

FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Marx famously wrote that people make their own histories, but they do not make them under circumstances of their own choosing. We could add that sociologists make our own theories, but we do not make them under intellectual circumstances of our own choosing—we work within circumstances inherited from the past.

In this course we learn about those circumstances. We examine thinkers from the past whose ideas continue to shape the way sociologists understand the world. These thinkers offered good answers to big, enduring questions: What is human nature, and how does it shape social life? How do people manage to cooperate? Does social order come at the expense of freedom? What is the origin of social inequality? How does historical change happen? Is a group of people something more than the sum of its parts? What distinguishes modern Western societies?

In addition to reading these theorists on their own terms and in their historical contexts, we will use their ideas to address issues relevant to us in the 21st century.

GOALS OF THE COURSE

- Understand foundational ideas of sociology.
- Improve reading skills by distilling key ideas from complex arguments.
- Improve analytical reasoning by comparing arguments and evaluating their merits.
- Improve writing skills by fashioning raw ideas into polished essays.
- Apply ideas from the readings when analyzing contemporary social issues.

REQUIREMENTS

This course invites you to grapple with influential and rewarding texts. It asks you to do this by reading them, discussing them, and writing about them.

1. Reading. All reading assignments are required. I expect you to complete the entire reading assignment prior to class, and I expect you to spend time trying to understand it. These texts are dense and reward close, patient reading. Forty pages of Max Weber, for example, takes longer to read than 40 pages of a typical academic text.

2. Discussion. The majority of our class time will be spent discussing the texts. Class attendance is mandatory and participation is expected. Absences will be excused for family and medical emergencies, religious holidays, and varsity athletic competition. Please note that laptops, tablets, or any device that has a screen and/or connects to the internet is prohibited without a documented need.

3. Writing. This course asks you to write two papers of 5-8 pages in length, one at the middle of the semester and one at the end. I will distribute a short reading assignment about a topic of contemporary relevance. The paper prompt will invite you to use ideas from the reading to analyze this topic. Due dates are named on the syllabus. Papers are due by midnight either by email or in my mailbox.

In addition, six 1-2 page writing assignments are spread across the semester. These assignments ask you to engage the reading by identifying a quote and analyzing its significance within the text. Group 1 will write during weeks 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, and 13. Group 2 will write during weeks 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, and 14. Assignments are due prior to the second course meeting of the week.

Each of the longer papers counts for 30% of the final grade. The six short assignments together count for another 30%. Class participation counts for 10%.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition. Robert C. Tucker, ed.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

Max Weber, *From Max Weber*. Gerth and Mills, eds.

All required books are available at [student bookstore] and the library reserve desk. Other reading assignments are available through [online course tool].

SYLLABUS COMPOSITION

You may notice that, with one exception, the theorists we read are all white men. (And if this doesn't cross your mind, you might ask yourself why it doesn't.) Why does the syllabus look this way? #SociologySoWhite

This syllabus fails if it is read as an intellectual history of sociology. It excludes prominent thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Marianne Weber, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Jane Addams. The topic of this class, however, is sociological theory, and that suggests a different logic of syllabus construction than a course on intellectual history would. If we ask what texts from the past have shaped contemporary sociological analysis, the relevant texts, alas, are credited largely to white men. Sexism and racism have plagued sociology no less than any other social institution. As a result, there is a Tocquevillian intellectual tradition, for example, but (for now) no extensive Martineauian tradition.*

* Some scholars are making efforts to establish and/or institutionalize alternative traditions. See for example Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, eds., *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives* (2001) and Marcus Anthony Hunter, ed., *The New Black Sociologists* (2018).

The (white male) thinkers who gained preeminence made wide-ranging intellectual contributions, yet they systematically overlooked important areas of social life. They say little, for example, about domestic labor—this despite their perennial interest in the division of labor as an organizing principle in society. When sociologists are looking for theoretical statements on such topics or for feminist perspectives on society more generally, they often turn to recent theorists such as Dorothy Smith, Nancy Chodorow, Patricia Hill Collins, and Arlie Hochschild. But even as these latter-day thinkers exposed the biases and omissions of their sociological forebears, they themselves were influenced by the very readings on this syllabus!

In our class we will address this in two ways. First, we will consider how the ideas we read can help us understand topics of contemporary sociological interest such as race and gender. Weber and Marx, for example, loom large in the sociology of race and ethnicity. Marx and Freud have been particularly influential for feminist scholarship. Second, we will question these thinkers from a critical perspective, asking ourselves whether the theories we read rely on masculine or Eurocentric conceptions of society, and if so what limitations this creates.

