

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA • DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
SOCIOLOGY SOC 7190 (A01) – "THEORY SELECTED TOPICS"
FALL TERM 2006, 3 CREDIT HOURS

Instructor: Christopher Powell **Meeting Location:** 128 St. John's Coll.
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Thinking Sideways: Experiments in Relational Sociology

Quick: what do Marx, Spivak, Garfinkel, de Bouvoir, Luhmann, and Foucault all have in common?

Since the late 1970s, critical thinking in the humanities and social sciences has argued strongly against *essentialism*, on several fronts. An 'essence' is a fixed set of attributes which define an object and that exist outside of history and society. Anti-essentialism about identity has appealed to feminists, anti-racist activists, and others concerned with progressive social action to eliminate inequality and oppression. But anti-essentialists have been accused of neglecting the urgent imperatives of our bodies and of the materiality of existence. Anti-essentialism about truth and morality are more disturbing. The idea of scientific truth seems to depend on truth existing independently of our awareness of it, and hence outside of society and history. And our deepest intuitions about morality tell us that certain practices, like rape or genocide, 'just are' wrong, even if an entire society seems to think otherwise. Without essentialism, we seem to be thrown into a nihilistic world where anything goes.

Sociology to the rescue! Panic about nihilism assumes that for identity, morality, or truth to exist at all, they must either be grounded in the biologically determined nature of individuals, or in some transcendent metaphysical domain. Sociologists have known all along that there is a third possibility: the domain of the social. Social processes generate binding consequences, immanent to the natural world but still not reducible to individuals taken in isolation. But sociologists, too, have had to wrestle with a pernicious dualism: is the social domain objective, existing independently of human consciousness, or is it subjective, a product of the meanings we attach to the world? The answer seems to be: both, and neither.

A *relational* sociology claims that the social is made up of networks of relationships, which constrain individuals but are inseparable from them. In the process, relational sociology rejects a whole series of dualisms that have bedeviled the discipline: object vs. subject, macro vs. micro, structure vs. agency, and so on. If identity, morality, and truth are relational social phenomena, then we are not in a nihilistic universe. But we are not on familiar moral or methodological terrain either. We break out of old patterns to confront new questions, new dangers, new opportunities ...

Course Objectives – What You Will Get Out of This Class

This course aims to use the theme of relational sociology to give you an overview of contemporary social theory, and allow you to work out your own position in relation to a crucial and ongoing debate in social thought. This course should enable you to:

- become familiar with a range of contemporary sociological thought,
- learn to identify the key points of disagreement and potential opportunities for synthesis among differing theoretical projects,
- identify theoretical resources that will assist you with your graduate thesis or dissertation,
- establish your own position in relation to a complex contemporary debate,
- develop your research and writing skills towards the level expected of academic publication, and
- become comfortable and confident in presenting before others and debating your ideas with others in an academic setting.

Readings

Required readings for this course will be placed in the reserved box for 77.7190 in the sociology mail room, 318 Isbister. You will be expected to make copies of each week's readings at your own expense. The readings are not to be removed from the mail room. **Please be respectful of other students by leaving the readings in good condition for the next person to use!**

Readings for this course will draw from the following areas of discussion:

- the debate over positivism
- cultural post-modernism
- Marxian theory
- Foucaultian theory
- deconstruction
- feminist, anti-racist, queer, and post-colonial theories of identity
- phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology
- standpoint epistemology
- the sociology of scientific knowledge and Actor-Network Theory
- the process sociology of Norbert Elias
- neo-functional systems theory
- cultural relativism in anthropology
- moral and epistemological relativism in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy

The complete reading list will be made available on the first day of classes, Thursday the 7th of September.

Format

We will meet once a week for a three-hour class, alleviated by a twenty-minute break. The seminars are an opportunity for you to discuss the assigned readings, in depth and critically, and to further develop your own ideas. I will join in the discussion but I will not be lecturing – unless the class falls so quiet that crickets start chirping, in which case I will say increasingly outrageous things to provoke you to speak up. Inevitably some students are more comfortable discussing their ideas in front of others, but I will gently encourage all students to get involved in a *collaborative* and *constructive* discussion of the strengths, weaknesses, and unexplored possibilities of the material we will examine.

Assessment

1. Seminar Participation – 20%

You are expected to read all assigned materials, attend all seminars, and to join in class discussion on a regular basis. In addition, you will be asked, on a rotating basis, to act as a ‘discussant’ to introduce part of the readings for each class. This introduction will be no more than 5-10 minutes long; as discussant you will highlight the main assertions of the reading and propose one or more question(s) to open discussion.

2. Mid-Term Essay – 30% – Due Friday, October 27th

Halfway through the term, you will be asked to submit an essay of approximately 3000 words in length, on a topic of your choosing relating to the themes of this course. This essay will conduct a critical review of literature, in relation to a theoretical question which that literature speaks to. The literature in question may be partly or even wholly drawn from the assigned course readings, although some additional research will probably be necessary in most cases. The essay will conclude by identifying a problem unresolved in the literature that warrants further investigation.

