

# Contemporary Sociological Theory

Audrey Devine-Eller  
Office: Carnegie 105  
Office phone: x4894  
devineau@grinnell.edu

Office Hours: 1-2 pm M&T;  
Lunch @ JRC, noon, MTWRF,  
by arrangement;  
or by appointment

The very shaping of history  
now outpaces the ability of  
men to orient themselves in  
accordance with cherished  
values.

- C. Wright Mills

## Required Books

Available at the College Bookstore  
or online:

- Kivisto, *Social Theory: Roots and Branches* (2011), ISBN-10: 0199732035
- Ritzer, *Contemporary Social Theory & its Classical Roots, 3rd Edition* (2010), ISBN-10: 0073404381
- Supplemental (short, electronic, required) readings will be available on PWeb.

285-01  
Fall 2012  
Grinnell College

ARH 318  
TR 10-11:50 am  
4 credits

## So what's this class about?

Welcome. As you well know from your prior sociology classes, sociology is the systematic study of society and human behavior. Sociologists seek answers about how society works and how individuals interact. We look at the *structural determinants* of individual action. This course is designed to provide you with an understanding of the key contemporary sociological theories, and their historical trajectories, so that you can begin using theory to understand contemporary social life. I assume you have prior experience with sociology, and that you have heard of at least some of the major theories and theorists we will discuss. However, you do not need to have studied or read about any of these theories in depth in order to succeed in the class.

Sociological theory is used to describe, explain, and predict social phenomena; to illuminate and debate meanings; to orient and empower action; and to resist and challenge existing social configurations. Historically, theory is a conversation – a complementary and contentious dialogue – among people with different life experiences, intellectual interests, and stakes in the academic game. As we move historically through sociological theory, we will explore some of this context in which theory gets made.

The first third of the course will focus on the ideas of particular theorists who are considered instrumental in the development of sociological theory, including Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel, as well as the folks who came before them and made the discipline of sociology possible, such as Adam Smith. My aim is to help you come to understand the contributions of these “grandfathers of sociology” and how “classical” sociological theory – seemingly a distant, abstract entity written mostly by dead white European men – still can provide insight into our everyday experiences and problems

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is a peculiar sensation,  
this double-consciousness,  
this sense of always  
looking at one's self  
through the eyes of  
others, of measuring one's  
soul by the tape of a world  
that looks on in amused  
contempt and pity.  
- W. E. B. Du Bois

In the remainder of the course, we will turn to contemporary and mostly American sociological theories. These theories draw on, but go considerably beyond, the “classical” tradition, and eventually get around to exploring the complexity of social life and theorizing forms of difference (like race, class, gender, sexuality). These theories begin to develop more complex understandings of power, inequality, and identity.



(<http://academiccoachtaylor.tumblr.com/>)

## Dialogists

Every week, two or three class members will serve as what I call “**dialogists**.” Your job is to help get discussion going and to serve as co-conveners for the week. Before class, the dialogists should work together to put together a BRIEF presentation (no more than 10-15 minutes) grounded in what I call the “triple three” rule:

1. The *three most important concepts or arguments* from among the week’s theorists that you expect to remember ten years from now.
2. The *three most salient points of connection* with other theorists/schools of thought we have discussed previously in the class.
3. The *three most challenging problems, tensions, or blind spots* you perceive in the theorist or theoretical approach discussed this week.

Of course, three is an arbitrary cut-off point and you could surely find additional concepts, connections, and problems. I’d like you to use the “rule of threes” as a disciplining device to avoid long, rambling (often tiresome) presentation and to try to go right to the heart of the issues to be discussed that week. Handouts, diagrams, and other kinds of visual heuristics are useful in organizing your points and keeping us all focused. You don’t need to be exhaustive – it will be the responsibility of the class to raise additional points and push us beyond your initial presentation. *That means the rest of the class is NOT off the hook that week!* I expect to hear everyone’s voices and contributions to our collective effort to dig deeply into the theorists and streams of theorizing each week.

