Sociology 211:
Classical Sociological Theory

Spring 2010 TTh 1:00-2:22 p.m
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This course is an introduction to the classical tradition in sociological theory. We will be considering the most important efforts in the last years of the 1800s and the first years of the 1900s to establish theoretical discourses for understanding the human condition in modernity. It is impossible to properly understand these ideas without considering the significant social, political, and cultural events in Europe and the US during the late 17th through early 20th centuries that provided their context. Thus some knowledge of modern Western history will be quite helpful in the course, though I will make some efforts to provide you with the basic facts of e.g., the French Revolution if you are not already aware of them.

Your task throughout the term is
1) to endeavor to fully understand the arguments and theories being presented in the books;

2) to comparatively evaluate them;

3) to arrive at a point of competence and confidence in taking your own intellectual stances vis-à-vis these arguments; and

4) to apply these theories to situations and events in the contemporary world.

The tasks are of course related, but they are also distinct to some degree, and each one depends on the accomplishment of the previous one. So, in order to effectively evaluate the theories in comparative fashion (e.g., to determine where and how Weber and Durkheim differ and where and how their arguments coincide), you must first understand them. If you misunderstand them, you cannot accurately compare them. Likewise, you cannot legitimately and intelligently take positions among the various theories if you have not understood them or been able to effectively and accurately compare them.

As Jeffrey Alexander makes clear in our first reading, we read these theorists not only because they were the most insightful and complex analysts of what was happening around them in their own day but also because even today, a century after they wrote, they still have much to teach us. It is a temptation for some, immersed as they are in a broader popular culture that tells them that history begins with the invention of the Internet and anything that happened before that cannot be of any importance at all, to fail to understand how important it is to be conversant with these thinkers and their ideas. For sociology majors, but also for all who would be educated and deeply understand the world in which they live, familiarity with the main ideas of these thinkers is a requirement. Not only will it enable you to call people to account when they say stupid and false things about ‘what Marx or Freud said,’ but it will give you insight into human action (including your own) that will ultimately make you more fully human.

**Class Requirements:**

Attendance is essential in this course. The only excused absences are those caused by serious documented illness (i.e., visit to a doctor) or a documented death in immediate family; all other absences (including those caused by participation in sporting events) are unexcused. You may miss up to 10% of our class meetings with no penalty, but beyond 10% I will begin deducting points from your overall grade.

To be in attendance in this class means not simply to be physically present, but, in the words of John Lennon, to **be here now**. When Lennon was once asked to describe the meaning of the Beatles’ music in a nutshell, he replied “Be here now.” This is a stunningly simple yet powerful idea: to experience the moments of your life truly, authentically, fully, rather than walking about in a kind of half-present trance, failing to actually live life because one is constantly elsewhere, perhaps dwelling on the past, perhaps anticipating a future that may not even come. Lennon’s idea is one I take as fundamental for the experience we share in our collective meetings in this class. I promise that I will be here now, and I ask you to do the same.

Being here now is not as easy as it might sound, perhaps especially in the present age. Much of the communicative technology that now exists in our world, and indeed many other elements of
our contemporary culture work hard against being here now. Many people (including many students on this campus) seem almost never to be here now; they are too busy texting and checking Facebook and generally living in a virtual space presented to them by their portable communicative technology to actually be present in the situations of their lives. Additionally, too frequently, students do not adequately prepare themselves for being here now in the classroom because they do not sleep properly and they wind up half-sleeping through classroom experience.

So, to facilitate being here now, the following is my policy in this class. Laptop computers may not be used unless it is your day as the official class note taker. If you own a cell phone or other small communicative device, I strongly advise you not to bring it to class. If you insist on doing so, it must be turned off. If I see you doing what looks like consulting your cell phone or other such device while we are holding class, or if you appear to be sleeping (i.e., your eyes are closed for more than a few seconds in succession), I will simply take up my attendance book and mark you “not here now,” i.e., absent for that class meeting. As class attendance counts toward your grade as outlined above, this is a real penalty. I sincerely hope I won’t have to invoke it.

The reading load is considerable and much of the material is weighty and requires real attention. Class meetings are basically efforts in collective close reading of the texts; most lecture material I add to that process emerges explicitly from the text we are reading on a particular day. It is absolutely imperative that you do the reading (and all of it) before class meetings, or your understanding of the material is bound to be deficient. For obvious reasons, you should bring the relevant text with you to class every day.

For each class meeting, one of you will be given formal responsibility for taking notes and posting them to Blackboard. On these notes, I expect a polished and elaborated document, not simply an outline or collection of bullet points, so you will have to be prepared to record a lot of information and also make some of your own elaborations and observations. Your class notes from your assigned day are worth 10% of your final grade.

