

# **SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS I**

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Thursdays, 11:00-14:00h (except for session 11)  
Room 18.1.A01

## **INTRODUCTION**

The course offers a general introduction to contemporary sociological analysis, understood as the attempt to produce scientific explanations of social phenomena. It will address and discuss the main problems in advanced sociological theory from an analytical point of view. The focus will be on contemporary problems and discussions that are relevant for social scientists when trying to explain general and particular social processes, patterns, and interactions. The course will adopt an interdisciplinary approach. The topics of the sessions will include epistemological problems of the social sciences, theoretical models of social action and interaction, and explanatory models of particular types of social phenomena, as well as empirical examples.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The assessment will consist in two different elements, weighted equally (50% each). First, students will prepare presentations in class of the assigned readings for each session, followed by a discussion. Each student will be asked to present one of the texts and to play the role of discussant for another. The topics and schedule of the presentations will be agreed during the first weeks of the course. Second, a brief individual essay (2000 words) discussing the topic of the debate in which each student has presented. Active participation in class discussions based on assigned readings will also count significantly for the final assessment.

## **BASIC REFERENCE TEXTS**

- Bearman, P. & Hedström, P. (eds.) (2009). *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge (Mass.), Belknap Press.
- Elster, J. (2007). *Explaining Social Behavior*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Hedström, P. (2005). *Dissecting the Social*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Noguera, J.A. (ed.) (2006). *Analytical Sociological Theory*. Special issue of *Papers*. *Revista de Sociologia*, nº 80 (available at <http://papers.uab.cat/issue/view/v80>).

## **SCHEDULE AND READINGS**

Each session will address a relevant topic for contemporary sociological analysis. Specific readings are assigned for each session. The readings will be the basis of class presentations and debates, and will be made available to students on-line. The

discussions will be preceded by a systematic introductory lecture which will offer an overview of the topic of each session. Additional complementary readings will be suggested during the course and on demand.

(When the readings are chapters from the basic reference texts, the complete reference is included in the list above).

### **Session 1** (21 September)

Theories and models in social science. Sociological theories: a typology. Types of explanation in the social sciences. Sociological explanation and social mechanisms. Introduction to the micro-macro problem.

Elster, J. (2007), chapters 1 (“Explanation”) and 2 (“Mechanisms”).  
Hedström, P. (2005), chapter 2 (“Social mechanisms and explanatory theory”).

### **Session 2** (28 September)

Social institutions and social ontology. Different rival approaches on the nature of social phenomena. The debate on ‘social construction’. Structure vs. action.

Searle, J. (2005), “What is an institution?”, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 1(1): 1-22.  
Guala, F. (2016), *Understanding Institutions*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.  
Chapters 1 (“Introduction”), 2 (“Rules”), and 6 (“Constitution”).

### **Session 3** (5 October)

Intentional explanation and its problems. Interpretation vs explanation. Rational choice, DBO theory, and rival approaches. Rationality and the theory of social action.

Elster, J. (2007), Chapter 3 (“Interpretation”) and pp. 67-74 (“The Mind”).  
Harsanyi, J. C. (1969), “Rational-Choice Models of Political Behavior vs. Functionalist and Conformist Theories”, *World Politics*, 21(4): 513-538.  
Boudon, R. (2006), “*Homo sociologicus*: Neither a Rational nor an Irrational Idiot”, *Papers. Revista de Sociologia*, 80: 149-169.

### **Session 4** (19 October)

Social interaction. Composition effects and unintended social outcomes. The ‘Coleman’s boat’: Reduction, individualism, and the micro-macro problem. The debate on ‘analytical sociology’.

Little, D. (2012), “Analytical Sociology and the Rest of Sociology”, *Sociologica*, 1:1-47.

- Opp, K.-D. (2012), "Can There Be Causal Effects at the Macro Level?", *Sociologica*, 1:1-7.
- Manzo, G. (2012), "Full and Sketched Micro-Foundations", *Sociologica*, 1:1-8.

**Session 5** (26 October)

Strategic interaction. Collective action and social cooperation. Social dilemmas and their solutions. Pro-social motivations and altruism. Social exchange and reciprocity.

- Kollock, P. (1998), "Social Dilemmas", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24:183-214.
- Fehr, E. & Gintis, H. (2007), "Human Motivation and Social Cooperation: Experimental and Analytical Foundations", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33: 43-64.

**Session 6** (2 November)

Trust and trustworthiness. The principal-agent problem and reputation. Signalling theory and apparently irrational behaviour. Social capital.

- Gambetta, D. (1988), "Can We Trust Trust?", in D. Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, New York, Basil Blackwell.
- Gambetta, D. (2009), "Signaling", en Bearman & Hedström (eds., 2009).

**Session 7** (9 November)

Social influence. Contagion. Imitation. Diffusion. Threshold models of collective behaviour. Social networks.

- Elster, J. (2007), chapter 23 ("Collective Belief Formation").
- Cialdini, R. B. & Goldstein, N. J. (2004), "Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55:591-621.

**Session 8** (16 November)

Social coordination and conventions. Social norms. Suboptimal norms and pluralistic ignorance. Falsification of preferences.

- Bicchieri, C. (2006), *The Grammar of Society*, New York, Cambridge University Press, chapter 1 ("The Rules We Live By"), pp. 1-42.
- Elster, J. (2009), "Norms", chapter 9 of Bearman & Hedström (eds., 2009).

**Session 9** (23 November)

Power: concepts and mechanisms. Status and status hierarchies. Inequality.

Menge, T. (2017), "The role of power in social explanation", *European Journal of Social Theory*, forthcoming.

Poldony, J. & Lynn, F. (2009), "Status", chapter 23 of Bearman & Hedström (eds., 2009).

**Session 10** (30 November)

Behavioural social science. The 'behavioural enrichment' of rational choice. Limited rationality, cognitive biases and social heuristics.

Manzo, G. (2013), "Is rational choice theory *still* a rational choice of theory?", *Social Science Information*, 52(3): 361-382.

Gigerenzer, G. (2011), "Heuristic Decision Making", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62: 451-482.

**Session 11** (Tuesday 12 December)

Biology vs. socialization and culture as explanatory factors. The debate nature vs. nurture. Evolutionary social science and cultural theory. Biological basis of social behaviour.

León, F. J. (2014), "Reasons and biological causes", *Papers. Revista de Sociologia* 99(4): 595-629.

Freese, J. (2008), "Genetics and the Social Science Explanation of Individual Outcomes", *American Journal of Sociology*, 114 (Suppl.): 1-35.

**Session 12** (14 December)

Current perspectives on the nature and the future of social science.

Elster, J. (2007), "Conclusion: Is Social Science Possible?"

Watts, D. (2015), "Common Sense and Sociological Explanations", *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(2): 313-351.