



### **Profile of the course**

The course Advanced Social Theory aims to train students to high academic standards, in particular with regard to research competencies and in-depth disciplinary knowledge. It provides students with knowledge on contemporary social theories. 'Contemporary' is used here to distinguish it from classical social theory (e.g. Marx, Weber, Durkheim), on which it builds, and roughly means that it was published between the 1930s and today. This is an advanced course, typically for highly motivated students who are not afraid for theoretical abstraction and close reading and intensive discussions of key texts in contemporary social theory. The course focusses on original texts from key figures in the social sciences (examples are Bourdieu, Collins, Foucault, Habermas, etc.). This will help you to build a strong foundation in social theory. The main goal of the course is to enable students to select an inspiring and fruitful theoretical framework for future or current (PhD) research. Establishing a meaningful relationship between theory and empirical results is one of the more difficult tasks of social scientific research.

This course is a restricted optional course in the WASS Graduate Programme.

### **Assumed prerequisite knowledge**

Introductory (e.g., RSO-10306 Sociology) and intermediate level social theory courses (e.g., ENP-22803 Theories and Themes: Sociology); Social Science Bachelor; basic seminar skills; in case of doubt contact the course coordinator. Follow-up course: Critical Perspectives on Social Theory (WASS PhD course).

### **Learning outcomes**

After having completed the course successfully, students are expected to:

1. Distinguish and contrast the main arguments in key texts of important approaches in contemporary social scientific theory;
2. Distinguish and contrast the core themes of important approaches and debates in contemporary social scientific theory;
3. Assess the differences and similarities between these approaches;
4. Appraise a particular social scientific work, considering these approaches and debates;
5. Assess the opportunities and limitations of these approaches for doing research;
6. Use concepts and theories of at least two of these approaches to compose research questions for social scientific research.
7. Being able to participate in and stimulate an open debate about social science theoretical literature.

### **Course materials and resources**

Selected chapters from C. Calhoun et al. (eds), (2012) *Contemporary sociological theory*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell and other readings. In the first session we will explain where and how to find the literature.

### **Educational activities**

In each meeting, fundamental ideas of one or more influential authors in social scientific theorizing will be discussed. The discussions are based on original (in the sense of primary sources) key texts that form landmarks of a certain approach because they provide an in depth understanding of a central problem and/or strong statements that reveal the core of a certain approach. On average, about 100 pages will be read each week. For each session, each student will be asked to prepare a question and/or comment for discussion in the group. The student is expected to participate actively in the discussions.

All meetings are in-person. No online or hybrid activities.

### **Assessment strategy**

1. Written assignment: 60% of the mark (threshold 5.5)
2. Active participation reflected in the quality of the submitted questions and comments and involvement in the discussions: 40% of the mark (threshold 5.5)

Due to circumstances the assessment strategy differs slightly from the study handbook this year.

The written assignment serves to show students' ability to discuss and confront different conceptualizations or ways of social scientific thinking. How do various theoretical approaches compare? What kind of questions would one ask when working from one or the other theoretical approach? How do these questions relate to one another? Which approach seems to be the most appropriate or relevant for particular research questions? Are there ways to combine theoretical approaches? The assignment is based on the literature discussed in the course, but students are allowed to use other literature as well if possible (e.g. books by authors mentioned in the course). In that case, students are expected to discuss their choice of literature with the teaching staff. More info on the written assignment in the guidelines and the assessment form that will be handed out in the first session.

**Target length** of the written assignment: 1500 words is good target. The principle is that you write a concise essay. There is no absolute minimum of words (so less than 1500 is accepted) and you are free the use more words if really needed, but remind that more than 2500 words will rarely be considered a concise text.

**Submission of the essay:** by email to the course co-ordinator, preferably as a pdf, with your name in the file name (start file name with your name).

**Participation** in the discussions means that you actively contribute to the discussion about the texts and are co-responsible for the good development of the group's discussion. This will be explained in the first session.

| Important dates and deadlines                           |  |
|---|--|
| One hour <i>before</i> each session; preferably earlier | Students hand in at least one question or comment about the literature (use the link on Brightspace for submission). |
| Tuesday, 22 Oct.: 23:59 hrs.                            | Written assignment due   |

| Learning outcome   | Participation: i.e. quality submitted questions and involvement in class room discussions | Written assignment |
|--|---|--------------------|
| Distinguish and contrast (level 4: analyse) the main arguments in key texts of important approaches in contemporary social scientific theory;                  | X   | X                  |
| Distinguish and contrast (level 4: analyse) the core themes of important approaches and debates in contemporary social scientific theory;                      | X   | X                  |
| Assess (level 5: evaluate) the differences and similarities between these approaches;  | X   | X                  |
| Appraise (level 5: evaluate) a particular social scientific work, considering these approaches and debates;  | X   | X                  |
| Assess (level 5: evaluate) the opportunities and limitations of these approaches for doing research;   | X   | X                  |
| Use (level 3: apply) concepts and theories of at least two of these approaches to compose (level 6: create) research questions for social scientific research. |   | X                  |

