

Introduction to Sociological Theory¹

Spring 2015

SOC 3020H-1001

*Department of Sociology
Bowling Green State University*

Class Time: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 11:30 – 12:20 PM

Location: Psychology Building, Room 108

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Office Hours: Thursday, 3:00-5:00 (or by appointment)

1. Why take a course on sociological theory?

Of all the courses that you will take from a department of sociology at an American university today, this one is likely the most peculiar and the toughest to provide a clear rationale for. Other courses focus on specific topics, like social inequality, population and society, gender, race and ethnicity, social movements, marriage and family, crime and deviance, etc, etc. These substantive courses are intended to provide you with clearly digestible information on each of those topics. More specifically, they are meant to provide you with sociological answers to a specific set of empirical questions. Meanwhile, other courses, like social statistics and methods, are meant to impart skills that those very smart people who have decided to become sociology majors cannot do without. Yet, a course on “sociological theory” is not as easy to justify as either substantive courses or methods or statistics courses. This is for two reasons:

¹ This document serves as a general plan for the course and will likely change throughout the semester. Any deviations from the current document will be announced in class and on the course website.

Problem #1: As opposed to substantive courses, this course is about no “area” of society in particular. Rather, it is about something more general and abstract: “sociological theory.” As we will see, the sociological theorists that we will read dealt with everything from culture, to marriage and the family, to social movements, to crime and deviance, etc. They did not “specialize” in any particular area of sociology. They talked about all of them.

Problem #2: As opposed to methods and statistics courses, there is not a pre-specified “package” of skills and abilities that this course is designed to transmit to you and on which I can “test” you at the end of semester to make sure that you indeed learned those skills and abilities.

2. Other people’s approach to these problems

Some instructors, when faced with these two problems, opt to justify you being here taking this course by claiming that the course is indeed designed to teach you specific skills and abilities (they deny problem #2). They claim that at the end of the course you will have learned to “think critically” or will have the ability and talent to “think theoretically” about society.

In this regard, these instructors claim that a course in sociological theory is a lot like methods and statistics courses: they are designed to give you a specific set of skills and abilities. Furthermore, they treat this course as qualitatively different from the other substantive courses available in a sociology department because it also deals with its own “area” of research (denying problem #1). This area of research is usually referred to as “theory.” Some go as far as to claim that there is such a thing as a “theoretical method” that can be taught like a recipe (on par with a recipe for making chocolate brownies).

3. My approach to these problems

In this course, I take seriously the two problems outlined above and, instead of denying them, I try to confront them head on. Here is where I depart from these other approaches:

First, I do not pretend (like problem #1 deniers) that there is a special area of “research” called “theory” which is qualitatively different from other areas of sociology, or that “theory” is somehow entirely limited to sociologists. Instead, I acknowledge that in this course we will be asking questions and dealing with subject matter that overlaps with things you have already encountered in your other courses in sociology, in the social sciences, and in the humanities. *This is a good thing*, since it means that a lot of you have already been exposed to some of what we will be dealing with in this course. Not only

that, it means that even if you are not particularly interested in sociology, you will hopefully find something of value in what we read and discuss in this class.

Second, I do not pretend (like problem #2 deniers) that this course will teach you specific methods, skills or styles of thinking (“critical,” “theoretical” or otherwise). On the contrary, rather than presume that you are somehow deficient in these kinds of skills, I firmly believe that you can do well in this course with the very same styles and habits of thought that you have used in all of your other classes (assuming that you have done well in them!) and in your life (as a rational human being) more generally. No “conversion” to an allegedly “theoretical” or “critical thinking” worldview is necessary to do well in this course, nor is it the ultimate goal of this class to provide you with them.

4. So what then?

If the subject matter of this course does not make it different from other courses that you’ve taken, and if it doesn’t provide you with any special skills or abilities, then what’s the point? Isn’t this course redundant? Shouldn’t we just all leave now? Why show up to this class (aside from the fact that you want a degree)? My answer to that (important) question is that while the subject matter of this course is essentially no different from that covered in your other courses, and while this course does not provide you with a marketable set of skills, *the type of questions* we will be asking are *very* different from the ones you ask in your other courses (in sociology or other departments); not only that they are *important* questions and can in fact help you understand society and your place in it much better than (I hope) you would otherwise be able to do.

