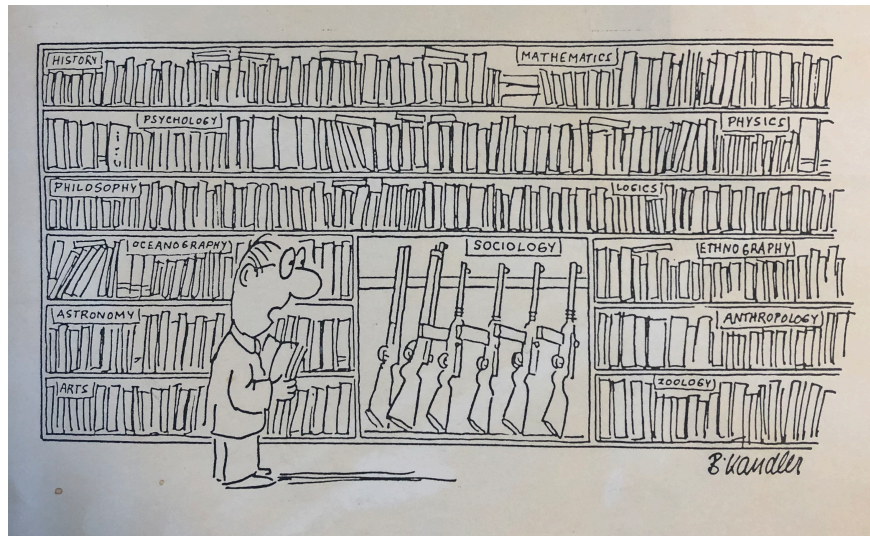


University of Colorado, Boulder
SOCY 5202-001: Contemporary Theory
Spring 2022
Thursday 3:30-6:00pm, KTCH 1B40
Mathieu Desan
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Office Hours: by appointment



Courses in “contemporary theory” are always idiosyncratic. This course is no exception. We consider authors such as Du Bois, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel canonical because they were pioneers in establishing sociology as a new discipline. But as the institutional and disciplinary position of sociology became more secure, and as the field fragmented into different specializations, the need to explicitly define and defend the scientific *raison d'être* of sociology declined, such that it has become harder to point to a common set of texts setting the theoretical agenda for the discipline as a whole. “Contemporary theory” typically designates what came after Talcott Parsons’s (briefly dominant, but ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to synthesize the classical tradition into a general unified sociological theory (i.e. structural-functionalism). In a sense, what defines “contemporary theory” is precisely the fact that there is no unitary thing called “contemporary theory.” It is a catch-all term that refers broadly to any theoretical work by sociologists or non-sociologists published after World War II that is relevant to sociologists. So “contemporary theory” is not necessarily “contemporary.” Neither is its designation as “theory” unproblematic. Many of what we now consider to be the classic texts of sociological theory were originally intended as contributions to empirical research. It is only over time that these texts have come to be considered more “theoretical” than “empirical.”¹ The distinction between “theoretical” and “empirical” has thus always been somewhat artificial, having less to do with any essential quality of a text than with its place in disciplinary discourse, and this holds true for many of the texts labelled “contemporary theory.” With some exceptions, the authors you will

¹ For an interesting discussion of this process with regard to Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, see Stefan Bargheer (2017) “The invention of theory: A transnational case study of the changing status of Marx Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis” *Theory and Society* 46: 497-541.

read in this course were/are active researchers addressing empirical, normative, methodological, and theoretical issues in sociology and the other human sciences. While we will be focused on the theoretical aspects of their work, it is important to keep in mind that their theoretical insights were often arrived at in the course of their concrete empirical work. One of the things I want you to reflect on over the course of this semester is what “theory” means and what its relation is to empirical research.²

In teaching a “contemporary theory” course, there are several important choices an instructor has to make. Do you structure the course around key concepts or key authors? Do you privilege breadth in coverage or depth of engagement? Do you limit yourself to capital-S Sociology, or do you take a more interdisciplinary approach? I have tried to split the difference on these questions, but you’ll notice a tendency to favor depth over breadth. In general, I have preferred to assign a single text from a single author in full rather than assign a collection of excerpts from multiple sources. The course is thus not meant to be a comprehensive survey, but the authors and texts I have assigned are generally considered to be among the most influential of the past 60 years, both inside and outside sociology.³ The material covered in this class is stuff that, as a sociologist and more generally as an intellectual, you should have some familiarity with. We cannot cover everything, but what we will cover will hopefully give you a sense of some of the defining theoretical issues and debates in “contemporary” sociology. More importantly, though, I hope that by engaging deeply with these texts, you develop your skills for thinking “theoretically” and come to a better understanding of the importance of “theory” in the production of scientific knowledge.

Course Modality

Class will meet in person when possible. All campus-wide COVID-19 safety measures apply (see below).

