

RSO-58306

## Advanced Social Theory

Period 1, Academic Year 2021-2022

### Contact person

Kees Jansen

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### Advanced social Theory (RSO-58306)

**Language**

English

**Credits**

6

**Period**

1, 2021-2022

**Time and venue**

**Afternoon:** Monday, Wednesday and Friday;  
Leeuwenborch and Forum, see schedules.

**Exam**

Written assignment and oral defence

**Contact person**

Kees Jansen

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**Lecturer(s)**

Kees Jansen, Joost Jongerden, Sanneke Kloppenburg,  
Esha Shah,

**Examiner(s)**

Kees Jansen

**Secretariat**

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### **Profile of the course**

The course Advanced Social Theory aims to train students to high academic standards, in particular with regard to research competencies and in-depth disciplinary knowledge. It provides students with knowledge on contemporary social theories. 'Contemporary' is used here to distinguish it from classical social theory (e.g. Marx, Weber, Durkheim), on which it builds, and roughly means that it was published between the 1930s and today. This is an advanced course, typically for highly motivated students who are not afraid for theoretical abstraction and close reading and intensive discussions of key texts in contemporary social theory. The course focusses on original texts from key figures in the social sciences (examples are Bourdieu, Collins, Foucault, Habermas, etc.). This will help you to build a strong foundation in social theory. The main goal of the course is to enable students to select an inspiring and fruitful theoretical framework for future or current (PhD) research. Establishing a meaningful relationship between theory and empirical results is one of the more difficult tasks of social scientific research.

### **Assumed prerequisite knowledge**

Introductory (e.g., RSO-10306 Sociology) and intermediate level social theory courses (e.g., ENP-22803 Theories and Themes: Sociology); Social Science Bachelor; basic seminar skills; in case of doubt contact the course coordinator

### **Learning outcomes**

After having completed the course successfully, students are expected to:

1. Distinguish and contrast the main arguments in key texts of important approaches in contemporary social scientific theory;
2. Distinguish and contrast the core themes of important approaches and debates in contemporary social scientific theory;
3. Assess the differences and similarities between these approaches;
4. Appraise a particular social scientific work, considering these approaches and debates;
5. Assess the opportunities and limitations of these approaches for doing research;
6. Use concepts and theories of at least two of these approaches to compose research questions for social scientific research.
7. Being able to participate in and stimulate an open debate about social science theoretical literature.

**Course materials and resources**

C. Calhoun et al. (eds), (2012) *Contemporary sociological theory*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Students have to buy this book in a bookshop. Make sure you buy the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

Additional readings: we will provide master copies that the students need to copy themselves (available from the coordinator).

**Educational activities**

In each meeting, fundamental ideas of one or more influential authors in social scientific theorizing will be discussed. The discussions are based on original (in the sense of primary sources) key texts that form landmarks of a certain approach because they provide an in depth understanding of a central problem and/or strong statements that reveal the core of a certain approach. On average, about 100 pages will be read each week. For each session, each student will be asked to prepare a question and comment for discussion in the group. The student is expected to participate actively in the discussions.

**Assessment strategy**

1. Written assignment and oral defence: 80% of the mark (threshold 5.5)
2. Active preparation as expressed in submitted questions and comments, and your participation in the discussions: 20% of the mark

The written assignment serves to show students' ability to discuss and confront different conceptualizations or ways of social scientific thinking. How do various theoretical approaches compare? What kind of questions would one ask when working from one or the other theoretical approach? How do these questions relate to one another? Which approach seems to be the most appropriate or relevant for particular research questions? Are there ways to combine theoretical approaches? The assignment is based on the literature discussed in the course, but students are allowed to use other literatures as well if possible (e.g. books by authors mentioned in the course). In that case, students are expected to discuss their choice of literature with the teaching staff. The assignment will raise two or more questions that have to be answered. More info on the written assignment in the guidelines and the assessment form that will be handed out in the first session.

Target length of the written assignment: 2500-3000 words (4000 words is the maximum; no absolute minimum).

| <b>Important dates and deadlines</b> |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 13:00 = one hour before each session | Students hand in at least one question or comment about the literature (use the link on Brightspace for submission). |
| Monday, 18 Oct.: 9:00 hrs.           | Written assignment due   |
| Wednesday, 20 October<br>14:00-17:20 | Defence of the written assignment  |

| Learning outcome   | During class room discussions and the defence of the written assignment | Written assignment |
|--|---|--------------------|
| Distinguish and contrast (level 4: analyse) the main arguments in key texts of important approaches in contemporary social scientific theory;                  | X   | X                  |
| Distinguish and contrast (level 4: analyse) the core themes of important approaches and debates in contemporary social scientific theory;                      | X   | X                  |
| Assess (level 5: evaluate) the differences and similarities between these approaches;  | X   | X                  |
| Appraise (level 5: evaluate) a particular social scientific work, considering these approaches and debates;  | X   | X                  |
| Assess (level 5: evaluate) the opportunities and limitations of these approaches for doing research;   | X   | X                  |
| Use (level 3: apply) concepts and theories of at least two of these approaches to compose (level 6: create) research questions for social scientific research. |   | X                  |