COURSE OUTLINE AND ASSIGNMENTS

PART 1: 17th & 18th CENTURY PRECURSORS

Early modern thinkers posed questions that have resonated for centuries and continue to animate sociology today: How does social order come about? What causes inequality? What produces conflict? Do humans have “natural” propensities? How does society shape individuals? How does the state shape society? How does economic prosperity develop? In the first two weeks of the course, we examine these questions by reading theorists who set the intellectual agenda for many who followed.

Week 1: Introduction

1. What are we doing and why?

2. Society and the state of nature

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* (1651)

Book I, Ch. XIII: “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery”

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755)

Week 2: Adam Smith

1. The Wealth of Nations (1776)

Book I, Chapter I: Of the division of labour

Book I, Chapter II: Of the principle which gives occasion to the division of labour

Book III, Chapters I-IV: Of the different progress of opulence in different nations

2. The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759)

Part I, Section I, Ch. I: Of sympathy

Part I, Section III, Ch. II: Of the origin of ambition, and of the distinction of ranks

Part III, Ch. I: Of the principle of self-approbation and of self-disapprobation

Part III, Ch. IV: Of the nature of self-deceit, and of the origin and use of general rules

Part IV, Ch. II: Of the beauty which the appearance of utility bestows upon the characters and actions of men

Key concepts:

Social order, social contract, division of labor, *amour de soi*, *amour propre*, looking-glass self, conflict, consensus, methodological individualism.

PART 2: 19th CENTURY PIONEERS

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) produced astute, but very different, contemporaneous analyses of 19th century Europe. Each of them responded to a revolution happening in his midst. In Marx's case it was the industrial revolution—a revolution in economic organization—while in Tocqueville's case it was the French revolution, a revolution in political organization. Marx saw society being remade (and threatened) by the rise of industrial capitalism and set out to understand the logic of this transformation. Tocqueville, meanwhile, saw society being remade (and threatened) by new democratic possibilities and set out to understand how this was playing out in both Europe and the United States.

Tocqueville and Marx offer concepts and analytical strategies that scholars continue to use to this day. Tocqueville, for example, has influenced recent scholarship on social capital and civic participation. Marx has influenced scholarship in nearly every field of the social sciences; in sociology, he has provided intellectual resources for research on topics as diverse as international development, educational outcomes, and gender relations.

Week 3: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

1. Overview

Manifesto of the Communist Party, pp. 473-90, pp. 499-500 in Tucker, ed.
“Working-Class Manchester,” pp. 579-85.

2. Alienation and estranged labor

Tucker's introduction, pp xix-xxvii.
Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844:
“Estranged Labor,” pp. 70-81. (*Short but dense!*)
“Theses on Feuerbach,” pp. 143-45.

Week 4: Marx and Engels (continued)

3. The materialist theory of history

“Preface: Marx on the History of His Opinions,” pp. 3-6.
The German Ideology
“Ideology in General, German Ideology in Particular,” pp. 149(bottom)-
165(middle), pp. 172(bottom)-175.
The Grundrisse
“Introduction,” pp. 222-26 (note that he invokes both Smith and Rousseau)
“Critical Marginal Notes on the Article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform,’”
pp. 130-132.

4. The critique of capitalism, or why capitalism is doomed (supposedly) and what follows

“Wage Labour and Capital,” pp. 203-17.
“Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” pp. 700-17.
“Critique of the Gotha Program,” pp. 529(bottom)-531(middle).

Recommended supplemental reading

Reed, Adolph. 2013. "Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism." *New Labor Forum* 22(1):49-57.
"Was Marx Right?" *New York Times* "Room for Debate":
www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/03/30/was-marx-right/

Key terms

Proletariat, bourgeoisie, exploitation, alienation, estranged labor, species being, historical materialism, means of production, relations of production, base, superstructure, ideology, ruling class, ruling ideas, social revolution, political revolution, "free" labor, necessary labor, surplus labor, use value, exchange value, labor value.

