

**Classical and Contemporary
Sociological Theory
Sociology 702
QC – Spring 2009**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an exploration to classical and contemporary sociological theory. It follows the approach of the sociological perspective and sociological imagination. This perspective argues that people act together to form “social forces”, and these forces shape our thoughts and actions.

In general, sociology emerged as discipline in the early decades of the 19th century as an extension of what is often termed “The Enlightenment”. The Enlightenment turned thinking about the human condition toward the view that progress was not only possible, but also inevitable. As an intellectual enterprise, sociology is powerfully conditioned by the directions taken in the intellectual work of thinkers working within three (at least) problematics, all emerging from advancing revolutions of preceding centuries. These were specifically:

1. The revolutionary idea of progress as a natural organizing principle of the human condition, set against theological and static doctrines.
2. A serious challenge of the idea of a fixed human nature.
3. The notion that human action could be understood scientifically, and that this understanding could be the basis for an emancipatory practice.

I wish to emphasize here that there is no single, homogeneous, and coherent body of sociological theory. The core works of sociological theory are subject to different interpretations and/or reinterpretations; (even what the “core” works are is debatable).

However, historically the classical sociological paradigms include the works of: Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel.

Another major objective of this course is to discuss and analyze sociological theory as it is practiced today. In this respect, the course also focuses on those writers whose work has most influenced social theory and the way sociologists currently approach and analyze their subject matter. Contemporary sociology, in many ways, builds on and incorporates the classics. Therefore, an effective way to study and understand contemporary theory is to follow the ways in which the works of classical writers have been incorporated into that of later sociologists and discuss the central ideas and arguments of these contemporary thinkers, and the ways in which they provide a number of quite distinct perspectives on society and social theory. Undoubtedly, creating a manageable list of readings for Contemporary Theory is extremely difficult given the number of different “schools” of sociological theory and the ongoing strength of theoretical debates and concerns. In this respect, a selective list of contemporary writers has been created in order to represent, in the best possible way, most of the recent sociological paradigms.

REQUIRED MATERIAL

1. Classical Sociological Theory Reader (prepared by the instructor)
2. Contemporary Sociological Theory Reader (prepared by the instructor)

PRESENTATIONS:

There will be a presentation in class scheduled on specific dates.

The purpose of the group presentation is to give you, the students, a chance to:

- (a) more deeply comprehend the basic themes of the course by doing a small amount of research along the lines suggested and illustrated in class, and
- (b) increase your ability to comprehend and critically evaluate theoretical ideas by discussing them among yourselves and presenting them to the class in the form of an oral report.

Before the end of the 4th week of class (February 24th) members of the class (either individually or groups of 2 or 3) will choose one of the major theorists – Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Simmel, Parsons, Merton, Mills, Coser, Mead, Goffman, Garfinkel, Berger and others, and make an oral presentation to the class in which the group:

1. presents brief personal biography of the individual, emphasizing important historical, cultural, political and/or personal factors which contribute to understanding his/her theory
2. identifies some of the important intellectual influences on the particular thinker; and
3. presents some issues or questions for further discussion/exploration to the class which are derived from the presented material.

In general, the format of the presentation is up to the individual/group. Handouts are encouraged; materials will be duplicated by the instructor if they are submitted at least two weekdays prior to the scheduled presentation. All members of the class not involved in presenting a particular report (including the instructor) will grade it.

TAKE - HOME ESSAY EXAMS: Two take-home exams will be given. Questions will be handed out each time after roughly one-half of the course has been completed. You will have one week to answer the questions.

TERM PAPER: The term paper will provide you with several options, but all of them will basically require you to compare and contrast the views of two (2) of the major theorists covered in this course. Specific guidelines will be handed out separately. The papers will be expected to be approximately 12-15 pages in length, including notes and references. The term paper is due on TUE, May 19th.

FINAL GRADE: Your grade basically will be determined from the average of the term paper (40%), the two take-home essays (2 x 25% each), and the presentation (10%). Participation and effort will also be considered.

