Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory

Classical sociology arose in response to the dramatic social transformation of European societies in the wake of the Industrial and French revolutions. Its central focus were the numerous social and political problems opened up by the advent of modern industrial society from the disintegration of community and the decline of the sacred to the emergence of new forms of exploitation and class conflict, and the pervasive rationalization and routinization of social life. The founding fathers of modern sociology--Durkheim, Marx, and Weber--formulated their theories in response to such problems, establishing, in the process, three distinct traditions in sociological theory and research. This course explores the continuities between classical and contemporary sociological theory and research within each one of these three traditions: Durkheimian, Marxist, Weberian.

The course is divided into three four-week segments, each one devoted to one of the three traditions. Each four-week segment, in turn, is divided into three parts: 1) an initial two-week segment devoted to the “canonical” works of the original thinker; 2) a third week devoted to the theoretical elaborations and empirical applications of the original theories in contemporary sociology; 3) a fourth week devoted to the use of sociological theory as social critique. Throughout the course, a consistent effort is made to evaluate sociological theories from the point of view of their empirical validity and explanatory power, as well as their “background assumptions” (values and methodological presuppositions).

Practical Considerations.

In order to facilitate the assimilation of difficult material that is being covered fairly rapidly, a number of background readings are assigned. The main background reading for this class is Lewis Coser’s Masters of Sociological Thought (the sections on Marx, Durkheim, and Weber).

Background readings by Tom Bottomore and Robert Holton will help students understand the context and development of contemporary sociological theories (functionalism, Marxism, critical theory), and are mandatory. Readings which deal with specific criticisms of Durkheim’s theory of suicide (Pope) or Marx’s historical analysis of class conflict (Dahrendorf) and Weber’s Protestant Ethic (Hamilton) are optional, but strongly encouraged. Students are expected to have done the reading before class. This is very important, as the reading for this class is rather abstract and difficult at times. You will quickly lose track if you are behind in the reading. Remember that this is a four-unit course mandatory for all sociology majors and you are expected to devote the corresponding amount of time and effort to study.

Course requirements:

There will be two in-class quizzes (50 minute blue-book exams, no readings allowed), two 6-7 page papers, and a final examination.

Grading will be done on the following basis:
2 quizzes: \(2 \times 10\% = 20\%\)
2 papers (6-7 pages): \(2 \times 25\% = 50\%\)
Final exam: 20%
Attendance and Participation: 10%

Course Schedule and Readings

Week One. Introduction. The History of Sociology and Sociological Theory

Part One. The Durkheimian Tradition

Week Two. Community and Society. From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity
Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, 1-87; 101-125.

Week Three. The Disintegration of Community and Suicide
Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, 126-175; Preface to the second edition, pp.xxxi-lix.
Emile Durkheim, Suicide, 152-170; 241-276.
Critique. Whitney Pope, Durkheim=s Suicide. A Classic Analyzed, 9-60.

Week Four. The Durkheimian Tradition: Structural Functionalism and Its Critics

Week Five. The Durkheimian Critique of Excessive Individualism.

1st Quiz, Friday March 12
Part Two. The Marxist Tradition.

Week Six. The Early Marx and the Critique of Alienation

Background Reading. Lewis Coser, Masters of Sociological Thought, 42-87.

All readings from Marx and Engles in Tucker, ed., The Marx-Engels Reader:

“Marx on the History of His Opinions,” 3-7;
“Estranged Labor,” 70-81;
“Alienation and Social Classes,” 133-135;

Week Seven. Marx as a Theorist of Class Conflict and Capitalism.

Robert Tucker, The Marx-Engels Reader:

“Wage Labor and Capital,” 203-217;
“The Communist Manifesto,” 469-501;

Critique: Ralf Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, 3-71.

Week Eight. The Marxist Tradition. Class Reproduction in Modern Society


Jay McLeod, Ain=t No Making It. Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood, 3-151, 239-269.

First paper due on Friday, April 9

Week Nine. Marxism as Critical Theory

Background Reading. Tom Bottomore, The Frankfurt School.

Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 1-55, 144-169, 247-257.


Part Three: The Weberian Tradition

Week Ten. Religion and the Rise of Capitalism

Background Reading. Lewis Coser, Masters of Sociological Thought, 216-260.

Week Eleven. Weber=s Sociology of Rationalization


Second Quiz, Wednesday April 28

Week Twelve. The Weberian Tradition: Religion, Status, Meaning, and Context


Second paper due, Wednesday May 5

Week Thirteen. Weberian Social Criticism. The Nightmare of Rationalization

George Ritzer, The McDonaldization of Society

Final Exam as Scheduled