### The principal themes of the content

The heart of the course consists of class meetings in which we discuss **original** texts of major thinkers that are considered cornerstones for current social theorizing. These texts illuminate central features of a certain approach and the thinkers are highly influential in contemporary social science. Each approach comprises a family of theories that share a specific point of departure or a

common concern, for instance the issue of power or how people give meaning. The approaches we have selected for this course (see the table below) belong to the most influential lines of social theorizing in the past decades. In this course, however, we can only discuss one text per author while most authors have addressed many different questions and their thinking has evolved over time. We had to make choices and selected and ordered texts that, on the hand, give a good idea of the particular approach and author and, on the other hand, address central themes in the social sciences that also are of particular relevance for the Wageningen context. The first column of the table below lists those themes. The selected authors stand for a particular theoretical approach: this is mentioned in the second column.

**Table 1 Overview of the main focus of the approaches and authors**

| <i>Theme/Issue</i>                | <i>Theoretical Approach</i>                | <i>Author</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|---------------|
| Interaction                       | Interpretative and interactionist theories | Blumer        |
|                                   |  | Goffman       |
|                                   |  | Collins       |
| Structure-agency                  | Structuration theory                       | Giddens       |
|                                   | Field theory                               | Bourdieu      |
|                                   | Theory of performativity                   | Butler        |
| Culture, Knowledge, and Discourse | Neo-Marxism                                | Althusser     |
|                                   | Post-structuralist theories                | Foucault      |
|                                   | Social movement theory                     | Tilly         |
| Science about Nature-Society      | Actor network theory                       | Latour        |
|                                   | Critical Realism                           | Sayer         |
| The Political                     | Political philosophy: theory of action     | Arendt        |
|                                   | Critical Theory                            | Habermas      |
|                                   | Feminist theories of justice               | Fraser        |
| Anti-colonial                     | Decolonization theory                      | Fanon         |
|                                   | Orientalism                                | Said          |
| Global Society                    | World Systems Theory                       | Wallerstein   |
|                                   | Network theory/Second modernity            | Castells      |

For practical reasons (availability of lecturers, course schedule) the actual order of texts to read and authors to discuss may depart from this list (see the schedule).

### Schedule RSO58306

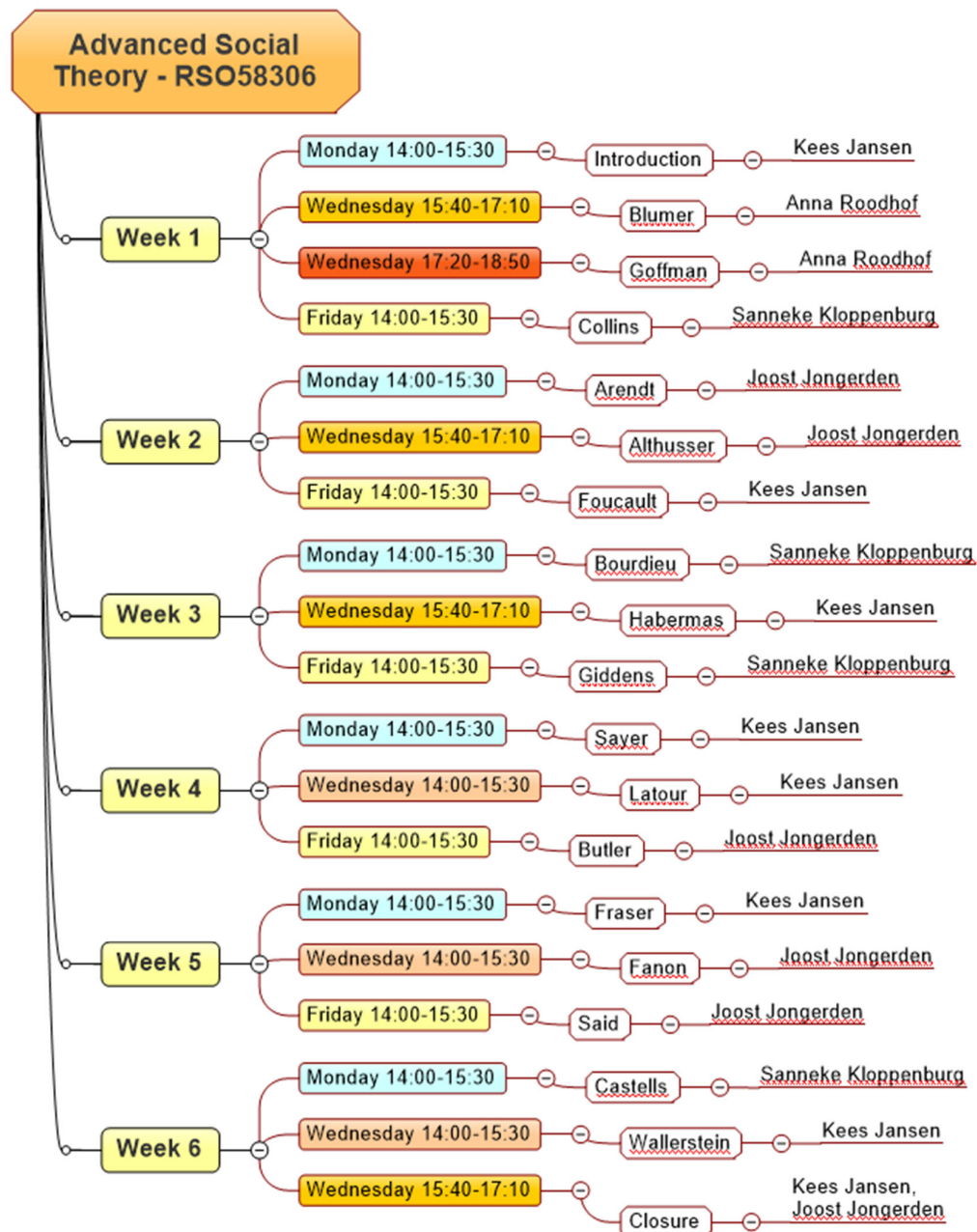
Standard schedule of sessions:

Monday 14:00 – 15:30

Wednesday Starts at 15:40 in first three weeks and at 14:00 in last three weeks

Friday 14:00 – 15:30

Venues: see TimeEdit; all sessions in the Leeuwenborch



## LITERATURE

A couple of readings are from Calhoun et al. (eds), (2012) *Contemporary sociological theory*, Wiley-Blackwell, indicated as CALHOUN below. We no longer require that participants buy the book as we only use a part of it (book available at the WUR library). The 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Calhoun et al. appeared more recently, but page numbers below refer to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. In the first session we will explain where and how to find all the readings.

- Blumer**, Herbert: 'Introduction to Part I' in CALHOUN: pp. 27-34 & 'Symbolic Interactionism'. In CALHOUN: pp. 62-74.
- Goffman**, Erving: 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'; In CALHOUN: pp. 46-61.
- Collins**, Randall: 'Interaction Ritual Chains'. In CALHOUN: pp. 75-90.
- Arendt**, Hannah (1958). From *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press: pp. 7-9, 22-37. + Intro to Hannah Arendt (excerpt).
- Althusser**, Louis (1971). From *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Verso, Chapter 12 'On Ideology', pp. 171-194 (the whole chapter continues to p.206, but we will only discuss the first part).
- Foucault**, Michel: 'Introduction to Part V' in CALHOUN: pp. 289-294 & 'Michel Foucault 'Discipline and Punish''. In CALHOUN: pp. 314-321.
- Bourdieu**, Pierre: 'Introduction to Part VI' in CALHOUN: pp. 325-334 & 'Structure, Habitus and Practice', in CALHOUN: pp. 345-358.
- Habermas**, Jürgen: 'Introduction to Part VIII' in CALHOUN: pp. 437-443 & Jürgen Habermas 'Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere'. In CALHOUN: pp. 469-389.
- Giddens**: 'Introduction to Giddens' & Anthony Giddens 'Agency, Structure'; as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Calhoun et al.
- Latour**, Bruno (1999). From *Pandora's Hope*, Chapter 3 'Science's Blood Flow', pp. 80-112. Second text to read together with Latour: **Benton and Craib** (2001), From *Philosophy of Social Science*, pp. 67-73.
- Sayer**, Andrew (2000). From *Realism and Social Science*. Sage. (excerpts)
- Butler**, Judith: 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. *Theatre Journal*, pp. 519-531.
- Fraser**, Nancy. (2000). 'Rethinking Recognition'. *New Left Review*, 3, 107-120.
- Fanon**, Franz (1967). From *The Wretched of the Earth*, Chapter 2 'On Spontaneity'.
- Said**, Edward (1978). From *Orientalism*: 'Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental'.
- Castells**, Manuel (2009). From *Communication Power*, Chapter 1, pp. 10-24 & 38-53. (we only read a part of the chapter)
- Wallerstein**: Immanuel: 'The Modern World-System in Crisis' in CALHOUN: pp. 587-599.