

SC215: Social Theory, Fall 2008

T-Th, 4:30-5:45, Carney 303

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He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.

~ Leonardo da Vinci

Whenever a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve.

~ Karl Popper

Course Description

Why should we care about social theory? What could a bunch of (mostly) dead white men possibly have to say that is relevant to our understanding of society today? If you are asking yourself these questions, it is my hope that by the end of this semester you will have found some answers, and that you will be persuaded that social theory does indeed have a few things to tell us that are relevant for our times. Analogous to sunglasses, general social theories of the type we will be studying give you a particular view of the world when you look through them: some let in more light than others; some are clearer and more focused, others more vague and suggestive. Each one gives the world a slightly different tint. The point of this course is to let you try on a few different theoretical lenses and see which ones you think yield the truest reflection of society, social action, and social change.

The course is designed to achieve three main goals: 1) to provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the major classical traditions in social theory and expose you to some of the most important contemporary perspectives that have emerged out of those traditions; 2) to help you learn to develop what C. Wright Mills calls a “sociological imagination” – that is, to learn how to analyze, evaluate, and *use* theories to explain or illuminate social life today, and more importantly, to learn how to think theoretically yourselves; and 3) to get a sense of how theorizing is influenced by the historical context and social location of the theorist and how theories develop over time in response to the ideas of those who came before. In other words, we will also do some meta-theorizing about the *sociology of social theory*.

In terms of content, in the first half of the course we will look in some depth at the ideas of the three men who are thought of as the “founding fathers” of sociology – Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. From there we will move on to critical theory, rational choice theory, symbolic interactionism, poststructuralist/postmodernist theories, and critical race and gender theory, focusing on one important exemplar of each theoretical school.

Reading abstract theory without any reference to actual social life is a little like eating dry bread with nothing to wash it down. So to make the meal more appetizing – and I think more

rewarding – we will apply and interrogate the theories we read about to the analysis of 6 different films, one for each section of the course. Viewings will generally be scheduled for Tuesday evenings at 7:00. If you can't make it to the viewings, the films will be available for you to watch on your own at the media library.

Course Format

While I will do some lecturing, most of our time will be spent in discussion, working together to understand, apply, and critique the various theories we are covering. I will do my part to facilitate discussion, help you understand the key arguments being made in the readings, and challenge you to think intelligently and critically about the material. But the quality of the discussion will really depend on your engagement, interest, and preparedness, so please do your best to come to class having completed the readings assigned for that day and prepared to discuss them.

Course Requirements

- 1) Participation. My assessment of your level of engagement with the course will constitute a significant part of your grade. Since not everyone feels comfortable speaking in class, coming to office hours, doing extra credit assignments, email communications with me, and your contribution to the discussion board on the course Blackboard page will all be considered in calculating your participation grade. I will not take attendance, but you will need to come to class regularly to do well. If you have to miss class, you are responsible for getting notes from a fellow student and keeping up with all readings and assignments. If something is causing you to miss more than a couple of classes, please let me know so that we can make arrangements to keep you caught up.
- 2) Three short film analysis papers (3-4 pages each). Over the course of the semester, we will see a total of 6 films. One will be the basis of the final exam. The other five correspond to sections of the course on Marx, Durkheim, Weber, critical theory, and microinteraction theories. You will sign up for *three* of these five topics/films and write a short paper on each of those three, analyzing how the theory helps explain/interpret what happens in the film and using the film to illustrate or critique the theory.
- 3) Final exam. The final exam will take place during the scheduled exam period. It will be an essay exam asking you to draw from material covered throughout the entire semester and from the film “The Matrix” to answer the questions. You will be given a review sheet ahead of time with potential exam questions, and I will also hold an optional review session during the study days to help you prepare.

