Studying Social Life

Syllabus

Course number: ELEC-GG 2740 (Graduate Elective; Proseminar by permission)
School: Gallatin School, New York University
Term: Spring 2012
Meeting time: Wednesdays, 6:20-8:40
Instructor: David Moore
Contact: 1 Washington Place, room 408
david.moore@nyu.edu
Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2-5; Wednesdays, 1-5

Overview

The primary function of this course is to help students to become more conversant with a variety of theories and methods in the social sciences; secondarily, it should help you develop ideas and skills that might move you toward a thesis. Some of you have strong backgrounds in one or another of the major approaches to understanding social life: psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, etc. But most of you have not had the chance, except perhaps in the Proseminar, to engage a wide range of approaches germane to the themes of your concentrations. Since your studies now are unusually interdisciplinary, it will be important for you to become at least generally familiar with the underlying assumptions, claims, questions, and methods of several schools of thought and approaches to research and practice. The course will expose you to a number of these approaches, and encourage you to figure out how some of them might help you develop your themes.

Let me illustrate what I mean by schools of thought or approaches to the study of social life. Some of you may be working with the concept of community, a prominent idea in social theory and practice. One could define that phenomenon as an objective “social fact” (cf. Durkheim) constituted by a variety of institutional structures, roles, and norms serving particular locality-relevant functions (Warren); that is, one could work from a structural-functionalist position. Alternatively, one could regard community as a set of relationships centered on shared symbols or meanings (Cohen); that is, one could draw on a semiotic tradition. Or one could see contemporary community as a fluid, fragile, multifaceted form of experience that shifts in shape and meaning depending on individual preferences and situations (Maffesoli); that is, one could adopt a post-modernist stance. As we will see, even these categories are contested and permeable – but it’s important to know that they exist and to work out a useful approach of your own as you embark on your work toward a thesis. This will be true whether your theme is community, identity, globalization, social change, or any other problematic within the study of social life.

Obviously, the course cannot “cover” all forms of social theory. Instead, our work together will be organized around a sequence of themes and activities that you will be able to tailor to your own interests and needs. Here, then, is the general plan for the course: After the initial introduction, we will first explore a number of theoretical perspectives on social life: positivist, structuralist, functionalist, interactionist, constructivist, post-modernist, and so on. We will try to
identify their key assumptions and claims about the nature of social phenomena, the kinds of questions they ask and the sorts of theories they propose. Second, we will spend a couple of weeks in a whirlwind tour of methods in the social sciences: experiments, tests and measures, participant-observation or ethnography, focus groups, discourse analysis, etc. You will not achieve “mastery” in any of those methods in two weeks, of course, but you should emerge with a feel for the options; you will come back to one or more of them in your individualized work for the course. Then the bulk of the course will be structured around three (arbitrarily defined and contestable) levels of social phenomena: studies of the person (issues such as emotion, cognition, learning); of the group (phenomena like community, organization, and network); and of the society (concepts like class and opportunity, demographic changes, and patterns of belief). Within each of the three levels, we will engage in three different kinds of activities: discussions of common readings; visits from Gallatin faculty members doing work in related areas; and presentations by students in the class about their own work.

In process and style, therefore, the course will be highly participatory: You will contribute your own thoughts and insights to the conversation; you will engage with working scholars from the faculty; you will develop your own themes and methods and share them with the class. The class will succeed only on the foundation of your active participation.

The Work

You will produce several kinds of work as part of that participation:

- **Response papers:** in advance of about eight of the class sessions, you will write short papers (<1 page) about the assigned and discovered readings. Those commentaries will be sparked (but not exhaustively determined) by questions provided by the instructor, and will be posted on the course Blackboard site so everyone can read them.

- **Unit papers:** at the end of each of the “level” units (person, group, society), you will write a paper exploring some aspect of that perspective on social life, preferably as it bears on your own concentration theme(s). Two of those papers will be relatively short (8-10 pp.), and one will be more substantial (15-20 pp.). The longer paper will constitute the basis of the presentation.

- **Presentation:** Once during the semester, you will be responsible for presenting a paper on a question/topic of major importance, partly illustrating an approach to one of the levels of social phenomena (and very possibly problematizing that perspective) and partly raising issues related to your own studies and work, perhaps to your thesis.

In each of these forms of work, you will be encouraged to grapple with issues and concepts related to your own thematic areas, to make them useful to your whole program of study. The papers, presentations, and other activities will manifest high levels of academic quality and integrity.
Policies

Here are several policies that you should be aware of as a participant in the course:

- **Academic integrity**: As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction in accordance with the Student Discipline Rules of the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Please read the Gallatin website page on academic integrity; you will be responsible for knowing this policy: [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html)

- **Attendance**: Since the course relies heavily on the active participation of all members, you will be expected to attend every session, to arrive punctually and to stay until the end of class. (Please do not make commitments elsewhere that result in your missing part of any class session.) You are entitled to *one excused absence* without its having an impact on your grade; please notify me in advance if you will not be present one evening. Absences beyond that one *will* affect your course grade, particularly in the participation element.

- **Grades**: This course is graded, and grades are based on rigorous academic standards. That means that “A” grades will be awarded for unusually strong work that draws on a wide range of materials (including some from outside the assigned readings) to construct unusually sound, insightful, and well-expressed arguments or analyses; “B” work will reflect a solid grasp of the ideas and methods we read about and discuss. The following general elements will be taken into account, though *not* in a strictly statistical way; that is, the weight of each listed component is only approximate, and may vary depending on students’ strengths:
  - **Participation**: regular, punctual attendance; participation in class discussions and Blackboard conversations (ca. 35%);
  - **Papers**: response papers (ca. 10% total); short papers (2 @ ca. 10 % each); long (ca. 25%);
  - **Presentation**: leading a class discussion about your own work as it relates to concepts, issues, and theories raised in class (ca. 10%).