To put it in a nutshell: while in other courses you have asked and been exposed to sociological (or psychological, economic, philosophical etc) answers to “small” and “medium-sized” questions, in this course we will deal almost exclusively with “big” (and sometimes “really big”) questions. And that, in essence, is what makes this course different from other courses. Not the subject matter, nor the way we go about trying to answer questions about the subject, nor the skills we use or learn, but the *scope* of the questions that we will be asking. In fact, what makes this course distinctive is that there is no question that is seemingly outside our collective purview. The only restriction is that the question has some relevance to the study of humans as “social beings.”

In this course, then, the definition of “sociological theory” will be: *big, important answers to big, important questions that can change our perception of our lives, the people around us, and society as a whole.* Insofar as you have some interest in grappling with these kinds of questions, this is reason enough to show up for this class (even on Friday afternoons!). Some of the “big, important questions” which we will be tackling head-on include:

1. What is the essence of human beings?

2. Where do science and religion come from?
3. Can there be a society without religion?
4. Why does our everyday experience *feel* the way that it does?
5. Where does morality come from?
6. Where does crime come from?
7. Can there be a society without economic inequality?
8. What is capitalism?
9. Which is more important: conformity or individuality?
10. Is “everything” ultimately about sex, or money, or power?

These are some very difficult (and big and important) questions. You might be asking yourself: How can social theorists (like the ones we’ll read in this class) even claim to be able to provide answers to them? Furthermore, how can reading, thinking about, discussing, and writing about social theory (which is what you’ll be doing in this class) help you develop your own answers to them? There are two quotes that I want you to keep in mind as we proceed this semester, which I think will help answer both questions:

“Social theories mold and change our self-understanding. Even without being applied in empirical research, social theories provide us with a certain way of defining our position as human beings in a social world, which inevitably implies a political and ethical dimension. Above all social theories... provide cultural resources for grasping ourselves—and frequently they are ways of breaking with cultural resources we already have, changing them and opening up ‘new’ possibilities of self-perception and self-understanding” (Andreas Reckwitz, “What is a social theory?”)

“When we read, we only ever come to *our own* understanding of a text. There isn’t an objective or definitive understanding of a text available to us, or at least not one that is *not* established by power relationships that have nothing to do with its meaning. We apply our background experiences, our means (or tools) of understanding to understand what a text is saying. To the extent that those means of understanding are unique, we will always come to a unique understanding of a text, which may or may not be shared by others. In the process, we may challenge and change those means of understanding, often in subtle though unmistakably important ways. In the social sciences, there can then be a valid response to the claim ‘I don’t understand’ and it is: ‘develop your intuitions,’ or more radically be willing to ‘change yourself!’ This is why there is no such thing as a text that is “too

hard” to understand. All theoretical texts make some kind of difference for us as we develop our own understanding of them. They change the basic tools we use to interpret ourselves and make sense of the world around us” (paraphrasing Hans-Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor)

5. What is required of you if you want to do well in this course

Likely the main impediment to doing well in this course is a very natural reticence to taking the questions that we are going to ask *seriously*. Because the questions are “big” it is going to be a bit more difficult (but not impossible) to “relate” them to your experience. This is a challenge that I will attempt to help you overcome. At first, some of the questions that we will be dealing with are going to seem alien and incomprehensible. Some of them are not going to seem interesting because the answers to those questions are not going to seem “practical” or “useful” in any way. Undoubtedly, a lot of the time you will stare at one of the questions and be tempted to dismiss it with a “why should I care?” kind of reaction.

Because of this, the main things that I ask of you throughout the semester are (1) open-mindedness, (2) patience, (3) a willingness to entertain questions about things that are somewhat removed from your everyday experience and (4) a willingness to invest some mental effort and time in coming to an understanding of the ways in which these big questions have been answered by the theorists we will be reading.

More specifically, here are some pointers that will help you succeed in this class:

- Your first reaction to some of the questions that we will pose this semester will likely be that they are impossible or too hard to answer. You have to give yourself and others a chance to try to come up with an answer however impossible it may seem at first.
- You have to be prepared to **change your mind** and to **listen** to what sociology has to say. Of course, you can keep your allegiance to your old answers, but this requires that you be explicit as to where that answer comes from and why it may be so appealing to you.
- You have to be **patient** because as opposed to “small” question, the answer to “big” questions does not come easily or all at once. Sometime you have to go about it in a very indirect and circuitous way. In fact the best answer to big questions have come in this way, as you’ll soon find out.
- You have to have a **tolerant attitude** toward abstraction and armchair speculation. Answers to big questions require thinking “big” which means

thinking with rather abstract concepts and coming up with what sometimes may seem like wild generalizations.

