In this paper you will investigate a variety of theoretical perspectives on social life. Some perspectives examine how social structures are built up from individual action, whether driven by evolutionary psychology, decided by rational choice, or motivated by meaningful values. Others identify the emergent properties of social life, ranging from face-to-face interaction to social networks to structures of thought. You will use these perspectives to investigate substantive problems. Why do social norms change? How do some groups manage to solve problems of collective action? What similarities exist between states and mafias? Throughout, you will learn how the insights of classical sociologists are being advanced in contemporary research.

**Convenor:** Dr Michael Biggs (michael.biggs@sociology.ox.ac.uk)

**Tutors:**
- Prof Lois McNay, Somerville
- Dr Anja Krausova, New
- Dr André Nilsen, Hertford
- Dr Amanda Palmer, St Catherine’s
- Dr Suke Wolton, Regent’s Park
- Dr Jonathan Lusthaus, Nuffield
- Mr Nicholas Martindale, Nuffield

**Syllabus**
Theoretical perspectives which may include rational choice; evolutionary psychology; interpersonal interaction; social integration and networks; functionalism. Substantive problems which may include stratification; gender; nationalism, race and ethnicity; collective action; norms; ideology; economic development; gangs and organized crime. Candidates will be expected to use theories to explain substantive problems.

**Teaching**
Dr Michael Biggs gives 8 lectures on Theoretical Perspectives in Michaelmas Term. Prof. Federico Varese and Dr Amanda Palmer give 8 lectures on Sociological Problems in Hilary Term. A revision class will be offered in Trinity Term. Tutorials are arranged by the student’s college tutor.

**Assessment**
The course is assessed by a three-hour unseen examination.
READING LIST

Online list with links to digital library resources: [https://tinyurl.com/y3cspl57](https://tinyurl.com/y3cspl57)

*Starred readings are strongly recommended

* AJS = American Journal of Sociology
* ARS = Annual Review of Sociology
* ASR = American Sociological Review
* BJS = British Journal of Sociology

Introductory

* Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology, 2009
* Randall Collins, Four Sociological Traditions, 1994
* Taylor, Charles, Modern Social Imaginaries, 2004

I. Theoretical Perspectives (Michaelmas Term)

1. Rational Choice

• ‘All social action is rational when viewed from the standpoint of the actor.’ Discuss.
• Can apparently altruistic actions be reconciled with rational choice theory?
• Is self-interest a testable hypothesis or a tautology?

* Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory, 1996
* George Ainslie, Breakdown of Will, 2001
* Duncan J. Watts, ‘Common Sense and Sociological Explanations’, AJS 120, 2014
2. Evolutionary psychology

- From a biological perspective, social hierarchy is grounded on reproductive competition. In modern societies, however, people with great wealth and high status do not have more offspring than average. Does this refute sociobiology?
- ‘Sociologists tend to ignore sexual desire, even though everyday experience as well as evolutionary biology suggests that this desire is an important human motivation.’ Discuss.
- Does evolutionary psychology challenge or complement feminist theories of patriarchy?

*Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby (eds), The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture, 1992
*Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, ‘Evolutionary Social Psychology and Family Homicide’, Science 242, 1988
*Christine Horne, ‘Values and Evolutionary Psychology’, Sociological Theory 22, 2004
Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding, 2009
Catherine Hakim, ‘Erotic Capital’, European Sociological Review 49, 2010

3. Values and meaning

- Sociology should be a science like biology or geology, and therefore must eschew the interpretation of meaning.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Self-interest is not a basic human motivation; it is a value peculiar to modern Western societies.’ Discuss.
- ‘Because social action cannot be divorced from cultural meaning, interpretation must take precedence over explanation in sociology.’ Discuss.

