Proseminar: Theory and Methods in the Social Sciences

CORE-GG 2025
Fall 2015
1 Washington Place, room 401

Description: This seminar, designed for incoming M.A. students, provides a broad introduction to theories and methods that have shaped the interdisciplinary terrain of the social sciences. The course emphasizes the reading of classic and more contemporary works of social theory and methodology, with a focus on key concepts and thinkers. How does one define a society? What is culture? How have social and cultural processes been understood? What is the relationship between a society or culture and a social group, an institution, or an individual? What is the nature of power, difference and identity? How do such foundational questions generate theories of modernity, capitalism, nationalism and globalization? How do such foundational questions orient the variety of disciplines within the social sciences? The course also surveys qualitative and quantitative methodologies, exploring the relationship between theory, methods, and the broader goals of research within the social sciences. Empirically grounded writings will explore the links between research frameworks, methodologies, data collection and theoretical claims.

Class Structure: The first half of every class will be devoted to exploring the theoretical and methodological texts assigned, teasing out the key ideas and perspectives of the authors and discussing how these might influence how we understand the study of society. During the second half of class we will put these theories and methods to work: collectively and collaboratively applying these frameworks to concrete social phenomenon, asking ourselves what observations, evidence, categories, descriptions and analysis are proposed by the approaches we have studied, and using these to draft appropriate plans for research.

Requirements:
1) Attendance, diligent reading, and active participation in all class discussions: 25%  
2) Three 10 page essays over the course of the semester (only necessary to meet 3 out of 4 due dates): 60%  
3) Weekly reading response posts on NYU Classes: 15%

Learning Goals:
- Introduce students to core theoretical texts in the social sciences
- Introduce students to multiple methodologies in use in the social sciences
- Introduce students to the basic questions that drive the social sciences
• Demonstrate how enquiry, theory and methodology work together
• Create a foundation for interdisciplinary study from a social sciences perspective.

Books:
- Gianpaolo Baiocchi, et al. *The Civic Imagination*
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol 1*
- Kristin Luker, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut*
- Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, *The German Ideology*
- Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
- Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*
- Sigmund Freud, *Dora*

Essays and Selections:
- Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”
- Theodor Bestor, “How Sushi Went Global”
- Julie Bettie, selections from *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*
- Ngina Chiterji and Darrick Hamilton, “Family Matters: Kin Networks and Asset Accumulation”
- Ngina Chiterji and Darrick Hamilton, “Estimating the Effect of Race and Ethnicity on Wealth Accumulation and Asset-Accumulation Patterns”
- Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, “Worthy and Unworthy Victims” from *Manufacturing Consent*
- Emile Durkheim, “What is a Social Fact?”
- Emile Durkheim, “The Cultural Logic of Collective Representations” from *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
- Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (selection)
- Robert Emerson, et. al *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition* (selections);
- James Ferguson, selections from *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*
- Jay MacLeod, selections from *Ain’t No Makin’ It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*
- Barbara Miller, “Anchoring” White Community: White Women Activists and the Politics of Public Schools”
- Kristin Luker, selections from *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*
- Karl Marx, “Thesis on Fuerbach”
- Karl Marx, “Commodity Fetishism,” from *Capital, vol. 1*
- C. Wright Mills, “The Promise” from *The Sociological Imagination*
- Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
- Saskia Sassen, “Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization”
- Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”
- William Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structure: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille”
Books can be ordered online through Amazon, Alibris, Powells and other stores (many can be bought used, some may be found free online, and sharing is encouraged) and will be on reserve at Bobst. All of essays and selections can be accessed, for reference purposes only (do not copy or download) via NYU Classes “Resources.”

**Semester Schedule:**

**Sept 8**
**What is a Social Question?**

**Sept 15**
**Marx**
READ: Karl Marx, “Thesis on Fuerbach,” “Commodity Fetishism,” and *The German Ideology*; and Jay MacLeod, selections from *Ain’t No Makin’ It*

**Sept 22**
**Weber**

**Sept 29**
**Durkheim**
READ: Emile Durkheim, Excerpts from *The Division of Labor in Society* and “The Cultural Logic of Collective Representations”; and Kristin Luker, selections from *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*

**Oct. 6**
**Freud**
READ: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* and *Dora*; and Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
DUE: Essay #1

**Oct. 13**
No Classes, Legislative Day

**Oct. 20**
**Foucault**
READ: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol 1*; and James Ferguson, selections from *The Anti-Politics Machine*

**Oct 27**
**Race**
READ: W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; and Barbara Miller, “Anchoring” White Community: White Women Activists and the Politics of Public Schools’
Nov 3  Gender
DUE: Essay #2

Nov 10  Globalization

Nov 17  The Case Study
READ: Gianpaolo Baiocchi, et al. *The Civic Imagination*
GUEST: Gianpaolo Baiocchi

Nov 24  Ethnography
READ: Robert Emerson, et. al *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition* (selections); Rosalind Fredericks, TBA
GUEST: Rosalind Fredericks
DUE: Essay #3

Dec 1  Documents, Content Analysis and Coding
READ: Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, “Worthy and Unworthy Victims” from *Manufacturing Consent*;
GUEST: Stephen Duncombe

Dec 8  Interviews and Surveys
GUEST: Kimberly Dacosta

Dec 15  Quantitative Analysis
READ: TBA
GUEST: Mary Killilea
DUE: Essay #4
Appendix

Assignments:

ONE: *Weekly*, posted on NYU Classes: Brief summation, less than a page, of what the week’s reading made you think about in terms your research interests. In other words: how were the readings useful? Your answer cannot be, “They were not useful”. Even if that is the case, humor me.

TWO: Three, ten page, essays:

2 of A
1 of B

A) Generating ideas, questions and categories that help you think about things in the world.

Pick a text. What ideas, questions, categories (as well as perhaps: observations, description, evidence and analysis) does the author use? How does the author do this?

Pick a social phenomenon. Informed by this author’s method, how would you approach your topic?

B) Devising a methodology that helps you analyze things in the world.

Pick a text in which a research methodology was used. What was the method, or methods? How were they used done? How was the data contextualized? How were the findings presented? What is gained and what is missed from using this method?

Pick a social phenomenon. Informed by this author’s method(s), how would you apply them to your topic?

THREE: You must sign up once this semester to present your research interests in relation to that week’s readings. How can you begin to think about your research topic in relation to the theoretical perspectives of the texts for that week? What kinds of specific questions does the theoretical framing enable you to ask about your topic? What does it not illuminate? What methodological implications might this framing have for your topic?