Week 5: Alexis de Tocqueville

1. The perils and peculiarities of American democracy

Democracy in America, Vol. I:

Author's Introduction

Part I, Ch. 3: Social state of the Anglo-Americans

Part II, Ch 7: The omnipotence of the majority in the United States and its effects

Democracy in America, Vol. II:

Part II, Ch. 1: Why democratic nations show a more ardent and enduring love for equality than for liberty

Part II, Ch. 2: Of individualism in democracies

Part III, Ch 5: How democracy modifies the relations between master and servant

Part III, Ch. 7: Influence of democracy on wages (*think about Marx here!*)

Part IV, Ch. 6-7: What sort of despotism democratic nations have to fear

2. Making democracy work

Democracy in America, Vol. I, Part II:

Ch. 4: Political association in the United States

Ch. 8: What tempers the tyranny of the majority in the United States

Ch. 9: The main causes tending to maintain a democratic republic in the US

Democracy in America, Vol. II, Part II:

Ch. 4: How the Americans combat the effects of individualism by free institutions

Ch. 5: On the use which the Americans make of associations in civil life

Ch. 7: Relationships between civil and political associations

Ch. 8: How the Americans combat individualism by the doctrine of self-interest properly understood

Ch. 14: How in America the taste for physical pleasures is combined with love of freedom and attention to public affairs

Key terms

Democracy, aristocracy, equality, individualism, self-interest "properly understood," public associations, political associations, free institutions, despotism, tyranny, civil society.

Week 6: Review

1. Comparing and evaluating: Rousseau, Smith, Marx, and Tocqueville

Reading assignment for first paper (to be announced).

2. In-class peer review

Exchange your first draft with your peer-review partner prior to class.

*****FIRST PAPER DUE ON FRIDAY AT MIDNIGHT*****

PART 3: ONWARD, MODERNITY

By the late 19th century and early 20th century, Europe was a different place than it had been during the time of Tocqueville and Marx. For one, capitalism had developed differently than Marx had predicted: Large corporations appeared, sometimes as monopolies, and at the same time workers saw their fortunes rise, both politically and economically. The state had consolidated its political power, extending its administrative reach beyond taxation and military conscription to include public education and social insurance programs. Nationalism had become an influential political ideology, and the nation-state had become the prevailing form of political organization. Socialism and socialist political parties also gained traction across the continent.

In this context appeared a new generation of university-affiliated scholars who understood themselves to be practicing a science called “sociology.” Among other topics, they addressed the question of how to study human society. Should the study of humans mirror the study of the natural world, which is believed to follow universal laws? Or do humans, as conscious, willful subjects who act upon the world rather than simply being acted upon by it, demand to be studied differently? Can social groups be understood as the sum of individual actors and actions, or does a collectivity operate according to principles of its own?

The thinkers we read in this section viewed the modern world warily, but not necessarily with pessimism. Weber (1864-1920), a scholar of immense erudition, analyzes social life historically, comparatively, and interpretively, often foregrounding conflict, authority, and domination. Durkheim (1858-1917), by contrast, fashions himself as an “objective” scientist while focusing on solidarity and cohesion rather than conflict. Simmel (1858-1918) is perhaps the most wide-ranging scholar of the three, one who studied a variety of topics but is known especially for identifying “formal” properties of social life, making him a precursor to today’s network analysts, and for analyzing urban life, making him a precursor to today’s urban sociologists. We finish the section with selections from Freud (1856-1939) and Elias (1897-1990), thinkers who examined how society shapes the psyche and the body.

Week 7: Max Weber

1. Capitalism and the “rationalization” of life

“‘Prefatory Remarks’ to Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion”

Pp. 149-64 in Kalberg translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Also pp. 13-31 in the Parsons translation (as “Author’s Introduction”) or pp. 356-72 in the Baehr & Wells translation.

“Bureaucracy,” Part 6: Technical Advantages of Bureaucratic Organization

Pp. 214-16 in Gerth & Mills, eds.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Chapter 2, “The spirit of capitalism”

2. Ideas: the “switchmen” of history

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Chapter 3, "Luther's conception of the calling," *final four paragraphs only*
Chapter 4, "The religious foundations of worldly asceticism," Parts A & D
Chapter 5, "Asceticism and the spirit of capitalism"

Week 8: Weber (continued)

3. Power

"The Types of Legitimate Domination," pp. 212-216 in *Economy and Society*
"Domination and Legitimacy," pp. 941-948 in *Economy and Society*
"Politics as a Vocation," pp. 77-83(middle) in Gerth & Mills, eds.
"Class, Status, and Party," pp. 180-195 in Gerth & Mills, eds.

4. Enchantment and disenchantment

"The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," pp. 245-252 in Gerth & Mills, eds.
"Science as a Vocation," pp. 134(2nd full paragraph)-156 in Gerth & Mills, eds.

Recommended supplemental reading

Yglesias, Matthew. "How Max Weber explains the 2016 election."
www.vox.com/2016/7/11/12053146/max-weber-hillary-clinton

Key terms

Protestant ethic, spirit of capitalism, worldly asceticism, rationalization, social action, ideal type, class, status group, party, authority (bureaucratic, charismatic, traditional), domination, bureaucracy, *verhesten*.

