

# SOCIOLOGY 500 – FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL THOUGHT

September – December 2016

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By the time that they reach graduate school, most sociology students have taken at least one course in Sociological Theory and so they generally 'know' the orientation of the major perspectives in the field. However, in their previous courses they have most likely focused on what key social theorist said about the nature of society and culture. But most sociological theorists also have something important to say about what were the appropriate approaches through which to collect and understand empirical evidence about society. This course focuses on this second set of issues and is about how one explains social life, not just conceptually but also empirically. In that sense it is a course in epistemology focusing on the foundations of explanation. As such, it provides an underlying link between social theory and sociological methods and research.

The aim of this course is not to have you 'learn' who said what. Rather, it is about 'why' they said it. This involves a fourfold analysis:

1. The focus is on the **underlying explanatory issues**, from those that the early sociologists were grappling through to their manifestation in more recent sociological analysis.
2. The course is concerned with analyzing the relative **traditions of social thought** and where individual sociologists fit into those tradition. In that sense, there will be a strong analysis of the philosophical basis of sociological thought as well as the traditions and schools of thought involved in sociology as they developed.
3. There will be a concern **with both the substantive and the epistemological concerns of sociological theorists**. That is, the course is not just about what they said about the nature of society, but also about what these theorists said about **the nature of how we achieve evidence and make explanations** with regard to the nature of society. In that sense, the course is not just a foundation in social thought, but also a course in the foundations of methods in social thought.
4. Finally, the course takes **a sociology of knowledge perspective to social thought**. That is, it sees social theory as a product of the society in which its creators are embedded. It asks the question, what were the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of the society around them that influenced the various sociological approaches? Moreover, it asks, how relevant are these perspective to the quite different social, economic, political and cultural conditions that exist today.

Four traditions of theoretical and methodological explanation will be explored in this course – **positivism, idealism, dialecticism, and the social brain**. Each will be traced from its origins through to its manifestations in modern social research.

**Positivism** is the epistemological foundation of quantitative sociology. The course will examine some of the principles set out by the founding fathers of sociology and trace them to how this perspective is articulated in recent sociological analysis including pragmatism and grounded theory.

**Idealism** is the foundation of much of qualitative sociology. It will be examined from its roots in historiography through to its manifestations in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and social constructionism.

**Dialecticism** will be examined from its roots in philosophy (Feurbach, Hegal and Marx). However, the focus will be on what the form of *praxis* offers as a methodological stance for sociologists. It will also examine the implications of this perspective for approaches in sociology that deal with inequality and with social justice analyses.

**Social Brain** perspectives have developed over the past two decades out of the fields of neurology and cognitive psychology. They have empirically demonstrated that foundational perspectives of social cognition are embedded in the brain, either from birth or from the experience of environment (i.e. epigenetics). Sociology has long eschewed any form of biological determinism when it comes to social behaviour. However, new neurological discoveries provide a major challenge to sociological approaches that do not take into account at least some of recent discoveries in a now expanding and vibrant field depicting the social brain. We will briefly examine how to blend these new perspectives with socio-cultural analysis related to New Institutional Analysis and Field Theory.