

–Classical social theory (SOC 63911)

Tuesdays and Thursdays 2p-3p

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The construction of the canon provided not only an intellectual but also a symbolic solution to the internal disintegration and cultural marginalization that had overtaken sociology before the midcentury. Inheritors of a golden age, bearers of the insights of great thinkers, sociologists had weight in the world—in their own eyes and, increasingly, in the eyes of students (Connell 1997: 1540-1541).

Because disagreement is so rife in social science, serious problems of mutual understanding arise...For disagreement to be possible in a coherent, ongoing, and consistent way, there must be some basis for a cultural relationship...This is where the classics come in. The functional necessity for classics develops because of the need for integrating the field of theoretical discourse...To mutually acknowledge a classic is to have a common point of reference. A classic reduces complexity...it is a symbol which condenses—'stands for'—a range of diverse general commitments (Alexander 1987: 27)

I have often pointed out, especially with regard to my relation to Max Weber, that you can think with a thinker against that thinker...To say that you can think at the same time with and against a thinker means radically contradicting the classificatory logic in accordance [to] which people are accustomed...to think of the relation you have with the thought of the past. For Marx, as Althusser said, or against Marx. I think you can think with Marx against Marx, with Marx and Durkheim against Weber, and vice versa. That's the way that science works (Bourdieu 1990: 49)

1 Why Classical Theory?

As late as 1928, when the “chairman” and founder of the Harvard department of sociology, Pitirim A. Sorokin, published his classic book-length survey [*Contemporary Sociological Theories*](#), the sociological “classical canon” did not exist or was at best in a state of flux. In his review Sorokin dealt with dozens of European (and Russian) theorists, now mostly obscure and unknown, considering all to be important precursors of modern sociological thought. That all changed nine years later when Sorokin’s junior colleague in the same department, Talcott Parsons (who would later on occupy Sorokin’s chair), published his landmark [*The Structure of Social Action*](#). In this book Parsons argued that two of the European thinkers that Sorokin had considered relatively minor figures, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, along with the Italian political theorist Vilfredo Pareto and the British economist Alfred Marshall had

converged on what he referred to as the quintessential sociological approach, which he outlined in his book as a “voluntarist” theory of social action. Parsons’ attempt to create a canon (and charter) for sociology based on what he considered the cream of the crop of the European tradition was a swift success. Within a generation, Durkheim and Weber acquired the mantle of “co-founders” of sociology in the American scene displacing the older disorganized panoply of figures that Sorokin had considered so important. Even as the “convergence thesis” that Parsons had argued for in *Structure* (and the influential interpretations of Weber and Durkheim that went along with it) was discredited in the 1970s (e.g., Pope, Cohen and Hazelrigg 1975), Durkheim and Weber now joined by Marx (as an icon of the ‘60s rebellion) went on to become even more consolidated as the “holy trinity” and the “founding fathers” of sociology as a scientific enterprise.

Parsons obviously had good taste, since the *situation outlined above remains unchanged to this day*. Because of this, most of this course focuses on the aforementioned three major figures (along with two “minor” ones undergoing recent revivals).

The basic premises and objectives of the course are threefold:

- ✓ Classical social theory (primarily Marx, Weber, Durkheim) is *important as an integrative cultural element of the discipline*. You cannot be a fully-functioning member of the sociological “thought collective” without being well-versed on the classics. They constitute one of the few pieces of common knowledge that hold the field together. *This course is meant to provide you with a minimum of this field-specific “cultural capital”*.
- ✓ Secondary study of the classics is a *live intellectual tradition*. The exegesis, study and historical re-interpretation of the classical tradition by contemporary scholars continue unabated to this day. Debates about the intellectual import and conceptual clarification of classical sociological thought represent an important *subfield* of the discipline. *This course is designed to introduce you to this line of scholarship in order to possibly allow you to contribute to it*.
- ✓ The classics remain viable as ideational and theoretical sources that inform *contemporary empirical research*. Thus, rather than being purely “theoretical” line of thinking, the classical tradition continues to in-form and to be in dialogue with contemporary sociological *research*, from the kind that uses regressions and formal mathematical models to the kind that uses field notes, interview transcripts or archival material. You would not be able to understand or take part in these lines of empirical inquiry without having a solid understanding of the classics. *This course is meant to provide an introduction to some of this research*.

2 Course Website

The primary non-face-to-face interface that we will use this semester is the Concourse course website. You can get there by pointing your browser to:

<https://concourse.nd.edu/webct/logon/280334555011>

We will use the website to submit weekly questions, and other comments regarding class and the readings and to submit your formal weekly assignments. In addition any and all readings that are referenced below which are not available via JSTOR will be available (in pdf format)

in the Concourse website. I recommend that you go to website as soon as you get a chance and explore it.

3 Requirements

3.1 Attendance and active participation in class discussions

An important part of class discussions involves raising questions about the readings. Don't be shy to ask a question or say "I didn't understand what Durkheim meant by..." most of your classmates are probably as clueless as you are.

3.2 Electronically submitted discussion questions

Each student will be required to submit a discussion question through the Concourse site before class meets for that week (no later than 12:00pm on the day of class; this deadline will be inflexible since it will be set by the electronic submission system on Concourse). You are required to do this *every* week that we meet this semester. The question should be a genuine query to clarify something or an attempt to raise a conceptual issue related to one of the readings.