Grading

Grades for the course will be derived according to the following weighting of individual requirements:

Participation:	
In-class & Blackboard discussion	10%
Discussion Questions	5%
3 Film Analysis Papers (20% ea.)	60%
Final Exam	25%

Academic Integrity

It is each student's responsibility to understand and adhere to the accepted norms of intellectual honesty in their academic work. Any form of cheating, plagiarism, dishonesty, or collusion in another's dishonesty is a fundamental violation of these norms. To see the College's policies in this area go to: <http://www.bc.edu/integrity>. Two other sources to consult about proper citation rules and exactly what constitutes a breach of policy are: "Plagiarism Examples and Guidelines: A Quiz" at http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/polisci/integrity/quiz/#Example_four and the American Sociological Association's "Quick Style Guide" at <http://www.asanet.org/page.wv?section=Sociology+Depts&name=Quick+Style+Guide>).

Policy on missed exams and late assignments (please read carefully!): If you miss the exam or are unable to provide discussion questions on your assigned date because of an *emergency* (something that is both unavoidable and unforeseeable), make sure to contact me by email as soon as possible afterwards to arrange a make-up. If you know about an unavoidable conflict with any assignment ahead of time, you must make other arrangements with me *in advance*. Missing an exam or your discussion question date due to an unexcused absence will result in a grade of zero. Papers will be graded down by *5 percentage points for each day they are late* unless other arrangements have been made in advance.

Readings

The reading for the course comprises one secondary text book and the rest primary texts, that is, the original texts of the writers we are studying. There are five required books:

- George Ritzer. 2007. *Sociological Theory*, 7th edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Robert Tucker. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Max Weber. 2003. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- Emile Durkheim. 1997. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press: pp.1, 3-5, 7-8, 71-80, 82-83.

These books can be bought at the Bookstore. The Ritzer and Marcuse books are late, but they should be on the shelf by Friday. You should also be able to find most of these books used for a better price, and copies will be placed on reserve at O'Niell Library. The text book is, unfortunately, quite expensive. Note, however, that because it is a new edition, you should have no problem selling it back to the bookstore or on Amazon at the end of the semester. On the other hand, it is a good reference book for a Sociology major to have, if you want to hold on to it.

While it's not required, you may also want to pick up *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, edited by William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore (1993, Blackwell Press). It is an excellent and very useful reference book with short, readable essays on every sociological concept or idea imaginable. There are two copies at O'Neill and it is also available online at:

http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=572/book?id=g9780631221647_9780631221647&authstatuscode=202

All other assigned readings will be on electronic reserve and can be downloaded and printed from any computer with an internet connection. From the library home page (<http://www.bc.edu/libraries/>), click on “course reserves” under “Find Library Materials,” log in, and look up the course.

Final Note:

You all have different academic backgrounds and strengths. Social Theory is one of those subjects that for many is an acquired taste. It can be somewhat intimidating and often impenetrable to read. It’s a little like math in that some people are completely phobic about it and others take to it like fish to water. Whichever category you fall into, it is important to realize that *no one* understands everything perfectly the first time, and that goes double for theory. Remember that some scholars spend their entire careers interpreting a single theorist! *So please ask questions in class!* The deeper we can delve into the material in our discussions, the deeper your understanding will be and the more you will get out of the class. And of course, speaking up will also improve your participation grade! And please *come to my office hours* if you need clarification on something, if you want to go over the material, or to talk about how you are doing in the course.

Welcome to Social Theory!

Weekly Schedule and Readings

Introduction and Overview of Classical Theory

Tuesday, 9/2 Welcome to Social Theory

Thursday, 9/4

- Ritzer, Ch. 1. “A Historical Sketch of Sociological Theory: The Early Years” (especially pp.1-33)

Marx: Philosophic Critique, Historical Materialism

Tuesday, 9/9

- Ritzer, Ch. 2. “Karl Marx”

Thursday, 9/11

- Marx-Engels Reader: Marx, “Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*” (pp.3-6);
- Marx-Engels Reader: Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” parts I-II, IV (pp.469-491; 499-500)

Tuesday, 9/16

- Marx-Engels Reader: “Theses on Feuerbach” (pp.143-145); and from “The German Ideology” Part I, (pp.146-163; 176-193)
- Film: “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?”
http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=5534

Marx: Critique of Capitalism

Thursday, 9/18

- Marx-Engels Reader:
 - “Wage Labour and Capital” (pp.203-217)
 - and from *Capital*: Part V “Production of Absolute and of Relative Surplus Value” (417-419); and Part VIII “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation” (pp.431-438)

