

**University of Trento – School of Social Sciences
PhD Program in Sociology and Social Research – 2020/2021**

**MAIN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY**

Instructor: Prof. Domenico Tosini (University of Trento)

SLIDES AND ASSIGNMENTS AVAILABLE AT GOOGLE DRIVE > UNITN.IT > DOMENICO TOSINI:
<https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B75f1HuMrwpMbTNZQzZFNGISQ0E&usp=sharing>

OBJECTIVES

The course examines some of the main theoretical perspectives in contemporary sociology. A number of key questions are addressed: the central theoretical principles that inform them, their most important thinkers, and some examples of their applications to social research. Our review begins with an overview of the paradigms of the rational choice theory and methodological individualism, focusing on the Raymond Boudon's contribution. This is followed by a discussion on the micro-sociological and interpretative approaches, particularly the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. Previous approaches form a first source of critiques of the functionalism *à la* Parsons, which are paralleled, since the 1950s, by those of conflict theorists. Here, we consider the example of Lewis Coser. Part of the contemporary sociology are also macro-sociological elaborations, among others Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory and Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. The final session of the course deals with more recent advancements in contemporary sociology, particularly the work of the analytical sociologists engaged in theorizing dynamics and interchanges involving micro- and macro-levels of social phenomena.

Class schedule and teaching method

A 12-hours course (3 hours a week for 4 weeks) based on the analysis and discussion of specific reading assignments.

REQUIREMENTS

No specific previous information on the course's content is required as a prerequisite. Class attendance and reading assignments will be critical components of the course experience. "Further readings" are optional and recommended to those students who would like to deepen some aspects. Additional references and didactic materials might be provided in class, during office hours, or by e-mail.

OFFICE HOURS

Room 19 at the Department of Sociology and Social Research – Via Verdi 26, 3rd floor. The instructor is mostly available on Wednesday, 11.30 – 13.00 pm. (<https://goo.gl/iHDupZ>)

CONTACT DETAILS

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COURSE OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Session 1. The Post-Parsonian Constellation

On the basis of a critical analysis of Talcott Parsons' theoretical synthesis, the course begins with a preliminary classification of the most important approaches in contemporary sociology.

Key questions: How can we classify post-Parsonian theoretical perspectives? How can we assess the sociology in our times? What are its main achievements and limitations?

Reading assignments

Holmwood, John 2009. 'Contemporary Sociological Theory: Post-Parsonian Developments.' Pp. 38-59 in *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, edited by Bryan S. Turner. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Further readings

Joas, Hans and Wolfgang Knöbl 2009. Chapters 2-4 (pp. 20-93). *Social Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Merton, Robert K. 1968. Chapters 2-3 (pp. 39-138). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.

Hedström, Peter 2005. Chapters 1-2 (pp. 1-33). *Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Rule, James B. 1997. Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 1-48). *Theory and Progress in Social Science*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Sociological Forum 1994. Special Issue: What's Wrong with Sociology? *Sociological Forum* 9 (2) (stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/i227630>).

Session 2. The Rational Choice Theory

An overview of the approaches associated with the paradigms of rational choice theory, focusing on the Raymond Boudon's analysis of assumptions and limitations of the rational choice models.

Key questions: Which theoretical principles characterize the rational choice theory? How has this perspective been developed and applied in contemporary sociology? Who are its most important thinkers?

Reading assignments

Boudon, Raymond 2009. 'Rational Choice Theory.' Pp. 179-196 in *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, edited by Bryan S. Turner. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

Further readings

Coleman, James 1990. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-26). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Elster, John 2007. Chapters 11-12 (pp. 191-231). *Explaining Social Behavior*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Goldthorpe, John H. 1998. 'Rational action theory for sociology.' *British Journal of Sociology* 49 (2): 167–192.

Joas, Hans and Wolfgang Knöbl 2009. Chapter 5 (pp. 94-122). *Social Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Lindenberg, Siegwart 2001. 'Social Rationality as a Unified Model of Man (Including Bounded Rationality).' *Journal of Management and Governance*, 5 (3-4): 239-251.

