

# **Intro to Sociological Theory**

Summer 2023

SOC 10b

*Department of Sociology  
Brandeis University*

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Class Time: M/T/W/R 6:30pm – 8:30pm

Location: Zoom

Instructor: Zachary Fox

Pronouns: He/Him/His

Contact: [zacharyfox@brandeis.edu](mailto:zacharyfox@brandeis.edu)

Office Hours: TBD

Sociological theory is a broad and expansive canon rife with conflict and disagreement with many unsettled questions, especially in terms of ontology, or, the “real” stuff that sociologists theorize about. The goal of this course is to give you an introduction to sociological theory as well as to expose you to an array of readings ranging from classical to contemporary social theory and corresponding topical areas where theory is applied and as a result becomes transformed into new explanations. Theory is aimed at explanation and understanding. This is not to say theory is not to be questioned. Some of what we read will fall under the general category of “social” theory. All this means is that sociologists are not the only theorists with important stuff to say about how society works. Overall, my goal in this course is to provide you with the tools to do your own questioning. While there are many approaches to theory, my approach is to read theory as a generative exercise aimed towards building theories of my own. Theory is a useful tool for thinking, critiquing, and making arguments. Over the course of the semester, this course will be our workshop as we try and build theories of our own.

## **Learning Goals**

Structurally, this course is meant to be a **reading/writing/discussion forum** that will help you think better, understand concepts more clearly (and write

your required papers more easily) than a prof-led lecture that feeds you necessary information (and very likely puts you to sleep and/or *forces* you to watch Netflix during class) and tests how well you regurgitate it for me (double yuck).

That said, keep the following point in mind: the overall goal of this course is not to provide you with facts or a method or a skill. I won't be giving you indubitable, must-memorize truths about social theory (as if that were possible), or telling you what you should think (sorry I cannot and *will not* do that ... existentialist reasons).

The **overall goal of this course** is instead to give you a basic understanding of that genre of writing known as social theory; an understanding of some of its core themes; an understanding of the purpose of social theory; and an understanding of why it is important for the social sciences and humanities, politics, society at large, and quite possibly your own life.

With (all of) this in mind the **learning goals** for this course are as follows:

1. To develop an elementary grasp of important social-theoretical themes, principles and techniques.
2. To understand (at least a little bit) the role that theory plays in science, social science and the humanities.
3. To gain a better understanding of how American and global society works (not to mention an understanding of what exactly "society" of which we speak might in fact be... not a whole lot of agreement about this).
4. To develop and hone argumentative and writing skills (not to mention the ability to read and evaluate arguments).
5. To use social theory to challenge your own common-sense preconceptions and (perhaps) help you and others live your life differently (no joke, this might happen) and perhaps change the world for the better (it *has* happened before, as we will talk about).

## **Course Requirements (TBD)**

I am currently working these out but expect some combination of papers (maybe 2 or 3, probably 2), reading reflections, and discussion boards. The class involves a lot of reading...hopefully not an overwhelming amount, we can always adjust accordingly ;). This means we'll be digging into each reading to

get some idea of the implications of how each author is applying social theory and talking about them together to make some sense out of the world around us. Writing is an important aspect of the course because it helps me get a sense of your thinking and interpretation/application of what we read in class. This won't be about regurgitation (again, yuck), but about thinking creatively using our sociological imaginations. I really want to see what *you* think, not necessarily the people we read in class.

## **Course Policies**

### **1. Code of Academic Conduct**

All students are responsible for compliance with the Brandeis Student Rights and Responsibilities circa 2022-2023. You can access that here:

<https://www.brandeis.edu/student-rights-community-standards/rightsresponsibilities/pdfs/2022-23-rr-.pdf>

Academic honesty violations include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating academic dishonesty. NO CHAT GPT!!! You can write better than AI.

### **2. Academic Honesty**

Let's spend a little time with this since you will be writing so much for this class... All of the work you submit for a grade must be your own. Claiming someone else's work as your own is a violation of academic honesty. Duh. We all know this. Please *do not do it*. The penalties for this (at the university level) are not good. If I suspect academic dishonesty, you will automatically fail the assignment. If it happens again, you will fail the course. Trust me, these assignments aren't that difficult anyway.

### **3. Disability Statement**

Brandeis seeks to welcome and include all students. If you are a student who needs accommodations as outlined in an accommodations letter, please talk with me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as you can. I want to support you. In order to provide test accommodations, I need the letter more than 48 hours in advance. I want to provide your accommodations, but cannot do so retroactively. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Support at 781736-3470 or [access@brandeis.edu](mailto:access@brandeis.edu).

### **4. Financial Need Statement**

If you need emergency technical gear of any sort, Brandeis can help. More info here. <https://www.brandeis.edu/student-financial-services/financialaid/emergency-funding.html> And I'm happy to help you with this however I can. Please just ask.

## To Do Well in This Course...

Here are a few tips to help you do well in this course:

- You have to have a **civil attitude** toward what we will read and talk about. It is all controversial in some way. But the answers it gives and the facts it provides about these topics can often be interpreted as supporting one political point of view instead of another. Given the potentially controversial material we will be reading and discussing, I ask that you to be tolerant of the opinions of others during our class discussions.
- You have to be prepared to **change your mind** and to **listen** to what sociology has to say. Even if you already have strong opinions about any or all of these topics, this course will still be (very) interesting for you if you are willing to change your mind and/or seek to more effectively defend and understand your own (pre-established) beliefs.
- That said, in order for this to work you need to have some **openness** about arguments that might not conform to what you already believe.
- Finally, you have to dedicate some **perspiration** (sweat, effort, work) to this course. This seems obvious, but really it is the most essential key to success. And why? Because the entire course is based on reading

**Therefore**, in order to be successful in this class ... You should, like, *read*. You should *take notes as you read*. You should be prepared to *talk in class and ask questions about what you've read*. We will be reading and writing this semester. Nobody is quite sure what the authors meant and, indeed, there is a social theory (thanks Roland Barthes!) that says we should have no expectation that even *the authors* know what their words mean. So it is all up to *interpretation*. But to interpret first you must *read*.

Please note here that all of these “keys to success” involve **reading**. The main point I want get across is very easily stated: **if you do the required reading, you will be successful in this class.**

An obvious tip for success (at least final grade wise) is that you **show up to class** and **take notes**. You should also come to class ready to engage with (having read and thought about... at least a little bit) the required material during the in-class discussions and lecture.

## **Readings/Schedule TBD**

I'm assuming this will evolve as the course goes on. If you are interested in the course feel free to email me with any questions about what kind of things we'll be covering: [zacharyfox@brandeis.edu](mailto:zacharyfox@brandeis.edu).