

**ST. THOMAS UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**

Sociology 3023 – Contemporary Sociological Theory, Fall 2021

Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30-3:50PM ECH G11

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Office hours: by appointment (email to schedule a zoom meeting)

Course Description

This class in contemporary sociological theory will explore key themes in our discipline. We will be picking up the strands of classical sociological theory, and extending them into our present. This class is taking place against the backdrop of momentous historical change: the mutation of neoliberal capitalism into something entirely new; a pandemic that is killing millions of people; an economic crisis that is pushing hundreds of millions of people into poverty and homelessness; an ecological emergency that we seem unable to address without destroying our economy; and the continuing permutations of global inequalities that warp global social relations and that pervade understandings of global society, particularly amongst relatively privileged global groups. We are living through what the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci called an ‘organic crisis,’ the complete upending of our cultural, political, economic, and even environmental way of life. From this, something new must come, perhaps better, but maybe worse.

Our main task in the class will be to acquire a greater understanding of how modern societies work, and how to situate ourselves within them. What are the key objects we study when we study sociology? What are we supposed to pay attention to? Why is sociology also so often a normative discipline—in other words, it doesn’t just describe social reality, but also engages in debates about how society should be different than it is. This latter point is particularly important given our current historical moment. Readings for the class focus on theoretical approaches that interpret our modernity and give us a better sense of where we have come from, who we are, and where we might be going.

How will the course be run?

This fall, we are back in person, but we are back in person in an unknown set of circumstances. The pandemic is not over. If you are feeling sick, please do not come to class. We will catch you up later if need be. If you are not fully vaccinated, get vaccinated ASAP! In addition to the risk of death (albeit not very high for your age group), you are at risk of developing long-term symptoms of chronic fatigue—like having mono all the time. This is known as long-Covid, maybe you have heard of it. One study had half of young adults who had Covid experience symptoms for longer than 6 months. Other studies have the percentage closer to 12% after 18 weeks. You do not want this. The risks of the virus far

outweigh the risks of the vaccines, including in your age group.

Don't take my word for it, read what the experts say:

Nature is one of the top science journals in the world, and there has been a lot of concern about young people: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01935-7>

And Science Daily reporting on the findings of a study published on young adults in *Nature Medicine*: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/06/210623113911.htm>

News from the UK, where 106,000 young people are experiencing long Covid:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/aug/10/what-is-happening-to-me-teenagers-long-covid>

Due to the high risks posed by the ongoing pandemic, we will remain masked while in class for the time being—even when speaking. If it becomes possible to change that later this fall, of course, we will!

In the likely event that classes go online (I certainly hope they won't but no point pretending it is not a possibility), our class meetings will take place on Teams at the regularly scheduled time. Classes will be synchronous on Teams, I am not intending to post lectures.

Office meetings are also online. Please email me to arrange a time. I am always available to meet one on one over the internet. I will also field any and all questions over email.

I will make use of forum discussions on the moodle page to open additional space for dialogue and class discussion, and I will monitor that periodically. Participation and discussion on the forums will count towards your participation grade of 10%. So if you are quiet in class or on Teams (in the event we revert to Teams), you can still demonstrate your engagement with the course online.

Course Material

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*. London: Routledge, 1984.

Joe Sacco, *Paying the Land*. New York: Macmillan, 2020.

Coultard, Glen, *Red Skin, White Masks*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Other course texts are available on Moodle.

If you are interested in doing the optional reading for Week 6, you will want to purchase Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, Malden MA: Polity Press, 2012.

Full bibliographic information for course readings is provided below.

Assessment:

Participation: 10%

4 commentaries on course readings, 5% each, total: 20%

Commentaries should run 300-600 words (approximately 1-2 pages, double

spaced) and focus on the readings (not the lecture). Commentaries will respond to questions that will be posted regarding each set of readings. In the event that commentary questions are not posted by the time you want to work on the commentary, at the end of each week's readings are a series of keywords. Your commentary can also define one or two of those key concepts and discuss how they relate to the reading.

Mid-term take home exam, due October 26th: 30%

The mid-term will be composed of two answers running 1250-1500 words each and will encompass material up to week 6. It will be distributed October 12th.