In case the class moves to a remote modality, you will need the following to ensure that that you can attend and participate effectively:

- A laptop or desktop computer
- A stable internet connection
- A working microphone
- A working webcam

If any of these pose a problem for you, please let me know ASAP so we can figure out a solution. I expect that you leave your cameras *on* during class when meeting remotely.

² On the different meanings of “theory” in sociology, see Gabriel Abend (2008) “The Meaning of ‘Theory’” *Sociological Theory* 26(2): 173-199.

³ For example, Pierre Bourdieu is arguably the most influential sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century (the most cited, in any case: <https://blog.oup.com/2015/07/pierre-bourdieu-us-sociology/>) which is why I’ve devoted two weeks to his work and largely structured the course around it.

Required Texts

You must acquire the following books. If acquiring any of them poses too much of a financial hardship, please speak to me about other ways of getting hold of the books. Used and electronic copies are fine. Other readings (articles, book chapters, etc.) will be posted on Canvas.

Howard S. Becker *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*

Pierre Bourdieu *Practical Reason*

Pierre Bourdieu *The Bachelor's Ball*

Judith Butler *Gender Trouble*

Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*

Erving Goffman *Asylums*

Abdelmalek Sayad *The Suffering of the Immigrant*

Expectations

Attendance and Participation: You are required to attend and participate in class. If you are unable to attend class (for health, family obligations, religious observance, etc.), please let me know in advance. Each *unexcused* absence will result in a 10% reduction of your final grade.

I am aware that students enter graduate school with different levels of experience and comfort with discussions. Being able to contribute to academic discussions is a crucial aspect of becoming a scholar, and this class is one of the places you will practice this skill. Please do not hesitate to ask questions, make mistakes, or disagree with others.

Readings: This is a doctoral seminar. As such, the reading load is substantial. You are expected to read all assigned material before coming to class. We will devote most of our class time to exploring the readings.

Please note that the readings can be difficult. If you are struggling to understand something in the reading, do not be discouraged. The important thing is to move forward and try to grasp the big picture. Often times, something that was unclear will only become clearer in hindsight, after you've read more. You are not expected to understand 100% of what you read, especially on the first pass. With that said, it is helpful to look up any words, names, events, etc. with which you are unfamiliar in the course of your reading.

As graduate students, you will be tempted to be critical of everything you read. This is great...so long as you also make a good faith effort to engage with the texts on their own terms. In my experience, it takes more work to be a generous reader than it does to be a critical reader. Cultivating a habit of generosity in engaging with other people's work is something that will make you a better scholar and serve you well in your careers. Your first instinct in reading a text should not be to find something to criticize, but to try and understand why the author wrote what they did in the way they did. What were they responding to? What questions were they trying to answer? Who were they in conversation with? What, given the epistemic and social contexts in which the authors wrote, was sayable and unsayable? In short, even if you find a particular text problematic or otherwise objectionable, I want you to make an honest effort to understand why many scholars consider these texts to be classics.

Respect: There are many ways to interpret the course readings and many competing views on the topics we will discuss, and I hope we will debate many contrasting viewpoints during the course of the semester. To facilitate good discussion, please keep in mind that we are debating ideas, not each other as individuals. This type of debate might take the form of "I disagree" instead of "you're wrong." Please keep the difference in mind so that we can engage in useful and vigorous discussion.

In the context of a graduate seminar, respect takes on an additional, specific meaning. In graduate seminars, there is a tendency to try to "show off" by "name dropping" (or, put more sympathetically, to make exciting intellectual connections to material outside the immediate scope of the class). This tendency can lead to stifled discussions and alienation as students who are unfamiliar with a particular thinker or concept are forced out of the conversation. Thus, as a rule, if you want to introduce a term or author that we have not explicitly discussed in the class, you must fully explain who the author is/was or the meaning of the concept, and then why that theorist or concept is relevant to our discussion. The goal here is not to prevent bringing in outside material, but to make sure that we can have a productive conversation.

Evaluation

Discussion questions/comments: Students are required to post at least one substantial question or comment (i.e. a paragraph or longer) on Canvas by the Wednesday before class. You may not have finished all the reading by then, but please plan on doing at least enough to be able to post a question/comment. Your post must be grounded in the texts, preferably referencing specific passages, and demonstrate that you have engaged with the readings. You are expected to read your classmates' questions before class and have them available to you during class.

