening of understanding and interpretation of Contemporary Sociological Theory.

## **2. *Lecture Schedule***

1. Ecology of Contemporary Social Theory
2. Talcott Parsons: Background and Foundation
3. Talcott Parsons: Action Theory
4. Talcott Parsons: System Theory
5. Talcott Parsons: Structural Functionalism, and Beyond
6. Michel Foucault: Archaeology
7. Michel Foucault: Genealogy
8. Michel Foucault: Bio-Technology
9. Michel Foucault: The Postmodern Watershed
10. Jurgen Habermas: The Rise of Critical Sociology
11. Jurgen Habermas: Public Sphere
12. Jurgen Habermas: The Linguistic Turn
13. Jurgen Habermas: Communicative Action and After
14. Towards the Post-Millennial Conditions

## **3. *Course Requirements***

1. Tutorial presentation and participation (25%)
2. Mid-Term essay (25%)
3. Final Take-Home Exam (50%)

\*Submission deadline of assessments will be announced in lecture.

#### **4. Academic Honesty and Plagiarism**

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at

<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>. Our Department also has a detailed guideline on academic citations <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/soc/citation.pdf>

With each assignment, students are required to submit a signed Academic Honesty Declaration Statement that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures. For assignment that is principally text-based and submitted via the VeriGuide system, the Academic Honesty Declaration Statement in the form of a receipt will be issued by VeriGuide upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment. Assignments without the receipt will not be graded by teachers. Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

#### **Collaboration with AI tools:**

Our University has guidelines on “Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools in Teaching, Learning and Assessments”. Students are required to acknowledge all functional uses of a generative AI tool and cite it when they paraphrase, quote, or incorporate into their own work any content (whether it is text, image, data, or other format) that was created by it. Use of AI tools with no citations and acknowledgements in the paper of this course will be treated as academic dishonesty and will be handled by the disciplinary committee

## **5. Assessment Rubrics**

### Grade descriptors

- A A thorough understanding of the course materials and an outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.
- A- A solid understanding of the course materials and an outstanding performance on almost all learning outcomes.
- B An adequate understanding of the course materials and a substantial performance, on average, on all learning outcomes.
- C A basic understanding of the course materials and a satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.
- D A partial understanding of the course materials and an inadequate performance on a number of learning outcomes
- F A poor understanding of the course materials and an unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.

# Contemporary Sociological Theory: Bibliography

(Works marked with \* are of higher relevance for the purpose of this course. Tutorial readings will be assigned during the first session)

## **A. General texts**

Calhoun, C. et al ed. (2007), Classical Sociological Theory, Blackwell Publishing (pt. VII on Structural-Functional Analysis)

Calhoun, C. et al ed. (2002) Contemporary Sociological Theory, Blackwell Publishing (\*Introduction)

Ritzer, G. & Stepnisky, J. (2002), Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots, Sage Publications

\*Seidman, S. (2017) Contested Knowledge-Social Theory Today, Wiley-Blackwell

Turner, J. (2012), Theoretical Sociology-1830 to the Present, Sage Publications (ch 9 and pt. II)

## **B. Ecology**

Alexander, J. (1987), Sociological Theory Since 1945, Hutchinson Press

\*Coser, L. (1977), Masters of Sociological Thought, HBJ press, (esp. chs. on American sociologists and \*recent trend)

\*Hawthorn, G. (1987), Enlightenment and Despair, Cambridge University Press (ch. 9)

Ross, D. (1991), The Origins of American Social Science, Cambridge University Press (esp. ch. 7)

Skinner, Q. ed. (1985), The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences, Cambridge University Press

### **C. Talcott Parsons**

Coser, L. (1956), *The Functions of Social Conflict*, Free Press, (chs. 1, 2, and conclusion)

Demerath, N. & Peterson, R. ed. (1967), *System, Change and Conflict*, Free Press

\*Gans, H. (1972), 'The Positive Function of Poverty', in *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78.

