

Advanced Sociological Theory
SOCI6001 – Sample Course Outline
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Course Description

One of the few constants of anglophone sociology is the first year graduate sociological theory seminar. It is taken by every graduate student in a department, usually together as a cohort, and it is often the only substantive course taken by every student. Thus, if there is a shared intellectual legacy for this diverse discipline, it is handed down to each new generation of scholars in courses like this one. The core of this legacy continues, despite myriad projects to revise the “canon” over the years, to be the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. Any given version of this course (or even of an undergraduate-level Classical Theory lecture) will include other authors as well, but the “others” are considerably more variable than the core triumvirate.

This is, considering the contemporary discipline as a whole, an admittedly odd situation. The questions pursued, methods used, and positions advanced by these three thinkers can seem quite far removed from most of the work done by sociologists today. Yet, there is a reason for these authors’ position and for the expectation that every student of sociology should be familiar with their work. What they all produced classics *of* were accounts of the profound historical changes that their societies had undergone in the preceding century and were still undergoing in their time. That is to say, they were all, in different ways, theorists of modernity. Today, only a minority of sociologists directly take on “modernity” as a subject of study, but we recognize that the processes that are sometimes called modernization — including capitalist economic development, urbanization, bureaucratization, individualization, secularization, as well as reactions and countermovements to each — are an unavoidable historical background to the particular social settings and phenomena that we do study.

The primary purpose of this course is to introduce students to the classic, and some more contemporary, interpretations of this background. Students will read and discuss major works by Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, supplemented with texts by other authors. Secondly, students will, through a series of exercises leading up to a final paper, gain practice in the essential skill of “writing with theories.”

Class Sessions

Reading and Preparation

This is a graduate-level seminar and as such is reading-intensive. In order to participate in the seminar discussion, it is essential that you read the assigned texts before each meeting. All readings will be made available electronically. However, I would strongly advise you to

purchase the major works we will be covering, though whether it makes more sense to acquire Chinese rather than English editions, I will leave up to your own judgment. At some point in your career, you will probably teach them.

Seminar Attendance, Presentations, and Participation

Attendance is required and participation in discussion is expected. The purpose of a seminar is to not merely *be informed* about a particular set of ideas but instead to *get practice* actually mobilizing those ideas in arguments. I recognize that for various reasons, people have different levels of comfort engaging in seminar discussions. Nonetheless, I strongly encourage you to push yourself to contribute. I believe you will find it to be easier than you might think.

Students will take turns leading seminar sessions. Seminar leadership involves preparing a brief presentation (15-30 minutes) advancing an argument about that session's readings and posing questions for discussion. It is important that you engage with the presentations and questions of your classmates. If there are multiple presentations in a session, it is the responsibility of the presenting students to coordinate to minimize overlap.

After the student presentation and any following discussion, I will usually lecture briefly on the broader ideas and context touched on by the readings. In some sessions, I will also prepare more structured activities for discussion or debate. In general, though, the more the seminar is driven by your contributions and questions, the better.

My strong preference is to hold in-person class meetings. However, in the event that we need to hold remote meetings by Zoom, you will still be expected to participate over the audio link.

Assignments

The course grade will be calculated as the weighted average of a final paper (75%) and a series of exercises (25%), with a modifier (unsatisfactory = down one fraction of a letter grade, satisfactory = no change, exceptional = up one fraction of a letter grade) based on seminar leadership and participation.

Exercises on Writing with Theories

Most sociologists are not "theorists." Instead, they engage with theories insofar as they represent the organizing principles of an existing literature, i.e. as partially competing and partially complementary attempts to explain phenomena and answer core questions within a particular social domain. To some extent, sociologists in different specialties engage with the same, or at least linked, theories (such as the "functionalism" or "conflict theory" perhaps familiar from your undergraduate courses). Often, though, each subfield has its own theoretical schools and debates between them, and even the shared theories take on a specific form and color in each particular domain.

So, professional sociologists are expected to some extent to be familiar with the "big" theories of the discipline, but they are most responsible for being able to speak and write

cogently about the theoretical terrain in their particular specialization. This is, however, easier said than done. It requires certain skills of thought and writing that are not usually taught explicitly. Instead, especially in the context of North American PhD programs that often involve three full years of courses, students are expected to just absorb them through observation and practice.

However, rather than three years to endlessly read and discuss and write seminar papers, RPg students at CUHK are expected to be finished with a full thesis in three or four years for a PhD, two for an MPhil. As such, I have attempted to formulate a series of exercises that will introduce you to some of the core skills involved in “writing with theories” as is required to review and situate your own research within a literature.

Final Paper

The major graded assignment for this course is an essay of roughly 15 to 20 pages. You are free to write on any topic related to the sociological theories we cover in class. A classic term paper for a theory seminar would involve picking some question that concerns different theorists considered in the course — and one or two who are not, if one wishes — then critically analyzing what they have to say about it, and to each other, and in the process trying to say something of one’s own on the question.

However, given the accelerated pace of the research graduate programs at CUHK, I suspect most of you will not feel you have the time to spend on purely theoretical questions unrelated to your research projects. So, as an alternative I encourage you to write a review of the *theoretical* literature relevant to a research project you are working on.

In general, a literature review offers an answer to the following two questions: First, what are the major theoretical perspectives in the subfield you seek to contribute to and on what do they disagree? Second, what “gap” or “puzzle” exists among those perspectives that your research will contribute to resolving? So, in the first place, your paper should address these questions, but because this is a term paper rather than just a literature section of an article, I also want you to address a couple of broader questions. How do these positions relate to the broader currents of sociological theory, classical and contemporary, covered in this course? What are some of the implications of resolving the specific empirical puzzle you will be tackling for the more general theoretical questions that have interested sociologists?

