

Gestalts, Fields and Systems, being an examination of the meetness of wholistic and relational thinking for the Social Sciences

Draft Syllabus  
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**Overview:** There have been recurrent waves of interest in explanatory approaches in the social sciences that attempt to assemble relations into some sort of whole with its own properties, and then use the attributes, properties, transformations, or needs of this whole to explain actions or existences of component persons and their acts. The three most successful have been *Gestalt* theory, field theory, and systems theory. (Despite close attention to social relations, there is not a clear “network” theory that uses relations in this same way, though we will begin with theoretical work that provides an excellent platform for a relational network theory.) We will be wandering around in this area, asking the following questions:

- 1) Does this make sense?
- 2) Does it give non-trivial insights?
- 3) Does it link with phenomena in other realms?
- 4) Does it imply novel means of formalization?

I am not sure what the answer is to any of these.

This is not a class on analysis, it is a class on theory. However, I do indicate here possible analytic approaches. I expect that the student interest will be away from the formalization aspect; if I am wrong we can add a few optional methods/math sections, or swap some things out entirely. There is something lovely in the idea of dropping Habermas’s theory of communicative action in favor of a module on matrix decomposition.

**Class Format:** Each class has a focal reading or set of related readings; this is a theory class, but it is one that also attempts to link theory to (a) facts and (b) formalizations. This is not because a good theory needs to explain anything in particular, but because facts and formalizations are essential in discriminating between theories and evocative chains of words. In some cases, the formalizations will be difficult for those of us (including myself) lacking a particular technical background; they are hence optional and encouraged—if we find someone who can explain them to us, we will all learn a great deal.

**Class Requirements:** Students *get* to write a paper. One choice would be a sustained analytic exploration of key issues in one type of covered theory with a delimited number of texts used as data. Another would be an examination of some key theorist not treated here. A third would be a bridge to a related discipline, and perhaps an attempt to ransack this for creative analogues to social processes. (For example, if you knew a great deal about perturbation theory in astrophysics, you might argue that there was a close analogy that would allow for the importation of certain approaches to approximation used therein.) What will not be allowed are syntheses of this and that author, let alone this and that system.

Other than that, cheerful attendance is expected, and active attendance of a particular nature: because this is a new course, I will be attempting to make connections and string things together. Destructive criticism is extremely helpful at this stage, and hence I will expect students to be watching for errors and alternatives and offering other ideas whenever possible.

Finally, in many cases we are reading big things. Because it is too much to expect everyone to read everything, I'll point to selections. However, if you've already read the material for week 4, say, you should use that time to read more of the material for week 5.

**Directions for Exploration:** There are three direction for further exploration indicated on the syllabus and built into the class. First, for every class, I indicate a set of related readings that might be nice for those who want to pursue something in greater depth or begin that sort of unfree association that can lead us to develop a theory of theories. Second, at a number of points, I indicate possible avenues of mathematization or formalization that could be of use to us. If there is interest in additional meetings to go over these, those can be scheduled. Third, at the end of the syllabus, I have a number of areas that we are not planning to cover, but might. Student unrest could lead to a substitution of some of the pieces here for those—or they might be good paper topics—or for another time—or just nice to see them there....

**Readings:** There are some required books at the Co-Op Bookstore:

- Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic* [978-1555530365; \$20]
- Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* [978-0871402189; \$20]
- Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function* [978-1440068959; \$11.80]
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* [978-0415567886; \$19]
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* [978-0804717984; \$22]
- Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics* [978-0262730099; \$17]
- Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* [978-0804726252; \$31]
- Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol II* [978-0807014011; \$23]
- Stephan Fuchs, *Against Essentialism* [978-0674015968; \$31]

The following aren't ordered for this class, but I think it makes sense to look around for them sooner or later:

- G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*
- Karl Marx and Frederik Engels, *The German Ideology*

Further, hard to get but we'll be using will be

- Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*

Other pieces with a \* will be available as photocopies on CHALK.

## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

We assume that everyone has read *The German Ideology* by Marx and Engels. We begin by reviewing that today—here one should have read the “section A” on Feuerbach, or at least the excerpted portions in the Tucker anthology that most of you have. If we don’t get to this today, we’ll talk more about that next time.

## II. RELATIONAL THINKING I

We go on to read some “bookends” for *The German Ideology* as a way of capturing what might be distinct to relational thinking. One is the beginning of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in which he outlines the dialectical method, and the other Dorothy Smith’s reframing of the project of *The German Ideology*, which suggests that there is something to the dialectical method fundamentally relational in the everyday sense.

A. Karl Marx and Frederik Engels, *The German Ideology*

B. Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic*

C. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, Introduction.\*

**Other things to mull over:** Marx has a nice discussion of the dialectical method as he muses in the *Grundrisse*, in the part excerpted in Tucker. Somewhere in the beginning of the book form.

## III. RELATIONAL THINKING II

We then go on to examine the core of the renewed “relational sociology” as it began to emerge way back in the 1990s.

A. Mustafa Emirbayer. 1997. “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology.” *American Journal of Sociology* 103:281-317.

B. Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, selections.\*

➤ Should we talk about ratios? About ratios of ratios? About the singularities that result in matrices when there are such ratios of ratios? That is, the rank of a matrix? There is, as we shall see over the next few weeks, a way in which it isn’t stupid to see something like factor analysis as relational sociology.

**Other things to mull over:** There is an obvious affinity between much of the work of Georg Simmel and the relational sociology examined here. He combined the dialectical approach with the relational and added a large dollop of nonsense. Should we, as Chicagoans, add something from his *Sociology*?

#### IV. GESTALT THEORY

The *Gestalt* school of psychology sprang from some of the same intellectual roots as Cassirer and turned into the most important philosophical and intellectual approach for the social sciences in the twentieth century. One can **never** read enough Wolfgang Köhler. Wolfgang, I dedicate this course to you!

A. Christian von Ehrenfels, [1890] 1988. “On ‘Gestalt Qualities’,” translated by Barry Smith. Pp. 82-117 in *Foundations of Gestalt Theory*, edited by Barry Smith. München: Philosophia Verlag.\*

B. Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology*.

➤ We could examine topology or something like that, but some of the most interesting stuff to pursue has to do with neurological evidence regarding our *Gestalt*-type processing. Facial recognition is perhaps the best example supporting the *Gestalt* school’s approach.

**Other things to mull over:** Unfortunately, the most important thing for the purposes of our class in this tradition has not been translated—it is Wolfgang Köhler’s (1920) *Die physischen Gestalten in Ruhe und im stationären Zustand*. (Braunschweig: Friedr. Vieweg und Sohn.) But some of the ideas are there in the *Place of Values* book that we look at next time. The *Gestalt* approach (like Cassirer) owes a great deal to Goethe, especially his *Theory of Colors*. There is also a way that, as Ronald Breiger argues in a forthcoming piece (and Ilyenkov also argues), this school owes a tremendous amount to Spinoza. In some ways, this course could also be called “Spinozan social analysis.”

After the evil empire of behaviorism, with its twisted pretend-enemy-but-secret-ally of depth Freudianism, eradicated the last vestiges of noble *Gestalt*-ism in the behavioral sciences and humanities (respectively), it was largely the great J. J. Gibson who kept this approach alive. See his work on the *Ecological Theory of Visual Perception*.

#### V. FIELDS I

There is, or so the *Gestalt* theorists believed, something coherent in a field-theoretic approach that can be used not only to understand perception, but action. The most coherent treatment was by Köhler as mentioned above.

A. Michael Faraday? I’d like to find something, but as he didn’t write much and his collected papers are mostly descriptions of experiments, it’s hard to know what to do here. Perhaps there is a popular treatment we could consult?

