

Theory Exam 2026

The questions below constitute the qualifying exam for Theory of Sociology.

To complete the exam, you must answer one question from each of the three sections below in an essay format. Each answer should be a self-contained essay approximately 8–10 pages long (i.e., 2,000–2,500 words). Although you must cite to referenced work in each essay, one comprehensive bibliography for all three questions will be sufficient. You may consult materials from the reading list you've been provided, as well as any other scholarly sources you've read during the exam period.

Section 1: Choose one of the following:

- 1.) Society is typically discussed as a nebulous entity that shapes and structures human social life. Yet the reality is that individuals understand their place in society through their own micro-level interactions. Drawing on the literature on self and society explore the ways in which individual interactions are structured by society. Is society an all-encompassing entity that dominates individual identity development or do individuals have agency over how their identities are shaped? In your discussion, be sure to identify and define key concepts that sociologists use to help us understand the relationship between the self and society.
- 2.) George Hebert Mead develops key concepts for understanding the relationship between the self and society. Using Mead's concepts as a starting point, discuss the ways in which interactionists like Goffman, Blumer, and Simmel agree or disagree with Mead's conceptualizations. Be sure to explore the strengths and weaknesses of each interactionist's approach to explaining the relationship between society and self. Which of the symbolic interactionist might have effectively anticipated the impact of social media on social interaction? Why?

Section 2: Choose one of the following:

1. Dialectics and dialectical methods have been central to the development of social theory and to the interpretation of social reality. Across different intellectual traditions, however, scholars have developed distinct understandings of the dialectical method, its ontology, its epistemic interventions, and its implications for the study of society, history, and social change.

Drawing on the reading list, critically examine at least three iterations of the dialectical method (e.g., Marxist, Critical Theory, Anti/decolonial, or other relevant traditions). In your answer, explain the ontological assumptions underlying each approach, situate them within their historical and intellectual contexts, and compare the continuities and contradictions across these traditions.

2. Violence, oppression, and the possibility of emancipation have been enduring concerns of social theory. Drawing on the reading list, compare how at least three theorists conceptualize the relationship between violence, domination, and emancipation. In your answer, situate each theorist within their historical and intellectual context, explain the role that violence and oppression plays in their account of social transformation, and analyze both the continuities and the tensions across their approaches. Conclude by reflecting on the different possibilities for emancipation that emerge from these traditions.

Section 3: Choose one of the following:

1. The role of critique plays a central role in social theory since at least Marx. Based on the readings, what are a few possible meanings of the term “critique” and how has this term changed meaning over time?
2. Across different readings and traditions, what is the meaning of “the social” as a concept? How and in what ways has it changed over time?