Sociology 267: Seminar in Complex Organizations

SYLLABUS

Organizations are a distinctively modern form of human association. We spend most of our waking hours in organizations, and our participation in organizations has a powerful impact on our views of the world, who we choose as friends, our career choices, and our opportunities for economic mobility and political voice. In fact, any time individuals come together to work toward some goal—to manufacture a product, to achieve social change, or simply to socialize with each other—they are likely to create an organization. But organizations are not simple tools, and goals are not static. The act of organizing is likely to have profound (and often perverse) effects on individual participants and on the goals they seek to achieve. Organizations are powerful actors in their own right, acting back on the structure of society. Organizing is a generic human activity, not an unusual or recondite one. And in the last 25 years, organization theory has had a transformative influence on the study of social organization generally, especially the study of politics, social movements, education, religion, culture, and law.

This seminar is designed for the entry-level student seeking exposure to some major trends and debates in the organizations literature. It does not cover everything in that literature, however—for the most part, we neglect the social-psychological aspects of organizations in favor of meso- and macro-level issues about the relationship of organizations to larger social, economic, and cultural processes.

READINGS AND REQUIREMENTS: Students will bear a major share of the responsibility for class discussions. All members will be responsible for the core readings for each meeting. In addition, one or two students each week (depending on the size of the seminar) will make informal presentations which will involve reading beyond the core selections. Presentations should not be simple summaries of the readings. Rather they should frame the readings within a larger body of literature (theoretical and/or empirical), and should aim toward raising questions and initiating discussion; beyond that, the field is open. I will be glad to help organize and goad your thinking.

Readings are listed on the schedule below in three levels of urgency. Unstarred titles are core readings—students should come to seminar prepared to discuss all of them in their respective weeks. Starred (*) titles are recommended, especially for weekly seminar leaders. In most cases, these represent more specific applications, developments, or critiques of core selections. Double-starred (**) readings are "deep background"—either secondary summaries and interpretations, or primary sources which are mainly of artifactual interest. Most of the readings are contained in a reader available at The Alternative in Isla Vista. In addition, one book has been ordered, and is available through the UCEN Bookstore:


I have also placed on reserve the following supplementary text:


Perrow offers very insightful and readable, but often out of date, discussions of many of the approaches we will be discussing. You should tackle the core readings on their own terms first; turn to Perrow if you’re stuck, or just want added insight.
SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Week 1 (3/29). Introduction

Week 2 (4/5). Max Weber: Domination, Authority, and Rationality


*Perrow, Complex Organizations, ch. 1.*


Week 3 (4/12). Institutional Critiques of Hierarchy and Formalization


*Perrow, Complex Organizations, ch. 2-3, 5.*


Week 4 (4/19). Organization as Control


Week 5 (4/26) Decision-making Theory


*Perrow, *Complex Organizations*, pp. 119-140.


**Week 6 (5/3) Economic Theories of Organizations**


*Perrow, *Complex Organizations*, ch. 7.


**Week 7 (5/10) Markets, Corporations, and Power**


**Week 8 (5/17): Organizational Ecology**


*Perrow, *Complex Organizations*, ch. 6.


**Week 9 (5/24): Neoinstitutional Theory: Theoretical Foundations**


DiMaggio and Powell, Introduction to *The New Institutionalism*.

*Perrow, *Complex Organizations*, ch. 8.


**Week 10 (5/31): Neoinstitutional Theory (continued): Extensions and Applications**


