UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
Department of Sociology

Sociological Theory

Honour School of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (218)
Honour School of History and Politics (218)
Honour School of Human Sciences (5b)

Academic Year 2025/26

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 systems of oppression. 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)

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. There will be 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

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

Introductory

Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., 2015

Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2009

Randall Collins, *Four Sociological Traditions*, 1994

Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 2004

I. Theoretical Perspectives (Michaelmas Term)

Note: Starred readings are strongly recommended

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?*

George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, rev. ed., 1974

*George C. Homans, 'Bringing Men Back In', *ASR* 29, 1954

Philip Pettit, 'The Virtual Reality of Homo Economicus', *Monist* 78, 1995

*John H. Goldthorpe, 'Rational Action Theory for Sociology', *BJS* 49, 1998

*Herbert A. Simon, 'Rationality as Process and as Product of Thought', *American Economic Review* 68, 1978

*Karl R. Popper, 'Models, Instruments, and Truth: The Status of the Rationality Principle in the Social Sciences', *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality*, 1994

Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*, 1996

George Ainslie, *Breakdown of Will*, 2001

Stephen Holmes, 'The Secret History of Self-Interest', Jane Mansbridge (ed.), *Beyond Self-Interest*, 1990

*Duncan J. Watts, 'Common Sense and Sociological Explanations', *AJS* 120, 2014

Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, 'The Weirdest People in the World?' *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, 2010

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

Laura Hamilton, Simon Cheng, and Brian Powell, 'Adoptive Parents, Adaptive Parents: Evaluating the Importance of Biological Ties for Parental Investment', *ASR* 72, 2007

Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*, 2016

*Jeremy Freese, Jui-Chung Allen Li, and Lisa D. Wade, 'The Potential Relevance of Biology to Social Inquiry', *ARS*, 2003

Rosemary L. Hopcroft, 'The Evolved Actor in Sociology', *Sociological Theory* 27, 2009

*Christine Horne, 'Values and Evolutionary Psychology', *Sociological Theory* 22, 2004

Barbara Smuts, 'The Evolutionary Origins of Patriarchy', *Human Nature* 6, 1995

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, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* 1904/5

*Max Weber, 'The Economic Ethic of the World Religions' and 'Intermediate Considerations: Theory of Stages and Directions of Religious Rejections of the world', 1915, *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, pp. 267–301, 323–62

Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 1920, part I

*Charles Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' and 'Self-Interpreting Animals', *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1: *Human Agency and Language,* 1985

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity,* 1989

Jeremy Ginges et al., 'Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, 2007

Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*, 1999

*Raymond Boudon, 'Beyond Rational Choice Theory', *ARS* 29, 2003

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, 'The Social Self', *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 10, 1913

George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, 1934

Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method,* 1969

*Howard S. Becker, 'Becoming a Marihuana User', *American Journal of Sociology* 59, 1953

*Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* 1959

Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour,* 1967

*Erving Goffman, 'The Interaction Order', *American Sociological Review* 48, 1983

*Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 2004

Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*, 2008

Gary Alan Fine, 'Group Culture and the Interaction Order: Local Sociology on the Meso-Level', *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, 2012

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 Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 2000

*Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*, 2012

*James S. Coleman, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', *AJS* 94, 1988

Alessandro Portes, 'Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology', *ARS* 24, 1998

Michele J. Gelfand et al., 'Differences Between Tight and Loose Cultures: A 33-Nation Study', *Science* 332, 2011

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

*John F. Padgett and Christopher K. Ansell, 'Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400-1434', *AJS* 98, 1993

Shin-kap Han, 'The Other Ride of Paul Revere: The Brokerage Role in the Making of the American Revolution', *Mobilization* 14, 2009

*Duncan J. Watts, 'The "New" Science of Networks', *ARS* 30, 2004

*Peter S. Bearman, James Moody, and Katherine Stovel, 'Chains of Affection: The Structure of Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Networks', *AJS* 110, 2004

Ronald S. Burt, 'Structural Holes and Good Ideas', *AJS* 110, 2004

James Moody and Douglas R. White, 'Structural Cohesion and Embeddedness: A Hierarchical Concept of Social Groups', *ASR* 68, 2003

Sinan Aral and Marshall Van Alstyne, 'The Diversity-Bandwidth Trade-off', *AJS* 117, 2011

Rick Grannis, 'Six degrees of Who Cares?', *AJS* 115, 2010

7. Systemic oppression

- *How can there be 'racism without racists?' (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva)*
- *'Modern ideals of equal rights serve to conceal class, gender, and racial oppression.' Discuss.*
- *How useful is it to conceptualize modern society as comprised of hierarchies between oppressor and oppressed?*

*Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848

Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852

Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 1867, ch. 1 sections 3–4, ch. 4, ch. 15 sections 3–4, ch. 28, ch. 32

Gayle S. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', Carole S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, 1984

Nancy C. M. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, 1983

*Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 1989, chs 1, 6–8, 11–12

Derrick A. Bell, 'Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory?', *University of Illinois Law Review* 1995, 1995

*Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43, 1991

Patricia Hill Collins, 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas', *Annual Review of Sociology* 41, 2015

8. Functionalism and cultural evolution

- *Do societies 'evolve'?*
- *Are there any features of modern societies that could be considered evolutionary 'adaptations'?*
- *Is it sufficient to explain an institution in terms of its function*
- *How do theories of cultural evolution explain the existence of diverse cultures?*

Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1871

David L. Hull, *Science as a Process: An Evolutionary Account of the Social and Conceptual Development of Science,* 1988

*David L. Hull, 'What's Wrong with Invisible-Hand Explanations?', *Philosophy of Science* 64, 1997