Week 9: Georg Simmel

1. The experience of modernity

"The Stranger," pp. 143-49 in *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, Levine ed.
"The Metropolis and Mental Life," pp. 324-39 in Levine, ed.
"Secrecy," pp. 330-338 in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Wolff, ed.

2. Social forms

"The Field of Sociology," pp. 3-11 in Wolff, ed.
"On the Significance of Numbers for Social Life," pp. 87-95 in Wolff, ed.
"The Isolated Individual and the Dyad," pp. 118-28, 135-36, 138-42 in Wolff, ed.

Week 10: Emile Durkheim

1. Solidarity and morality

"Forms of social solidarity," pp. 123-40 in *Selected Writings*, Giddens, ed.

Moral Education

Chapter 3: "The spirit of discipline (continued)," pp. 33-46.
Chapter 4: "The spirit of discipline (concluded): and the second element of morality: attachment to social groups," pp. 47-63
Chapter 5: "Attachment to social groups," pp. 64-69(middle)

2. The division of labor

“The division of labor and social differentiation,” pp. 141-54 in Giddens, ed.

“Division of labor in society: consequences,” pp. 128-33 in *On Morality and Society*,
Bellah, ed.

“Division of labor in society: conclusions,” pp. 134-40, 143-46 in Bellah, ed.

Week 11: Durkheim (continued)

3. Egoism, anomie, and suicide

Suicide

Introduction, pp. 46-53

Book Two, Ch. 2, “Egoistic Suicide,” pp. 152-160, 168-70

Book Two, Ch. 3, “Egoistic Suicide (cont.),” pp. 171-73(middle), 178-89, 197-202,
208-16

Book Two, Ch. 5, “Anomic Suicide,” pp. 241-58

Book Three, Ch. 1, “The Social Element of Suicide,” pp. 297-325

4. Religion and ritual

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Oxford University Press edition, trans by Cosman.

“The Genesis of the Notion of the Totemic Principle or Mana,” pp. 153-82

“Conclusion,” pp. 310-343

Key terms

Mechanical solidarity, organic solidarity, collective conscience, morality, integration, regulation, egoism, anomie, collective effervescence, social fact, positivism.

Week 12: Freud and Elias

1. Civilizing the mind

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, chapters 3-8.

2. Civilizing the body

Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*

Part Two, Chapter 1, “The History of the Concept of *Civilité*”

Part Two, Chapter 2, “On Medieval Manners”

Part Two, Chapter 3, “The Problem of the Change in Behaviour during the
Renaissance”

Part Two, Chapter 4, “On Behaviour at Table,” pp. 99-109: “On the Eating of
Meat”

PART 4: MEANWHILE, IN AMERICA

By the late 19th century, Americans were developing intellectual traditions of their own that would become important for sociology. At the University of Chicago, the American pragmatist tradition flourished under thinkers such as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Cooley. At Atlanta University, W.E.B. Du Bois pursued a theoretically grounded, empirically rigorous program of social research on “the Negro problem.”

Some of this American scholarship reached Europe: Durkheim read (and rejected) early American pragmatists, while Weber read, met, and corresponded with Du Bois, later arranging the German translation and publication of Du Bois’ work. Du Bois, in turn, had attended at least one of Weber’s lectures while on a fellowship in Germany.

Week 13: W.E.B. Du Bois

1. The self in a racialized society

The Souls of Black Folk

Ch. 1: “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”

Dusk of Dawn

Ch. 5: “The Concept of Race,” pp. 97-133

2. Racialized social worlds

The Souls of Black Folk

Ch. 2: “Of the Dawn of Freedom”

Ch. 9: “Of the Sons of Master and Man”

Dusk of Dawn

Ch. 6: “The White World,” pp. 134-72

Week 14: American Pragmatism

1. The social self

Blumer, Herbert. 1966. “Sociological Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead.” *American Journal of Sociology* 71(5):535–44.

Cooley, Charles. 1902. “The Social Self—the Meaning of I” and “Primary Groups.” Pp. 163-75 and 179-84 in *On Self and Social Organization*, Schubert, ed.

2. Habit and social action

James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*

Chapter IV: Habit (excerpt)

Dewey, John. 1922. *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*

Part One: The Place of Habit in Conduct (excerpts)

Week 15: Conclusion

Reading for second paper (to be announced).

*****SECOND PAPER DUE ON FRIDAY AT MIDNIGHT*****