COURSE OUTLINE

Class Meetings: Tue 6:30-8:20

Room: PH 302

Note: You are requested to read all of the assigned material before the topic is covered in class and to come to class prepared to discuss it. Class time will be used to extend the supplement material in the readings and to clarify it and discuss it in greater depth. This class will be organized, to the extent possible, in a combination lecture/discussion format. After all, theory can be most effectively learned through intellectual dialogue

WEEK 1

1/27/09 TUE

I. Introductory Concepts & Classical Theory

Course Overview; the Nature of Human Society; the Nature of Social Theory; The Sociological Perspective and The Sociological Imagination; Masters of Sociological Perspectives

A brief review: from Renaissance to the Enlightenment
The Emergence of Sociology

**II. The Sociology of Emile DURKHEIM (1858-1917)
A Consensus Theory**

Read: *The Rules of Sociological Method. What is a Social Fact?*

WEEK 2

2/3/09 TUE

Durkheim's Theory of Human Beings

Suicide: Social Causes and Social Types

Read: *Anomic Suicide; The Social Element of Suicide*

Durkheim's Theory of Society

The Division of Labor in Society: Mechanical and Organic Solidarity

Read: *Society and Collective Representations*

WEEK 3

2/17/09 TUE

**III. The Sociology of Karl MARX (1818-1883)
Conflict Theory**

On Historical Materialism

Marx's Theory of Human Beings

WEEK 4

2/24/09 TUE

Marx's Theory of Society

WEEK 5

3/3/09 TUE

**IV. The Sociology of Max Weber (1864-1920)
An Action Theory**

Read: *Economy and Society: Basic Sociological Terms*

Weber's Theory of Human Beings

Read: *Types of Social Action*

Weber's Theory of Society

Read: *Forms of Social Relationships*

Status Groups and Classes

WEEK 6

3/10/09 TUE

Weber's Political Sociology

Power and Bureaucracy

Economy and Society: The Types of Legitimate Domination; Authority; The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism

WEEK 7
3/17/09 TUE

V. The Sociology of Georg Simmel (1958-1918) - Interactionism

Read: *The Field of Sociology*;
Conflict as the Basis of Group Formation: *The Sociological Nature of Conflict*

The Stranger; The Metropolis and Mental Life; Fashion;

Take Home Exam 1

WEEK 8
3/24/09 TUE

VI. Functionalism

- (i) Talcott Parsons: System Levels; Theory of Action
- (ii) R. K. Merton: Middle-Range Theory

Take-Home Essay Exam 1 - DUE

WEEK 9
3/31/09 TUE

VII. CONFLICT THEORY

- (i) C.W. Mills: *The Power Elite*
- (ii) The Frankfurt School: Theodor Adorno: *Mass Culture. How to Look at Television*

Jurgen Habermas: *Legitimation Crisis*

- (iii) Lewis Coser: *The Functions of Social Conflict*

- (iv) Randal Collins: *Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification*

WEEK 10
4/7/09 TUE

VIII. THEORIES OF RATIONAL CHOICE

George Homans: *Social Behavior as Exchange*
Peter Blau; *Exchange and Power in Social Life*

WEEK 11
4/21/09 TUE

IX. SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

G. H. Mead: *The Mind, Self and Society*
Erving Goffman: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

WEEK 12
4/28/09 TUE

X. PHENOMENOLOGY/ETHNOMETHODOLOGY

Harold Garfinkel: *Studies in Ethnomethodology*
Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann: *The Social Construction of Reality*

XI. FEMINIST THEORY

Katherine MacKinnon: *A Feminist Theory of the State*

WEEK 13
5/5/09 TUE

XII. POSTMODERNISM - GLOBALIZATION

David Harvey: *The Condition of Postmodernity*
Saskia Sassen: *Globalization and its Discontents*
Linda Weiss: *Globalization and the Myth of the Powerless State*
Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*
Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Modernity/is There a Postmodern Sociology?*

Take-Home Exam 2

WEEK 14
5/12/09 TUE

Last Day of Classes
Take-Home Essay Exam 2 - DUE

WEEK 15
5/19/02 TUE

Term Paper Due