CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY

Course goals:

This course emphasizes theory as an active part of the working toolbox of social scientists. In studying the ideas of classical theorists, we will be interested in how those theories help orient social scientists’ interests, and can help interpret and analyze the social world.

The course attempts to do several things at once: provide an advanced introduction to classic sociological theory (Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Gramsci, and Weber); give students experience in systematic theoretical analysis (separating assumptions from theoretical claims, levels and units of analysis, etc.); help students see how contrasting traditions of classical theory shape complementary approaches to current research questions; and explore some extensions of classical theory within contemporary theory, methodology, and empirical research.

Course format and structure:

The course will proceed in a seminar format. Students are expected to prepare the readings carefully each week, and email to me a one-page (no more!), single-spaced précis by 9 p.m. the night before each class. The précis is not simply a summary; rather, it is a brief overview of the core ideas presented in the reading, followed by the students critical/appreciative reaction to those ideas and the author’s analytic orientation. Students will be expected to bring their own ideas, understanding of the readings, intellectual interests, and research orientations to bear on the discussion every week. The reading load will be significant, and students will be expected to come to class with the readings fully digested and having put real thought into their comments and questions. That is, do not be misled by the informality of the seminar format and the instructor’s style. That informality is to allow each student to bring his/her interests to bear on the learning process, but you are expected to do so within a rigorous process of learning and thinking seriously about social theory, even as you are adapting classical sociological ideas to your current interests.

Thus, come to class with readings prepared, not just cursorily read. But “prepared” can include skimming sections of readings — indeed, you’ll be best prepared if you read quickly, skim some, return to important sections, and then take time to really think through the reading before writing your précis. Then, come ready to learn from others even as you argue for your own point of view, with me and with other students. Simply lose whatever shyness you have about disagreeing publicly; that’s how we all learn. At the same time, lose whatever inclination toward a one-dimensional, knee-jerk “critical thinking” stance common in academe: simply finding weaknesses in others’ work and trashing it. In place of that cheap-and-easy-and-fashionable stance, let’s all work to develop a more authentically critical tone in the class: appreciative of what an author does well and how it offers partial insight into societal dynamics, critical of what an author does poorly and how it obscures other important societal dynamics.

Once during the semester, each student will help frame and advance the seminar discussion, as described below. This will require a greater level of preparation of the readings a week ahead of time, including writing some generative questions or themes that will help deepen the discussion. Note: at the end of each class session, the student responsible for the following
week’s readings will have five minutes or so to introduce the reading, suggest themes worth paying attention to, and suggest three or so generative questions about which students should be thinking while they do the reading. These should be presented verbally at the end of class and the themes/questions should be emailed to myself and all seminar students immediately thereafter.

The structure of the course will generally proceed as follows: a week or two covering the key writing of a particular classical social theorist (always some of their original work; often some additional material), followed by a week or two covering contemporary sociological or other social scientific work broadly within the tradition of the preceding classical theorist. At a couple of points during the semester, we’ll pause to consider broader questions about the role of theory in social inquiry.

Each class session will proceed roughly as follows: I will moderate the first hour or hour-plus of class. To some extent, in order to bring some structure into the discussion, I will focus our attention on themes such as the following:

• What’s the fundamental thing this author is trying to explain?
• At what level of analysis does this author operate – whole societies? Organizational level? Individual-level?
• For this author, what are the core dynamics of society – the place to pay attention if you want to understand societal life?
• How does this author’s analytic perspective compare and contrast with others we have read?
• More broadly, but importantly: how does this author think about the world? How does his/her mind see the dynamic flow of societal life; how can that help us think about our own world?
• What is of value here for your own interests and research? How would taking this author’s perspective seriously shift your attention to different aspects of the things in which you are interested?

But more generally, these will be relatively open discussions revolving around what you find interesting, compelling, and/or problematic in the readings.

After a short break, we will reconvene (if students would like to self-organize to take turns bringing refreshments for the break, feel free). At this point, we will step back and together consider what important matter we have so far missed in our discussion: major themes, important concepts, particular insights, major holes, etc. The student especially responsible for that week’s readings will initiate this discussion with her/his insights into “what else matters?”, then I will moderate some further discussion (including major points I still want to get on the table). Occasionally during the semester, I will also save some time for us all to step back still further and jointly evaluate the flow of the course and seminar discussions. Finally, the last ten minutes of class will be given over to preparing for the following week’s readings. Be prepared, with notes to do so.

Course requirements include:
1. Read all required materials and participating actively in class discussions; taking primary responsibility for readings and helping to moderate one class session; writing a précis each week.

2. Complete a series of three short exercises, due on the following Fridays: March 31, April 14, and April 21. In these exercises, you will: a) define a phenomenon or problem or question of analytical interest and argue for why it is important (no more than one page, single spaced); b) construct at least two plausible, alternative theoretical causal explanations of that phenomenon (no more than four pages, plus a one-page “causal model” – a flow-chart depicting the logic of your potential explanations; and c) refine and tighten those causal arguments, and suggest how one might empirically differentiate those competing theories – i.e. study which one is right (no more than six pages, plus a flow-chart.

3. During the second half of the course, write a term paper either systematically examining a central theoretical controversy in a substantive field, applying ideas from classical social theory to a research question, or analyzing a problem treated by one or more of the theorists we have read in the course. Feel free to propose a paper that dovetails with other grad program requirements: part of a dissertation or thesis proposal, the theory section of an article draft, etc.