A very large percentage of the course grade consists of a course journal that you must begin keeping on the first day of class. This is where you should make daily entries relating to your reading and thoughts on the course. If you do not begin your journal promptly at the beginning of the term and/or fail to make regular entries, it will inevitably negatively affect your grade. I will have a look at your journals at least once during the term to see how you are progressing. In evaluating your journals, I am looking for a) regularity of entries (i.e., if you periods of more than a day or two between entries, this is bad); b) volume and substance of entries (i.e., if your entries are regular but only a few lines in length, this is bad); and c) discussion of and intersection with course readings (i.e., if you seldom mention course readings in your journal, this is bad). You are not limited to talking narrowly about the readings or what happened in class on a given day in your journal; you might also write down thoughts on how one could apply some theoretical idea from class to a contemporary event, or just record questions you have about something we have read or discussed in class. The point is both to document your most direct interaction with the ideas (i.e., notes on reading) but also to show that you are thinking a considerable amount about the course material above and beyond the act of
reading itself. On days when we see films, you are expected to write in your journals about how you see the film illustrating course themes or debates. An example of a course journal entry is attached. I will talk about course journals on the first day of class.

In addition to the course journal and the class note day, you will write two short (around 6 pages) essays during the term on topics of my choosing. Each is worth 20% of your overall grade; the midterm will cover material in the first half of the course and the final will deal with material in the second half. Details of these essays will be provided two weeks before they are due. See the calendar below for the due dates.

Here then is a brief summary of the grade breakdown:

1. Class notes = 10%
2. Course journal = 50%
3. Midterm essay = 20%
4. Final essay = 20%

Required Texts:

1. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
2. Émile Durkheim, *On Suicide*
3. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*
4. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*
5. Max Weber, *From Max Weber*

Recommended but not required: Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (lots of cheap used copies of this book can be had at amazon.com, and I highly recommend that you get one, as a good deal of the relevant historical context of these thinkers is provided by Nisbet)

Additional course readings are available on Blackboard.

Calendar of course themes and readings

*Situating Sociological Theory Historically and Setting Out Some Basic Problems and Insights*


January 26: Video: TBA. Reading: none

January 28: What is a Social Fact and What are Social Theoretical Problems? Reading: Emile Durkheim, "What is a Social Fact?" (BLACKBOARD); Karl Marx, "The Material Forces and the Relations of Production" (BLACKBOARD)

Community

Daumier, “Third Class Marriage”

February 4:  The Problem of Community: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in the Work of Tönnies. Reading: none

February 9:  Solidarity (Mechanical and Organic), Integration, and Regulation in Durkheim. Reading: Emile Durkheim, On Suicide, Book 2, chapters 2-4, “Egoistic Suicide” and “Altruistic Suicide”

February 11: Simmel and the Embrace of Gesellschaft: The Case of the Stranger. Reading: Georg Simmel, "The Stranger" (BLACKBOARD)

Authority/Power

Daumier, "The Republic"

February 16: The Problem of Authority. Reading: none
February 18: Marx and the State as Authority. Reading: Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (BLACKBOARD)


February 25: The Superego and Guilt as the Bases of Civilization. Reading: Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, pp. 36-104

March 2: same as last time. Reading: same as last time


March 9: Civil Associations and the State: Tocqueville's Analysis of American Society. Reading: Alexis de Tocqueville, selections on authority (BLACKBOARD)

March 11: Video: TBA. Reading: none

Status

Degas, "Race Horses in Front of Grandstand"

March 23: The Problem of Status. Reading: none. MIDTERM ESSAY DUE IN CLASS TODAY

March 25: Status and Class Conflict: Marx's Analysis of the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. Reading: Karl Marx, "Bourgeois and Proletarians" (BLACKBOARD)


April 1: Video: TBA. Reading: none

The Sacred
April 6: The Problem of the Sacred in Modernity. Reading: none

April 8: Durkheim's Theory of the Sacred. Reading: Emile Durkheim, Elementary Forms, introduction; Book 1, chapters 1 and 4; Book 2, chapter 7; Book 3, chapters 1-2 and 5; conclusion


April 20: Video: TBA. Reading: none

**Alienation**

Tooker, "Alienation"
April 22:  The Problem of Alienation. Reading: none

April 27: Alienated Labor in Marx. Reading: Karl Marx, "Estranged Labor" (BLACKBOARD)

April 29: Anomie and Suicide in Durkheim. Reading: Emile Durkheim, On Suicide, Book 2, chapter 5, "Anomic Suicide" **FINAL ESSAY ASSIGNED TODAY (DUE ON OUR ASSIGNED FINAL EXAM DAY)**

May 4: Bureaucracy and Alienation in Weber; Simmel's Embrace of the 'Insanity' of Modern Life. Reading: Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (BLACKBOARD); Max Weber, From Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," pp. 196-244