William H. Durham, *Coevolution: Genes, Culture, and Human Diversity,* 1991

Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996

Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, 'Complex Societies: The Evolutionary Origins of a Crude Superorganism', *Human Nature* 10, 1999

Joseph Fracchia and R. C. Lewontin, 'Does Culture Evolve?', *History and Theory*, 1999

Richard Dawkins, 'Viruses of the Mind', Bo Dahlbohm (ed.), *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*, 1993

Alex Mesoudi, Andrew Whiten, and Kevin L. Laland, 'Towards a Unified Science of Cultural Evolution', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29, 2006

*Alex Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution: How Darwinian Theory Can Explain Human Culture and Synthesize the Social Sciences*, University of Chicago Press, 2011

*Peter Richerson et al., 'Cultural Group Selection Plays an Essential Role in Explaining Human Cooperation: A Sketch of the Evidence', *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 39, 2016

Thomas E. Currie, Peter Turchin, Jenna Bednar, Peter J. Richerson, Georg Schwesinger, Sven Steinmo, Romain Wacziarg, and John J. Wallis, 'Complexity and Evolution', David S. Wilson and Alan Kirman (eds), *Complexity and Evolution: Toward a New Synthesis for Economics*, MIT Press, 2016

*Fred L. Block, 'The Ruling Class Does Not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State', 1977; *Revising State Theory*, 1987

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

Mark Granovetter, 'Threshold Models of Collective Behavior', *AJS* 83, 1978

Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman, 'What is Analytical Sociology All About? An Introductory Essay', Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2011

Michael Biggs, 'Self-Fulfilling Prophecies', Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2011

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

Scott E. Page, 'What Sociologists Should Know About Complexity', *ARS* 41, 2015

John R. Searle, 'Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles', *Anthropological Theory* 6, 2006

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?*

Brian Skyrms *The Stag Hunt and the Evolution of Social Structure*, 2004

Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, 2007, ch. 19 (Strategic Interaction) and ch. 21 (Trust)

Cass Sunstein, Introduction, Sunstein (ed.) *Behavioral Law and Economics,* 2000

Barak D. Richman, 'How Community Institutions Create Economic Advantage: Jewish Diamond Merchants in New York', *Law and Social Inquiry* 31, 2006

Diego Gambetta, 'Signalling', Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2009

Partha Dasgupta, 'Trust as a Commodity', Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, 1988

Anthony Pagden, 'The Destruction of Trust and Its Economic Consequences in the Case of Eighteenth-Century Naples', Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, 1988

https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/users/gambetta/Trust_making%20and%20breaking%20cooperative%20relations.pdf

3. Gender

- *'Gender is inextricably connected with hierarchy: masculinity denotes domination, femininity subordination.' Do you agree?*
- *'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

R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, 1987

Sylvia Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy*, 1990

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

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* 1990

Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt, 'Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System', *Gender and Society* 28, 2014

Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2003

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

Hae Yeon Choo, and Myra Marx Ferree, 'Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities', *Sociological Theory* 28, 2010

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?*
- *If activists wish to abolish an existing social norm, what should they do?*

Jon Elster, 'Norms', Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2011

Gerry Mackie, 'Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account', *ASR* 61, 1996

Robert E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, 1996

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

Robert Ellickson, *Order Without Law: How Neighbors Settle Disputes*, 1991

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.*

Delia Baldassarri, 'Collective Action', Peter Bearman and Peter Hedström (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 2011

Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, 2nd ed., 1971

Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984

Jon Elster, *The Cement of Society*, 1989

Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, 1990

Robb Willer, 'Groups Reward Individual Sacrifice: The Status Solution to the Collective Action Problem', *American Sociological Review* 74, 2009

Ernst Fehr and Herbert Gintis, 'Human Motivation and Social Cooperation: Analytical and Experimental Foundations', *ARS* 33, 2007

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, in S. J. Woolf (ed.), *Nationalism in Europe: From 1815 to the Present: A Reader*, 1996

Fredrik Barth 'Introduction', *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, 1969

Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1983

Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, 2000, Introduction

Herbert Blumer, 'Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position', *Pacific Sociological Review* 1 (1958)

Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, 1994

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva 'Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation', *ASR* 62, 1997

Andreas Wimmer, 'The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory', *AJS* 113, 2008

7. Governmentality and totalitarianism

- *'Foucault's concept of "power" is essentially the same as Durkheim's concept of "society".' Do you agree?*
- *Does Foucault's notion of governmentality amount to a sociological theory?*

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, 1975

Michel Foucault, *Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values), 1979; https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/f/foucault81.pdf

Colin Gordon, 'Governmental Rationality: An Introduction', Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, 1991

Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality' (1978), Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, 1991

Richard Hamilton, 'Michel Foucault', *The Social Misconstruction of Reality: Validity and Verification in the Scholarly Community*, 1996

Hannah Arendt, 'Totalitarianism', 1951, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, Section III

8. Violence and protection

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

Scott H. Decker, Tim Bynum, and Deborah Weisel, 'A Tale of Two Cities: Gangs as Organized Crime Groups', *Justice Quarterly* 15, 1998

J. A. Densley, ‘The Organisation of London's Street Gangs’, *Global Crime* 13, 2012

Avinash K. Dixit, ‘Economic Governance’, Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume (eds), *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, 2nd ed., 2008

Diego Gambetta, Introduction*, The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*, 1993

Frederic C. Lane, ‘Economic Consequences of Organized Violence’, *Journal of Economic History* 18, 1958

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 1974, ch. 1–2

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

Donald Black, ‘Crime as Social Control’, *American Sociological Review* 48, 1983

Federico Varese, ‘What is Organized Crime?’, *Organized Crime*, 2010