Session 3. Micro-Sociological Accounts

An examination of the key ideas of the symbolic interactionism – particularly the original contributions of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer's discussions of the macro-sociological accounts of individual behaviors.

Key questions: Which theoretical insights identify the symbolic interactionism? Who are its most important scholars? How do they view society and social research?

Reading assignments

Joas, Hans and Wolfgang Knöbl 2009. Chapters 6-7 (pp. 123-173). *Social Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Further readings

Blumer, Herbert 1986 [1967]. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-60). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Garfinkel, Harold 1967. Chapter 1 (pp. 1-34). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Mead, George Herbert 1967. Part II (pp. 42-134). *Works of George Herbert Mead*. Vol. 1: *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hilbert, Richard A. 2009. 'Ethnomethodology and Social Theory.' Pp. 159-178 in *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, edited by Bryan S. Turner. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Schütz, Alfred 1967 [1932]. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press.

Session 4. Conflict Theories

An analysis of the conflict theories which, particularly since Lewis Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956), have challenged system-theoretical views of society and proposed an alternative understanding centered on the crucial role that conflict and power play in social relations.

Key questions: Which theoretical principles inform the constellation of conflict theories? How has this perspective been elaborated in contemporary sociology? Who are its most important thinkers?

Reading assignments

Joas, Hans and Wolfgang Knöbl 2009. Chapter 8 (pp. 174-198) and Chapters 14-15 (pp. 339-400). *Social Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Further readings

Bourdieu, Pierre 1998 [1994]. *Practical Reason: on the Theory of Action*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Coser, Lewis 1956. *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: The Free Press.

Dahrendorf, Ralf 1959 [1956]. Chapter 5 (pp. 157-205). *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press.

Foucault, Michel 1995 [1975]. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books Edition.

Rule, James B. 1988. *Theories of Civil Violence*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Session 5. System-Theoretical Perspectives and Beyond

An overview of Niklas Luhmann's new theoretical synthesis inspired by recent advancements within systems theory and a look at Jürgen Habermas' sociological theory aimed at overcome limitations affecting both system-theoretical perspectives and interpretative approaches.

Key questions: How has Luhmann's theoretical framework been applied to conceptualize and explain the nature and transformations of human societies? What distinguishes Habermas' work from those of systems theorists and interpretative thinkers?

Reading assignments

Joas, Hans and Wolfgang Knöbl 2009. Chapters 10-11 (pp. 222-280). *Social Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Further readings

Habermas, Jürgen 1989. Chapter 3 (pp. 273-338) and Chapter 6 (pp. 113-198). *Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, Jürgen 1996 [1992]. Chapters 1-2 (pp. 1-81). *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Luhmann, Niklas 2000 [1995]. Chapters 1-4 (pp. 5-133). *Art as a Social System*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, Niklas 2004 [1993]. Chapters 2-4 (pp. 76-210), Chapters 6-7 (pp. 230-304) and Chapter 10 (381-422). *Law as a Social System*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Luhmann, Niklas 2013 [2002]. *Introduction to Systems Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Polity.

Tosini, Domenico 2006. 'Medium as a Basic Concept of Sociology.' *Social Science Information* 45 (4): 539-560 (DOI: 10.1177/0539018406069589).

Session 6. Analytical Sociology

An introduction to the recent work of a number of scholars engaged in theorizing the dynamics and interchanges involving micro- and macro-levels of social phenomena.

Key questions: What distinguishes analytical sociology from other sociological perspectives? Which theoretical and methodological principles guide its contributions? Who are its main scholars?

Reading assignments

Hedström, Peter and Petri Yllosoki 2010. 'Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences.' *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 49-67 (DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102632).

Further readings

Demeulenaere, Pierre (ed.) 2011. *Analytical Sociology and Social Mechanisms*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Hedström, Peter 2005. *Dissecting the Social: On the Principles of Analytical Sociology*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Hedström, Peter and Peter Bearman (eds.) 2009. *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hedström, Peter and Richard Swedberg (eds.) 1998. *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

Manzo, Gianluca 2010. 'Analytical Sociology and its Critics.' *European Journal of Sociology* 51 (1): 129-170 (DOI: 10.1017/S0003975610000056).