

Preparing for the Theory Comprehensive Exam

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The theory comprehensive exam is designed as a measure of one's early development as a sociologist who plans to focus his or her teaching and/or scholarship in social theory. This exam will test student's comprehension of the field of sociological and social theory including, but going beyond, the specific course requirements for a concentration in theory. The theory curriculum provides a framework, not a complete reading list, for what we consider to be essential knowledge for a sociologist with a specialty in social theory.

Part I: Preparing Your Bibliography

The first step in the theory comprehensive exam process is preparing your bibliography.¹ The bibliography represents a contract between you and your committee regarding the scope of the exam. You are in effect saying that you have read the works that appear on your list and in ultimately accepting your list we are saying that the exam that we create will be based on its content.

You must submit a draft bibliography for review the semester before you plan to take your comprehensive exam (see deadline schedule). Your first draft will go to the Chair of the committee for her or his review and then, after revisions that satisfy the Chair, each committee member may suggest additional changes to your revised list. You will turn in a final draft of the bibliography to the entire committee by the end of the preceding semester in which you will sit for your exam.

Your list will be used by the committee to create the specific exam questions (you may also submit questions for the committee's consideration). The questions posed on the exam will reflect the areas you are prepared to answer. Questions will be posed in such a way as to permit differences among multiple students taking the exam based on differences in interest within theory. Please make sure your list is an accurate representation of your knowledge.

What to include on your list?

The goal of the list is to demonstrate your comprehension and coverage of the *major* theorists and theoretical schools of thought in sociological theory. We divide sociological theory into three specific areas: Classical, Contemporary and Cultural. These three areas are temporal and thematic. Each progressively allows more flexibility in terms of what must be included on your list.

Your list should be organized around these three areas with sub-headings where appropriate.² The list should include major theorists and theoretical perspectives you feel represent the core aspects of each area *and* those aspects beyond the core that you are beginning to develop as your theoretical areas of expertise. You are the architect of the bibliographic reading list; as a result, every list will be a bit different. Some students may focus more heavily on globalization, some will emphasize feminist thought, and others might pay more attention to interactionism. Nonetheless, the differences will primarily be in areas of emphasis; every list will share a certain breadth of knowledge. There are things that *every* literate student

¹ It is never too early to begin this preparation. Socy620 and socy621 are starting points.

² While previous lists are a valuable source of information and many students have found it helpful to refer to the lists of those who completed and passed the theory comprehensive exam, not all students wish to share their lists. We ask you to respect this individual decision.

of theory should know and while there are disagreements around the margins, all would agree, for example, that knowledge of the classical work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are essential. In contemporary theory, one might include in such a list the work of Giddens, Bourdieu and Habermas. In cultural theory one should know the work of people like Foucault and Baudrillard. One way to think about this is what questions you should be able to answer during an interview for a job teaching theory. An inability to deal with questions about the theorists mentioned above might prove embarrassing and endanger your job chances.

Whatever your choices, you should include the *breadth* of scholarship around the theorists or schools of thought you delineate. Thus, for Durkheim, you should include *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). If Du Bois is important to your list, we would expect you to commit to reading in its entirety *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches* (1903) as well as one or more of his over twenty five books and 100 essays. That is, whomever or whatever schools you place on your bibliography, we expect that you are demonstrating expertise (not superficial familiarity) with their writings.

Classical (Soc 620): We regard Marx, Weber, Simmel and Durkheim to be “canonical” classical theorists and, therefore, expect your list to not only include these four theorists, but also to demonstrate your knowledge of their corpus of work (see above on Durkheim). Each of these four should be studied by reading the original, full-length manuscripts. Furthermore, there are often key articles by these people as well as key secondary books (for example, Steven Lukes’ [1972] *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Works*) and articles that should be included here. In addition, there are other classical theorists who are regarded as central to sociological theory for many and, who therefore, could be added to this list of classical theorists. These include W.E.B. Du Bois, George Herbert Mead, Thorstein Veblen, Alexis de Toqueville, August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Jane Addams, Charles Cooley, William James, Adam Smith, Harriet Martineau, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and others. Thus, we expect that you incorporate some other theorists or theoretical areas into this list in a way that makes sense for you, your conception of theory, your interests, and the knowledge you want to demonstrate to the committee. Whomever or whatever you include, however, should allow you to demonstrate your expertise in classical theory.