B. Kurt Koffka, 1935. *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, selections.\*

C. Köhler, Wolfgang. 1938. *The Place of Values in a World of Fact*. New York: Liveright, selections.\*

- Maxwell, *A Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism*. Or perhaps there is a popular treatment of the mathematics used in Maxwell's field theory? Or we could look at fluid mechanics as a simpler backdrop?

**Other things to mull over:** We might examine Kurt Lewin's work on field theory, especially the essays collected in *Essays on Field Theory*, but I frankly think despite their influence in sociology, they aren't up to the level of Koffka and Köhler.

## VI. FIELDS II

Field theory gets picked up in the social sciences in two major ways. The first pertains to organizational fields, and the second is the work of Pierre Bourdieu. OK, I know that it is a bit much to assign two big works of his for one day, but I think *Homo Academicus* is the most impressive example of Bourdieu's field analysis in practice, and *Distinction* is the best empirical piece of social science since the Lynd's *Middletown*. You should own both of these anyway—in fact, you should carry *Distinction* with you at all times—so I don't feel guilty about the expense.

A. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

B. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*.

C. DiMaggio, Paul J. and Walter W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48: 147-160.

- One should investigate Correspondence Analysis seriously as a theoretically-informed technique; these theoretical arguments are best laid out in a stunning line of work by Ronald Breiger, especially “The Duality of Persons and Groups.” *Social Forces* 53 (1974):181-190; and 2000, “A Tool-Kit for Practice Theory” *Poetics* 27 (2000): 91-115. For Correspondence Analysis we have the classic piece: Greenacre, Michael J. 1988. “Clustering the Rows and Columns of a Contingency Table.” *Journal of Classification* 5:39-51 and the equally helpful Wasserman, Stanley, Katherine Faust and Joseph Galaskiewicz. 1989. “Correspondence and Canonical Analysis of Relational Data.” *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 1:11-64. An approach that does not follow Greenacre’s transformation into matrix notation is found in *Geometric Data Analysis* by Brigitte Le Roux and Henry Rouanet. In fact, maybe we should toss some other day and work through correspondence analysis and duality....

**Other things to mull over:** Regarding organizational fields, an important contribution is Emery, F. E. and E. L. Trist. 1965. “The Causal Texture of Organization Environments.” *Human Relations* 18:21-32.\* Other interesting contributors to field theoretic approaches include Karl Mannheim and Victor Turner.

## VII. SYSTEMS I

The focus for this week is Parsons’s *The Social System*. God, I hate that book. There are shorter treatments, such as the version in *Toward a General Theory of Action*, and perhaps this book on the university that Jackson Toby helped him with. But maybe we need to tough it out. I’ll Xerox as much as I can take. But we’ll start out with some more general issues on how to think through the logic of systems.

- A. C. E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, selections\*
- B. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics*
- C. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, selections\*
- D. Something on biotic systems, perhaps termite mounds?
- E. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, selections.\*
- F. Wolfgang Köhler, “On the Problem of Regulation,” in the Henle volume.

**Other things to mull over:** There is a non-trivial sense in which this sort of systemic thinking goes back to August Comte, lunatic founder of sociology. But to explore the development of structure/function thinking would take us a bit away. It might be worth reading Comte on what is distinctive to organic bodies, and perhaps Spencer as well, to see whether, if, when, how, why there might be a distinction between society-as-organism and society-as-system. Are all organisms systems? Are all systems organismic? If not, what is distinctive about organisms (no fair just saying “they’re alive”)?

## VIII. SYSTEMS II

Boy, wasn’t that Parsons book boring as all hell? Well don’t worry, this time we’re reading...Luhmann’s *Social Systems*. If you like eating steel wool, you’ll like reading this. But we’ll start out with an inspiration for the Luhmann and the Luhmanniacs, namely Spencer Brown’s trippy axiomatic algebraic theory!

A. G. Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form*, brief selections.\*

B. Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*.