Week 7 Assignment: 10%

This week, you will be doing what is essentially a reflection assignment, but a little bit more elaborate. You will be asked to apply specific concepts to empirical material, which you will gather either in everyday conversation, or on social media. Length: 600-800 words, e.g. 2 pages. Assignment will be handed out October 19th, and will be due November 2nd.

Final take home exam, due December 16th: 30%

The final will be composed of *two answers*, running 1500-1800 words *each*, and will encompass material from the whole course, but will focus primarily on material from weeks 8-13. Though there will be some choice in which questions you can answer, you will have to select from a group of questions that will relate to Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land*. It will be distributed December 7th.

Plagiarism

Please abide by St. Thomas's policy on academic honesty. Anti-plagiarism software will be used in this class. In a third-year course, cases of plagiarism from the internet or from other sources will be dealt with rigorously. If you are in doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me or consult the academic honesty guidelines in the STU calendar. If you need extra time to finish assignments, please contact me.

Readings:

Weeks 1, 2 and 3: Pierre Bourdieu and Field Theory (September 9, 14, 16, 21 and 23)

Week 1 readings:

Ritzer, George and Douglas J. Goodman. 2004. "Habitus and Field," in *Modern Sociological Theory*, 6th edition. Boston: McGraw Hill, pp. 387-398.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1986) 'The Forms of Capital' in Richardson (ed) *The Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241-258.

Weeks 2 and 3 readings:

1. Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *The Social Space and its Transformation, Distinction*, Chs 2-3: pp. 93-108; 122-123; 162-163; pp. 165-171.
2. Ch. 4, *The Dynamics of the Fields*: 223-254. Ch. 7, *The Choice of the Necessary*, pp. 375-385.
3. Selections (empirical interview transcripts from the book), Ch. 5: 271-275 (the grand bourgeois). Contrast with pp. 392-394 (the effects of working for somebody else).

Bourdieu's work is paramount to modern sociological theory, and particularly to attempts to bridge critical sociology to empirical research on inequalities. We will study his main concepts of social field and habitus and discuss in detail how our own lives are wrapped up with economic, cultural and social capital, symbolic power, and social distance. We will also look at how the Oedipal Complex plays out in a society rapidly changing in terms of distribution of capitals and opportunities for social mobility. We will try to use these ideas to understand the contemporary social and political scene.

Keywords: field; habitus; capital; symbolic space; practice; distinction.

Weeks 4 and 5: Ulrich Beck and Risk Society (September 28, 30, October 5 and 7)

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. [1986] *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage.
Ch 1: *On the Logic of Wealth Distribution and Risk Distribution.*, pp. 19-50.
Ch. 7: *Science Beyond Truth and Enlightenment*, pp. 155-182.

We look at the risks of industrial society and how these change the contours of modernity and modernization, as they have been understood by the classics of sociological theory. The development of this type of society is a major factor determining the condition of our social lives today and well into the future. We will also discuss the global challenge of carbon pollution, and how this brings into being a new type of global society, calling for new political agents of change.

Keywords: Risk; risk distribution; risk tolerance.

Week 6: Love and Emotion in the Risk Society – Eva Illouz (October 12 and 14)

Illouz, Eva. 2012. *Why Love Hurts*. Malden MA: Polity Press.

Ch 1: Introduction, *The Misery of Love*, pp. 1-17

Ch 2: *The Great Transformation of Love or the Emergence of Marriage Markets*, pp. 18-23; 40-58 (optional, whole chapter, pp. 18-58).

(optional) Ch 3: *Commitment Phobia and the New Architecture of Romantic Choice*, pp. 59-71ff.

This week we add a more structural analysis to the topic of love and relationships. Love, like other human sentiments, is caught in the gear of social change, which, as Karl Marx famously put it, turns all that is solid into air. The readings for this week are more than 20 years apart, but draw out some of the socio-structural transformations—labour market trends, individualization, changing gender relations, the rise of homosexual relationships and the growing acceptance of alternative relationship and family forms—that have profound influences on the loves we can live.