3. Final Essay – 50% – Due Thursday, December 7th

The final assignment for this course will be an essay, approximately 6000 words in length, on a topic of your choosing but relating to the themes of this course. This essay will make an original theoretical argument, by proposing a question that is recognizably based on existing debates and then resolving or advancing that question in a novel and constructive way. You are encouraged to use your findings from the mid-term essay towards the final essay, but the final essay must be an original piece of writing that stands on its own merits.

Guidelines for Written Work

1. All written work is to be typed in 12-point Times or Times Roman (or equivalent font). Please do not use sans serif fonts such as Helvetica or Arial; these fonts are for titles and headings only.
2. Your work should have one inch margins and be double-spaced.
3. Each assignment should have a title page that includes your name, student number, my name, and the number of the course. No binders or assignment covers please.
4. Use in-text citations with page numbers, e.g. (Weber 1978: 83) to cite your work. Each assignment must include a bibliography that lists your references alphabetically by author. Either APA or Chicago, or a similar style, is acceptable, as long as it is used consistently.
5. Please use gender-inclusive language in your written assignments, even if your sources do not. However, please note that when quoting directly from other authors, you should not 'correct' their language to make it gender-inclusive.
6. The recommended lengths indicated for each assignment do not include the title page or the bibliography.
7. Please retain a clean hard copy of each assignment that you submit. I will not be responsible for misplaced assignments.

Grading Scheme

The following letter/percentage/GPA/descriptive scale will be used.

<u>Letter Grade</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>GPA</u>	<u>Description</u>
A+	90-100%	4.5	Exceptional
A	80-89%	4.0	Excellent
B+	75-79%	3.5	Very Good
B	70-74%	3.0	Good
C+	65-69%	2.5	Satisfactory
C	60-64%	2.0	Adequate
D	50-59%	1.0	Marginal
F	49% or less	0	Failure

A more detailed description of my grading criteria will be given on the first day of class.

Late Penalties

Please be advised that a late penalty of 2.5% per day, including days on weekends and holidays, will be applied to any assignment submitted after its due date. Medical documentation will normally be required to waive this penalty. However, if you know before the due date that a paper will be late *for any reason*, you should *contact me immediately*. In some cases, entirely at my discretion, it may be possible to arrange an extension. It is your responsibility to approach me as early as possible to make arrangements for an extension. No request for an extension will be given if made after the relevant due date, except for documented medical reasons or very severe family emergencies. No extension will be given under any conditions if requested more than two weeks after the due date.

Instructional Offences

Academic dishonesty is a serious offense, with grave consequences. The University's policy on 'Plagiarism and Cheating' is found in the Graduate Calendar (sections 7.1 and 7.2). Penalties for plagiarism and academic dishonesty are severe.

The common penalty in Arts for plagiarism in a written assignment, test or examination is "F" on the paper and "F" for the course. For the most serious acts of plagiarism, such as the purchase of an essay or cheating on a test or examination, the penalty can also include suspension for a period of up to five years from registration in courses taught in a particular department in Arts or from all courses taught in the Faculty. The Faculty of Arts also reserves the right to submit student work that is suspected of being plagiarized to Internet sites designed to detect plagiarism.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism can be defined as passing off someone else's work as your own. Plagiarism involves taking another person's words (written or spoken), ideas, theories, facts (that are not considered general knowledge), statistics, art work, etc. *and presenting them as your own*. Simply changing the wording of the information you are using still constitutes plagiarism if you do not acknowledge your source.

To avoid plagiarizing, you must cite your sources diligently in each of the following cases:

- all direct quotations of other authors
- close paraphrases of statements by other authors
- important ideas or points taken from another author's work

To copy the exact words of another author is to quote them. All quotations must be indicated, either by quotation marks or by block indentation, and the source of the quotation must be indicated. However, note that you do not have to quote someone directly in order

to cite them! *Your papers should be littered with citations even if they do not contain a single direct quotation.*

Special Needs and Religious Holidays

Students with special learning needs who may require special accommodation with respect to the course assessment should meet with me at the beginning of the term so that we can arrange suitable accommodation.

The university recognizes the right of all students to observe recognized holidays of their faith that fall within the academic year. If you will have to miss any classes or will require an extension for an assignment due to a religious holiday, *please notify me* at the beginning of the term or at least three weeks in advance of the relevant date.

Although I hope that no one will want to drop out of this course, please be advised that the last day for voluntary withdrawal from second term courses is Wednesday, November 15th.

Student Support Services

The University of Manitoba provides a number of support services to students that can help you to write your term paper, develop your study skills, or get through a stressful situation. Many of these services are described online at:

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/student>

If you're not already familiar with these services, I encourage you to spend some time getting to know about them; they can help you improve your academic performance and get the most out of your time at university. Some key resources include:

- **Student Counselling and Career Centre**
474 University Centre
(204) 474-8592
<http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/counselling>
- **Disability Services**
155 University Centre
(204) 474-6213/TTY: 204 474-9790/Fax: 204 261-7732
Email: disability_services@umanitoba.ca
http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/resource/disability_services/index.shtml
- **Learning Assistance Centre**
520 University Centre
(204) 474-9251
<http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/resource/learning>