Perhaps the difference between a professor and a bus driver is that the professor can say stupid things with complete authority while the bus driver is not authorized to make brilliant insights.  
 - Les Back, *The Art of Listening*

Assignments	Points	Due Date
• Film Analysis Essay	10	Oct 2 & 9
• Empirical Evaluation Essay	20	Nov 13 & 22
• Forgotten Theorist Essay &	20 + 5	December 6 & 19 & 21
• Dialogizing	7 * 2	See sign-up sheet
• Reading prep (3 cycles)	7 * 3	Continuous
• Attendance & participation	10	Continuous
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	

## Readings

This course is **reading-intensive**. Because the class focuses on the historical development of sociological theory, this course will involve a lot of reading of a lot of difficult material. Most of the reading will come from *primary texts*, that is, the original author’s original published works (such as Karl Marx’s *Capital*). And a

significant portion of what we read will be *old*; theory is difficult to read, and hundred -or-more-year-old theory even more challenging. But it is rewarding, too, to finally wade through a dense paragraph and emerge with a new understanding of how the world works. **To make the most of this course, you will**

**need to make time to read and make reading notes on a regular basis.** I suggest that you organize significant, uninterrupted blocks of reading/writing time into your schedule for this course. And start early, so you can begin digesting and synthesizing the material before class. I do not expect you to fully understand all or even most

of what you read the first time, but I do expect you to try. Reading materials twice before class, and a third time after class, is an advisable strategy.

## Reading Prep

The class will be split into four groups: A, B, C, & D. Each week, each group will have a task to help prepare us for discussion. The four tasks are as follows:

**Post:** Write a reflection on the reading and post it to the appropriate week's discussion folder on P-Web. Make sure you include "Post" in the subject of your post. These posts must demonstrate the following: a) that you have done all of the assigned readings; b) that you have a basic grasp of the core arguments; c) that you are beginning to wrestle with the problems posed by the readings in a thoughtful and critical way; and d) that you are beginning to connect the week's readings to previous theorists and schools of thought. These reflections are generally about a page long, single-spaced; they should be thoughtful but may be much more informal than papers. Keep in mind that these are the jumping-off point for our class discussion; they need not be perfect but they do need to help us move forward towards discussion. They must be posted by **Sunday 6 pm**, so everyone has a chance to read them (and responders have time to respond) before the Tuesday class.

**Respond:** After reading the Posts, write a response to them on P-Web. Make sure you include "Response" in the subject line. The Posts may be provocative to you, bringing up arguments you hadn't thought of. You may want to challenge the Posts. You may see themes emerging across several posts. You might want to respond to one Post in particular, or to use the Posts collectively to strike out in a new

theoretical direction. Responses are generally shorter than Posts; they, too, should be thoughtful and respectful but may be informal. They must be posted by **Monday 5 pm** so everyone has a chance to read them before the Tuesday class.

**Background:** Do some quick internet searching for background of or context on our theorists. You might find it important to know about their historical or political location, or to understand their life events. You might find out that they were colleagues with other theorists, or that they were involved in political feuds, or that they were social activists for particular causes. You'll BRIEFLY (<5 mins) present your findings in class, in whatever format suits you and the material (Want to just talk to us? Want to make a little slideshow? Want to show us a video clip? Want to work together with one or more other Background people this week? All are fine.) You might want to put things on P-Web in that week's discussion folder; make sure you include "Background" in the subject line. These must be prepared for the Thursday class.

**Connect:** Look for contemporary, relevant examples of how this week's theory can be applied, challenged, adapted, used to analyze social life. You'll BRIEFLY (<5 mins) present your "connection" in class. Feel free to be creative: video clips, media images, cartoons, etc. are all fair game. You can work together with one or more other Connection people this week. You might want to put things on P-Web in that week's discussion folder; make sure you include "Connect" in the subject line. These must be prepared for the Thursday class.

\* Weeks 13 & 14 you can contribute in your role of choice.