### **The principal themes of the content**

The heart of the course consists of class meetings in which we discuss original texts that are considered cornerstones of current social theorizing. These texts illuminate central features of a certain approach and are highly influential in contemporary social science. Each approach comprises a family of theories that share a specific point of departure or a common concern, for instance the issue of power or how people give meaning. The approaches we have selected for this course (see planning below) belong to the most influential lines of social theorizing in the past decades. Table 1 categorizes the approaches on the basis of their main focus: interactions, structure and practices, and social change.

### *Interactions*

In the first block we will look into approaches that focus on interactions. This will be specified further into interpretative/interactionist theories and exchange/rational actor theories. In interpretative or interactionist theories, social processes are the result of people acting on the basis of meanings, which they construct while interacting with each other. In exchange or rational choice theories, people are either unconsciously or consciously balancing costs and benefits of their actions; these costs and benefits may be weighted differently, depending on the specific social context.

### *Structure and practices*

In the second block we look into a diverse range of approaches that focus on structures and practices. First, various theories emphasize and elaborate the notion power. Second, in post-structuralist theories, there is a structure/culture that exists relatively independent from individual actors that conditions social and individual behaviour. Third, in both field and structuration theories people act (engage in social struggle) by using resources and making rules and as a result of this, social arenas (fields, structures) emerge which in turn enable and constrain the actions of the actors involved, whose actions subsequently change the arena in an on-going interactive process between actors and arenas. Fourth, actor network theories regard people, animals and objects as part of networks of relationships. Fifth, a more recent branch of theories have conceptualized the relationships between nature/society, in order to do more justice to the role of nature and biological processes in social life.

### *Social Change*

The third and final set of approaches takes social change as its focal point. Often, this literature combines elements of the already mentioned approaches. First, theories that conceptualize modernity try to capture the central social developments that appeared during modernization, the era in which social science itself was shaped. The theories under the heading 'Theorizing Second Modernity: The Sociology of Networks and Flows' capture recent influential social theories. Although these theories often bear the roots of older theorizing, they seek to formulate new conceptualizations to understand current social processes. Third, 'Critical theories and social change' encompasses theories that not only attempt to offer insights in the unequal, unjust or otherwise undesirable outcomes of social processes, they also envision the directions for social change that improve these outcomes. The final approach covers theories that take a broad range and a long time horizon. Combining history and sociology, these theories depart from the idea that social reality is not given but time-specific and the result of on-going historical trajectories.

**Table 1 Overview of the main focus of the approaches and authors**

| <i>Main focus</i>        | <i>Approaches</i>                                 | <i>Authors</i>                                 |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Social interactions      | Interpretative and interactionist theories        | Blumer, Goffman, Collins (cf. Schutz)          |
|                          | Exchange/rational actor theories                  | Homans (cf. Blau, Coleman, Granovetter, Olson) |
| Practices and structures | Power and Inequality theories                     | Tilly (cf. Lukes, Wright Mills)                |
|                          | Culture-power and the birth of neo-Marxist theory | Gramsci  |
|                          | Post-structuralist theories                       | Foucault                                       |
|                          | Field theory                                      | Bourdieu                                       |
|                          | Structuration theory                              | Giddens  |
|                          | Actor network theory                              | Latour   |
|                          | Nature/society theories (critical realism)        | Benton   |
| Social change            | Modernization theories                            | Giddens, Habermas                              |
|                          | Second modernity theories                         | Castells, Giddens                              |
|                          | Critical theories and social change               | Habermas                                       |
|                          | Long term & comparative theories                  | Sassen, Wallerstein, Tilly                     |
|                          | Post-Colonial Theory                              | Said   |
|                          | Feminist theory & Performativity                  | Butler   |

**Schedule RSO58306**

Standard schedule of sessions:

Monday 14:00 – 15:30

Wednesday 14:00 – 15:30

15:50 – 17:20 (no session in the 5<sup>th</sup> week)

Friday 14:00 – 15:30

Venue:

Mondays and most Fridays B0229 in Forum

Friday 17 September B0610 in Forum

Wednesdays B0073 in Leeuwenborch

## LITERATURE

Most texts printed in C. Calhoun et al. (2012) *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford Blackwell Publishing. 3rd edition. (= CALHOUN below).

