

## THEORIZING: THEORY CONSTRUCTION

Bin Xu

Associate Professor of Sociology

Emory University

Email: [bin.xu@emory](mailto:bin.xu@emory)

Office Hours: 4-6 PM Wednesday or virtual meeting by appointment

Office: Tarbuton 211

### INTRODUCTION

This is not a theory course. Nor is it a method course. Instead, this is a course about “theorizing”: how to think theoretically and how to come up with good theoretical ideas. You learn classical and contemporary theories and research methods in other courses, but most courses do not tell you where the good ideas come from. Instead of leaving the job to the muse, quite a few scholars now are advocating for an agenda of theorizing in social sciences. In other words, coming up with theoretical ideas is not something mysterious but something that can be learned and improved in a conscious and systematic way. Theorizing should be incorporated into graduate education in social sciences.

This course realizes this conviction into two parts. In the first part, we will read and learn philosophy of social science to get a clear sense of the epistemologies and ontologies out there in social science and to reflexively think about the basic assumptions on which our theorization is based. The term “philosophy” may sound intimidating, but it can help us understand some of the basic issues in social sciences which “social theory” courses do not usually teach.

In the second part, we read materials about theorizing, and, probably more importantly, apply the theorizing agenda to the topics we are interested. This workshop-style pedagogy can provide you with hands-on experience and feedback from your fellow students and instructor. The theoretical ideas you get from the theorizing exercises can be used in your future studies. The topics you choose may be the one you are planning for your thesis or paper.

### TEXTBOOKS

Benton, Ted, and Ian Craib. 2011. *Philosophy of Social Science*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gerard Delanty, Piet Strydom. *Philosophies of Social Science: The Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Open University Press.

Swedberg, Richard. 2014. *The Art of Social Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Abbott, Andrew Delano. 2004. *Methods of discovery: heuristics for the social sciences, Contemporary societies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

### **Recommended:**

Swedberg, Richard, ed. 2014. *Theorizing in Social Science: The Context of Discovery*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Tavory, Iddo and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

## PEDAGOGICAL METHODS AND EVALUATIONS

### PART I PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Every week one or two students lead discussions. The students should present a summary of required readings. In addition, every student who is not presenting in the week must also send one or two discussion questions to the discussion leaders the day before the meeting. Those questions will be compiled in advance and discussed in class.

### PART II: STUDENTS PRESENT THEIR REPORTS ABOUT THEORIZING

Every week each student needs to do an assignment of theorizing after a careful reading of the materials. The assignments are designed to help students to apply the skills and methods in the books to the case they are interested in. Students are strongly encouraged to use these exercises in writing research design or proposal for their 2<sup>nd</sup>-year paper or dissertation or any serious projects.

In each class meeting, the students present their assignments and give feedback to each other. For those students who have relatively clearer ideas about what they are going to do in the graduate study or are thinking about starting a project, these assignments are good devices to come up with new ideas and think through some of the issues they have encountered or will encounter. For those who do not have a clear idea at this moment but have an interested field, it is also a good way to explore some new ideas in a relatively open and tentative manner. Nevertheless, I encourage every student to take the exercises seriously instead of a necessary evil.

## EVALUATIONS

1. Presentations in both parts
2. Mid-term: We have a take-home, **mid-term exam**. You will be asked to read and review a few theoretical texts in light of our discussions of philosophy of social science.
3. **Final paper:**
  - 1) **Option 1:** Revise your assignments in the second part of the course based on your classmates' and the instructor's feedback and organize them into a brief paper on how you theorize in your interested case and, also, in addition to the theorizing part, how philosophies learned in Part I can shed light on some of the issues you encounter in the process of theorizing.
  - 2) **Option 2:** Students can team up with each other or the instructor to write a publishable paper on "Theorizing through X method." Such a paper should be based on a careful reading of representative studies that use X method and discuss how scholars theorize and what can be done to improve theorizing with this particular method. Some methods have not been systematically discussed, for example, interviews, computational social science, etc. This option certainly needs synergy, collective interests, and also more time investment, but I can see a clear gap to fill in.