	Week 1 - 9/4; Week 5 - 10/2; Week 9 - 11/6	Week 2 - 9/11; Week 6 - 10/9; Week 10 - 11/13	Week 3 - 9/18; Week 7 - 10/16; Week 11 - 11/20	Week 4 - 9/25; Week 8 - 10/30; Week 12 - 11/27
<b>Post</b>	A	B	C	D
<b>Respond</b>	D	A	B	C
<b>Background</b>	C	D	A	B
<b>Connect</b>	B	C	D	A

## Attendance & Participation

Attendance is required. Learning is about the interaction of minds and ideas in the classroom. Especially, since this course is structured around discussion and workshopping writing together, it's critical that you attend class to participate in the exchange of ideas and to support your classmates.

You have the option to use, without penalty or question, **two "personal days"**. You might choose to save these for when you're sick; you might need to use them when you travel for athletics; you might wish to observe religious holidays; you might just want to go sledding or sleep in. You don't even have to tell

me which. I suggest choosing carefully. You don't, of course, have to use all of them, and I strongly recommend against using them on days when you're a Dialogist, Backgrounder, or Connector.

**Lively and respectful participation** is expected; if you have concerns about this,

It takes centuries for sense to become common.  
- Anthony Steyning

please come talk to me for ideas about how to contribute.

## Papers

This course is **writing-intensive**. One great way to understand theory is by writing about it, struggling with it and trying to take it apart. You will write 3 short papers in this class. These papers are designed to get you writing about—even DOING—theory in short bursts, which is often less intimidating than one long paper. That’s not to say easier; in fact, writing in a concise and focused manner is often more difficult than blathering on and filling up space without saying much, as is possible in a longer paper. I highly recommend that you take advantage of office hours to discuss each of these essays as you prepare and draft them. I am happy to read drafts during my office hours, well in advance of deadlines. The papers build in difficulty. You will be graded on your clarity of writing, your demonstration of knowledge of the relevant terms and concepts, and the insightfulness of your analysis.

### Film Analysis Essay—10 points—3 pages:

In this essay, you will make your first stab at applying sociological theory to social life, by analyzing a film of your choice using a theory of your choice. I will provide a list of good possibilities, but you’re free to choose a different film if you like. Your goal is to demonstrate your understanding of the theory you choose, to build connections between theoretical principles and contemporary popular culture, and to seamlessly integrate theory with illustrations from the film. This will help you build your theoretical muscles, and hopefully you’ll start “seeing” theory in the rest of your life as well.

(This assignment is adapted from Pelton, Julie A. 2012 "Film Analysis Papers." Assignment published in TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (<http://trails.asanet.org>))

### Empirical Evaluation Essay—20 points—5 pages:

In this essay, you will discuss an empirical application of theory we cover in class. Specifically, you will evaluate which of two theories of your choice is superior for explaining some empirical topic of your choice. Thus, you will assess the relative usefulness of two different theories. That is, how well do these theories work in the real world?

One good way to go about this essay is to describe a current event, news item or experience from “real life” (your own or someone else’s), and evaluate whether it is a good example of an idea in the reading. Show how the example embodies, illustrates, or contradicts the theorists’ ideas. Perhaps you’ll chose conflicting theories and show how one is better than the

other at explaining your empirical example; perhaps you’ll choose complementary theories and show how using them in conjunction allows a deeper understanding of your example; perhaps you’ll choose apparently contradictory theories and use your example to show how they are actually complementary – or vice versa. There are a lot of possibilities!

(This assignment is adapted from Karla Erickson’s Fall 2010 and Peter Hart-Brinson’s Spring 2012 Contemporary Sociological Theory syllabi.)

The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need for words, and ask no more than complicitous silence. – Pierre Bourdieu

### Forgotten Theorist Essay—20 points—5 pages & Presentation—5 points—5 minutes

In this essay, you will explore the theoretical tradition outside what we covered in class. Find a theorist you think could or should have been included and read some of their original work. Write an essay

- Introducing the theorist (their life, their context, their relationship to the field of sociology)
- Outlining key aspects of their theory
- Showing how their theory is useful (or not – maybe this person is left out for good reason?) for understanding contemporary social life, by applying it to some topic of your choice
- Describing the connections and tensions with other sociological theory. If you choose a classical theorist (pre-1910), make sure you talk about how/whether that theory has been continued into the present: does anyone build on this work? Has it been largely forgotten?

