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, and established 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, and 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 two parts: 1) an initial two-week segment devoted to the works of the original thinker; 2) a second two-week segment devoted to the theoretical elaborations and empirical applications of the original theories in contemporary sociology and 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).

Background Readings, Attendance, and Assignments

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* (chapters 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 that deal with specific criticisms of Durkheim’s theory of suicide (Pope) or Marx’s historical analysis of class conflict 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 mandatory course for all sociology majors and you are expected to devote a corresponding amount of time and effort to study. Attendance will be taken as of the third week of class: more than two unexcused absences will negatively affect the participation portion of the grade. Papers should be handed in at the specified time. Late papers will be penalized and extensions will be given only under exceptional circumstances.
Blackboard.

In order to encourage continuity and participation in the classroom there will be six required Blackboard postings throughout the semester. Students will be required to answer questions and/or write short summaries of the readings, and will not be formally graded on the postings. However, the frequency, length, and quality of your postings will be taken into account in determining the final grade (with frequency and quality more important than length). All postings will be due by Monday, 11 p.m. on the dates specified in the syllabus.

Course requirements

There will be two in-class quizzes (60 minute blue-book exams), two 6-7 page papers, and a final examination. In addition, there will be 6 Blackboard postings throughout the semester. Students will be expected to attend one feature film outside of regular class time.

Grading

2 quizzes: 2x10%=20%
2 papers (6-7 pages): 2x20%=40%
Attendance, Participation, and Blackboard: 20%
Final exam: 20%

Honor Code

This course and all its assignments are covered by the Oberlin College honor code. This means, most importantly, that—unless otherwise indicated—you are to produce your own work and honor the rules and conventions of scholarly quotation, attribution, and citation. While you are allowed to ask advice and help from librarians and official writing tutors, you are, in the end, to submit work produced by you. Some assignments may be collaborative in nature; those will be clearly identified as such. Any case of (suspected) plagiarism will be reported to the Honors Committee. For more details, see http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/10-Policies-Honor.pdf

Required Books (All on hard copy reserve)

Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labor on Society
(New York: The Free Press, 2014)
ISBN (paper): 978-1-4767-4973-0
Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*  

Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods. Class, Race, and Family Life*  

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*  

George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*  

**All other readings will be on Blackboard under “Course documents.”**

**Course Schedule**

**Week One: The History of Sociology and Sociological Theory**

Tues. 2/3    Introduction to the class and syllabus

Thurs. 2/5   Classical Sociological Theory in Its Historical Context


**Part One. The Durkheimian Tradition**

**Week Two: Community and Society. From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity**

Tues. 2/10   Collective Consciousness and Mechanical Solidarity


Thurs. 2/12   The Division of Labor and Organic Solidarity


**Week Three: The Crisis of Community, Individualism, and Suicide**

*First Blackboard posting due on Monday, 2/16 by 11 p.m.*
Tues. 2/17  The Problem of Social Integration


Thurs. 2/19  Suicide as a Sociological Phenomenon


**Week Four: The Durkheimian Tradition: Structural Functionalism**

Tues. 2/24  Structural Functionalism: Talcott Parsons


Thurs. 2/26  Functionalist Theory Modified


[Film] *American Beauty* (viewing at scheduled time)

**Week Five: Anomie Theory Revised. Gemeinschaft, and Gesellschaft Reconsidered.**

*Second Blackboard posting due on Monday, 3/2 by 11 p.m.*

Tues. 3/3  Social Structure and Anomie

Thurs. 3/5  The Weakness of Strong Ties: A Critique of Gemeinschaft

1st Quiz, 60 minutes in class


Part Two. The Marxist Tradition.

Week Six: Marx as a Theorist of Class Conflict and Capitalism.

Third Blackboard posting due Monday, 3/9 by 11 p.m.

Tues.  3/10  Marx’s Historical Materialism


   “Marx on the History of His Opinions;”
   “The German Ideology;”
   [Friedrich Engels] “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific;”


Thurs. 3/12  The Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Class Conflict, and Ideology

   “The German Ideology;”
   “The Communist Manifesto;”


Week Seven:  Capitalism, Systemic Crisis, and Alienation.

   First paper due on Monday 3/16, by 4 p.m. in King 301b (hard copy)

Tues.  3/17  The Systemic Crisis of Capitalism

   “Wage Labor and Capital;”
   “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific;”

Thurs. 3/19  Alienation in Capitalist Society

“Estranged Labor,”
“The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society,”
“Alienation and Social Classes,”


****SPRING BREAK, March 21-29****

**Week Eight: Class and Sociological Research: Social Class in Institutional Settings**

Tues. 3/31  Cultural Capital: Social Class Reproduction Through Family and School


Thurs. 4/2  Social Class and Language Use


**Week Nine: Marxism and Sociology. Social Class, the State and Culture**

*Fourth Blackboard posting due on Monday 4/6 by 11 p.m.*

Tues. 4/7  Developments in Marxist and Marx-Related Sociology


Thurs. 4/9  2nd Quiz, 60 minutes in class

Part Three: The Weberian Tradition

Week Ten: Religion and the Rise of Capitalism

Tues. 4/14 Western Rationality, Capitalism, and the Capitalist Spirit


Thurs. 4/16 The Concept of the Calling and Calvinist Predestination


Week Eleven: Capitalism, Rationality, Bureaucracy

*Fifth Blackboard posting due on Monday 4/20 by 11 p.m.*

Tues. 4/21 The Protestant Ethic and Its Unintended Consequences


Thurs. 4/23 Bureaucracy as Institutionalized Rationality


Week Twelve: Critical Theory

*Sixth Blackboard posting due on Monday 4/27 by 11 p.m.*

Tues. 4/28 Critical Theory: Instrumental Rationality and New Forms of Domination

*Background Reading.* Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School.*

Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man,* pp. 1-55.
Thurs. 4/30  Critical Theory II: Modernity, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust


**Week Thirteen: The Sociology of Rationalization and the Uses of the Classics**

Second paper due Monday 5/4, by 4 p.m. in King 301b (hard copy)


**Final Exam: Wednesday, May 13, 2-4 p.m.**