NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

SOC 375: Contemporary Social Theory

Instructor: Paul Semm Phone: 619-286-5254

E-mail: psemm@mail.sdsu.edu

Course Meets: Mon, Wed, and Sat (2)

Spectrum Center

Required Text:

Ritzer, George. Modern Sociological Theory. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007. Ed.7.

Kivisto, Peter. Social Theory: Roots and Branches. Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2007. Ed.3.

Directed Readings

**Course Description**:

This course examines the major social theories and social theorists from the 1930s to the present. The course also investigates the historical, social, intellectual, and biographical contexts within which contemporary social theories have developed and the extent to which these contexts inform current sociological research and thinking.

There will be four main emphases throughout the course. The first emphasis will be on two of the theoretical paradigms that have shaped sociological inquiry - structural functionalism and conflict theory. The second emphasis will be on globalization theories, theories that explain the transformation of the countries of the world into what is called a “global village.” The third emphasis will be on contemporary social movements and the theories that explain them. And the fourth emphasis will be on post-modern and post structural social theories.

**Course Goals:**

Students will read a broad selection of major works by contemporary social theorists. They will analyze the social issues, problems, and themes that gave rise to new theoretical frames for describing and understanding contemporary society, politics, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. The focus will be on contemporary perspectives that modified classical social theorists such as Marx and Weber and on paradigm shifts that changed the modernist traditions of Western thought shaped by the classical theorists. The sociological, historical, intellectual, and biographical influences shaping contemporary social theory will also be examined.

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify and describe the intellectual foundations of social theory as it is practiced today.
2. Distinguish the theories of major contemporary social theorists.
3. Analyze the social issues, social problems, and social themes that inform contemporary social theorists, as well as the historical, sociological, and biographical influences that shape their ideas.
4. Evaluate the various theoretical approaches to the study of society, the individual, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.
5. Investigate and describe how class, race, gender, and sexual orientation biases and identities influence social thought, social theory, sociological research, and public policy.
6. Evaluate the relevance of the central and defining themes of social theory for understanding everyday social experience (e.g., technology, media, politics, terrorism, crime, punishment, war, the body, fashion, consumption, social inequality, experience of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, etc).
7. Research the relevant scholarship and integrate this research into original arguments that contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion of a topic within the period.
8. Articulate how social theory shapes public, political, and moral debates.

**Course Content**

This course covers the work of social theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Marcuse, Michele Foucault, Arundhati Roy, George Ritzer, Jean Baudrillard, Immanuel Wallerstein, Zygmunt Bauman, Andrew Feenberg, Neil Postman, Aldo Leopold. To foster scholarly discussion, the course will be organized around small and large group discussion, lecture, workshops, and media presentations.

This course includes an overview of contemporary social theories such as:

* critical theory
* neo-Marxism
* symbolic interactionism
* structuralism
* post-structuralism
* postmodernism
* theories of the mass media
* theories of consumerism
* theories of globalization
* social theory and the environment
* social theory and technology

**Evaluation Process**:

There will be a total of 400 points.

Exams. There will be three exams, each worth seventy-five (75) points for a total of two hundred and twenty-five (225) points. The exams will be based on the lectures, the readings, and in-class videos, and will consist of multiple choice, true/false, fill-in, and short answer questions.

Oral and Written Reports. Each student will give one oral report on an assigned reading (see Class Schedule). With this report, the student will hand in a two page written paper analyzing the reading on which he/she reported. This paper should include the thesis, or theme, and the main points of the reading, and also relate the reading to the topic of that particular class, e.g., how does Foucault’s essay on the Panopticon relate to the problem of security versus privacy in contemporary U.S. society. The paper must also be computer generated and in essay form and handed in on the day of the report. The report and the essay combined will be worth fifty (50) points.

Papers. There will be two papers assigned during the term. These papers will be three to four pages in length and focus on the application of theory to a social issue or social problem discussed in class. The papers will be worth fifty (50) points each for a total of one hundred (100) points.

Class Participation. The final twenty-five (25) points will be based on class participation. Attendance is mandatory at National University and the necessary starting point for class participation, but being present is not class participation, class participation consists of relevant comments and questions that reflect both that the student has read the material and made an attempt to engage the material analytically.

Late Work. Late work will be given a grade reduction for class period that it is late. Exceptions in grade reduction can be made for compelling family emergencies, documented medical emergencies, and unexpected demands at work; however, any of these need written documentation, e.g., letter from a physician or work supervisor. However, no late work will be accepted at all after the last scheduled hour/day of class except for the above reasons.

**Class Structure**:

The first part of each class will be a lecture given by the professor on the topic for that class (see class schedule). After the dinner break, the students will present their reports. The reports will have been assigned in the previous class. Every student is required to read all the assigned readings and participate in the class discussion of them even though not reporting on them. After the reports and discussions, the class will view a documentary (partial) on a relevant topic, or be given an on-site research assignment. After viewing the documentary, or doing the research, there will be a class discussion. The two most important ways to gain class participation points is during the discussions on the reports and during the discussions on the documentaries/research.

I treat students with respect and expect to be treated likewise. I consider it disrespectful to me when students engage in non-class related activity during class time. Once class starts and until it finishes all non-related activity should cease. Types of disrespectful activity include, but are not limited to, private conversations, reading outside material, and non-class related e-activity. If there is a family or work emergency that requires keeping a cell phone on, let me know before class. .

**Points System**:

Assignment *#* Points Total % Grade

Exams 3 75 225 56%

Report 1 50 50 12.5%

Papers 2 50 100 25%

Participation 25 25 7%

400 100%

Grading System:

Grade Percent

A 93%-100%

A- 90%-92%

B+ 87%-89%

B 83%-86%

B- 80%-82%

C+ 77%-79%

C 73%-76%

C- 70%-72%

D 60%-69%

F below 60%

Class Schedule

Day and Date Topics Readings

Class 1 Course Introduction Ritzer Ch 1

M Mar 1

Class 2 Structural Functionalism Ritzer: Chapter 3

W Mar 3 **Paper # 1 Assigned** Kivisto\*: 28, 31

Class 3 Conflict Theory Ritzer: Chapter 2

M Mar 8 **Paper # 1 Due** Kivisto: 35, 37

Class 4 Neo-Marxist Theories Ritzer: Chapter 4

W Mar 10 **Exam #1**

Class 5 Post-Structural Theory Ritzer: Chapter 13 (490-501)

M March 15 Kivisto: 67, 72

Class 6 Collective Behavior and Ritzer: Chapter 6 (235-45)

W March 17 Social Movement Theories Kivisto: 40, 44

Class 7 Globalization Theory Ritzer: Chapter 12 (422-427)

S March 20 **Exam #2**

Class 8 Globalization Theory Ritzer: Chapter 12 (428-446)

M March 22 **Paper #2 Assigned** Kivisto: 70, 73

Class 9 Post-Modern and Feminist Social Theory Ritzer Chapter 9

W March 24 Kivisto: 66, 54, 52

Class 10 Social Theory and the Twenty-first Century

S March 27 **Exam #3 and Paper #2 Due**

**\*Kivisto assignments refer to the number of the reading in the text, not to page numbers. For example Kivisto: 28 is “Civilization and Its Discontents” by Freud Section VI p. 173.**

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