

Sociology 120W Sociological Theory

Tu/Th 9:30-10:50

BP 1131

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Social theory was born in an age of industrial and political revolution, its mission to usher in the age of modernity. Yet the analyses forwarded by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were profoundly ambivalent about the promise of modernity. The possibility of individual action in a world of powerful institutions, the social costs of technological progress, the persistence of social inequality--these issues shaped the new discipline of sociology, and have proven of lasting concern.

In this course, we will explore the work of the “founding fathers” as well as that of contemporary sociologists who have reexamined and revised the work of their forebears. The questions we will wrestle with are thorny ones. Do we as individuals make our history or are we made by it? Why do poor kids, in general, grow up to be poor and rich kids, in general, grow up to be rich—even in a society, like ours, that professes a commitment to equal opportunity? What holds our society together, if anything? What exactly is social theory? Can it be used to improve our lives? Should it?

Course Requirements

Our exploration will combine close reading of theoretical texts, discussion of the empirical studies they have influenced, and an ongoing discussion about what social theory is and does and how it should be evaluated. To that end, course requirements include class participation informed by careful reading of the assigned texts, a midterm exam, and completion of a series of writing exercises designed to hone class members’ skills in evaluating, developing, and supporting written sociological arguments.

In the first written assignment, you will be asked to summarize and extend the argument made in a published book; in the second, you will be asked to evaluate a theoretical perspective; and in the third, you will be asked to compare and evaluate two perspectives in terms of their ability to shed light on a contemporary social problem. Each of the written assignments will be worth 20 percent of your final grade.

Assignments are described briefly below; fuller guidelines will be provided in class. You will receive written comments on each assignment from the instructor or teaching assistant and will be asked to resubmit the paper after revising it. In addition, a portion of several class sessions will be devoted to discussing issues involved in constructing a sociological argument. You will work sometimes in a small group and sometimes with a writing partner to review and revise your written work. Your performance in this component of the course, along with your participation in discussions of the course readings, will count for 20 percent of your final grade. The mid-term,

which will include in-class and take-home components, will be worth 20 percent of your final grade.

Paper and attendance policy

Class attendance is mandatory. Attendance will be taken and more than two absences over the course of the quarter will result in a substantial grade reduction. Please consider this before signing up for the course. Paper deadlines are strict. Late papers will be penalized with a letter grade deduction for each day they are late. An extension *may* be granted by the professor or teaching assistant but it must be requested no later than the class session before the session in which the paper is due and only on the grounds of illness or other emergency.

Please come to talk to the professor or teaching assistant if you are having difficulties with the readings, lectures, or discussions, want to try out an idea for a paper, or want to chat about issues that have come up in the course.

Writing resources

Follow links on the course website to get help on how and when to cite published materials, and to find tips on grammar, punctuation, and spelling. There is also a link to the UCI Electronic Writing Center. Upload the article titled “How to evaluate a sociological argument” from the class files for help on summarizing and evaluating sociological perspectives. Finally, take advantage of the Learning and Academic Resource Center by calling 824-6451 or going to the LARC office at 423 Social Science Tower.

Books and readings

The following books should be purchased at the bookstore:

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields
Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*
Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, 2004)

Note that if you have a different version of *The Elementary Forms* and *The Protestant Ethic* than the one assigned, your page numbers may be different. Check with the professor for the correct ones.

Course readings, which are marked with an asterisk (*) below, are available on the course website. Files are labeled by the week and the author. Make sure to download, print, and read the assigned materials before we are scheduled to discuss them. If you have trouble downloading materials, contact the professor or TA about photocopying one of their reading packets.

Week one. January 8, 10. What is Social Theory?

Week two. January 15, 17. Sociology and Modernity

- *Peter Stearns, "Britain's Revolution," in *The Industrial Revolution in World History*
- *Charles Dickens, excerpt from *Hard Times*, Book One, chs. 1-6
- *Emile Durkheim, excerpt from *Suicide*
- *WHO and US Census statistics on suicide patterns

Week three. January 22, 24. Durkheim: Culture and Ritual

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 1-18, 33-39, 99-126, 207-241, 418-433.

First writing assignment due Thursday, January 24 at 9:30 a.m. Summarize the central argument of *Suicide* and evaluate how well that argument makes sense of contemporary patterns of suicide in an essay of about 1,000 words. Make sure that your essay does the following things: 1. State clearly the main claims that Durkheim stakes in the book excerpt. 2. Describe briefly how he supports those claims. 3. Say why those claims are surprising and important. 4. Using the WHO and US Census statistics provided online, provide a Durkheimian perspective on patterns in contemporary suicide rates, focusing either on international rates or domestic ones.

Week four. January 29, 31. Durkheim and Modern Sociology

- *Erving Goffman, "Embarrassment and Social Organization" in *Interaction Ritual*
- *Theodore Kaplow, "Rule Enforcement Without Visible Means: Christmas Gift Giving in Middletown," *American Journal of Sociology* 89 (1984): 1306-1323

Week five. February 5, 7. Midterm and Marx: Historical Materialism

Tuesday, February 5, MIDTERM. One component will be completed in class and instructions for the other, take-home component will be given in class. The take-home component is due at 12 pm on February 6.

- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Tucker (ed), *Marx-Engels Reader* pp. 473-480 (first paragraph); skim 483-491.
- Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," pp. 70-80
- Marx, "The German Ideology," pp. 150-163; 172-174
- Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," pp. 203-217

Week six. February 12, 14. Marx: Capitalism

- Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 367-373 (x:3)
- Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 480-483.
- *Charlie LeDuff, "At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die: Who Kills, Who Cuts, Who Bosses Can Depend on Race." *New York Times*, June 16, 2000

Week seven. February 19, 21. Marx and Weber: Class

*Max Weber, "Class, Status, Party"

Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, chs. 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12

Second writing assignment due Tuesday, February 19. Compose an essay of about 1,000 words in response to the following questions. Why, according to Karl Marx, is capitalism destined to be followed by communism? Do you find Marx's argument convincing? Why or why not?

Week eight. February 26, 28. Max Weber: Social Change

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: xxviii-80; 102-125

Week nine. March 4, 6. Weber: Organization, and Rationality

*Max Weber, "Bureaucracy"

*Mark Dowie, "Pinto Madness"

*Peter Green, "Czechs Debate Benefits of Smokers' Dying Prematurely." *New York Times*, July 21, 2001.

*Valerie Strauss, "Some Colleges Want to Curb Flow of Data to Magazine." *Washington Post*, May 20, 2007.

Week ten. March 11, 13. Conclusion

Third writing assignment due Thursday, March 13. Compose an essay of about 1,200 words in which you compare and evaluate Marxian and Weberian perspectives either on how class inequalities are reproduced in modern society or on organizational deviance.