Gerhardt, U. (2002), *Talcott Parsons: An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge University Press

Gouldner, A. (1970), *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, Basic Books (p. 138-p. 167, and p. 199-246)

Hamilton, P. (1983), *Talcott Parsons*, Tavistock Press (chs. 1-4 for Action Theory, 5, 6, and conclusion for System Theory)

Hamilton, P. ed. (1985), *Readings from the Works of Talcott Parsons*, Horwood Press (pts. one and two for Action Theory, three and four for System Theory)

Jackson, T. (1977), 'Introduction' to Parsons, T. *The Evolution of Societies*, Prentice-Hall Press

Martel, M. (1980), 'Parsons, Talcott', in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, vol.18 (Biographical supplement), MacMillan Press

\*Merton, R. (197 ), 'Manifest and Latent Functions' in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press (also in Calhoun, C. et al ed. *Classical Sociological Theory*, Blackwell publishing)

\*Merton, R. (1949), 'On Sociological Theory of the Middle Range', in Calhoun, C. et al ed. *Classical Sociological Theory*, Blackwell publishing

\*Parsons, T. (1937), *The Structure of Social Action*, Free Press (chs. 1, 2, and conclusion)

Parsons, T. (1951), *Social System*, Free Press

Parsons, T., Beals, R. et al (1953), *Family, Socialisation and Interaction Process*, RKP press

\*Parsons, T. (1961), 'An Outline of the Social System', in Calhoun, C. et al ed. (2007), Classical Sociological Theory, Blackwell Publishing

Robertson, R. and Turner, B. ed. (1991), Talcott Parsons: Theorist of Modernity, Sage publications (chs. 1, 5, 8)

### **D. Michel Foucault**

\*Calhoun, C. et al ed. (2007), op. cit. (pt. IV, The Sociological Theory of Michel Foucault)

Foucault, M. (1972), The Archaeology of Knowledge, Tavistock Press

Foucault, M. (1975), The Order of Things, Tavistock Press

Foucault, M. (2006), History of Madness (abridged edition: Madness and Civilisation), Routledge Press

\*Foucault, M. (1980), Power/Knowledge, Pantheon Books (chs. 3, 6, 8)

Foucault, M. (1979), The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, Allen Lane

Lyotard, J-F, (1982), The Postmodern Condition, University of Minnesota Press

Miller, J. (1993), The Passion of Michel Foucault, Simon and Schuster

\*Rabinow, P. ed. (1984), The Foucault Reader, Pantheon Books (handy and well-classified selections of excerpts and short essays from Foucault)

Sheridan, A. (1990), Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth, Hutchison Book

Skinner, Q. ed. (1985), op. cit. (chs. on \*Foucault, Levi-Strauss, and Derrida)



## **E. Jurgen Habermas**

Bernstein, T. (1976), *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, HBJ press (pt. iv)

Brand, A. (1990), *The Force of Reason*, Allen and Unwin (pt. 1)

\*Calhoun, C. ed. (1992), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, M.I.T. Press (ch. 17)

\*Calhoun, C. et al ed. (2007), *op. cit.* (pt. VIII, *The Sociological Theory of Jurgen Habermas*)

Dews, P. (1986), *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jurgen Habermas*, Verso Books (chs. 4, 6)

\*Habermas, J. (199 ), *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, M.I.T. Press (pt. 5)

Habermas, J. (1971), *Knowledge and Human Interest*, Beacon Press

Habermas, J. (1984), *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2vols, Beacon Press

Held, D. (198 ), *Introduction to Critical Theory*, Polity Press (chs. 1, 3, 5)

Jay, M. (1973), *The Dialectical Imagination*, Heinemann press

McCarthy, T. (197 ), *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*, M.I.T. Press (ch. 2)

Rasmussen, D. (1990), *Reading Habermas*, Blackwell Books (chs. 3, 4)

\*Skinner, Q. ed. (1985), *op. cit.* (ch. on Habermas)