- You have to have some **openness** to give these speculations and generalizations a chance and to consider the way in which they might be right (as opposed to dismissing them immediately). It is much easier to find the quick exception to a general statement than to truly appreciate the grain of truth that can be found in it.
- Finally, you have to dedicate some **perspiration** to understanding the big answers to these big questions. This is important, because it will sometimes seem as if a particular theorist is getting lost on some irrelevant detour. If you find yourself in this situation, just stop and remind yourself of the “big” question that this theorist began to answer in the first place.

More concretely, in order to be successful in this class ... You should *read*. You should *take notes as you read*. You should be prepared to *talk in class and ask questions about what you've read*. And you should be able to *summarize, in writing, the main points of what you've read and construct coherent arguments about it*. Please note here that all of these “keys to success” involve **reading**. The main point I want get across: **if you do the required reading, you will be successful in this class**. You should be prepared to set aside at least 5-6 hours of work (that's reading and writing) for this course every week.

Given that the exams are open-note, an obvious tip is that you **show up to class and take notes**.

You should also come to class ready to learn and ready to engage with the required material during the in-class discussions and lecture. My educational psychologist friends tell me that this is by far the best way to prep for exams.

6. Why all this old stuff?

You may have noticed that a big part of the reason why this course is called an “introduction” is because we are going to have to read a lot of stuff by long-dead white males of European ancestry. There's a reason for this, and it's connected to what I mentioned above: coming up with good answers to big questions requires both skill and imagination, and the really good answers have been so good as to have stood the test of time. That's why they are often called “classics.” Hence, the “old stuff” we'll be reading are unsurpassed examples of incredibly creative answers to some really big, important and difficult questions. They are examples for you and me to follow in thinking through these big questions. This is why we read them.

7. Course website

We will *not* be using Canvas for this course. The primary non face-to-face interface that we will use this semester will instead be provided through www.lore.com. This is where you will submit your assignments and download course readings. The format is similar to Facebook, so it will also be available to use to clarify and expand upon points mentioned in class. During the first week, I'll send you instructions for how to log on.

8. Requirements

1. Attendance and Active Participation in Class Discussion (10%)

This course will only be interesting if you actively participate in it. To help motivate you to do this, I will quantify your level of participation in the following way: Did I normally see this person's face in class? Did this person sometimes talk in class when the opportunity arose? Did this person submit the homework assignments I periodically assigned? Did I have to ask this person more than once to put away smartphone, laptop, or other *illegal* (in this classroom on MWF from 11:30-12:20 PM) tech device during class? If I can answer "yes" to the first three questions, and "no" to the last question, you will get 100% participation grade. If I *can't* answer yes to them, or if I can answer yes to the last question, then you will get something lower than 100% participation grade.

2 Theorist Essays (50%)

At the end of each section of the course, I will post a writing prompt to Lore that asks you to write an essay drawing on the material covered. There will be five of these due: one on Mills, Berger and the philosophical precursors, and then one each on Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel. I will post the writing prompt Friday after class, and your essay will be due by the following Tuesday at noon.

I will average your 5 scores on the essays to calculate your final grade. Missing essays will count as 0.

3. Midterm and Final (20% each)

There will be two examinations of the material covered in the course. They will include multiple choice, true/false, and short answer questions. They will be open-note.

Other points to mention about grading

Late/Makeup Work:

It is your responsibility to make sure that all assignments are turned in on time. With the exception of previously approved absences, late assignments will never be accepted for

full credit. Grades will be marked down one percentage point for each hour the assignment is late. If you know that you cannot make a certain deadline, please contact me *beforehand* so that we can work together (assuming you have good reason to miss the original deadline) to consider alternative options for completion.

Disputed Grades:

Contact me in writing if you feel that you have been incorrectly awarded a particular grade on a class assignment. Include a paragraph describing: (a) how your work fulfills the course objectives outlined in the syllabus; (b) why your work is deserving of a higher grade; (c) what texts and page numbers in the required readings you based your paper's content and argument on; (d) what you think your grade should be. If I think your request has merit, then we can meet in person to further review your assignment and discuss the validity of your current grade. However, this meeting will come only after my reevaluation of the assignment in question.

Extra-Credit:

In rare situations there might be opportunities for extra-credit. I must approve each individual request, so you should contact me by the end of March if you think you need to earn extra-credit. In general, different point values are awarded for different ranges of effort. Potential exercises can include: (a) a short book report on a sociological text related to our course content. You should meet with me to discuss your interests, and we'll pick a book that matches them; (b) attend a university-sponsored event that relates to any of our class topics (e.g. a guest speaker, department colloquium, film, etc) and complete an essay on how the event relates to the course content.