Week 7: Cultural Sociology and Individualism in Contemporary American Life

(October 19 and 21)

Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, New York: Perennial, pp. 3-51.

This week applies a sociological imagination to cultural life, and to the ways individuals justify and make sense of their dispositions and actions. We will engage with American cultural sociology. As an example of this work, we will historicize our own individualism, and our attachment to particular types of individual projects and individualistic ways of living with the help of Robert Bellah's classic work. This week, students will learn to identify different forms of individualism present in the arguments in favour of vaccine mandates, as well as anti-vaxxers and those opposed to mask mandates.

Keywords: Religious individualism; republican individualism; utilitarian individualism; expressive individualism

Week 8: Jeff Alexander, Cultural Sociology and Cultural Trauma (October 26 and 28)

Alexander, Jeff. 2004. Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by J. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. Smelser and P. Sztompka. University of California Press, pp. 1-30. (This reading is available as an e-book through the HIL library)

Alexander, Jeff. 2016. Cultural trauma, morality and solidarity: The social construction of the 'Holocaust' and other mass murders. *Thesis Eleven* 132(1): 3-16.

Jeff Alexander is the leading theorist of cultural sociology, an approach that builds on Emile Durkheim's key concepts of solidarity and collective effervescence. We will be thinking about Alexander's work on the cultural understandings of the Holocaust and their importance to post-World War II international human rights regimes and global societal democratization. We will also explore how his cultural sociology might help us understand the trauma process that Canada is now entering.

Keywords: Cultural trauma; trauma process; solidarity; radical evil; inclusion/exclusion; responsibility; circle of the we

Week 9, 10, 11: Decolonization, Recognition, and Canada (November 2 and 4; November 16, 18, 23 and 25)

Sacco, Joe. 2020. *Paying the Land*, Macmillan.

-this is a 260 page graphic ethnography

Coulthard, Glen. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks*, University of Minnesota Press. Intro, Chs 1 and 2, pp. 1-78.

(optional: Coulthard, the whole book)

Over these three weeks we will explore the trauma process in Canada, and delve into the coloniality of the Canadian state, and of the day to day lives of settlers in this territory. We will be doing this primarily from a standpoint that attempts to see modernity and modernization from the vantage point of indigenous people. Our readings focus on the Dene of the Northwest Territories, who were colonized relatively recently, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s. This standpoint estranges us from many of the things we assume about colonialism and its distance from the present (since it is an ongoing process).

Joe Sacco's graphic ethnography will take us to the Northwest Territories, to explore how Dene in the Mackenzie Valley interpret the transformation that has taken place on their territory and in their lives. Glen Coulthard provides an epistemological critique of colonization and the politics of recognition that is the primary way that the colonial Canadian state has sought to address indigenous sovereignty, which it is unable to address. Together, these readings provide us with a standpoint for reconsidering what Canada is, as well as the ongoing settler colonialism in New Brunswick and what that means from different social positions here.

Keywords: recognition; decolonization; extractivism; essentialism / anti-essentialism

Week 12: Animism and the Anthropocene (November 30 and December 2)

Shono Yoneyama. 2021. Miyazaki Hayao's Animism and the Anthropocene. *Theory, Culture, and Society* Online First.

Bird-David, Nurit (1999) 'Animism' revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology. *Current Anthropology* 40 (sup: S67–S79).

This week explores epistemological critiques of modernity from a standpoint in decolonial sociology and anthropology that takes the epistemological claims of animism seriously. We will explore various ways that these critiques help sociologists think about the arbitrary separation of humans and nature, which is the foundation point of 'Western' culture.

Keywords: animism; Shintoism; kami; epistemology; dualism

Week 13: Gender, Sexuality, Identity and Colonialism (December 7 and 9)

Palmater, Pamela. 2011. A Mi'kmaq woman. *Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, pp. 14-27 (pp. 22-27 outline the argument of her book).

Maria Lugones. 2007. Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System. *Hypatia* 22(1): 186-209.

This week we will explore the way that gender and sexual identities have been shaped by colonialism and colonial legal regimes, that imposed heterosexual categories and patrilineal traditions on colonized peoples.

Keywords: Heterosexualism; coloniality; identity; belonging