

**Contemporary Social Theory**  
**Soc 201**  
**Wellesley College**  
**Spring 2007**

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PNE 329  
Office Hours: Wed 10-12  
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Course Description and Objectives

This course offers an overview of important twentieth-century social and cultural theories, with special emphasis on modern and postmodern explorations of human identity and selfhood. Students will:

- Understand the connections between classical and contemporary social theories
- Trace the development of 19<sup>th</sup> century themes through 20<sup>th</sup> century social theory
- Further develop their capacity to read and “unpack” complex theoretical texts
- Extend their vocabulary of key analytical concepts
- Use contemporary theoretical concepts to interpret social and cultural phenomena

Required Texts

*Civilization and its Discontents*, by Sigmund Freud, W.W. Norton 1961.  
*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, by Erving Goffman, Doubleday 1959.  
*Discipline and Punish*, by Michel Foucault, Vintage Books 1995.  
*Modernity and Self-Identity*, by Anthony Giddens. Stanford U Press 1991.

Additional required readings in E-reserve section of course conference

Course Requirements

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|---|-----|
| • Class attendance & participation              | 13% |
| • Reading reflections                           | 32% |
| • Essay: Cultural analysis / Theory application | 25% |
| • Take-home final exam                          | 30% |

## Proposed Course Outline & Schedule\*

**\*The schedule is subject to revision; changes will be announced in class and posted on the course conference**

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Readings to be completed</u>
I. Intro/overview	1/30	“Questions of Identity”
	2/2	Alexander “The Centrality of the Classics”
II. Freud & the irrational	2/6	Freud <i>Civilization and its Discontents</i> Rieff “Reflections on Psychological Man in America”
	2/9	Blumer “Society as Symbolic Interaction” Begin Goffman <i>The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life</i>
III. Symbolic Interaction & The Presentation of Self	2/13	Complete Goffman <i>Presentation of Self</i> Goffman “The Interaction Order”
	2/16	Horkheimer “Traditional & Critical Theory”
IV. Critical theory (The Frankfurt School)	2/20	Marcuse “Some Implications of Modern Technology” Habermas “The Public Sphere”
	2/23	Horkheimer & Adorno “The Culture Industry”
	2/27	Simmel “The Metropolis and Mental Life”; Excerpts from <i>The Philosophy of Money</i> “The Conflict in Modern Culture”
V. Theorizing our Time: Modernity & Postmodernity	3/2	begin Giddens <i>Modernity and Self-Identity</i>
	3/6	complete Giddens <i>Modernity &amp; Self-Identity</i>
	3/9	Ritzer “The McDonaldization of Society” & “Enchanting a Disenchanted World”
	3/13	Bauman “Sociology After the Holocaust” & “Modernity and Ambivalence”
	3/16	Catch-up / TBA
	3/19-23	Spring Break

	3/27	Bauman “Sociology and the Postmodern” & “The Self in Consumer Society”
	3/30	Baudrillard “Consumer Society” & “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media”
VI. Power & the embodiment of the self	4/3	Foucault Selections from <i>Discipline &amp; Punish</i>
	4/6	Elias “The Social Constraint Toward Self-Constraint” & “Shame & Repugnance”
	4/10	Turner “An Outline of a General Sociology of the Body” & “The Discourse of Diet”
	4/13	Featherstone “The Body in Consumer Culture”
VIII. Feminist Theory	4/17	Lorber “The Socially Constructed Body” Butler “Subversive Bodily Acts”
	4/20	Smith “Women’s Experience as a Radical Critique of Sociology” Collins “Transforming the Inner Circle: Dorothy Smith’s Challenge to Sociological Theory”
	4/24	Collins “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination”
	4/27	Gramsci Selections from “The Prison Notebooks” Bell “The Coming of Post-Industrial Society”
IX. Hegemony & Cultural Distinction	5/1	Bourdieu “Social Space and Symbolic Power” & “Distinction” Willis “Common Culture”
	5/4	Castells “The Global Network” Beck “World Risk Society” Hall “Cultural Identity & Diaspora”
X. Theorizing the Global World	5/8	Wrap-up

## Reading Reflections

These short writing exercises are designed to encourage you to concisely summarize and critically reflect upon theoretical readings. Reflections should be *no more than 1000 words*. They should be submitted as attachments to the “drop” subconference before the beginning of the class for which the reading is assigned. You may choose which readings you wish to write about, but you may only submit one reflection per week. You must complete at least 4 reflections by March 16 and a total of at least 8 reflections over the course of the semester.

