

# Soc 422: Complex Organizations

## Spring 2007: Tu/Th 12:30–1:45, Chavez 400.

Kieran Healy

Social Sciences 404

[kjhealy@arizona.edu](mailto:kjhealy@arizona.edu)

<http://www.u.arizona.edu/~kjhealy>

### Course Description and Objectives

Formal organizations pervade our society: most of us spend most of our lives inside one sort or another, be they schools, churches, corporations or the state. They are also a relatively modern phenomenon. It is only in the past century or so that the American labor force went from being about 90 percent self-employed to 90 percent working for someone else. Such a transformation suggests formal organizations are remarkably successful entities. And yet often they don't seem to work properly at all, in small and large ways. Trying to get customer support turns out to be a nightmare, for instance. Or the organization is responsible for some big disaster (such as the Challenger explosion or the transmission of HIV in the blood supply). Or corporate executives turn out to be corrupt (as in the case of Enron or WorldCom). So, how should we think about organizations? Can we understand them?

This course is an upper-division introduction to sociological theories of complex or formal organizations. It is designed to give students a good understanding of some of the main lines of sociological thinking on organizations. We will pay particular attention to for-profit corporations, in large part because this kind of organization has been the focus of most research in this area. But we will also make comparisons as we go with other kinds of organization (e.g., churches, the state, voluntary associations, and so on). The course covers the material roughly in chronological order, so we will see how thinking about organizations has changed over time. This will also allow us to explore three main themes over the semester.

First, we'll see from the beginning the often uneasy relationship between two strands of organizational theory: one strand focused on helping managers do their jobs, and a different one rather more skeptical about the whole business of formal organizations and their effects on those who work inside them.

Second, we'll see a gradual expansion in the scope of organizational theory: it begins with efforts to explain problems in organizations in terms of the psychology of employees or the nature of small groups within the firm, and moves from there to

considerations of formal organizational structure and its problems within particular firms, and then discovers the important role of an organization's technical and social environment. Eventually, we end up with quite large-scale theories of organizations and their institutional environments, where individual employees – or even particular firms – are by now quite difficult to discern. This isn't a coincidence: just as modern society becomes a "society of organizations", organizational theory increasingly becomes more like a theory of society as a whole. Whether this trend is worthwhile is something we'll talk about as we go.

Third, we'll see that even as organizational theory in sociology has become more macro-level and large-scale, there is still a very strong tendency to think in psychological or individual terms when it comes to theories of management, just as there was at the beginning. The difference is that, in the old days the problem was all about fixing the psychology of low-level workers on the production line, whereas today we have a huge emphasis on the special personal qualities required by upper-level managers, executives, and above all the CEO.

## Books

Two required texts are on order at the bookstore. They are:

1. Michael J. Handel. 2003. *The Sociology of Organizations: Classic, Contemporary and Critical Readings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
2. Rakesh Khurana. 2002. *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

A few other readings not from these sources will be made available on electronic reserve.

## Examinations, Writing Assignments and Quizzes

You will be assessed in three ways, each of which will contribute a portion of your final grade.

1. There will be two examinations. The first will be in class, the week before Spring Break (see schedule below for details). The second will be during finals week. Each exam will count for 20 percent of your grade for the course.
2. You will write three memos, each about four to five pages in length, over the course of the semester. Each memo will count for 16.6 percent of your grade (i.e., the three of them will count for 50 percent of your grade). Memos are due

in class on the dates marked in the course schedule below. *You must submit hard copies of your memos in class.* Emailed memos will not be accepted. I will circulate a choice of topics for each memo in advance. We will talk in more detail in class about my expectations for the memos.

3. Finally, I will occasionally administer short in-class pop quizzes. These will test whether you have been keeping up with the reading. Cumulatively the quizzes will be worth 10 percent of your final grade.

I will only schedule a make-up exam or accept a late paper in the following circumstances: (a) You have a pressing non-academic emergency, such as an illness (for which you will need documentation), death in the family, etc, *and* (b) you contact me beforehand to let me know about this. Should you fail to show up for an exam or turn in a paper for any other reason, I will be forced to record a zero for that assignment. Note that this policy especially applies to lame computer-related excuses.