You can do research for your theorist any way you like, but one good place to start is by looking some social theory textbooks. Kivisto covers a lot of theorists we won’t cover in class; any of those are fair game. I’ve put the tables of contents for other texts I have in my office on PWeb; if you see something of interest you are welcome to come by and browse those chapters. You might also start with Wikipedia or other online references to social theory. When in doubt, come talk to me about the process or the theorist you’re interested in.

You will present your theorist in class to your peers during the final exam period, December 19 from 2-5 pm. These presentations must be SHORT (no more than 5 minutes) and POLISHED.

(This assignment is adapted from Gallant, Mary J. 2010. "CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY - GROUP PROJECT ESSAY." Assignment published in TRAILS: Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology. Originally published 2005 in *Women Founders Into Classical Theory*, edited by J. E. Thomas. Washington DC: American Sociological Association. (<http://trails.asanet.org>))

## Peer Review

**Peer-review process:** Each of your papers will be written in multiple drafts, with feedback from a writing group formed in class. Good writing necessitates re-writing, and the earlier and oftener you get feedback on your writing, the better it will be. This format allows you to practice writing and revising, and allows you to get better at a particular kind of writing across the semester. You will ‘workshop’ your essays with your group, which means that you will turn in copies of an early polished draft to your group, and your group members will read it and return a short written critique to you. Then, your group will have a short discussion about your paper, in which you will get to hear what your group members think is incredible and awesome about your paper, and what they think could be improved. Using the feedback from this workshop, you will revise this paper, and turn in the revision to me.

Working in small groups enables you to get to know and trust each other, in order to facilitate better analysis and critical honesty of each others’ writing. **Keep in mind that the peer-review process requires your commitment to the group and your constructive feedback and attendance;** other students will rely on you to help them improve their essays, just as you will rely on them. Nevertheless, in rare cases, personal differences preclude meaningful interaction; if you think it would be unhealthy or academically unwise for you to continue with a particular group, please let me know. And rest assured: you will NOT be penalized if a group member lets you down; all grading is individual.

**I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus, as I see fit or necessary for the course.**

## Acknowledgements

The design of this course relies heavily upon the theory courses of Professor Karla Erickson at Grinnell College; Professor Ann Mische at Rutgers University; and Professor Jodi O’Brien at Seattle University. I thank them for their generosity. – ADE

Habit is the great flywheel of society.  
- William James

## Contacting me.

The best way to contact me is via **email:** devineau@grinnell.edu. Please read the syllabus thoroughly before emailing me with questions about the course. Don’t email me an hour before class starts to ask me questions about the reading or exams; not only will I not have time to respond to you before class, but I will also know you put off the assignment until the last minute. You can expect me to respond to email every afternoon while I’m in my office (i.e., I might not check email between 5 pm and the start of class the next morning ... plan ahead!).

When you email, please put the name of the course (e.g., “Theory”) in the subject heading and include your full name in the email. I don’t like to respond to email when I don’t know who it’s from. I welcome anonymous emails with suggestions, critiques, or comments about the course.

**Website.** I will post announcements and readings on PWeb; please check it frequently.

**Office hours.** I have office hours every week, as listed on the first page of this syllabus. Feel free to just drop by or to make an appointment ahead of time; if two or more people show up at the same time, those with appointments will be given priority. If my scheduled office hours conflict with your schedule, email me or see me in class to set up an alternate time. **Mornings** are my writing time; if my door is closed, either I’m engrossed in work or I’m not in.

## Helpful Information

**If class is hard for you,** here are some steps you can take:

- Come to my office hours and talk about it!
- Seek out an ARC that will help with reading, writing, or time management
- Sign up for a Library Lab (one-on-one help)

The **Add/Drop Period** for Fall 2012 Courses ends Friday, September 21 for Regular Full-Semester Courses. Last day to withdraw from a course is Friday, November 9.

**Connectivity problems** will not be accepted as an excuse for not completing electronically-contingent assignments. I highly recommend that you work ahead, save to disk and/or print out the online readings well ahead of time.

## Classroom Atmosphere.

**Be respectful** of me, of your classmates, of the College personnel and facilities. This means, at a minimum, turning off your cell phones and minimizing disruptive behavior in class, generally paying attention in class, arriving on time, and staying for the full class period.