Contemporary (Soc 621): This area of theory is vast and will, therefore, require your own work as a scholar of social theory. In general, we regard contemporary theory to be both temporal (beginning around 1918 or the end of WWI) and conceptual. Conceptual issues begin with the contours of modernity and extend to include the workings of power, the involvement of states and nations in organizing social life, the formation of group and individual identities and selves, and macro-micro and agency-structure integrationist perspectives. As such, this list should largely be organized around your coursework in contemporary theory and emphasize *modern theory*, but should also move well beyond what was read for class. Similar to classical theory, contemporary theory includes a list of “canonical” authors and schools of thought. These include: The Chicago School and its early and mid-century theorists; critical theory; the structural-functionalist school of Parsons and Merton; the work of C.W. Mills and other variants/elaborations of neo-Marxism and/or conflict theory; modern feminist and race theories; and structuralism. There are some theorists we would, therefore, expect you to include here (e.g., Critical Theorists such as Marcuse, Habermas, Adorno, Horkheimer; Robert Merton; Erving Goffman; C. W. Mills; and Anthony Giddens), but we largely consider you to be the architect of this section.

Cultural (Soc 621, 622, 699s and beyond): The concept of culture has long been part of sociology’s concern with social stratification, social order, social change and the ways people are connected or disconnected. Materials selected should build on the heritage of classical and contemporary social theories, but emphasize what we regard as focusing around four areas of concern: 1) discourse; 2)

postmodern culture; 3) subjectivities, identities, and everyday life and 4) ideology, hegemony and other forms of power/knowledge. In sociology, the turn to culture largely includes a focus on meaning, discourse, or knowledge; social and material practices; the production, maintenance, and transformation of inequalities and the ways these are variously mobilized and embedded in everyday life, popular culture(s), intellectual and political movements and institutional forms. While there is no temporal origin to these ideas (as these are often extension of earlier classical and contemporary ideas), our general hope is that you focus on theorists and theoretical work that emerged beginning around and within various movements for social justice in the *final third of the twentieth century*.

Culture Section: What to include

We recommend you begin this section with your course syllabus from 621 as it emphasizes the “turn to culture” and then incorporate areas from your theory area electives. Your “culture” list will be divided into several sections. While no list is expected to, nor should, include all of the following areas, your culture list should include *at least three* major areas of foci from the following list: Poststructuralism; postmodernism; globalization; consumption; spaces and places; theories of science, medicine and bodies; sociology of knowledge; feminist social thought; and critical race theory (these are drawn from our list of specialty course offerings).

Sections may also include additional areas in which you are able to demonstrate expertise. These may include such perspectives as postcolonialism; transnationalism; intersectional theories; cultural studies; technoscience studies; media, popular culture, and cyberculture studies; sexuality studies and queer theories or others that emphasize issues of exclusions and inclusions that unsettle modern notions of universality and a common culture in favor of multiple ways of being, knowing, and making the social.

The Use of secondary Sources and Excerpted Materials:

Theory is largely a book field. While there are many important theoretical articles and book chapters, the scope and breadth of a theoretical argument is largely found in major books. However, it is generally useful to read secondary material as a way to organize and think about primary sources. We encourage you to do so. However, we expect that you will bring your training to bear on the relevance and source of the materials you choose. For example, a textbook is very different from a *meta-theoretical project* that makes an *innovative contribution* to the field. A secondary source by Bryan Turner on theories of bodies and embodiment would, of course, be an appropriate and rigorous choice. Your bibliography should emphasize primary sources with some meta-theoretical projects. We ask you to limit your inclusion of encyclopedia entries, books on key words, and textbooks.³

Similarly, we expect you will read excerpted material in theory courses as well as in preparing your list. However, these should be used as a resource to point you to the full text and not as representing the full text itself. The committee does not look favorably upon excerpted materials. We expect you to look beyond these to the original sources from which they are drawn.

³ Secondary sources are very useful as “orientations” and/or reviews of major theorists and schools of thought. Reading and re-reading overview texts by George Ritzer, Charles Lemert, Randall Collins and others will help you to organize ideas in the early stages of becoming a sociologist, when teaching social theory courses, and when compiling your bibliography and studying for the comprehensive exam. You should consult these over the course of your training, but these should not be a significant part of your reading list (they can be part of a section titled “overview texts”), although they can serve as a starting point for the creation of your bibliography.

Part II. Studying for the Exam⁴

While your preparation for the theory comprehensive started with your course-work and has been ongoing, you will need to spend at least three months engaging in structured preparation for the exam. Reading for an exam is an analytic process in which you organize literatures thematically reading for their scope, key concepts, and evidence marshaled in support of claims. Only you will know what works best for you. What follows are tips that we think will help you be prepared for the exam.

