THE FIRST WISDOM OF SOCIOLOGY IS THIS:

Things are not what they seem.

- Peter Berger

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Welcome to the Contemporary Social Theory course. In second year, you were introduced to thinkers such as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim who are regarded as central figures of the nineteenth century to think through the problems associated with the development of modern western capitalist, society and the relationship between the individual and society. This course builds on from the second year Theory and Society course where you were introduced to the value of social theory in helping us to make sense of our social world. The third year course aims to familiarise you with developments, continuing debates, and arguments that have animated sociology and cognate disciplines in recent years. In this course, we will examine some of the main theoretical perspectives in contemporary sociology and, a number of key questions will be addressed: the central theoretical principles that inform them, their most important thinkers, and some examples of their applications to social research

This course is contemporary in three distinct and refreshing ways. In the first instance, students will be introduced to intersectionality as a theoretical approach to explore the relationships between multiple dimensions of social relations and inequalities: gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. In this way, the course begins by engaging a branch of scholarship rooted in Black feminist thought. Secondly, the course, in the men and masculinities theory section, offers students an opportunity to witness ‘Africanising’ of theory in action. In this way, students will get an opportunity to engage practical application of decolonial theories. Thirdly, this course queers theory by challenging and problematizing rigid identity categories, norms of sexuality and gender, and the oppression and violence that such hegemonic norms justify. In essence, this course will introduce students to theory that is intersectional, decolonised, and queer.

In essence, the focus of this course will be on current ideas and debates about what social theory means for us today. The overarching aim of this course is to introduce students to the epistemological, methodological, and political questions posed by postmodern sociological thought. By the end of this course, students should possess adequate knowledge of key approaches and debates in contemporary sociological theory, and the capacity to use sociological theory to construct social research questions.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

While social theory literature can be intellectually stimulating, it can also be dense and require a lot of conceptual thinking and critical thought. **For this reason, you are urged to attend ALL lectures.** Failure to attend lectures will impact negatively on your understanding of the theorists covered in the course. You are strongly advised to read as widely as possible on the topics below.

Your in-term class mark will comprise 40% of your overall mark for this course. The class mark will be made up of two tests, which will each involve the writing of one essay. A three-hour examination written in November carries 60% of the entire course mark.

**Test dates:** 8 March & 29 March

COURSE READINGS AND LECTURES

There are no prescribed texts assigned for this course. Rather, for each of the four parts of the course, specific readings are listed. **All of the textbooks listed under each section have been placed on short loan in the library.** It is imperative that you do reading throughout this course. Ongoing reading will enable you to make the content of the course your own. Additional readings will occasionally be sent via email.

There will be no lectures on Monday. The lectures for the course will be on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. In the Friday slots (except for the dates of the class tests), instead of lectures, there will be class discussions based on an assigned reading.

WEEK 1: SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIZING AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITIES

When identity is covered in many disciplines, different categories are often deconstructed and taught separately (class, race, sexuality, gender and so forth). Moreover, if intersectionality is
taught, it is frequently as an additional consideration to the categories rather than as a theoretical and methodological framework in and of itself. In this section, students will explore the theoretical framework of intersectionality by engaging with a wide range of texts from across disciplines. At the core of intersectionality theory is the premise that there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle. Intersectionality is often taught in Feminist studies as such the legacy and influence of Black feminist thought will be emphasized in this section. My hope in including it here is that by the time you finish your studies you will possess a perspective that is sensitive to the workings of multiple axes of difference, such as gender, race, ethnicity, etc.

By the end of the section, students should:

- Have acquired an understanding of Crenshaw’s ideas about intersectionality and the different forms thereof; and
- Have acquired knowledge of how multiple axes of differentiation, such as gender, race, class, intersect and how these may be articulated and discussed in complex ways.

ESSENTIAL READINGS


**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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**WEEK 2 & 3: MEN AND MASCULINITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY RESEARCH**

Sociological research and theorizing on men and masculinities has grown exponentially over the last decade. In this section, we will explore constructs of masculinity within contemporary culture using a sociological lens. We will also examines the notion that there are multiple masculinities that intersect with a range of areas including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and gender identity. This section is divided into two parts. On the one hand, there is research and theorizing from the Global North, which tends to assume a canonical position in ‘scholarship circles’. On other hand, there is interesting research and theorizing which not only questions the ‘supposed’ canon but also rejects it as inapplicable in contexts outside the North. My hope is that students will get to see decolonial theorizing in action.

By the end of this section, you should:

- Be able see and understand gender as a social practice;
- Understand the hierarchies of manhood and their place in our local realities;
- Have an adequate understanding of hegemony;
- Be able to critique the ‘canon’ using your own lived realities; and
- Understand narratives about violent masculinities.


**MASCULINITIES THEORISING OUTSIDE THE NORTH**


**MASCULINITIES AND VIOLENCE**


**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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**WEEKS 4 & 5: QUEER(ING) SOCIAL THEORY**

From the beginning, queer theory is linked to sociology. The term ‘queer theory’ covers a very broad area of scholarship that is difficult to summarise. Jagose, for instance, observes ‘queer’ as a category in the process of formation ... ‘It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics’. Queer theory as an epistemological perspective began to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a response to the essentializing consequences of prior movements such as the civil rights movement (1950s to 1960s) and, the gay liberation movement (1960s to 1980s). Teresa de Lauretis, an academic and critical theorist, coined the phrase “queer theory” to serve as the title of a conference that she organised in 1990 at the University of California.

In his introductory essay to *Fear of a Queer planet: Queer Politics and Social theory* (1994), Michael Warner envisions queer theory as a social theory with more far-reaching consequences than simply the inclusion of GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual) into the already existing social theories. Queer theory critically examines the way power works to institutionalize and legitimate certain forms and expressions of sexuality and gender while stigmatizing others.

By the end of this section, students should:
Have an adequate comprehension of the history of the term ‘queer’ and the meanings thereof;

Be familiar with the key thinkers in queer theory as an epistemological perspective and the key themes, concepts, and debates within the field; and

Be able to describe how sexual identity, orientation, and desire are socially constructed.


**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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**WEEK 6: FOUCAULT’S POST-STRUCTURALISM: POWER, DISCOURSE, DISCIPLINE, CONTROL**

The second-year *Theory and Society* course introduced you to structuralism, the agency-structure duality and Pierre Bourdieu’s constructivist-structuralist perspective. This section will now progress to Foucault’s post-structuralism and his ideas about concepts such as power, discourse, discipline and governmentality. Foucault and the rich field of theoretical and empirical work inspired by his thinking currently play a prominent role in the social sciences. Foucault gives an analysis of political power and its institutions, which are crucial to understanding the world we now live in. In this section, we will seek to understand Foucault’s claim that modern societies are characterized less by freedom and autonomy than by discipline and docility.

By the end of this section, you should:

- Have acquired adequate knowledge about Foucault’s ideas regarding the creation and regulation of individuals, and populations through the use of power; and
- Have acquired an understanding of how to use these concepts in empirically-based research.


**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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**WEEK 7: REVISION**

This week is set aside for revision, questions, exam preparation and, course review. *Again, you are urged to attend all lectures.*