C. Niklas Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference*, first one or two chapters.\*

D. Dirk Baecker, “Why Systems?” *Theory Culture & Society* 18 (2001), pp. 59-74

➤ Sooner or later, if you are interested in systems theory, you can’t just mess around with hippie math, you need to think in terms of systems of dynamic equations. In fact, there’s a reasonably argument to be made that systems theory and dynamic equation systems are coextensive. I have absolutely no facility with any of this.

**Other things to mull over:** Luhmann’s other work is sometimes considered more approachable; we might investigate a few things here. His followers have become quite central in German sociology; not that much is translated, but Baecker has an edited volume, *Problems of Form* that contains a number of key people. There is increasing interest in Germany in wedding systems theory to social networks theory: some of the people to examine here would include Jan Fuhse, Veronika Tacke and Boris Holzer. We will explore a different approach by Fuchs next week.

## IX. WHAT CAN WE DO WITH SYSTEMS?

The cool thing about systems theory is that it explains everything. The problem is that it can be too self-contained, too fit in its relation with its environment. So then the question for us would be, can one do anything except say that systems exist?

A. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume II*

B. Stephan Fuchs, *Against Essentialism*

**Other things to mull over:** One really should read the first volume of Habermas before hitting the second. Although these look very imposing, they are really wonderfully written, wonderfully translated and not nearly as hard to read as the other things you've been hacking your way through.

X. IS CLASSIC STRUCTURALISM A WAY TO PROCEED RELATIONALLY?

OK, now here's the weirdness coming out—just like Dorothy said, sometimes you're looking for your heart's desire, and it turns out that if it's not in your own backyard, we never lost it to begin with. The whole revival of *Gestalt* wholism that led Pierre Bourdieu to risk everything on field theory was in opposition to the cold logic of structuralism. But if we are looking for a relational theory, why doesn't structuralism qualify? Let's look at the most technically rigorous aspects of structuralism from a relational viewpoint.

A. Piaget, *Structuralism*, selections.\*

B. Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," Ch 11 in *Structural Anthropology*.\*

C. Harrison White, *An Anatomy of Kinship*, selections.\*

➤ Pursuing this would lead us to examine the basic algebra of groups and semigroups; any introductory text on abstract algebra would be fine, but we might also consider examining the work of Phillipa Pattison, in particular, the work with Ronald Breiger, but also her *Algebraic Models for Social Networks*.

**Other things to mull over:** Once we are here, the question is whether we want to connect to the earlier structuralism via Durkheim and Saussure, or whether to go straight to linguistics and phonology. Since we already got a sense of the organismic idea of relational analysis when we were messing around with systems theory, it would probably be the latter that makes more sense. So then we are doing that thing of wondering "why am I reading about this?" as we struggle through Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy.



## XI. ADDITIONAL TOPICS?

Here are a few things that haven't really come up, but might well....

### A. Networks:

I've argued that there isn't as much relational thinking in classic network analysis as many folks would have you believe. But there are, of course, exceptions.

- 1) Harrison White, *Identity and Control* is the one that is most central, and I would teach it here except that I'm not sure if it really fits with the relational thing, despite the fact that it is the bible of current relational sociology. Plus I get to teach it in classes on social networks.
- 2) Ann Mische's work (her book *Partisan Publics* and articles solo and with White, and with Emirbayer) is perhaps the network thinking that is more clearly relational. But then see the discussion in week 8.

### B. Dynamic models multiple equilibria.

There is a way in which thinking in terms of relations can lead to thinking in terms of multi actor models. Economics has focused on the class of these models that lead to analytically simple solutions. But the wider class of dynamic models that don't have unique solutions is maybe more relevant.

### C. Aesthetics.

I know this sounds strange, but I'm increasingly convinced that a serious relational sociology will lead to a theory that has more in common with aesthetics (an empirical, not normative, aesthetics) than anything else. And the *Gestalt* theorists would have been very comfortable with this. Here I think that the most promising way to proceed might be to build on American pragmatism.

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