

History of Sociological Thought

SOC 401 • Fall 2008 • C.B. Peters • 182 Chafee • 874-4296 • cbp@uri.edu

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of our inquiry do not strike us at all. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #129

Sociology 401 is not the sort of course that students approach with the enthusiasm that comes from having freely chosen to enroll. On the contrary, most of you have enrolled because you were required to do so (which, if you think about it, is a curious thing). As a consequence, I suspect that your eagerness for the course is somewhat muted. Always the optimist, however, I think that by the end of the semester you each of you will find social thought intriguing, entertaining, worthwhile, and perhaps even useful.



That sea change from a kind of scholastic dread to intellectual excitement will not come easily. Social theory and its history are often forbidding, difficult, and obscure. Because of these facts, this course will require some hard intellectual labor and sustained attention to ideas and notions that can leave your head swimming. But your efforts in this regard will be well rewarded. Come December, you’ll have a much better sense of why we as sociologists view our world and ourselves the way we do.

Not surprisingly, the scope of this course is too much for a single semester (perhaps too much even for an intellectual lifetime). Nevertheless, together I think we can come to substantial agreement about the basic questions that animate theoretical sociology. In doing so, I hope we will acquire a deeper knowledge of and appreciation for the contributions of social theory to the understanding of our lives and our times.

Course Work

Admittedly, the goal of enhancing our understanding of the nature of social theory and its contribution to how we see ourselves and our world is a bit grandiose—but what would a theory course be without grandiose ideas (a remark you’ll appreciate more in the first dark, cold days of

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winter than in the last balmy days of summer)? So, we'll forge ahead. As I said earlier, this course will require hard work and sustained attention on your part. Just what you'll have to work at and just what you'll have to pay attention to are described below.

Class Sessions

Except for the fact that we will spend our time sorting through some fairly complicated ideas dreamed up by some even more complicated people, there won't be too much unusual about our class sessions. Of course, I will spend some time talking to you, and you can expect my comments to range from exegesis to exposition, from interpretive generalization to intellectual gossip.

More important, however, than my talking and your listening is *your* talking and listening to each other. If this course is to succeed, each of you must be willing to take some chances by talking about things you might not understand, some things you think are stupid, and some things you think are wrong. I'm not going to leave you on your own in this regard. Each class day we will engage in some sort of project or exercise designed to get you actively involved in talking and thinking and, if we're lucky, arguing about our penchant for "cheap pleasures," the "ascetic but usurious miser and the ascetic but productive slave," the capacity of the vast "cosmos of modernity" to erode the very essence of humanity, and who knows what else.

If you have been in my classes before, you are no doubt aware that I have a relatively open approach to class attendance. I assume that class is interesting, informative, and reasonably fun (given the other alternatives on weekday afternoons). For the most part, this approach has worked – students have attended regularly and have had fun doing so.

I don't plan to change this approach this semester, but because this course is going to be heavily invested in class activities, attendance is probably more important than usual. Your attendance will have an impact on how rewarding this course is for you – the more you come, the more rewarding you'll find it.



But there is more to class attendance than that. All of us, I think, tend to regard courses as essentially private matters, something we as individuals choose to attend and participate in independently of, and with little effect on, the actions of others. In fact, however, classes aren't simply collections of individuals, some interested and engaged, others disinterested and disaffected. They are, rather, communities tied together by common purposes and shared practices. A course is a collective enterprise that produces goods that can be attained only in concert with others. It is our pursuit of these social goods that make your attendance and your vitality crucial to the success of

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this intellectual community. (By the way, you might, if you are reading carefully, recognize this notion as a *social theory*).

Written Question Sets

Ordinarily, I would let the above discussion of community and how important you are to the success of this community suffice. There is, however, another obstacle which threatens the success of the course. Reading social theory, even the breeziest of it, is hard and demanding work. I know from experience (both as a beginning social theory student and as an graying social theory instructor) that even the best students are tempted to skim or even skip the assigned reading in the hopes that a more comprehensible oral account will be provided in class. Although I understand (and to some extent even share in) this temptation, I don't want it to turn our course into a mere oral history of sociology in which I discuss those texts you should have read.

Accordingly, I have developed a system of written assignments that will require you to read regularly. These assignments will be due in class on Tuesdays throughout the semester. For the most part, these assignments will ask you to use the assigned texts in a fairly straightforward manner – summarizing, outlining, or identifying the argumentative structure of the passages assigned. Occasionally, however, the assignments will ask you to respond to the reading or to apply the arguments in the reading to current issues and problems.

There will be ten of these assignments during the course of our semester, each of them worth 2 points. I know students have legitimate reasons for missing class, and I will take those into account by substituting your two best assignments for two you have missed or two that were less than your best work. Under this system, you may miss (or do poorly) two of these assignments without penalty.

In addition to encouraging you to do your reading regularly and thoughtfully, these assignments are also designed to encourage you to come to our class sessions prepared to talk about the material we are working through. In order to ensure the timeliness of your participation, I will not accept written question sets after the date they are due.

Examinations

I have scheduled four examinations during the semester, three during our regular meeting hours and the fourth during the week of final examinations. The exams during the semester will cover the material presented in the weeks immediately preceding them. The exam scheduled during finals week will be a true final examination and will cover the entire course.