**Introduction Calhoun:** 'Introduction' In CALHOUN: pp. 1-24.

**Goffman:** 'Introduction to Part I' in CALHOUN: pp.27-34 & Erving Goffman 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'; In CALHOUN: pp. 46-61.

**Blumer:** Herbert Blumer 'Symbolic Interactionism'. In CALHOUN: pp. 62-74.

**Homans:** George C. Homans 'Social Behavior as Exchange'; In CALHOUN: pp. 93-111.

**Gramsci:** Antonio Gramsci 'On Hegemony' in CALHOUN: pp. 237-250

**Collins:** Randall Collins 'Interaction Ritual Chains'. In CALHOUN: pp. 75-90

**Giddens 1:** 'Introduction to Giddens, by Calhoun: et al. & Anthony Giddens 'Some New Rules of Sociological Method' & Anthony Giddens 'Agency, Structure' (all master copies)

**Foucault 1:** 'Introduction to Part V' in CALHOUN: pp. 289-294 & 'Discipline and Punish'. In CALHOUN: pp. 314-322.

**Foucault 2:** Michel Foucault 'Truth and power'. In CALHOUN: pp. 305-313.

**Bourdieu 1:** 'Introduction to Part VI' in CALHOUN: pp. 325-334 & Pierre Bourdieu 'Structure, habitus and practice', in CALHOUN: pp. 345-358.

**Bourdieu 2:** Pierre Bourdieu 'The Forms of Capital' (master copy)

**Wallerstein:** Immanuel Wallerstein 'The Modern World-System in Crisis' in CALHOUN: pp. 587-599.

**Giddens 2:** Anthony Giddens 'The Consequences of Modernity'. In CALHOUN: pp. 531-545.

**Tilly:** Charles Tilly 'Coercion, Capital and European States' in CALHOUN: pp. 251-265.

**Sassen:** Saskia Sassen 'Reconfiguring Territory, Authority, and Rights' CALHOUN: pp. 579-586.

**Habermas:** 'Introduction to Part VI' in CALHOUN: pp. 437-443 & Jürgen Habermas 'Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere'. In CALHOUN: pp. 469-489.

**Said:** Edward Said. 2003 (1978). 'Orientalism'. Preface, pp. xi-xxiii & Introduction, pp. 1-25. (master copy)

**Castells:** Manuel Castells (2009) 'Communication Power', Chapter 1, pp. 10-24 & 38-53. (master copy)

**Benton:** Ted Benton (1991) 'Biology and Social Science: Why the Return of the Repressed Should Be Given a (Cautious) Welcome', *Sociology*, 25(1), pp. 1-29. (master copy)

**Latour:** Bruno Latour (1999) 'Pandora's Hope', pp. 80-112 (master copy) & Benton and Craib (2001) *Philosophy of Social Science*, pp. 67-73. (master copy)

**Butler:** Judith Butler 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. *Theatre Journal*, pp. 519-531. (master copy)

# Advanced Social Theory

## Week 1

- Monday 14:00-15:30 Introduction; Calhoun Kees Jansen
- Wednesday 14:00-15:30 Goffman Joost Jongerden
- Wednesday 15:50-17:20 Blumer Joost Jongerden
- Friday 14:00-15:30 Homans Joost Jongerden

## Week 2

- Monday 14:00-15:30 Gramsci Kees Jansen
- Wednesday 14:00-15:30 Collins Sanneke Kloppenburg
- Wednesday 15:50-17:20 Giddens 1 Sanneke Kloppenburg
- Friday 14:00-15:30 Foucault 1 Kees Jansen

## Week 3

- Monday 14:00-15:30 Foucault 2 Esha Shah
- Wednesday 14:00-15:30 Bourdieu 1: Esha Shah
- Wednesday 15:50-17:20 Bourdieu 2: Esha Shah
- Friday 14:00-15:30 Wallerstein Kees Jansen

## Week 4

- Monday 14:00-15:30 Giddens 2 Sanneke Kloppenburg
- Wednesday 14:00-15:30 Tilly Joost Jongerden
- Wednesday 15:50-17:20 Sassen Joost Jongerden
- Friday 14:00-15:30 Habermas Esha Shah

## Week 5

- Monday 14:00-15:30 Said Joost Jongerden
- Wednesday 14:00-15:30 Castells Sanneke Kloppenburg
- Friday 14:00-15:30 Benton Kees Jansen

## Week 6

- Monday 14:00-15:30 Latour Kees Jansen
- Wednesday 14:00-15:30 Butler Joost Jongerden
- Wednesday 15:50-17:20 Closure Kees Jansen, Joost Jongerden