Modern sociology was born in the context of transition from traditional to modern societies in the West. This dramatic transformation opened a whole new series of social problems which have defined the modern era. We will explore the ways in which some of the most important founding figures of sociology explained the contrast between traditional and modern societies, and the mechanism of transition from one to the other. More specifically, we will focus on problems related to the rise of modern capitalism, such as class conflict, the moral consequences of the growth of the division of labor, individualism, alienation, the disintegration of community and, more generally, the role of ideas in social change. Throughout the course students will be encouraged to analyze their personal experiences as well as the problems of contemporary society in terms of the sociological concepts which they have mastered.

The course is divided into three parts.

The first section of the course (weeks 1-5) is an introduction to the sociological way of thinking about reality. We will analyze the relationship between the individual and society and define basic sociological categories (understanding, ego, super-ego, socialization, social role, reference groups, social structure, class, status group, manifest and latent functions). We will dwell at length on the various kinds of constraints which society places on individual behavior, and then, in order to give a little (but not too much) substance to the idea of human freedom, we will look at how individuals manipulate their social environment in order to achieve their goals (Goffman).

In the second part of the course (weeks 5-8) we will explore the basic features of traditional society. We will pay special attention to the process of social exchange, the nature of social hierarchies, and the distribution of social roles and political power in pre-modern societies. Once we have identified the basic principles of traditional societies, we will read a Marxist historical account of the demise of feudalism and the rise of capitalism, paying special attention to class conflict and the gradual rise of the bourgeoisie. We will end this section of the course by examining Marx’s theory of the rise of capitalism and his analysis of class conflict in modern society.

In the third part of the course (weeks 9-12), we will look at two alternative accounts of
the birth of modern society in the West, those of Durkheim and Weber. In the process of discussing Durkheim and Weber, we will analyze such sociological problems as the sources of social cohesion, the role of different types of sanctions in maintaining social order, the growing complexity of modern societies and the rise of individualism, the relationship between religion and the rise of capitalism, the routinization of social activity, and the decline of meaning. We will end the course with a brief examination of Durkheim and Weber as critics of modern society and culture.

Course Requirements: There will be two short essays (4-5 pages), two quiz-type exams, and a final exam. The quiz-type exams will consist of short definitions (identifying 5-6 sociological concepts in one or several sentences and/or paragraphs). The final exam will consist of short definitions (similar to mid-term) plus 2 broader questions based on the reading.

Grading

- Essays: 20% (each essay) x 2 = 40%
- Quiz: .15% (each quiz) x 2 = 30%
- Final exam: 20%
- Attendance: 10%

Part One: Basic Sociological Concepts

Week One. The Sociological Imagination


Week Two. Instinct and Civilization. Social Role, Socialization, Social Control.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Week Three. Social Roles


Week Four. Reference Groups, Social Structure and Social Stratification


Week Five. Society as Theater and Drama: Role-Management and Performance in Everyday Life


*Mid-term quiz (Thursday, October 2, half-hour in class)*

Part Two: Traditional Society and the Transition From Feudalism to Capitalism

Week Six. Traditional Society Defined


Week Seven. Social Reciprocity and Exchange in Traditional Society

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

*First Essay Due (Tuesday, October 14)*

*Fall Break*

Week Eight. The Birth of Modern Capitalism


Viewing of *The Godfather, Part I*.

Week Nine. Karl Marx: Class Conflict and Modern Capitalism


*Second Essay Due (Thursday, November 6)*

Week Ten. Emile Durkheim: The Division of Labor, Mechanical and Organic Solidarity

Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, pp.xxv-xxx (preface to the first edition); 11-100.

Week Eleven. Emile Durkheim: Organic Solidarity and the Problems of Modern Society


Week Twelve. Max Weber: Religion and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism


*Second Quiz (Tuesday, December 2)*

Week Thirteen. Max Weber: Calvinism, Religious Asceticism, and Meaning in Modern Society


*Final Exam, Wednesday December 17, 9am.*