

CSOn4002 INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Room M117, Mondays 16:00 to 17:40

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Course Description:

Arguably, signs, symbols and meanings have always been the province of sociologists but not always their primary concern. Many believe we have finally taken or are in the midst of taking a “cultural turn” in contemporary sociology. Problems of meaning, discourse, aesthetics, value, textuality, and narrativity, topics traditionally within the purview of humanists, have come to the fore as sociologists increasingly emphasize the role of meanings, symbols, cultural frames, and cognitive schema in their theorization of social processes and institutions. This course will chart such a move, providing a wide-ranging overview of the ways in which culture has been conceived and utilized in the evolution of contemporary cultural sociological thought.

To achieve these goals, the classroom experience is structured around weekly simulations. Students take on the roles of a “real-world” experience related to the assigned topic and readings. The aim is to make classical and contemporary cultural sociology come to life, while developing critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Above all, the simulations are intended as a form of interactive and experiential knowledge production, making students active agents in their own learning process.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Join classroom discussions more actively
- Acquire the ability to connect abstract social theories to real life situations
- Improve their understanding of social institutions and policy-making processes
- Compare and contrast different sociological approaches to the study of culture
- Review and analyze patterns of historical change in the meanings of culture as a theoretical concept
- Critically reflect about their own cultural experiences in light of sociological and historical data
- Cultivate research proficiency and expertise by undertaking a semester-long research project that involves primary sociological texts, the incorporation of a strong thesis and the use of AI technology.

Assessment methods

Conditions for passing the course:

1. **Regular Attendance and active participation in seminar simulations and discussions**
2. **In-class written responses to the simulations** (You will reflect upon and assess the session’s simulation, synthesizing and developing theories, hypotheses, or frameworks of explanation that they then test for “real-world” applicability.)
3. **Final research project** (topic of your choice in consultation with instructor; you will create a 2000-word essay in ChatGPT on your topic, and write a 1500-word critique of the essay. The critique should contain an introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.)

Particular activities of students will be evaluated as follows:

- 48% - participation in class and reflection on the simulations (4 pts. each)
- 52% - research project

Academic Honesty

The Faculty of Social Studies at MU expects students to know the study rules and maintain academic honesty by refraining from plagiarism and from cheating during exams. Plagiarism means that one presents other peoples’ ideas as one’s own and does not credit the author. Plagiarism is one of the most serious breaches of ethical standards in the academic environment, for it denies the mission of the university and the meaning of studying. From a legal perspective, plagiarism is the stealing of intellectual property. In addition, the use of AI tools should be judicious and under the direction of the teacher. The official FSS policy on academic honesty and on the use of AI technology are available in the course’s interactive syllabus in IS. Academic dishonesty is not tolerated under any circumstances at FSS. **The minimum penalty for academic dishonesty is expulsion from the course, a grade of F for the semester, and referral to the Faculty disciplinary committee.**

PLEASE NOTE:

All assignments may require an oral defence. Students will have to prove that their paper does not contain parts that can be classified as plagiarized or contain academic fraudulence. Students have to demonstrate that they used all the references enlisted in the paper and show beyond doubt that they wrote the paper by being able to defend it in a discussion.

(IMPORTANT: See online Interactive Syllabus for specific simulation preparation readings for each week!)

Week	Date	Seminar topic	Required reading
1	Sept 23	Introduction to course (NJ & WB)	No reading
2	Sept 30	Introduction to the field Cultural turn in the social sciences & Constitution of cultural sociology (NJ)	1. Spillman – Introduction, pp. 1-15. (14 pp.) 2. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2021. “Recovering the primitive in the modern: The cultural turn and the origins of cultural sociology.” <i>Thesis Eleven</i> 165(1): 10-19. (8 pages) 3. Bauman, Zygmunt. 2010. “Culture: Liquid-Modern Adventures of an Idea.” Pp. 326-334 in <i>Handbook of Cultural Sociology</i> , edited by J. R. Hall, L. Grindstaff, and M. Lo. New York: Routledge. (8 pp.) 4. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2020. “The Double Whammy Trauma: Narrative and Counter-Narrative during Covid-Floyd,” <i>Thesis Eleven</i> , Online Special: Living and Thinking Crisis. https://thesiseleven.com/2020/07/09/the-double-whammy-trauma-narrative-and-counter-narrative-during-covid-floyd/ (4 pp.) 5. “Culture” (<i>The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology</i> , pp. 111-117) (6 pp.) 6. Simulation Preparation Readings