1. Once you complete your bibliography, **READ THE TEXTS!** Underline key passages and take notes. You will read the texts several times taking notes on their main arguments, concepts, and evidence.
2. After reading and note-taking, convert your bibliography into an annotated bibliography with brief abstracts including key concepts and main arguments for each text.
3. Designate a roughly equal amount of study time for each of the three areas.
4. Sketch out thematic areas and central preoccupations of each area and draft brief descriptions of the core concepts, texts, ideas each theorist contributed to the themes identified.
5. Outline practice answers. If you were presented with a question on power and inequalities; the role of ideas; structure vs. agency; the rise of modernity; etc. what key concepts, texts, and arguments would you bring forward for each theorist and school in your list.

If you have prepared well, at least some of your practice answers will be relevant to the questions you receive. However, it is unlikely that you will be able to just plug in a previously written answer. Instead, it may well help to incorporate some of what you have previously written. Do so very carefully and only if it fits within your argument.

Part III. Taking the Exam

The actual exam is structured in three parts: Classical, Contemporary and Cultural. You will be asked to answer one of three questions in each section (You have a choice).

Some advice on test-taking:

- Spend roughly equal time on each question. Make a plan and stick to it. Time management is essential.
- Digest and understand the essential meaning of the question. Ask yourself what the question is asking and put this into your own words to make sure you answer the question. Students have often run into difficulties in the past because they have not answered some or all of a question.
- Outline your essay before you begin.
- Provide an introduction of your argument and essay coverage to assure that you stick to your outline and place your ideas up front for the reader.
- Make sure you answer the questions posed and do not try to tell us everything you know about the given area. We are looking for crafted responses to the questions asked.
- A good answer shows that you know the relevant material. A great answer does that as well as demonstrating some creative new thinking on your part.
- Write in complete sentences and full paragraphs.

⁴ Preparation for the exam may also include conversations with your roommates, partners, friends, and other family members. However, figure out a plan so that you are not interrupted during the exam time. For some this might include childcare arrangements, discussions about phone calls etc.

- Cite referenced materials in the text following ASA format. Only attach a bibliographic list for references beyond those previously submitted to the committee.

Once you have decided how you are going to answer the questions, start writing. A quick introduction with a few sentences that directly answer the question posed is an effective way to get started on each section. Make sure you structure your answer. Have a thesis for each question and state it up front. Let the committee easily recognize when you are answering each part of a question.

Additional tips on taking the exam:

- Take intermittent breaks to rest, stretch, and have something to eat.
- Keep snacks handy during the test to keep your energy level high without having to leave your desk.
- Make sure you eat and sleep.
- If you get stuck on a section, move on to the next section and return later.
- Review and edit your work.

Part IV. Criteria Used to Evaluate Candidate Responses

Students will either Pass or Fail the exam. You will only receive detailed comments if you fail to pass the exam. In this case, the committee will make efforts to explain why they felt the exam did not demonstrate competency. Students who pass the exam do not receive detailed comments.

The general criteria used to evaluate your responses include:

1. the development of an argument or thesis in response to the question (your voice);
2. the evidence you marshal in support of your thesis (i.e., we expect you to reference the bibliography and emphasize primary sources);
3. the conciseness, organization, and clarity of written expression;
4. evidence of comprehension of the theoretical concepts and ideas;
5. evidence of breadth of knowledge as well as depth in particular areas;
6. ability to make connections within and across theoretical schools of thought;
7. an ability to apply theoretical concepts in a synthetic manner
8. creativity

A note on Passing with Distinction: In rare occasions, we will recognize a student's performance as excelling beyond the requirements for passing the exam. If a student meets the above criteria *and* exceeds these, she or he will earn a pass with distinction. While there is no single measure for this distinction and students are not encouraged to focus on this goal, distinction has been awarded when a student offers an innovative theoretical argument and/or demonstrates a strong ability to engage in theory building.

Important Deadlines: These deadlines *must be met* in order to receive committee approval to take the comprehensive exam in the desired semester.

Fall Exam Schedule Due Dates

Spring semester – Begin assembling reading list
 April 15 – Draft bibliography due to Chair
 May 1 – Revised bibliography due to committee
 May 15 – Final bibliography due to committee
 Fall semester – Exam

Spring Exam Schedule Due Dates

Fall semester – Begin assembling reading list
 Nov. 1 – Draft bibliography due to chair
 Nov. 15 – Revised bibliography due to committee
 December 1 – Final bibliography due to committee
 Spring semester – Exam