In addition to this, every week at the end of class, I will ask for a volunteer to choose a question (or two) for the following week that they found particularly interesting, and to *briefly* explain their choice at the beginning of the next class. Everybody must volunteer at least once during the semester. **(30%)**

Response Papers: You must write four (5-6 pages double spaced) response papers. *At least one of these must be turned in before the start of Spring Break, while the rest can be turned in any time before the end of the semester.* Response papers can be on any topic related to the readings, but they should each deal with a mostly different set of readings. Responses must substantially engage with the course readings, but they cannot simply summarize the readings. You should think of these more like thought exercises than papers. The point is to think aloud in writing and say something interesting *about* the readings. **(40%)**

Class Participation: This being a seminar, students will be expected to participate *actively* and *consistently* in class. If you feel that you are not participating adequately, please come talk to me in office hours. **(30%)**

This class uses the standard Sociology Department grading rubric for graduate classes:

- A Consistently performed well above expectations for the course.
- A- Performs above expectations
- B+ Meets expectations for the class
- B Occasionally performed below expectations for the course
- B- Consistently performed below expectations for the course
- C Unsatisfactory work for a PhD student (incomplete or late work, missed classes, lack of participation in discussions, etc.)

Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1—Introduction

Thursday, January 13

- Bourdieu, Pierre, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1991 [1968]. *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*, pp. 1-38. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993 [1981]. "A Science That Makes Trouble" in *Sociology in Question*, pp. 8-19. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990 [1987]. "A Lecture on the Lecture" in *In Other Words*, pp. 177-198. (Canvas)

Week 2—Goffman and the Dramaturgical Approach

Thursday, January 20

- Benzecry, Claudio E. and Daniel Winchester. 2017. "Varieties of Microsociology" in *Social Theory Now* (eds. Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, Isaac Ariail Reed), pp. 42-74. (Canvas)
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums*, pp. 125-320.
- Sennett, Richard. 1973. "Two on the Aisle" *New York Review of Books*. (Canvas)

Week 3—Becker and the Sociology of Deviance

Thursday, January 27

- Becker, Howard S. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*.

Week 4—Structuralism and the Semiotics of Myth

Thursday, February 3

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. [1958]. "Structural Analysis in Linguistics and in Anthropology" in *Structural Anthropology*, pp. 31-54. (Canvas)
- de Beauvoir, Simone. 2015 [1949]. "A Review of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*" in *Feminist Writings* (eds. Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmermann), pp. 51-66. (Canvas)
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963 [1958]. "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structural Anthropology*, pp. 206-231. (Canvas)
- Barthes, Roland. 1972 [1957]. "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, pp. 107-164 (Canvas)

Week 5—Structuralist Marxism

Thursday, February 10

- Glucksmann, Miriam. 1974. *Structuralist Analysis in Contemporary Social Thought*, pp. 94-119, 139-157. (Canvas)
- Althusser, Louis. 1969 [1965]. "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*, pp. 49-79. (Canvas)
- Althusser, Louis. 1971 [1970]. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp. 127-186. (Canvas)

Week 6—Feminism, Materialism, Marxism

Thursday, February 17

- Delphy, Christine. 1984 [1977]. "Women in stratification studies" in *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*, pp. 28-39. (Canvas)
- Delphy, Christine. 1980 [1970]. "The Main Enemy" *Feminist Issues* 1: 23-40. (Canvas)
- Barret, Michèle and Mary McIntosh. 1979. "Christine Delphy: Towards a Materialist Feminism?" *Feminist Review* 1(1): 95-106. (Canvas)
- Delphy, Christine. 1980. "A Materialist Feminism is possible" *Feminist Review* 4: 79-105. (Canvas)
- Jimenez, Martha. 2019. "What's Material about Materialist Feminism? A Marxist-Feminist Critique" in *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction*, pp. 110-128. (Canvas)

Week 7—Intersectionality and Articulation

Thursday, February 24

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, pp. 139-167. (Canvas)
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 221-239. (Canvas)
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2015. "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas" *Annual Review of Sociology* 41: 1-20. (Canvas)
- Fields, Barbara J. 1990. "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181, pp. 95-118. (Canvas)
- Hall, Stuart. 2019 [1980]. "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Essential Essays, Volume 1*. Duke University Press, pp. 172-221. (Canvas)

Week 8—Bourdieu: Habitus, Symbolic Violence, and the Theory of Practice

Thursday, March 3

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990 [1987]. "From Rules to Strategies" in *In Other Words*, pp. 59-75. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990 [1980]. *The Logic of Practice*, pp. 52-65. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991 [1977]. "On Symbolic Power" in *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp. 163-170. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2007 [2002]. *The Bachelor's Ball*, pp. 1-96, 131-159, 165-200.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998 [1994]. *Practical Reason*, pp. 92-123.

Week 9—Bourdieu: Capital, Field, and Reflexivity

Thursday, March 10

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998 [1984]. *Practical Reason*, pp. 1-13, 19-34, 75-91, 127-145.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1975. "The Specificity of the Scientific Field and the Social Conditions of the Progress of Reason" *Social Science Information* 14(6): 19-47. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1983. "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed" *Poetics* 12: 311-356. (Canvas)
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2004 [2001]. *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, pp. 85-116. (Canvas)

Week 10—Sayad: The Double Absence

Thursday, March 17

- Pérez, Amin. 2020. "Doing politics by other means: Abdelmalek Sayad and the political sociology of a collective intellectual" *The Sociological Review* 68(5): 999-1014.
- Sayad, Abdelmalek. 2004 [1999]. *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, selections TBD.