			SIMULATION: Exercise in urban planning, simulation of how a municipality can “use” culture to market itself
3	Oct 7	Culture in “Classical” Social Theory – Part I (WB)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Durkheim, Emile. 1915. <i>The Elementary Forms of Religious Life</i>, Book 2, Ch. 6 & 7, pp .188-234. (*46 pp.) 2. Inglis, Chapter 2, pp. 27-52. (25 pp.) 3. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: Exercise in designing collective effervescence to foster political participation
4	Oct 14	Culture in “Classical” Social Theory – Part II (NJ)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007 [1903]. <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i>. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. READ: Chapter I “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” and Chapter II “Of the Dawn of Freedom.” (27 pp.) 2. Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007 [1903]. <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i>. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. READ: Introduction (17 pp.) 3. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: A school board meeting about teaching Critical Race Theory in secondary schools
5	Oct 21	Structuralism and the Semiotic Analysis of Culture (WB)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Barthes, Roland. 1990[1972] “The World of Wrestling.” Pp. 87-93 in <i>Culture and Society</i>. (6 pp.) 2. Sahlins, Marshall. 1990[1976]. “Food as Symbolic Code.” Pp. 94-104 in <i>Culture and Society</i>. (10 pp.) 3. Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1955. “The Structural Study of Myth.” <i>The Journal of American Folklore</i> 68(270):428-444. (*16 pp.) 4. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: Meeting of a left-wing political party on how to create more effective, structured stories that promote its agenda.
6	Oct 28	NO CLASS – READING WEEK	
7	Nov 4	The Poststructural Turn (WB)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decoteau, Claire Laurier. 2017. “Poststructuralism Today.” Pp. 251–77 in <i>Social theory now</i>, edited by C. E. Benzecry, M. Krause, and I. Reed. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press. (26 pp.) 2. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: Meeting of authors for a new history textbook for secondary school students, influenced by post-structuralist ideas

8	Nov 11	Culture in “Classical” Social Theory – Part III (NJ)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Martineau, Harriet. 1838. <i>How to Observe Morals and Manners</i>. London: Samuel Bentley. READ: Introduction (3 pp.), “What to Observe” (4 pp.). Part II, Chapter II, General Moral Notions (13 pp.), and Part III, Chapter VI, “Discourse” (5 pp.) (total = 25 pp.) https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33944/33944-h/33944-h.htm#si 2. Martineau, Harriet. 1838. <i>How to Observe Morals and Manners</i>. London: Samuel Bentley. READ: Part I, Chapter 1, 2, and 3 (25 pp.) 3. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: Meeting of survey designers for the next national census in the United States
9	Nov18	Societalization: A Macro-Institutional Model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2019. <i>What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization of Social Problems</i>. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. CHAPTERS 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, Conclusion. PLEASE READ ALL THE FOOTNOTES – THEY ARE CRUCIAL. (total = 49 pp.) 2. Simulation Preparation Readings
		(NJ)	SIMULATION: Meeting of organizers for a #MeToo rally
10	Nov 25	Pressing Issues: Gender and the Body (NJ)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inglis – Chapter 1, pp. 15-26 (11 pp.) 2. Gamson, Joshua and Laura Grindstaff. 2010. “Gender Performance: Cheerleaders, Drag Kings, and the Rest of Us.” Pp. 252-262 in <i>Handbook of Cultural Sociology</i>, edited by J. R. Hall, L. Grindstaff, and M. Lo. New York: Routledge. (10 pp.) 3. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: Meeting of the United Nations entity UN Women to create new guidelines for Gender Equality
11	Dec 2	Culture as Text (NJ)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” Pp. 415-451 in <i>Interpretation of Cultures</i>. New York: Basic Books. (*36 pp.) 2. Smith, Philip. 2011. “Narrating Global Warming.” Pp. 745-762 in J. Alexander, R. Jacobs, and P. Smith, <i>The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (17 pp.) 3. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Pp. 3-30 in <i>Interpretation of Cultures</i>. New York: Basic Books. (*27 pp.) 4. Simulation Preparation Readings
			SIMULATION: Meeting of scientists planning to issue a press release on climate change

12	Dec 9	<p>“Strong” vs. “Weak” Programs? (WB)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alexander – <i>Meanings of Social Life</i>, Introduction & Ch. 1, pp. 3-26. (23 pp) 2. Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." <i>American Sociological Review</i> 51:273-286. (*13 pp) 3. Pierre Bourdieu, “Artistic Taste and Cultural Capital” (1968) pp. 205-216 in <i>Culture and Society</i>. (11 pp.) 4. Simulation Preparation Readings
			<p>SIMULATION: Planning meeting to write a museum guide for secondary students</p>
13	Dec 16	<p>Looking Forward: The Cultural Sociology of Artificial Intelligence (WB)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2003/1992): “The Sacred and Profane Information Machine”. In: <i>The Meanings of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology</i>. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 179-192. (14 pp.) 2. Airoldi, Massimo. 2021. <i>Machine habitus: Toward a sociology of algorithms</i>. John Wiley & Sons. Chapter 1, pp. 1-31. (31 pp.) 3. Simulation Preparation Readings
			<p>SIMULATION: Working with AI programs online to create sociological essays on current affairs</p>