

The Metaphysics of Social Systems

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This is a course on social ontology, a rapidly developing field of inquiry that uses the tools of analytic metaphysics to study social phenomena.

Our topic will be the idea of social systems. According to a venerable tradition in philosophy and sociology, associated with Hegel, Marx, and Luhmann (among others), societies are complex unities like organisms or sophisticated machines. They are not, in other words, mere aggregates of individuals whose small-scale interactions and individual decisions constitute, by way of simple addition, social reality. In contrast to such individualistic approaches, systems theorists emphasize irreducible large-scale structures as the key to the existence and persistence of societies.

The course looks at both recent work that is related to the systems approach and some historical sources. No previous knowledge of metaphysics, sociology, or social ontology is assumed.

Schedule:

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Is society a game?
Vlerick: The evolution of social contracts
- 3 Emergence
Elder-Vass: *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (ch.2)
- 4 Top-down causation
Ellis: Top-down causation and emergence
- 5 Institutional identity
Rust: Institutional identity
- 6 Organisations as computing systems
Strohmaier: Organisations as computing systems
- 7 Group minds
Ludwig: Is distributed cognition group level cognition?
- 8 Social dynamics
Miller & Page: *Complex Adaptive Systems* (ch.9)
- 9 Hegel
Hegel: *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, §§483–486.
- 10 Marx
Marx: Wage labour and capital, The fetishism of commodities.

11 Critical social ontology

Thompson: Collective intentionality, social domination, and reification.

12 Actor-network theory

Latour: *Reassembling the Social* (pp. 173-190)

13 Material parts in social structures

Elder-Vass: Material parts in social structures