3.3 Paper assignment

This is the main assignment for the course. You will be asked to write a 6,000-12,000 word "theory" paper. In contemporary sociology a "theory" paper is one which (among other things) deals with either (a) the *intellectual history* of an idea or concept in classical social theory, (b) the *development of a line of thinking* in a single classical social theorist, (c) *draws conceptual connections* between two or more different classical theorists or classical theoretical tradition, (d) *connects a classical line of thinking or a classical thinker with a more contemporary line of thinking or thinkers* (i.e. compares Durkheim and Foucault on education) or (e) *resolves or sheds light on conceptual contradictions within the work of one or more classical theorists*. You will write the paper in "stages" first writing a short proposal for an idea, then a short draft of the main argument, and finally a preliminary draft of the final paper. Check the schedule below for the due dates of each of these assignments. Remember: this paper is not meant to be a final or polished product. It will ultimately be a *draft* (even the "final" version that you submit for the course) one that you will hopefully be able to continue to work on in the future and possibly either present at a conference or submit to a "classical theory" journal.

4 Grading policy

The first rule of grad school: *you do NOT talk about grad school* (with your parents and friends back home). The second rule of grad school: *grades don't matter. Nobody looks at, or cares about your grades in grad school classes*. Therefore the issue of grades should take not a single metaphorical inch of cognitive space in your head. The way that it will work is that if you do well on all three of the course requirements (you contribute to class, you send in your questions, you write a good paper) then you will get an A. If you take a vow of silence in class you will not get A, regardless of how great your paper is. Obviously you won't get a good grade if you don't write a good paper. This arrangement is inherently unfair, simply because the material may be intimidating and some of you that already have the appropriate background, requisite linguistic capital and will be more comfortable speaking in class than

others. However I am comfortable with this unfairness, for the simple reason that this course (like all courses in grad school) is also meant to be a professionalization tool. *Sociologists (however awkwardly) have to be able to speak in public.* This is a requirement of the formal structure of the discipline, since you have to *present* at conferences, and if you want to get a job, you have to give a *job-talk*. So, if you are shy, I would recommend that you begin to practice talking in front of the mirror and leave the shyness at home (i.e. “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and gosh darn it...”). For those of you who may have a leg up on classical theory, I ask that you give your fellow classmates a chance to have their say, even if it is about something that you consider elementary.

For those of you who prefer the security of numbers, here is the breakdown:

Attendance and Participation	30%
Discussion Questions	20%
Final Paper	50%

5 Readings

There will be two primary sources of material in class: primary texts and secondary readings. Primary texts are the actual things written by the dead people, such as Weber, Durkheim, Simmel or Marx (among others). Secondary readings are commentaries on the classics written by people who may still be alive. All of the assigned readings (including excerpts from primary texts) will be available in the course website in pdf format.

5.1 Primary Classical Theory Texts

I will be drawing mainly from the following texts for all of the “primary” readings that I will assign. You are **not required** to buy them, although you should if you don’t like messing around with pdf copies. Having these books in your bookcase also make you look sophisticated and wordly; certainly appropriate for conspicuous intellectual consumption. They are available at major booksellers, used or new, such as Amazon.com.

- ✓ Tucker, Robert C. (Editor). 1972. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Publisher: W. W. Norton (ISBN-10: 039309040X).
- ✓ Toonies, Ferdinand. 2002. *Community and Society*. Publisher: Dover Publications (ISBN-10: 0486424979).
- ✓ Kalberg, Stephen (Editor). 2009. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*. Publisher: Oxford University Press (ISBN-10: 0195332539).
- ✓ Heydebrand, W. (Editor). 1994. *Max Weber: Sociological Writings*. Publisher: Continuum (ISBN-10: 0826407196).
- ✓ Weber, Max. 1963. *The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff. Publisher: Beacon Press (ISBN-10: 0807042056).

- ✓ Gerth, H.H. and C. Wright Mills (Editors). 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Publisher: Oxford University Press (ISBN-10: 0195004620).
- ✓ Levine, Donald N. (Editor). *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Publisher: University of Chicago Press (ISBN-10: 0226757765).
- ✓ Frisby, David Patrick and Mike Featherstone (Editors). *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. Publisher: Sage Publications (ISBN-10: 0803986521).
- ✓ Durkheim, Emile. 1984[1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by W. D.Halls. Publisher: The Free Press (ISBN-10: 0684836386).
- ✓ Durkheim, Emile. 1982[1895]. *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, Edited by S. Lukes. Translated by W. D. Halls. Publisher: The Free Press (ISBN-10: 0029079403).
- ✓ Traugott, Mark (Editor). 1978. *Emile Durkheim on Institutional Analysis*. Publisher: University of Chicago Press (ISBN-10: 0226173712).
- ✓ Pickering, W. S. F. (Editor). 1994. *Durkheim on Religion*. Publisher: Scholars Press (ISBN-10: 1555409814).
- ✓ Durkheim, Emile and Marcel Mauss. 1963[1903]. *Primitive Classification*. Translated by R. Needham. Publisher: University of Chicago Press (ISBN-10: 0226173348).
- ✓ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. Publisher: W. W. Norton (ISBN-10: 039332043X).

5.2 Textbooks

There are *no textbooks* assigned for this course. These are some that I would recommend if you want a convenient reference:

- ✓ Calhoun, Craig J., Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff, Kathryn E. Schmidt, Indermohan Virk. *Classical Sociological Theory*. (Latest Edition). Blackwell.
- ✓ Ritzer, George. *Classical Sociological Theory*. (Latest Edition). McGraw Hill.
- ✓ Turner, Jonathan H. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. (Latest Edition). Wadsworth.

A creative reading of the classical tradition from the point of view of American Sociology is:

- ✓ Collins, Randall. 1994. *Four Sociological Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- A pioneering “sociological history” of the classical theory tradition (itself a modern classic) is:
- ✓ Coser, Lewis. 1977. *Masters of Sociological Thought*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

A book that really has no equal and cannot be easily classified, but which is a must for anybody interested in classical and contemporary *sociological* theory (and how intimately they are linked) is:

- ✓ Fararo, Thomas J. 1989. *The Meaning of General Theoretical Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.