Beyond concisely summarizing key theoretical concepts, you may find it helpful to consider some of the following questions (although you should not feel limited by them):

- What is the theorist’s broader conception and characterization of the current epoch of human society (“modernity,” “postmodernity,” etc.), including its central problems and likely tendencies?
- What is the theorist’s conception of human nature and identity and how is this expressed in the selection?
- How does the theorist explicitly or implicitly draw on or criticize the works of classical social theorists?
- How does or how might the theorist extend and/or criticize the ideas and approach of another theorist we have read?
- What key questions does the theorist leave unexamined or unanswered and why?
- What further application might these theoretical ideas have in understanding current problems or real-world phenomena?
- What kind of empirical research agenda or methodology might follow from this theoretical base?

These reflections are critically important to your learning in the course, and will be evaluated accordingly. They are an incentive for you to allow plenty of time for reading and reflecting on these theoretical pieces, and they should encourage you to “process” what you are reading as we go along, rather than waiting for an exam to begin to pull it all together. Evaluation standards:

- ∅ Papers which are not minimally adequate will not receive credit
- √- Demonstrates completion of the reading but shows room for marked improvement in comprehension, conceptual clarity, and/or written communication
- √ Demonstrates basic conceptual comprehension and summary of the reading
- + Demonstrates added depth of theoretical comprehension by “unpacking” difficult or interrelated concepts in a well-written and concise manner; attempts to assess the theorist’s location within the theoretical discourse or offer some application of concepts
- ☺ Insightfully engages the reading; clearly and concisely communicates full theoretical comprehension; successfully engages in metatheorizing about the theorist’s location in theoretical discourse and/or offers relevant and insightful extension or application of the theorist’s ideas

## **Application and Analysis Essay**

Write a theoretical essay, choosing one of the formats described below. Suggested length for essays: 9-10 pages. However, the guiding principle on essay length is quality. Strive to be both thorough and concise. Due: April 13

### **Theory application**

Apply a theoretical concept or concepts to some aspect of contemporary life. The paper should summarize and explain the concept(s) being used and

- (1) use the concept(s) to make sense of some contemporary social phenomenon, event, issue, or problem;
- (2) use the concept(s) and related theoretical ideas to forecast some development regarding the phenomenon;  
and/or
- (3) explain how the concept should be altered or theoretically extended in light of the realities presented by the phenomenon.

### **Cultural analysis**

Use a theoretical concept(s) from the assigned readings to analyze some contemporary cultural text (e.g., a motion picture, novel, music lyrics, speech, etc.). The paper should summarize and explain the concept(s) being used and

- (1) explain how the work demonstrates the concept(s);
- (2) show how the concept(s) deepened your appreciation of the work;  
and/or
- (3) critique the work using the concept(s).

## **Course Policies**

This course will abide by the following **grading system** outlined by the Wellesley College Articles of Government (Book II, Article VII, Section 1):

Grade A is given to students who meet with conspicuous excellence every demand which can fairly be made by the course.

Grade B is given to those students who add to the minimum of satisfactory attainment excellence in not all, but some of the following: organization, accuracy, originality, understanding, insight.

Grade C is given to those students who have attained a satisfactory familiarity with the content of a course and who have demonstrated ability to use this knowledge in a satisfactory manner.

Grade D is a passing grade. There is no grade of D+ or D-.

Grade F denotes failure and a loss of credit for the course.

**Academic honesty** is expected of all students in accordance with the Wellesley Honor Code. Suspected honor violations relating to course work in this class will be reported to the General Judiciary.

**Late papers and exams will not be accepted, except in cases of extreme emergency** (such as hospitalization, death of a family member). Minor illnesses, over-scheduling, and perfectionism do not constitute emergencies. However, if you have had a major disruption in your life and need extra time, I am willing to work with you; in such cases, please make a request as early as possible. Similarly, except for special cases, **I do not distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. More than 4 absences during the semester will result in no credit for class attendance and participation.** Please come to class on time.

**I will gladly make necessary accommodations for students with disabilities.** Those needing accommodations are encouraged to work with either Jim Wice or Barb Burck in the Pforzheimer Learning and Teaching Center in Clapp Library to make appropriate arrangements.

I strongly encourage students to **schedule an appointment to meet with me individually** in my office at least once during the first half of the semester. This can be either during my office hours or at some other agreed-upon time. If at any point in the semester you are experiencing difficulty with the course material or requirements, please make an appointment to see me.

\*\*\*Disclaimer: The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus. Any changes will be announced in class and posted on the course conference.