**Please choose your words carefully.** The classroom must be a place in which everyone can participate. This means that every person must feel safe enough to express their opinions without fear of ridicule or intolerance. Remember that in good discussions, people critique ideas and not other people. The more heated the political issue we discuss, the more important it is to keep this in mind. It is normal to be or become emotionally connected to the concepts we discuss, and it is normal to have personal experiences related to those concepts. It is also normal for those experiences to be in conflict with the experiences of others in the room. For example, just as there will likely be someone in class who would prefer abortion not be legal, there will also likely be someone who has *had* an abortion. It's important to remember this diversity in our discussion so that we maximize, to the extent possible, the vibrancy and respectfulness of our intellectual inquiries.

He was a sociologist; he had got into an intellectual muddle early on in life and never managed to get out.  
- Iris Murdoch

## Academic Integrity.

Grinnell College takes academic honesty very seriously. Academic dishonesty includes (but is not limited to) such behavior as **quoting** or **paraphrasing** without complete citation, collaborating with others on assignments or exams without

the explicit permission of the instructor, submitting work for more than one course without the instructors' permission, and presenting another's work as your own. Penalties range from a failing grade for the assignment to permanent expulsion from

the College, depending on the severity of the offense. As an instructor, I am **obligated** to report all suspected violations to the Academic Honesty Subcommittee of the Committee on Academic Standing. In other words, as

soon as I suspect it, it is entirely out of my hands. Don't put me, or yourself, in this position. See the [full policy](#) for details. Please ask me if you have any questions.

## Reasonable Accommodations.

**Late Work.** Since you'll be workshoping your papers with your classmates, it's important that our schedules be coordinated. *I suggest that you begin your papers early enough to accommodate any last-minute emergencies.* As the saying goes, a failure to plan ahead on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part. That being said, if there are big events I seem to be unaware of which will impact the class, please bring them to my attention.

**Classroom Accessibility.** Please come see me no later than the third class if you have special learning needs. I will work with you to make the classroom and the material accessible. The Academic Resource Centers (<http://www.grinnell.edu/academic/arc>) are fabulous resources for all students.

**Unusual circumstances.** You might face unusual circumstances that affect your attendance or your work this semester; these might include religious or athletic commitments, health or personal problems, or other things. Please contact me within the first three weeks of the semester if you would like to discuss a specific instance that applies to you. In the case of major emergencies, please talk to me as soon as you're able.

**Grading policy.** I will accept written rebuttals up to one week following the return of any assignment. A persuasive rebuttal includes a summary of the question or task involved, a copy of your original response with my comments/grades, and a statement about why you think you deserve more credit than you were given. I encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity to participate in the process of your own evaluation. Use it if you think you have just cause. Though I put a great deal of consideration into my teaching methods they are not perfect for every individual.