Week 11—Spring Break

Week 12—No Class

Week 13—Foucault: Knowledge and Power

Thursday, April 7

Foucault, Michel. 1978 [1975]. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison*, pp. 3-31, 195-228, 293-308. (Canvas)

Foucault, Michel. 1978 [1976]. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*.

Week 14—Poststructuralism and Performativity

Thursday, April 14

Decoteau, Claire. 2017. "Poststructuralism Today" in *Social Theory Now* (eds. Claudio E. Benzecry, Monika Krause, Isaac Ariail Reed), pp. 251-277. (Canvas)

Haraway, Donna. 1985. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" *Socialist Review* 80: 65-108. (Canvas)

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp. vii-xxviii, 1-46, 175-203.

Week 15—Critical Sociology or the Sociology of Critique?

Thursday, April 21

Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, pp. 141-156. (Canvas)

Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" *Critical Inquiry* 30: 225-248. (Canvas)

Boltanski, Luc and Laurent Thévenot. 1999. "The Sociology of Critical Capacity" *European Journal of Social Theory* 2(3): 359-377. (Canvas)

Boltanski, Luc. 2011 [2009]. *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, pp. 1-49, 150-160. (Canvas)

Week 16— Postcolonial Sociology

Thursday, April 28

Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*, pp. 1-28. (Canvas)

Fanon, Frantz. 2008 [1952]. *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 89-119. (Canvas)

Go, Julian. 2013. "For a Postcolonial Sociology" *Theory and Society* 42(1): pp. 25-55. (Canvas)

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Classroom Behavior

Both students and faculty are responsible for maintaining an appropriate learning environment in all instructional settings, whether in person, remote or online. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation or political philosophy. For more information, see the policies on [classroom behavior](#) and the [Student Conduct & Conflict Resolution policies](#).

Requirements for COVID-19

As a matter of public health and safety, all members of the CU Boulder community and all visitors to campus must follow university, department and building requirements and all public health orders in place to reduce the risk of spreading infectious disease. Students who fail to adhere to these requirements will be asked to leave class, and students who do not leave class when asked or who refuse to comply with these requirements will be referred to [Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution](#). For more information, see the policy on [classroom behavior](#) and the [Student Code of Conduct](#). If you require accommodation because a disability prevents you from fulfilling these safety measures, please follow the steps in the “Accommodation for Disabilities” statement on this syllabus.

If you feel ill and think you might have COVID-19, if you have tested positive for COVID-19, or if you are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, you should stay home and follow the further guidance of the [Public Health Office](#) (contacttracing@colorado.edu). If you are fully vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, you do not need to stay home; rather, you should self-monitor for symptoms and follow the further guidance of the [Public Health Office](#) (contacttracing@colorado.edu). If you will be absent for class due to illness or quarantine, please notify me in advance so we can figure out an alternative way for you to participate.

Accommodation for Disabilities

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](#). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or dsinfo@colorado.edu for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) on the Disability Services website.

Preferred Student Names and Pronouns

CU Boulder recognizes that students' legal information doesn't always align with how they identify. Students may update their preferred names and pronouns via the student portal; those preferred names and pronouns are listed on instructors' class rosters. In the absence of such updates, the name that appears on the class roster is the student's legal name.

Honor Code

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Honor Code academic integrity policy. Violations of the Honor Code may include, but are not limited to: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Code (honor@colorado.edu; 303-492-5550). Students found responsible for violating the academic integrity policy will be subject to nonacademic sanctions from the Honor Code as well as academic sanctions from the faculty member. Additional information regarding the Honor Code academic integrity policy can be found on the [Honor Code website](#).

Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment and/or Related Retaliation

CU Boulder is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. The university will not tolerate acts of sexual misconduct (harassment, exploitation, and assault), intimate partner violence (dating or domestic violence), stalking, or protected-class discrimination or harassment by or against members of our community. Individuals who believe they have been subject to misconduct or retaliatory actions for reporting a concern should contact the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) at 303-492-2127 or email cureport@colorado.edu. Information about university policies, [reporting options](#), and the support resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#).

Please know that faculty and graduate instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when they are made aware of incidents of sexual misconduct, dating and domestic violence, stalking, discrimination, harassment and/or related retaliation, to ensure that individuals impacted receive information about their rights, support resources, and reporting options. To learn more about reporting and support options for a variety of concerns, visit [Don't Ignore It](#).

Religious Holidays

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. Please let me know if you foresee any scheduling conflicts due to religious observances.

See the [campus policy regarding religious observances](#) for full details.