- **Lateness and incompletes**: Response papers will be posted on the course Blackboard site by 3 pm on the day of class when the respective readings will be discussed. The unit papers (both short and long) will be submitted by email (to david.moore@nyu.edu) before the student-presentation class sessions (see the calendar below). Proposals for the presentation sessions will be handed in no less than one week before the session. In each case, late papers will receive significantly reduced grades. Students may receive an Incomplete for the course *only* in case of documented illness or family emergency; a request for an Incomplete must be submitted no later than the final class session.
**Calendar**

The following chart presents the initial version of the schedule plan for the course, including themes, specific reading and writing assignments, faculty guests, and student presentation dates. As we collaborate on developing the details, these plans might change depending on students’ interests and needs.

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<th>#/Date</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Assignments/Activities</th>
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<td>1. 1/25</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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| 2. 2/1 | **Theoretical perspectives 1:** positivist, structuralist, functionalist | *Paper:* your basic research interests and perspectives (post on Blackboard)  
*Readings:* on methodologies, theories  
*Schutt, Chs. 1, 2 (1-52)*  
*Delanty, Ch. 1 (11-38)*  
*Turner, Chs. 1, 2, 3, 4 (1-42)(BB)*  
*Optional:*  
*Delanty & Strydom, Introduction, Part 1 intro (1-25); selections by Durkheim (26-30), Parsons (51-54), and Quine (57-61)(BB)* |
| 3. 2/8 | **Theoretical perspectives 2:** interactionist, interpretivist, constructivist, critical, postmodern | *Readings:*  
*Delanty, Chs. 2, 3 (39-76)*  
*Flyvbjerg, Chs. 1, 2, 3 (1-49)*  
*Hall, Ch. 1 (13-74)(BB)*  
*Optional:*  
*Turner, Ch. 26 (343-358), Ch. 31 (412-424), Ch. 41 (552-558)(BB)*  
*Delanty & Strydom, Part 2 introduction (85-98); selections by Weber (107-120), Geertz (187-190), Goffman (202-205)(BB)*  
*Geertz, “Thick Description” (link on BB)* |
| 4. 2/15 | **Methods 1:** quantitative/positivist | *Readings:*  
*Schutt, Chs. 4, 6, 8 (pp. 91-131, 171-199, 233-285)* |
| 5. 2/22 | **Methods 2:** qualitative/interpretivist/post-positivist | *Readings:*  
*Schutt, Chs. 9, 10 (pp. 286-356)*  
*Stake, Chs. 1, 2, 3 (pp. 11-70) (BB)*  
*Schatzman and Strauss, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-17)(BB)* |
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| 6. 2/29 | **Focus 1: The Person** (emotion, cognition, learning) | *Readings:*  
  *Strongman, Chs. 3 (21-37), 4 (38-51), 6 (75-99)(BB)  
  *Tversky and Kahneman, “Judgment” and “Decisions” (BB)  
  *Dewey, Ch. 1 (pp. 1-13)(BB)  
  *Iliris, Chs. 1, 2, 3 (pp. 1-29)(BB) |
| 7. 3/7  | Guests 1: Meredith Theeman and Pat McCreery | TBA                                                                       |
| 8. 3/14 | No Class: Spring Break |                                                                           |
| 9. 3/21 | **Student work 1:** presentations and discussions | *Unit Paper #1 due (3 pm, via email)*                                   |
| 10. 3/28 | **Focus 2: The Group** (community, organization, network) | *Readings:*  
  *Erickson, Part 1, esp. Chs. 1, 2, 3 (1-71)  
  *Geertz, “Deep Play” (link on BB)  
  *Christakis and Fowler, Preface and Ch. 1 (xiii-32)(BB) |
| 11. 4/4 | Guests 2: Kim DaCosta and Rosalind Fredericks | TBA                                                                       |
| 12. 4/11 | **Student work 2:** presentations and discussions | *Unit Paper #2 due (3 pm, via email)*                                   |
| 13. 4/18 | **Focus 3: The Society** (class, demographics, globalization) | *Readings:*  
  *Erickson, Chs. 6, 7 (107-174)  
  *Bellah, Chs. 1, 2 (3-51)* |
| 15. 5/2 | **Student work 3:** presentations and discussions | *Unit Paper #3 due (3 pm, via email)*                                   |
| 16. 5/9 | Final: wrap-up, thesis talk |                                                                           |

**Faculty guests**

- **Kimberly DaCosta**: production of racial boundaries; advertising and race
- **Rosalind Fredericks**: postcolonial identities in Africa; cultural politics of garbage collection in Dakar, Senegal
- **Patrick McCreery**: sexual politics; childhood and family life
- **Ali Mirsepassi**: political Islam; tradition, cosmopolitanism and democracy
• Vasuki Nesiah: transitional justice, international law
• Meredith Theeman: environmental psychology; seasonal mood/behavior change

Texts

Required (purchase at NYU Bookstore on Broadway)

• Erickson, Frederick, Talk and Social Theory: Ecologies of speaking and listening in everyday life. Malden, MA, 2004.

Excerpts on Blackboard (others may be posted as needed)

• Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture.” Online at: <http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/Geertz_Thick_Description.php>
• Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight.” Online at: <http://rfrost.people.si.umich.edu/courses/MatCult/content/Geertz.pdf>