Your grade will be based on your performance in three areas:

1. Quality of précis work (one-sixth of grade).
2. Quality of work on a series of three short written assignments (one-sixth of grade; see #2 above).
3. Class participation (one-sixth of grade): instructor’s assessment of the quality of your participation in class discussion. Do you bring insight to bear in class discussion? Do you help provoke fruitful disagreement and/or identify areas of emerging clarity in discussion? Do you show respect for others’ views, and do you disagree with them frankly and directly and constructively? Does your class participation reflect having done the readings and prepared thoughtfully for class? Do you help draw contrasts between various theoretical approaches, highlight particular strengths/weaknesses of them, show how they might contribute to empirical areas of sociological inquiry? i.e. the quality of participation is much more important than quantity, though of course if you almost never participate, it’s hard to call that high quality.

4. Term paper (half of grade): On any topic related to classical social theory that you choose (in consultation with instructor); possible approaches suggested in #3 above. See also the “Memo on Good Papers” I will distribute a few weeks into the course. Topic paragraph due Friday, March 24; final paper due Wednesday May 3.

Required books:

Giddens, Anthony. Capitalism and Modern Social Theory, Cambridge University Press
any edition

Tucker, Robert C. The Marx-Engels Reader, any edition

Bellah, Robert N. Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society, 1973


Course Outline and Readings:
Notes: I provide here the initial readings; on first day of class, we will discuss student interests in some detail and I will subsequently provide the readings for later class sessions: select examples of theoretical or strongly theory-driven empirical articles from within major traditions of social theory.

Throughout: You may wish to read Randall Collins' Four Sociological Traditions (New York: Oxford University Press Books, 1994) as an accompanying text for the course, but this is not required.

Week 1: Wednesday, January 18, 2006:
INTRODUCTION: THEORY AS FRAMEWORK, THEORY AS TOOL
No readings

Week 2: Wednesday, January 25, 2006:
THE USES OF SOCICAL THEORY:
KARL MARX: SOCIETY AS TOTALITY
Reading: Giddens: Preface, Introduction, and Chapters 1 & 2


Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party [1848], Sections I and II, pp. 473-491 in Tucker (ed.).

Other recommended readings:

Arthur L. Stincombe, Constructing Social Theories, (Chicago: University of Chicago), most of pp. 3-56 (except some missing pages, as indicated).

Week 3: Wednesday, February 1, 2006:
KARL MARX: HISTORICAL DETERMINISM
Reading: Giddens: Chapters 3 & 4

Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital" [1949], pp. 203-217 in Tucker (ed.).

Marx, Capital [1867], Part IV, Chs. 12-13 and 15; Part V, Chs. 16 and 25; and Part VIII (403-438) in Tucker (ed.).
Week 4: Wednesday, February 8, 2006:

**GEORGE SIMMEL AND HIS DESCENDENTS: SOCIAL NETWORKS**


Week 5: Wednesday, February 15, 2006:

**DURKHEIM: SOCIETY AS REAL**

Reading: Giddens 5 & 6


Week 6: Wednesday, February 22, 2006:

**DURKHEIM: THE POWER OF SYMBOLISM IN HUMAN LIFE**

Reading: Giddens, Chapters 7 & 8


Week 7: Wednesday, March 1, 2006:

**MAX WEBER: FORMS OF HISTORICAL EXPLANATION**

Reading: Giddens, Chapters 9 & 10


Week 8: Wednesday, March 8, 2006:
MAX WEBER: FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS, IDEAL TYPES, TYPOLOGIES, AND MODELS
Reading: Giddens, Chapters 11 & 12

Max Weber, Economy and Society [1914-15] (Berkeley: University Press, 1968), Vol. 1, on Social Action (pp. 4-12; 22-36); Ch. 3 "The Types of Legitimate Domination," (pp. 212-254); Vol. 2, Ch. IX, Sec. 6, "The Distribution of Power within the Political Community: Class, Status, and Party" (pp. 926-939); and Ch. XI "Bureaucracy" (pp. 956-989). [In Dept Reading Room, photocopied]**

Week 9: Wednesday, March 15, 2006: SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS

Week 10: Wednesday, March 22, 2006:
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE IN SOCIETY


Week 11: Wednesday, March 29, 2006: NO CLASS?

Week 12: Wednesday, April 5, 2006:
CONTEMPORARY DESCENDANTS OF MARX: GRAMSCI AND MODERN POLITICAL ECONOMY

Week 13: Wednesday, April 12, 2006:
CONTEMPORARY DESCENDANTS OF DURKHEIM:

Week 14: Wednesday, April 19, 2006:
CONTEMPORARY DESCENDANTS OF WEBER

Week 15: Wednesday, April 26, 2006:
CONTEMPORARY THEORISTS

Week 16: Wednesday, May 3, 2006:
FINAL PAPERS DUE: CLASS PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION? MORE CONTEMPORARY THEORISTS?
DURKHEIM’S DESCENDENTS: INSTITUTIONALIST THINKING


??RLW: Meyer on education? other? below?

Recommended:


DESCENDENTS OF MARX: GRAMSCI

DESCENDENTS OF WEBER: RELIGION IN THE MODERN WORLD


??RLW: other on Islam

Other to be announced.

RECENT THEORY: REPRODUCTION MODELS


Recommended:


Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

Week 14 (April 24) LEVELS OF EXPLANATION: ANALYZING GENDER DIFFERENCE


Recommended:


Week 15 (May 1): THEORY, PRAGMATISM, AND THE NEW CULTURAL ANALYSIS


Recommended:


Left out of syllabus, but recommended: On social theory: structure and agency:


Week 17: Final paper due

Students with disabilities:
Any student who, because of a disability, may require some special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make necessary accommodations. It is the responsibility of the student to request accommodation for individual learning needs. UNM will make every attempt to accommodate all qualified students with disabilities. For further information, contact Student Support Services at (505) 277_3506."