# Tentative Schedule.

Date	Readings	# of Pages	Dialogist	Dialogist	Dialogist
<b>0: Aug 30</b>	<b>Intro to Social Theory</b> Read this syllabus! hooks, Theory as Liberatory Practice	12			
<b>1: Sept 4 &amp; 6</b>	<b>Legacies of the Enlightenment and the Spirit of Progress</b> Ritzer, Ch 1 Intro to Social Theory Hobbes, A Tough-Minded View of Power and Nature Smith, On Pin-making Heilbroner, Ch 4 & 5 Munch, Spencer (p35; 41-49)	13 8 7 60 9			
<b>2: Sept 11 &amp; 13</b>	<b>Roots of Conflict Theory: Marx</b> Ritzer, Ch 2 p 21-30	10			
<b>3: Sept 18 &amp; 20</b>	Kivisto, Chs 1, 3, 4, 5 (Marx) <b>Roots of Conflict Theory: Weber &amp; Simmel</b> Ritzer, p 30-53 Kivisto, Chs 12, 13, 14, 15 (Weber); 17, 19, 20 (Simmel) Simmel, The Metropolis and Mental Life	27 24 44 9			
<b>4: Sept 25 &amp; 27</b>	<b>Functions &amp; systems: Durkheim to grand theory to the middle range (and back)</b> Ritzer, p15-20, 66-87 Kivisto, Chs 6, 7, 8, 10 (Durkheim); 32, 33, 35 (Merton, Parsons, Alexander) Merton, Manifest and Latent Functions Gans, The Uses of Poverty: The Poor Pay All	28 48 2 5			
<b>5: Oct 2 &amp; 4</b>	<b>Meaning, self &amp; world: intersubjectivity and everyday life</b> Ritzer, p57-65, 149-154	16			
<b>6: Oct 9 &amp; 11</b>	Kivisto, Ch 31 (Mead), 42 (Schutz), 43 (Sacks), 44 (Garfinkel), 50 (West & Zimmerman) Film Analysis Early Polished Draft due Oct 2 <b>Meaning in interaction: symbol, performance and the interaction order</b> Ritzer p137-149 Kivisto, Ch 40 (Blumer), 41 (Goffman) Goffman, Presidential Address: The Interaction Order Film Analysis Revised Draft due Oct 9	30 13 14 17			
<b>7: Oct 16 &amp; 18</b>	<b>Rational action theory: interest, choice, and exchange</b> Ritzer p155-175 Kivisto, Ch 45 (Homans), 45 (Emerson), 47 (Coleman) Fall break	20 30			
Oct 20 - 28					

# Tentative Schedule, continued.

Date	Readings	# of Pages	Dialogist	Dialogist	Dialogist
<b>8: Oct 30 &amp; Nov 1</b>	<b>Structures of power: class, conflict and hegemony</b>	7			
	Ritzer p 87-93				
	Kivisto, Ch 36 (Coser), 37 (Mills), 38 (Dahrendorf), 39 (Collins)	26			
	Gramsci, Intellectuals and Hegemony	3			
<b>9: Nov 6 &amp; 8</b>	<b>Symbolic power and domination: habitus, field and social reproduction</b>	17			
	Ritzer, p175-191				
	Kivisto, Ch 70 (Bourdieu)	9			
	Bourdieu, Structures and the Habitus	16			
	McClaurin-Allen, "Incongruities"	18			
<b>10: Nov 13 &amp; 15</b>	<b>Critical theory: the public sphere and its critics</b>	20			
	Ritzer Ch5 except "The Civilizing Process" (122-126) and "The Juggernaut of Modernity" (130-136)				
	Kivisto, Chs 60 - 64 (Benjamin, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Honneth, Habermas)	30			
	Empirical Evaluation Early Polished draft due Nov 13				
<b>11: Nov 20</b>	<b>Reconfiguring modernity: structuration, selfhood and the civilizing state</b>	10			
	Ritzer Ch5 p122-126, 130-136				
	Kivisto, Ch 65 (Elias), 66 (Debord), 67 (Giddens)	15			
	Empirical Evaluation Revised Draft due Nov 22				
<b>12: Nov 27 &amp; 29</b>	<b>Towards postmodernity: power, knowledge and regulatory regimes</b>	40			
	Ritzer Ch9				
	Kivisto, Ch 71 (Baudrillard), 72 (Foucault), 73 (Bauman), 74 (Featherstone)	30			
<b>13: Dec 4 &amp; 6</b>	<b>Identities in question: standpoints, intersections and instabilities</b>	36			
	Optional: Ritzer Ch8				
	Kivisto, Ch 51 (Butler), 53 (Smith), 54 (Connell), 55 (Omi & Winant), 58 (Brubaker)	50			
	Collins, Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination	12			
	Hartsock, A Theory of Power for Women?	5			
	Forgotten Theorist Early Polished Draft due Dec 6				
<b>14: Dec 11 &amp; 13</b>	<b>Post-colonial encounters: subaltern challenges and global decenters</b>	19			
	Ritzer, p272-290				
	Kivisto, Ch 75 (Wallerstein), 76 (Robertson), 77 (Appadurai), 78 (Kellner)	50			
	Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?	5			
19-Dec	Exam—2 to 5 pm—Presentations & Celebration				
21-Dec	Forgotten Theorist Revised Draft due 5 pm				