Max Weber, Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, 1920
Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity, 1989
Jon Elster, Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions, 1999
4. Interpersonal interaction

• ‘Society is neither an aggregate of individuals nor a macro-level structure; it is a series of face-to-face encounters.’ Discuss.
• How are larger patterns of social stratification manifested in face-to-face interactions?
• Why are interpersonal interactions of interest for sociology?
George H. Mead, Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, 1934
Herbert Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method, 1969
*Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1959
*Randall Collins, Interaction Ritual Chains, 2004

5. Social integration

• Can “social capital” explain anything?
• What is “social structure”?
• What is “social cohesion” and how can it be measured?
Emile Durkheim, The Rules of the Sociological Method, 1895/1901
*Emile Durkheim, Suicide: Study in Sociology, 1897
Frank van Tubergen, Manfred te Grotenhuis, and Wout Ultee, ‘Denomination, Religious Context, and Suicide: Neo-Durkheimian Multilevel Explanations Tested with Individual and Contextual Data’, AJS 111, 2005
*Robert J. Sampson, Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect, 2012
Richard G. Wilkinson, Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality, 1996

6. Social networks

• How useful is it to theorize “society” as a series of overlapping social networks?
• Why are “weak ties” so important in social networks?
• Are social networks a type of “capital”?
*Mark Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, AJS 78, 1973
Mark Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited’, Sociological Theory 1, 1982
7. **Semiotic systems; functionalism**

- Does the analysis of language provide insights for sociological theory?
- ‘All societies are founded on a conception of the sacred.’ Discuss.
- Can functionalist theories explain why societies change?
- Is it sufficient to explain an institution in terms of its function?
- *Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1912*
- Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification, 1903*
- Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics, 1916*
- Charles Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs, 1938*
- Roman Jakobson, ‘Two Types of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’, *Fundamentals of Language, 1956*
- Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology, 1963*
- *Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, 1980*
- Ezra W. Zuckerman, ‘Structural Incoherence and Stock Market Activity’, *ASR, 2004*

8. **Cultural evolution**

- Do societies ‘evolve’?
- Are there any features of modern societies that could be considered evolutionary ‘adaptations’?
- Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex, 1871*
II. Sociological Problems (Hilary Term)

*Note: Students should try to read as much as they can on the reading list for each week.*

1. **Micro and macro**
   - ‘*Society is not something external to the individual; it is internalized through social emotions such as shame and anger.*’ Discuss.
   - **Must accounts of social order always be able to provide micro-foundations for their claims?**

   Robert Merton, ‘The Unanticipated Consequences of Social Action’, *ASR* 1, 1936
   Raymond Boudon, ‘Social Determinisms and Individual Freedom’, *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action*, 1982
   James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*, 1994, ch. 1
   Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*, 1978, ch. 1

2. **Strategic interactions, games, and trust**
   - **How do cognitive biases such as the endowment effect and the status quo effect challenge classical utility theory?**
   - **What factors lead to the depletion of trust in a community?**
   - **Can economic exchange take place without trust?**


3. Gender

- ‘Patriarchy is premised on the unequal division of domestic labour.’ Discuss.

- ‘The question for feminist theory is not why men exercise power over women but why women let them.’ Discuss.

- To what extent are gender differences derived from differences between the sexes?

Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949


Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism?*, 1999

Sylvia Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy*, 1990

Candace West and Don Zimmerman, ‘Doing Gender’, *Gender and Society* 1, 1987


Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*, 2014


4. Norms

- Are social norms consistent with rational behaviour?

- ‘Any norm that endures within a social group must be functional for that social group.’ Do
you agree?

• How do social norms emerge (and disappear)?
James S. Coleman, Foundations of Social Theory, 1994, ch 10
Ernst Fehr and Urs Fishbacher, ‘Social Norms and Human Cooperation’, Trends in Cognitive Sciences 8, 2004
Cristina Bicchieri, Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms, 2016

5. Collective action
• Can social networks explain how individuals can overcome the problem of collective action?
• Under what conditions can cooperation emerge from repeated interactions?
• ‘Neither lab experiments nor observational data confirm the prediction of a Nash Equilibrium in a prisoner’s dilemma’. Discuss.
Robert Axelrod, The Evolution of Cooperation, 1984
Elinor Ostrom, Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action, 1990

6. Collective groups: ethnicity, nationality, and race
• Can signalling theory help explain the formation and persistence of ethnic markers?
• Is ethnicity a primordial feature of human societies?
• How does ethnicity help overcome transaction costs?
Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, 1882
Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, 1983
Michael Hechter, Containing Nationalism, 2000, Introduction
David Laitin, ‘Language Games’, Comparative Politics 20, 1988
7. Governmentality and totalitarianism

8. Violence and protection

- Is protection a commodity?
- How does the state differ from the mafia?
- Are gangs a form of organized crime?

Frederic C. Lane, ‘Economic Consequences of Organized Violence’, *Journal of Economic History* 18, 1958
Charles Tilly, ‘War Making and State Making as Organized Crime’, Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*, 1985