For other departmental and university policies, see the last page of this syllabus.

## Course Schedule

- *Week 1.* (Jan 11) **Introduction: The Idea of Formal Organization.**
- *Week 2.* (Jan 16/18) **Taylorism and Scientific Management.**  
Reading: Taylor (Ch. 2) and Braverman (Ch. 3) in Handel.
- *Week 3.* (Jan 21/25) **The Human Relations Movement.**  
Reading: Bramel and Friend (Ch. 8) and Rubinstein (Ch. 11) in Handel.
- *Week 4.* (Jan 30/Feb 1) **Bureaucracy**  
**Memo 1 is due in class on Jan 30th.**  
Reading: Weber (Ch. 1) in Handel. Extract from Charles Perrow's *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*.
- *Week 5.* (Feb 6/8) **...and its Discontents.**  
Reading: Burawoy (Ch. 15) and Jackall (Ch. 14) in Handel. Robert K. Merton, "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality."
- *Week 6.* (Feb 13/15) **When things go (very) wrong.**  
Reading: Allison (Ch 16) and Vaughan (Ch. 33) in Handel. Kieran Healy, "Organizations and Obligations."

- *Week 7.* (Feb 20/22) **The Organization's Environment I: Technology.**  
Reading: Burns and Stalker (Ch. 4) and Woodward (Ch. 5) in Handel.
- *Week 8.* (Feb 27/Mar 1) **The Organization's Environment II: Resources and Competition.**  
**Memo 2 is due in class on Feb 27th.**  
Reading: Reading: Carroll & Hannan (Ch. 20) in Handel.  
Glenn Carroll and Anand Swaminathan, "Why the Microbrewery Movement? Organizational Dynamics of Resource Partitioning in the U.S. Brewing Industry."
- *Week 9.* (Mar 6/8) **Midterm Review and Examination.**
- *Week 10.* (Mar 13/15) Spring Break.
- *Week 11.* (Mar 20/22) **The Organization's Environment III: Institutions.**  
Reading: DiMaggio & Powell (Ch. 19) in Handel.  
Khurana, pp. 1–117.
- *Week 12.* (Mar 27/29) **Institutions and Legitimacy.**  
Reading: Khurana, pp. 118–220.  
Dirk Zorn. "Here a Chief, There a Chief: The Rise of the CFO in the American Firm."
- *Week 13.* (Apr 3/5) **The Origins of the Modern Corporation.**  
Reading: Chandler (Ch. 24) in Handel. Extract from William Roy *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America.*
- *Week 14.* (Apr 10/12) **Post-Bureaucratic forms of organization?**  
Reading: Powell (Ch. 25) and Harrison (Ch. 26) in Handel.
- *Week 15.* (Apr 17/19) **Organizations and Careers.**  
**Memo 3 is due in class on Apr 17th.**  
Reading: Kanter (Ch. 28) in Handel. Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly, "Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies."
- *Week 16.* (Apr 24/26)  
Final review.

## University and Departmental Policies

### Academic Integrity

Students are expected to observe the University's Code of Academic Integrity. The Code can be found at: <http://dos.web.arizona.edu/uapolicies>.

### Behavior in the Classroom

Students are expected to observe the University's Student Code of Conduct as it pertains to classroom behavior (see <http://dos.web.arizona.edu/uapolicies>), and should be familiar with University policies against threatening behavior by students (see <http://policy.web.arizona.edu/~policy/threaten.shtml>).

### Students with Disabilities

If you anticipate the need for reasonable accommodations to meet the requirements of this course, you must register with the Disability Resource Center and request that the DRC send me official notification of your accommodation needs as soon as possible. Please plan to meet with me to discuss accommodations and how my course requirements and activities may affect your ability to fully participate.

### Officially Excused Absences

1. All holidays or special events observed by organized religions will be honored for those students who show affiliation with that particular religion.
2. Absences pre-approved by the UA Dean of Students (or Dean's designee) will be honored.