	%
Part I Presentation	15
Midterm	20
Assignments (6)	30
Part II Participation	10
Final Paper	25
	100%

### RULES OF DISCUSSIONS AND PARTICIPATION

1. Active participation in discussion is required.
2. When discuss theoretical literature, do not go beyond the texts. Do not show off your knowledge. Breadth of knowledge is certainly a desirable quality, but too often students use it to impress people instead of improve their study.
3. Study with your goal in mind: how can this course help my project?

### WEEKLY SCHEDULE

#### WEEK 1 AUGUST 25 INTRODUCTION

No Reading

#### PART I PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

#### WEEK 2 SEPTEMBER 1 EMPIRICISM, POSITIVISM, AND CHALLENGES

Benton and Craib. Chapters 2, 3

In *Delanty*:

1 EMILE DURKHEIM: What is a social fact? (1895)

3 CARL G. HEMPEL. Concept and theory in social science (1952)

5 KARL POPPER. The problem of induction (1934)

#### WEEK 3 SEPTEMBER 8 WEBER AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Benton and Craib. Chapter 5. (Skip “Instrumental Variations” I & II)

In *Delanty*:

15 WILHELM DILTHEY. The development of hermeneutics (1900)

17 MAX WEBER. ‘Objectivity’ in social science (1904)

21 ALFRED SCHUTZ. Concept and theory formation in the social sciences (1954)

31 HAROLD GARFINKEL. Rational properties of scientific and common-sense activities (1960)

**WEEK 4 SEPTEMBER 15 RATIONALITY AS RULE-FOLLOWING: CULTURES, TRADITIONS, AND HERMENEUTICS**

Benton and Craib. Chapter 6.

In Delanty:

24 PETER WINCH. Philosophy and science (1958)

25 HANS-GEORG GADAMER. Hermeneutical understanding (1960)

**WEEK 5 SEPTEMBER 22 CRITICAL THEORY**

Benton and Craib. Chapter 7

In Delanty:

33 MAX HORKHEIMER. Traditional and critical theory (1937)

35 THEODOR W. ADORNO. Sociology and empirical research (1969)

36 JÜRGEN HABERMAS. The tasks of a critical theory (1981);

26 JÜRGEN HABERMAS. The hermeneutic claim to universality (1973)

**WEEK 6 SEPTEMBER 29 CRITICAL REALISM**

Benton and Craib. Chapter 8.

Gorski, Philip S. 2013. "'What is Critical Realism? And Why Should You Care?'" *Contemporary Sociology* 42 (5):658-670.

In Delanty. 61. Bhaskar. 63. Randall Collins.

**WEEK 7 OCTOBER 6 PRAGMATISM**

New readings:

Delanty. Whole Part 4. (Excluding Morris, Apel); plus 36. JÜRGEN HABERMAS. Knowledge and human interests (1965)

SEP entry on Charles Peirce:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce/>

Tavory, Iddo. (2016) The pragmatist wave of theory construction. *British Journal of Sociology*, 67: 50-56.

**Take-home Midterm. Due on October 11.**

## **PART II THEORIZING AND HEURISTICS**

### **WEEK 8 OCTOBER 13 WHAT IS THEORY AND THEORIZING? HOW TO DO IT?**

Gabriel Abend, "The Meaning of 'Theory'", *Sociological Theory* 26(June 2008):173-99.

Tavory and Timmermans. *Abductive Analysis*. Introduction and Chapter 1

Swedberg. "Introduction" to *The Art of Social Theory*

Swedberg, R. (2017) *Theorizing in Sociological Research: A New Perspective, a New Departure?* *Annual Review of Sociology*, 43: 189-206.

### **WEEK 9 OCTOBER 20 OBSERVATION**

Tavory and Timmermans. Chapter 3.