You can think of this as a combination of a first draft of the “theory chapter” of a potential future thesis and practice for writing those parts of a research proposal that entail sketching the theoretical significance of your project.

Syllabus

Week 1 Introduction

Part I — The Individual and Society

Week 2 Cooperation and Exchange

- Adam **SMITH**, *The Wealth of Nations: A Selected Edition* (ed. Kathryn Sutherland, Oxford University Press, 1998)
 - Introduction
 - Book I: Chs. 1-3, 7 and 9, and selections of Ch. 10
 - Book II: Ch. 3
 - Book V, Ch. 1 parts I-III
- Karl **MARX**, *Capital* Vol. 1, Ch. 1 (pp. 302-329 in the *Marx-Engels Reader* 2nd edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker, W. W. Norton, 1978 [hereafter, *MER*])

Week 3 Social Solidarity and the Division of Labor

- Emile **DURKHEIM**, *Division of Labor in Society*,
 - Introduction
 - Book I
 - Ch. I
 - Ch. II sections I and IV
 - Ch. III sections I and IV
 - Ch. V sections I-II and V
 - Ch. VI sections I and II
 - Ch. VII

Week 4 Social Change, Social Functions, and Their Dysfunction

- Karl **MARX** and Friedrich **ENGELS**, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Section I (*MER* pp. 473-91)
- Emile **DURKHEIM**, *Division of Labor in Society*,
 - Prefaces
 - Book II
 - Ch. I (skip section III)
 - Ch. II
 - Book III (entire)
 - Conclusion

Week 5 The Individual against Society

- Alexis de **TOCQUEVILLE**, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Book 4, Chs. 6-8
- Karl **MARX**, “Alienation,” from the 1844 Manuscripts (*MER* pp. 70-81)
- George **SIMMEL**, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”
- Emile **DURKHEIM**, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Ch. 5 section IV

Part II – Theoretical Legacies of Marx and Weber

Week 6 The State as Organized Coercion

- Max **WEBER**, “Politics as a Vocation” and selections on bureaucracy (Chs. 4 and 8 in *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Oxford University Press, 1946 [hereafter, *FMW*])
- Charles **TILLY**, “War-Making and State-Making as Organized Crime” (pp. 170-91 in *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge University Press, 1985)

Week 7 The Powers of the State

- Michael **MANN**, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results” (*European Journal of Sociology* Vol. 25, No. 2, 1984)

- Pierre **BOURDIEU**, “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field” (translated in *Sociological Theory* Vol. 12, No. 1, 1994)
- Charles **TILLY**, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Blackwell, 1992), pp. 67-107.
- Wendy **BROWN**, “Finding the Man in the State” (*Feminist Studies* Vol. 18, No. 1, 1992)

Week 8 Classical Theories of Capitalism

- Karl **MARX**, selections from *Capital*, Vol. 1, Chs. 4, 6-7, 25-7, 31-2 (*MER* pp. 329-61, 419-38)
- Max **WEBER**, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (read all except for Ch. 4)
- Immanuel **WALLERSTEIN**, “The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System” (*Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 16, No. 4, 1974)
- Randall **COLLINS**, “Weber’s Last Theory of Capitalism” (*American Sociological Review* Vol. 45, No. 6, 1980)

Week 9 Neo-Marxism: Class and Politics

- Claus **OFFE** and Helmut **WIESENTHAL**, “Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organizational Form” (*Political Power and Social Theory* Vol. 1, 1980)
- Ellen Miexsins **WOOD**, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism” (*New Left Review* Series 1, no. 127, 1981)
- Erik Olin **WRIGHT**, “Working-Class Power, Capitalist-Class Interests, and Class Compromise” (*American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 105, No. 4)

Week 10 Debating Theories of Class

- Erik Olin **WRIGHT**, “Foundations for a Neo-Marxist Class Analysis” (Ch. 1 in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, ed. Wright, Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- Pierre **BOURDIEU**, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups” (*Theory and Society* Vol. 14, No. 6, 1985)
- Christine **DELPHY**, “Women in Stratification Studies,” (Ch. 2 in *Close to Home*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1984)

Part III — The Problem of a Science of Society

Week 11 Are Social Facts “Things”?

- Karl **MARX** and Friedrich **ENGELS**, selections from *The German Ideology* (in *Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 149-58 and 172-6)
- Emile **DURKHEIM**, *The Rules of Sociological Method*
 - Introduction
 - Chs. 1-2
 - Ch. 5, section II
- Max **WEBER**, *Economy and Society*, Vol. I, Part 1, Ch. I, Section 1: intro paragraph; A, paragraphs 1-8 and 11; and B
- Erving **GOFFMAN**, “Performances” (Ch. 1 in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959)
- Harold **GARFINKEL**, “‘Good’ Organizational Reasons for ‘Bad’ Clinic Records” (ch. 6 in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 1967)

Week 12 Sociology, Interests, and Values

- Max WEBER,
 - “Science as a Vocation” (*FMW* pp. 129-56)
 - Selections from “Objectivity in Social Science” (in *Methodology of the Social Sciences*), pp. 89-93, 101-3, and 106-112
- Emile DURKHEIM, *Rules of Sociological Method*, Prefaces and Conclusion
- C. Wright MILLS, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1959/2000), Chs. 1, 5 and 6