Emile Durkheim: Social Differentiation and Anomie

Monday, 9/22 – Marx papers due by 1:00 pm

Tuesday, 9/23

- Ritzer, Ch. 3. “Emile Durkheim”

Thursday, 9/25

- Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, Book I, Ch. 2 (31-67)

Tuesday, 9/30

- Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, Book I, Chs. 3 and 7 (pp.68-87; 149-178)
- Film: “Witness” or “Devil’s Playground”

Thursday, 10/2

- Durkheim, *Division of Labor*, Book III, Ch. 1 and Conclusion (pp.291-308; 329-340)

Weber’s Modernity: Power, Inequality, and the “Iron Cage”

Monday, 10/6 – Durkheim papers due by 1:00 pm

Tuesday, 10/7

- Ritzer, Ch. 4. “Max Weber”

Thursday, 10/9

- Weber, “Bureaucracy” (pp.196-209; 214-230)

Tuesday, 10/14

- Weber, “Class, Status, and Party” (pp.180-195)
- Film: “Article 99”

Weber: Ideology and the Origins of Capitalism

Thursday, 10/16

- Weber, Ch. I, “Religious Affiliation and Social Stratification” (pp.35-46) and Ch. II, “The Spirit of Capitalism” (pp.47-78)

Tuesday, 10/21

- Weber, Ch. III, “Luther’s Conception of the Calling” (pp.79-94) and Ch. V, “Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism” (pp.155-184)

Wednesday, 10/22 – Weber papers due by 1:00 pm

Neo-Marxian Theory: Critical Theory

Thursday, 10/23

- Ritzer, Ch. 6, “A Historical Sketch of Sociological Theory: The Later Years” (thru ‘from Mid-Century’)

Tuesday, 10/28

- Ritzer, Ch. 8, “Varieties of Neo-Marxian Theory” (thru ‘Critical Theory’)
- Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. Ch. 1

Thursday, 10/30

- Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. Chs. 3 and 5

Tuesday, 11/4

- Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. Chs. 6-7
- Film: "Fight Club"

Thursday, 11/6

- Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. Chs. 9 and Conclusion

Microinteraction: Exchange & Rational Choice Theories

Monday, 11/10 – Marcuse papers due by 1:00 pm

Tuesday, 11/11

- Ritzer, Ch. 12. "Exchange, Network, and Rational Choice Theories"
- Coleman, James S. 1966. "Foundations for a Theory of Collective Decisions." *American Journal of Sociology* 71(6):615-23.

Microinteraction: Symbolic Interactionism

Thursday, 11/13

- Ritzer, Ch. 10. "Symbolic Interactionism"

Tuesday, 11/18

- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor Books. Excerpt at <http://www.brainwashed.com/h3o/Dislocation/reality.html>
- Goffman, Erving. "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" in *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, Craig Calhoun et al, eds. 2002. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers. pp.51-65
- Blumer, Herbert. "Symbolic Interactionism" in *Four Sociological Traditions: Selected Readings*. Randall Collins, ed. 1994. New York: Oxford University Press. p.304-321
- Film: "Girl, Interrupted"

Structural, Poststructural, and Postmodern

Thursday, 11/20

- Ritzer, Ch. 17. "Structuralism, Poststructuralism, and Postmodern Social Theory"

Monday, 11/24 – Microinteraction paper due by 1:00 pm

Tuesday, 11/25

- Blackwell, Part IV, "The Sociological Theory of Michel Foucault" (pp.191-218)

Thursday, Nov. 27 – THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS

Critical Gender and Race Theories: Epistemologies of Difference

Tuesday, 12/2

- Excerpts by Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Franz Fanon from Part VII “Race, Gender, and Difference” in *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, Craig Calhoun et al, eds. 2002. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers. (pp.307-331)
- Film: “The Matrix”

Thursday, 12/4

- Ann Snitow. 1989. " A Gender Diary." In Adrienne Harris and Ynestra King, eds. *Rocking the Ship of State: Towards a Feminist Peace Politics*, pp. 35-73.

Final Exam: Tuesday, December 16th, 4:30