9. Other Course Policies

1. Code of Academic Conduct

All Bowling Green students are responsible for compliance with the Academic and Student Codes of Conduct. Academic honesty violations include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating academic dishonesty. The BGSU Student Handbook provides a great deal of detail on the Codes of Conduct and academic honesty violations. For violations with lesser penalties, a course instructor at BGSU has the discretion to determine guilt and impose sanctions *as high as removal from the course and an assignment of WF (withdrawn–failed)*. Violations carrying greater penalties are handled by the academic dean; at the *most lenient*, such violations lead to suspension from the university.

2. Academic Honesty

All work must be your own. Do not submit others peoples' papers. Do not directly copy material without appropriate citation. Claiming someone else's work as your own is a violation of academic honesty. This is not an introductory course, and you are expected to know and follow appropriate academic standards of citation. If you have

any doubts about how to conform to standards of academic writing, consult BGSU's resources including information at the Learning Commons and at the Library (e.g., <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/assistance/page41070.html>).

3. Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets and other tech stuff in class

Per Department of Sociology policy, use of laptop computers, cell phones and other "tech stuff" is *strictly forbidden* during class meetings, unless they are involved in an in-class assignment. If you have a medical excuse to use one of these devices, please bring the excuse to me so I can verify it. Otherwise, no student should use a laptop, phone, tablet, or other tech thing in class. If you do this, you will be immediately asked to leave and this will count as an unexcused absence.

4. Prerequisites:

All students must have taken and passed SOC 1010 "Principles of Sociology"

10. Course Resources

The text for this course is available for purchase at the BGSU Bookstore.

Required Text

1. Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff, Indermohan Virk (eds). 2013. *Classical Sociological Theory*. Third Edition. London: Wiley-Blackwell [ISBN: 9780470655672]
2. Articles and book excerpts will be available for download on the course website

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SOC 3020
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Reading Schedule

Week 1: Course Introduction and Why Sociology (and Theory) Matters

Themes:

Social theory as a way of thinking
Accessing social reality through social science
Changing perceptions

Monday, January 12
Welcome

Wednesday, January 14
The Sociological Imagination

- Required reading: C Wright Mills, “The Promise” (Lore)

Friday, January 16
First rule of sociology: “things are not what they seem”

- Required reading: Peter Berger, “Sociology as a Form of Consciousness” (Lore)

Week 2: The Philosophical Precursor to Asking “Big, Important Questions”

Themes:

How should society be organized?
“Ideal” theory
How philosophy is different from sociology

Monday, January 19
No Class, MLK Jr Day

Wednesday, January 21
Hobbes vs Rousseau on the origin of society

- Required reading: chapters 1 and 2 in *CST*

Friday, January 23
Sapere aude! Kant and the public use of reason

- Required reading: chapter 3 in *CST*

Week 3: Karl Marx on Sociology and Human Nature

Themes:

Social science vs Philosophy
Ideas and consciousness
Alienation
Work

Monday, January 26

Marx on Sociology

- Required reading: Karl Marx, “To Make the World Philosophical” and “Toward a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing” (Lore)

Wednesday, January 28

Marx 101: Materialism and Ideology

- Required reading: chapter 9 in *CST*

Friday, January 30

Our Relationship to the World: Alienation

- Required reading: chapter 10 in *CST*

Week 4: Karl Marx on Capitalism

Themes:

Capitalism as a system of production for profit
Consumerism
Social interdependency

Monday, February 2

Capitalism defined

- Required reading: Karl Marx, “The General Formula for Capital” (Lore)

Wednesday, February 4

Marx on Class: Why work sucks

- Required reading: chapter 14 in CST, Karl Marx, “Primitive Accumulation and its Secret” (Lore) and Erik Olin Wright “Class Counts” (Lore)

Friday, February 6

Our shared duty: consumerism

- In-class video: “The Merchants of Cool”

Week 5: Karl Marx on Revolution and Social Change
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Themes:

Class conflict

Social change

Culture and false consciousness

Monday, February 9

You say you want a revolution? How society changes

- Required reading: Daniel Bell, “Two Schemata in Marx” (Lore)

Wednesday, February 11

The Communist Manifesto

- Required reading: chapter 11 in *CST*

Friday, February 13

The “culture industry”: the reason why we don’t revolt?