Swedberg. Chapter 2. Social Observation

#### **Exercise #1**

1. Choose a specific topic that interests you for any reason. The topic should be phrased as "phenomenon X in context Y": for example, campus shooting in the United States.
2. Find and "observe" (read, watch, listen, etc.) the following materials:
  - 1) A fictional or non-fictional book or long article in a serious but non-academic magazine about the topic
  - 2) A documentary/fictional movie about the topic
  - 3) A report that contains statistics
3. First reaction: Find something that shows up in all the materials and interests you. Do not try to think theoretically at this moment. Find the thing that intuitively puzzles, intrigues, and strikes you.
4. Then ask yourself: "Does my expertise or previous immersion in the related field shape my thinking of the topic? If yes, how?"
5. Second reaction: Then another thing that interests you. This thing should be beyond the mental framework set by your previous expertise (see no.4).
6. Compare the first and second reactions; re-read Swedberg's Chapter 2. Contemplate on the issue of observation and report your contemplation to the class.

### **WEEK 10 OCTOBER 27 CONCEPT AND TYPOLOGY**

Swedberg. Chapter 3 (28 pages)

Goertz. Chapter 2 of *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (40 pages)

Blumer. What is wrong with social theory? (*American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Feb., 1954), pp. 3-10)

#### **Exercise #2:**

1. Find a concept to describe your new thing discovered in last week's exercises.
2. Define your concept in two ways: Goertz's 3-level scheme or follow Blumer's sensitizing concept.

3. Compare the two ways of conceptualization and discuss in class which one is more suitable for you and what are the possible drawbacks of the conceptualization.

### **WEEK 11 NOVEMBER 3 HEURISTICS I**

Swedberg. Chapter 4, 6

Abbott. Chapters 3

**Exercise #3:** Come up with new ideas

1. Apply one or some of the skills and methods of discovery in Swedberg and Abbott to come up with new ideas. Try as many as possible. Compare them and decide on the ones that excite you most.
2. Share your findings with others during the class discussion.

### **WEEK 12 NOVEMBER 10 HEURISTICS II**

Swedberg. Chapter 5

Abbott. Chapters 4, 5, 6

**Exercise #4:** Argument/Explanation and Description

1. Apply one or some of the skills in Swedberg and Abbott to your case and refine your argument.
2. Come up with at least three explanations by using these skills
3. Imagine you are about to write a paper based on this argument, and apply the descriptive heuristic methods in Abbott Chapter 5 and 6 to your paper.

### **WEEK 13 NOVEMBER 17 FROM THEORIZING TO METHODS**

Tavory and Timmermans. Chapters 4, 5, 6.

Bin Xu. Appendix to "Chairman Mao's Children." & Chapters 1 & 2.

**Exercise #5: From theorizing to methods**

1. Think of this exercise as a tentative research design, or a document that leads to final research design. But you need to have more detailed descriptions of your thinking processes
2. Determine which methods are most feasible and useful ones for your research.
  - 1) Try both quantitative and qualitative methods and compare them.
  - 2) Try both your favorite and your least favorite methods and compare them.
  - 3) Try different levels of analysis (for example, if your initial thoughts are micro-level, try a research design on macro-level, and compare the two).
  - 4) Try different units of analysis (for example, individuals versus groups, narratives versus actions).
3. Write a memo of your analysis: your final decision on methods and justification; it is okay if you don't have a decision or have more than one method.

**WEEK 14 DECEMBER 1 THE ROAD AHEAD: HONING GOOD THEORIZING HABIT**

Swedberg. Chapters 8, 9, 10

Abbott. Chapter 7

Pick one chapter that is closer to your substantive interest in *Theorizing in Social Science*. Think about how the chapter can provide you with interesting thoughts for future research.

**Exercise #6:** A plan for future study (final assignment)

Draw on the practical advice in Swedberg's and Abbott's chapters and our in-class discussions, write a plan for future study that specifies how you develop your theoretical thinking habit and ability in your graduate school study.

This plan is not only an assignment but also a document for you to keep and revise in the next few years.

**Final paper: due on TBD.**