

15.S14: Social Theory

Nathan Wilmers

Fall 2025

wilmers@mit.edu

Office: e62-338

Class Room: e62-346

<https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/34734>

Tuesday 2:30-5:30pm

Course Description

Social theory tries to explain order outside of sheer coercion and competitive market prices. Solidarity, status, network ties, identity and culture: social dynamics explain much oppression and inequality and also define visions of freedom and successful collaboration. This course provides an overview of social theory, drawing mainly from sociology, supplemented with political economy, history and anthropology. The substantive readings will be oriented toward employment, markets and firms, but with an emphasis on the underlying insights that guide research on these topics.

The course is organized thematically, mixing classical and contemporary theory development efforts. The first half of the semester will be 'micro' (social ties and embeddedness; norms and externalities; groups and closure processes; status and styles of life; identity) and the second half 'macro' (roles; hegemony and coercion, cognitive structures and culture; imagined communities; political economy).

Term paper

The main written assignment for this course is a 20-page final paper. One option is a pure theory paper, in which the student works out a new idea. Another option is to develop an empirical test of an idea engaged in the course. The specific terms for this paper will be discussed and agreed upon between student and professor in late October, with an outline due in mid-November.

Schedule

Tuesday, September 9: Social ties as collateral

- Granovetter, Mark. 1985. "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91(3): 481–510.
- Tooby, John, & Cosmides, Leda (1996). "Friendship and the banker's paradox," In *Evolution of social behaviour patterns* (pp. 119–143). Oxford.
- Greif, Avner (1993). "Contract enforceability and economic institutions in early trade: The Maghribi traders' coalition," *The American Economic Review*, 83(3), 525–548.

Tuesday, September 16: Groups and closure processes

- Sørensen, Aage B. (2000). "Toward a Sounder Basis for Class Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 105(6): 1523–1558.
- Wimmer, Andreas (2008). "The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(4), 970-1022.
- Patterson, Orlando. (1982). *Slavery and Social Death*. Harvard. [selections]
- Said, Edward. (1978). "Interpretive Geography," *Orientalism*.

Tuesday, September 23: Norms and externalities

- Gellner, Ernest. (1981). *Muslim Society*. Cambridge Univ. Press. [selections summarizing Ibn Khaldun]
- Jack P. Gibbs, "Norms: The Problem of Definition and Classification," *American Journal of Sociology* 70(5):586–594 (1965) [focus on Table 1 matrix]
- Coleman, James S. (1990). "The Demand for Effective Norms" and "Social Capital." In *Foundations of Social Theory*.
- Bicchieri, Christine (2005). *The Grammar of Society, "The Rules We Live By,"* (pp. 8-42 selection) Cambridge University Press
- Young, Iris Marion. (1990). "Five Faces of Oppression." In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
- Thompson, EP, "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century." *Past & Present* 50.1 (1971): 76-136.

Tuesday, September 30: Status and styles of life

- Hadot, Pierre. (1995). *Philosophy as a Way of Life* [selections]. Blackwell.
- Weber, Max. (1922) [1978]. "Class, Status, Party." In *Economy and Society*, ed. Roth & Wittich, UC Press.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard. [selections]
- Henrich, Joseph, and Francisco Gil-White. "The Evolution of Prestige: Freely Conferred Deference As a Mechanism for Enhancing the Benefits of Cultural Transmission," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 22, no. 3 (2001): 165-96. [skim; focus on 'summary of argument']

Tuesday, October 7: Identity as conviction

- Hegel, G. W. F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," Translated and edited by Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. (1986). *Veiled Sentiments* "Identity in Relationship." UC Press.
- Brubaker, Rogers, & Frederick Cooper. (2000). "Beyond 'Identity.'" *Theory and Society* 29(1): 1-47.
- Hall, Stuart. (1996). "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Becoming National: A Reader*.

Tuesday, October 14: Roles and interpolation

- Ralph H. Turner (1956) "Role Taking, Role Standpoint, and Reference-Group Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology*, 61: 316-328
- Althusser, Louis. (1971). "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy*.
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. (1940) "On joking relationships." *Africa* 13.3: 195-210.
- Foucault, Michel. (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, "Introduction" and "Perverse Implantation." Pantheon.

Tuesday, October 21: No class (LEAD week)

Tuesday, October 28: Hegemony beyond coercion

- Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). Read: "The Formation of Intellectuals" (pp. 5-14); "Political Struggle and Military War" and "The Transition from the War of Manoeuvre to War of Position" (pp. 229-239).
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. "Social Structures of the Public Sphere," *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press.
- Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Contested Exchange: New Microfoundations for the Political Economy of Capitalism," *Politics & Society* 18, no. 2 (1990): 165-222.
- Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright, "Coercion and Consent in Contested Exchange," *Politics & Society* 18, no. 2 (1990): 251-266.

Tuesday, November 4: Cognitive-social structures

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1969). *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* [Selections]. Beacon.
- Durkheim, Émile. (1995) [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, "Conclusion" . Free Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1940). *The Nuer* (selections). Oxford.
- Swidler, Ann. (1986). "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51(2): 273–286.

Tuesday, November 11: No class (Veterans Day)

Friday, November 18: Systematic distortions

- Marx, Karl. (1976) [1867]. "Commodities." In *Capital*, Vol. I. Penguin.
- Horkheimer, Max, & Theodor W. Adorno. (1944). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "The Concept of Enlightenment;" "The Culture Industry."
- Scott, James C. (1998). *Seeing Like a State*, "Nature and Space." Yale.
- Steinmetz, George. (2007). "Introduction," *The Devil's Handwriting*. U Chicago Press.

Tuesday, November 25: No class (Thanksgiving week)

Tuesday, December 2: Communitarianism and social cohesion

- Tönnies, Ferdinand (1887). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* [a few selections; read these as aphorisms, rather than a sustained argument].
- Nisbet, Robert A. (1953) *The Quest for Community*, "The State as Revolution," Simon and Schuster.
- Deneen, Patrick. (2018). *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale.

Tuesday, December 9: Political economy

- Robinson, Cedric J. (1983). *Black Marxism*. Zed Press.
- Hämäläinen, Pekka. (2008). *The Comanche Empire*, "The Empire of the Plains." Yale.
- Harvey, David. (1989). *Condition of Postmodernity*. Blackwell.
- Hall, Peter A. & David Soskice (eds.). (2001). *Varieties of Capitalism*. Oxford.