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I am most interested in evaluating your ability to think creatively and critically about some of the problems that emerge when we think deeply about the issues that define the history of social thought and how those issues affect our understanding of ourselves and our world. For the most part, you *will not* need to memorize names, dates, places, schematic diagrams of theoretical propositions, and the like. You *will* need to turn ideas over and around so that you can see all sides of them and you *will* need to make some effort to extend those ideas into new areas of inquiry. Don't worry too much about learning to do these things; that's what the class activities are designed to do (and why it's so important for you to come to class).

If you have taken essay examinations from me before, you probably know what to expect. I will distribute the question(s) that constitute the examination to you about a week in advance of the exam date. That way you will be able to focus your attention on the issues and problems that I regard as important rather than on trying to guess just what it is that I will ask. In addition, you will also be able to prepare some working notes and papers to help you organize the answer that you will write in class. That way you can spend your time being creative and critical rather than committing to memory some hastily constructed and somewhat ill-conceived paragraphs. Of course, if you work together in preparing for these examinations you'll find that your preparation can be both enriching and interesting.



Don't let this question-in-advance-and-working-papers strategy fool you into thinking that the exams are easy or that they won't require too much effort. The issues that we need to explore are difficult and challenging. The exams will reflect that fact.

Grading

I have tried to weigh each of the assignments in terms of their relative importance. To determine your grade at the end of the semester, I will use the following point distribution:

In-semester examinations (20 points each)	60 points
Final examination	20 points
Written Question Sets (2 points each)	20 points

I will assign points to each of your graded activities based on my judgment about how well you have met the stated requirements. This process is far from flawless, but it is not so flawed that I feel compelled to look for an alternative. Nevertheless, if you are disgruntled with the grade I assign to your work, please voice your dissatisfaction and the reason for it to me. I'll reconsider.

When the semester is completed I will use the following scale to assign your course grades.

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<u>Grade</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Points</u>
A	93-100	C+	78-79
A-	90-92	C	73-77
B+	88-89	C-	70-72
B	83-87	D+	68-69
B-	80-82	D	60-67

I realize that this scale looks demanding. It is. However, if you do the things I ask you to do, if you work diligently and thoughtfully, I am sure each of you can succeed in this course.

Examination Dates

Examination One	September 23
Examination Two	October 21
Examination Three	November 25
Final Examination	December 16 (3:00 – 6:00 p.m.)

Required Reading

Durkheim, Emile

On Suicide. London: Penguin Books, 2006 (1897).

Freud, Sigmund

Civilization and Its Discontents. London: Penguin Books, 2002 (1930).

Goffman, Erving

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

Marx, Karl.

Early Writings. New York: Penguin Books, 1975 (1843-44).

Weber, Max.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York: Penguin Books, 2002 (1905).

We'll start our reading tour of the history of social theory in the United States and very nearly in the present with the seductive vision of a keen sociological eye, Erving Goffman and his *The*

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Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. When we finish, we'll head to Vienna to confront one of the most profound influences on how we see and construct our world: Sigmund Freud and one of his last essays, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Next we'll cross into France to spend some time with the progenitor of all contemporary sociology: Emile Durkheim and his landmark study *On Suicide*. We'll then turn eastward Germany to consider a complex thinker and his trenchant critique of the culture of modernity: Max Weber and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. After our visit with Weber, we'll conclude the academic year by in conversation with a messianic figure and the author of some of sociological theory's most famous tracts: Karl Marx and a selection of his *Early Writings*.

This is a rather unusual approach. Most history of social thought courses, particularly those taught in sociology departments, proceed chronologically (from say 1500 CE to the present) or scholastically (looking first at functionalists, then conflict theorists, then interactionists), or nationally (touring Europe, especially France and Germany, before crossing the channel to Britain and then the Atlantic to the United States).

Instead of all of that, we are going to trace the history of social thought in our own way, zigzagging through the United States and Europe, while dispensing entirely with the idea that there are schools of thought. Nevertheless, there is rhyme and reason to our itinerary and one of your jobs during the semester will be to tease out just what it is (a hint about the final).



Reading Assignment and Examination Schedule

<u>Date</u>	<u>Assignment</u>
September 4.....	Introduction
September 9*	Goffman, pp. 1-76
September 11	Goffman, pp. 77-140
September 16*	Goffman, pp. 141-207
September 18.....	Goffman, 208-255
September 23.....	Examination One
September 25.....	Freud, pp. 1-23
September 30*	Freud, pp. 24-35
October 2	Freud, pp. 36-44
October 7*.....	Freud, pp. 45-60
October 9	Freud, pp. 60-82
October 14*.....	Durkheim, pp. 1-65
October 16	Durkheim, pp. 116-143
October 21	Examination Two
October 23	Durkheim, pp. 262-39
October 28*.....	Durkheim, pp. 329-361
October 30	Weber, pp. 1-36,
November 4	<i>No Class, Election Day</i>
November 6*.....	Weber, pp. 67-87
November 11	<i>No Class, Veterans Day</i>
November 12*.....	Weber, pp. 105-122
November 13	Weber, reprise
November 18*.....	Marx, pp. 42-428
November 20	Marx, pp. 211-242
November 25	Examination Three
November 27	Marx, pp. 243-257
December 2*	Marx, pp. 358-379
December 4.....	Marx, reprise
December 9.....	Review
December 16.....	Final Examination, 3:00-6:00 p.m.

*= Indicates class sessions when typewritten question sets are due.