- Required reading: chapter 34 in *CST*

Week 6: Max Weber on Sociology and the Problem of Meaning
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Themes:

How and why we give meaning to our lives

Sociology as the study of meaning

Where religion comes from

Monday, February 16

Weber’s starting point: Nietzsche and nihilism

- In class video: “Human all too human: Nietzsche” (50 min)

Wednesday, February 18

Weber on Sociology

- Required reading: chapter 20 in CST

Friday, February 20

What Sociology Can (and Cannot) Do For You

- Required reading: Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy” (Lore)

Week 7: Max Weber on Religion and Capitalism

Themes:

How cultural belief affects our behavior

The ethic of hard work

Religion as rationally motivated activity

Monday, February 23

Weber on Religion: Searching for Salvation

- Required reading: Max Weber, “The Different Roads to Salvation” (Lore)

Wednesday, February 25

The Protestant Ethic, or why work doesn't suck

- Required reading: chapter 21 in CST

Friday, February 27:

The Spirit of Capitalism, or reasons to be pessimistic about the future

- Required reading: chapter 21 in CST

Week 8: Max Weber on the Structure of Modern Society

Themes:

Social status

Sources of power

Organizations and corporations

Monday, March 2

The nature of power in modern society

- Required reading: chapter 23 in *CST*

Monday, March 4

Class and Status

- Required reading: chapter 22 in *CST*

Friday, March 6

The view from inside the iron-cage: bureaucracy

- Required reading: chapter 24 in *CST*

Week 9: Spring Break (no class)

March 9: no class

March 11: no class

March 13: no class

Week 10: Max Weber on Rationalization

Themes:
Rationalization

Monday, March 16

Rationalization and its Discontents

- Required reading: George Ritzer, “The McDonaldization of Society” and Eva Illouz, “Love and Its Discontents: Irony, Reason, Romance” (Lore)

Wednesday, March 18

Review Session

Friday, March 20

Exam #1

Week 11: Emile Durkheim on Sociology

Themes:
Sociology as a Science

Positivism
Division of Labor and interdependence
Shared beliefs and culture
Social Solidarity

Monday, March 23
Durkheim on Sociology

- Required reading: Emile Durkheim, “What is a Social Fact?” (Lore)

Wednesday, March 25
The Great Transformation: Gemeinschaft to Geselleschaft

- Required reading: Emile Durkheim, “Review of Toennies *Gemeinschaft und Geselleschaft*” (Lore)

Friday, March 27
The Division of Labor in Society

- Required reading: chapter 16 in CST

Week 12: Emile Durkheim on Religion
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Themes:

Why societies need religion
Ritual behavior and emotion
The individual as “sacred”

Monday, March 30
Durkheim on “elementary” religion

- Required reading: Emile Durkheim, selection from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Lore)

Wednesday, April 1
Durkheim on the religion of modernity: the “cult of the individual”

- Required reading: Emile Durkheim, “Conclusion” from *The Division of Labour in Society* (Lore)

Friday, April 3
Rituals and Modern Selfhood

- Required reading: Erving Goffman, “The nature of deference and demeanor” (Lore)

Week 13: Emile Durkheim on Deviance

Themes:

The social (not individual) causes of suicide
Crime and punishment

Monday, April 6

The social causes of suicide

- Required reading: chapter 18 in *CST*

Wednesday, April 8

“Crime is necessary”

- Required reading: Emile Durkheim, “The Function of Crime” (Lore)

Friday, April 10

From Torture to Prison: On the changing nature of punishment

- Required reading: Michel Foucault, “The body of the condemned” (Lore)

Week 14: Georg Simmel on Sociology

Themes:

Experiential sociology
Formal sociology
Modes of interaction

Monday, April 13

Simmel on Sociology

- Required reading: Georg Simmel “The Problem of Sociology” (Lore)

Wednesday, April: 15

Example of a Social Form: Sociability and Fashion

- Required reading: Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Sociability” (Lore) or “The Philosophy of Fashion”

Friday, April 17

Example of a Social Form: Strangers

- Required reading: chapter 26 in *CST*

Week 15: Georg Simmel on the Modern Experience

Themes:

Urban life
Money and materialism
Consciousness
Thrill-Seeking

Monday, April 20

Empire State of Mind: The urban experience

- Required reading: Georg Simmel “The metropolis and the mental life” (Lore)

Wednesday, April 22

Money maketh the world go round

- Required reading: Georg Simmel, “Money in modern culture” (Lore)

Friday, April 24

“Our lives are empty shells” : the crisis of experience in modern society

- Required reading: Georg Simmel, “The crisis of culture” (Lore)

Week 16: Georg Simmel on Social Networks

April 27

Individuality versus Conformity

- Required reading: chapter 27 in *CST*

April 29:

Social Networks: An (all too brief) introduction

- Required reading: chapter 28 in *CST*

May 1:

Review Session

May 4-9 Finals Week