

Contemporary Social Theory  
Mandatory Course  
4 credits  
Winter Semester 2014-2015

Instructor: Jean-Louis Fabiani

If we take a look backwards at the last thirty years of sociological theory, we may have mixed feelings. On the one hand, macro-sociological constructions ( in other words, « grand theory » ) seem to belong to a kind of metaphysical age of social sciences : it would be difficult to define oneself as a new Emile Durkheim or Talcott Parsons. A complete system of society would be hard to find today. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in social theory as such, Jeffrey Alexander being the best example of the revival of general theory.

As socio-anthropologists devoted to empirical research, we certainly do not dismiss the importance of theorizing in our disciplines: but, as Anselm Strauss said, it is possible to consider that the best theories are « grounded » in field research. Theories are means and not ends: they help us describe precisely the social worlds that we choose to study, and to develop general statements about them. We need theory to prevent us from over-interpretation, ethnocentrism and hasty generalizations, but we must be careful about pure theorizing.

The aim of this course is to propose a kind of « reconstructionist » approach to social theory, after decades of deconstruction. Of course, we have to take into account and to make use of deconstructionist approaches and of the various « turns » undertaken by sociology (linguistic, pragmatic, hermeneutic, historical and so on and so forth) : but we must propose new frames for comparison and generalization of statements and observations. Those frames must be reflexive and non-« essentialists », according to the

status of our objects (phenomenological and reflexive social worlds) ; they must contribute to the unended but unescapable discussion about the nature of the laws that we are able to determine in the social sciences.

A special attention will be given to theories that take into account their « grounded » dimension. After having defined conceptually the theorizing process, the seminar will draw attention on two types of theorization:

-the first may be called endogenous, is produced by sociologists who have to cope with the peculiarities of their field : Erving Goffman, Anselm Strauss, James Coleman, Andrew Abbott, Harrison White, Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot, Margaret Somers.

-the second, I call it exogenous, is not produced by empirical sociologists, but by philosophers or other theoreticians who are interested in historical or sociological processes : Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour.

Based on intensive reading of texts and confronting them with various sociological fields, this course aims at providing an original framework: a post interactionist and processual approach to social theory based on a critical study of the logical processes that lead us to make general or universal statements about society.

#### Learning outcomes:

Through the course, students develop an articulate, personal, and dialogical position on the following questions:

--How do I define theory and what do I need theory for? What use will I put it to in my empirical work? Is my work rather theory- or empirically-driven?

--Which methodological choices and practices do my preferred theoretical frame(s) imply?

--Which definitions of culture, agency, practice, knowledge, reflexivity, interpretation, power, structure, system, etc. are important to my work? How does my work fit in the long-term history of broader debates about these notions in the social sciences? In case I do not use some of these notions, what are the positive reasons not to?

--What is my position on the general questions of: \*is the concept of culture relevant to social theory today, and in what respect?\*what do we need a concept of power for? \*what is the critical potential of the notion of social system? \*what is the nature of the relationship, if there is one, between micro-level interaction and macro-level social systems? Is the micro-macro link a theoretical fiction or a real causal relationship, in particular? \*What do I do when I do research and theorize through sociology? What do I expect my activity as a social scientist to produce? Are my expectations well founded; are they meaningful in any publicly arguable way?

#### Requirements:

- Regular attendance and participation (15% of grade). One unjustified absence will not affect the participation grade.
- In-class presentation on a mandatory reading. The presentation offers a personal view of the text, as well as 2-4 clearly articulated questions to be debated collectively.
- Critical summary of a supplementary reading. (25%)
- One final paper: an essay and a bibliography. 3000 words (60%)

## Week 1

### Introduction

**A. What is Theory?** (Lecture)

B. Screening: Pierre Bourdieu. Sociology is a martial art

## Week 2 The Geopolitics of Theory

### **A. Lecture Theory from the South?**

B. Gabriel Abend, "The Meaning of Theory", *Sociological Theory* Volume 26, Issue 2, pages 173–199, June 2008

Raewyn Connell. 2006. "Northern social theory: The political geography of general social theory. *Theory and Society* 35: 237-64.

## Week 3 The Meaning of Theory

A. Fuchs, Stephen, *Against Essentialism*, ch 1

B Judith Butler : *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (1990), New York, Routledge, ch 1

"Towards a Theory of Discursive Practice" in Herbert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982)

Week 4

4 The Organization of Experience

**A. Lecture Interaction Rituals**

B. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 1974, ch 2

Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 1974, ch 3 and Margaret Archer, "Morphogenesis vs Structuration: on combining structure and action", *British Journal of Sociology*, 1982, 33:4

Week 5

The Theory of Practice

**A. Practice, routine, improvisation** (lecture)

B. Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, ch. 2 and 3.

Week 6 The Practice of Practice

A Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Introduction, chapters 7 and 8

B Dona Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial perspective" in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge, 1989.

Charles Taylor (1994) "To follow a rule" in LiPuma et al. *Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, Chicago: U of C Press.

Ann Swidler. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies" *American Sociological Review* 51:273-86.

7 Rational Choice Theory

**A. How Rational are we?** (Lecture)

B. James Coleman, *The Foundations of Social Theory*, ch 7 and 9.

Margaret Somers – 'We're no angels: Realism, rational choice, and relationality in social science?', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol 104, 1998

Week 8      The Social Link

A. **Societies, Associations, Networks** (Lecture)

B. Bruno Latour “How to Keep the social flat, first and second move”, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford, 2005

Mustafa Emirbaier, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology”, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 103 (1997)

Week 9      Marxism or Post-Marxism?

A. **Making Sense of Marx** (Lecture)

B. Moishe Postone “Necessity, Labor and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism”, *Social Research*, 45-4 (1978)

Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright, “Sociological Marxism”, *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, (Jonathan Turner, ed.), 2002

Michael Burawoy, *Marxism after Communism* (video, CriticAtac)

Week 10 Eventful Theory

A. **The Return of the Event** (Lecture)

B. William Sewell Jr William H. Sewell Jr. 1996. “Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology” Pp.245-280 in Terence McDonald (ed.) *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*. Michigan.

Andrew Abbott, chapter One, *Time Matters. On Theory and Method*, Chicago, 2001

Week 11 Time and Social Explanation

A. Tilly, Charles. 1994. "The Time of States". *Social Research*, vol.61, no2, pp. 269-295.

B. Tilly, Charles. 2005. "Why and How History Matters", in Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, editors, *Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Calhoun, Craig. in Terrence J. McDonald, ed., *The historic turn in the human sciences*,. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Week 12 On Critique

A. **What is critical sociology?** (Lecture)

- B. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot, *On Justification*, Preface and Afterword, Princeton, 2001  
Luc Boltanski, *On Critique*, chapter 4.  
Jean-Louis Fabiani, "The two Boltanskis", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2011, n°14-3, 401-406