SOCIETY 611
FALL 2010

CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Office hours: Wed 3-5pm
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COURSE OBJECTIVES

Knowing a lot of good theories does not automatically make you good at constructing one by yourself; however, thorough knowledge of historical developments and conceptual mechanics of good theories is essential for becoming a good theorist. Such knowledge helps you not only avoid reinventing the wheel, so to speak, but also acquire good theoretical intuition—how to identify conceptual problems in the existing literature as well as construct new concepts and explore their implications.

Thus this first-year theory seminar has two objectives. The first is to help you understand historical developments of good theories from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The second—and this is the ultimate objective—is to train you as a theorist who can wield sociological concepts to construct cogent explanations of phenomena under consideration.

CLASS FORMAT

At the beginning of each class, you present at least one question about or reaction to the assigned reading. I then give a short lecture (10-15 minutes) to provide you with the historical and theoretical context of the reading. In the remaining of class, we discuss your questions (as well as mine) and examine theoretical underpinnings, problems, and implications of the reading.

GRADING

Analytic Papers (20% x 3) 60%
Final Paper 40%

Analytic Paper (5 pages, doubled-spaced)

For each of the three sections of the course (“Classics,” “Interaction and Self,” and “System and Structure”), you will write an analytic paper. Pick (at least) one reading
from each theorist assigned in the section. Then critique a total of three readings (i.e. three theorists) in the following format:

(1) Problem—You state what is problematic with the theorist’s argument; for example, a logical contradiction, conceptual inadequacy, or empirical implausibility can be defined as a problem. Articulate the problematic as precisely as possible by using direct quotes;
(2) Solution—You propose and elaborate a solution to the stated problem. What would be a most effective way to solve the stated problem? Argue as concretely as possible;
(3) Implication—You draw implications of your solution for the theorist’s argument. Does your proposed solution reject or extend his argument? If “reject,” only partially or entirely? If “extend,” in what way? Be as specific as possible.

Final Paper (9 pages, doubled-spaced)

For your final paper, you will pick one empirical phenomenon that you are interested in researching while in graduate school (e.g. the Chinese Revolution, American higher education). Then use each of the nine theorists covered in the course to do the following:

(1) Question—Based on the theorist’s argument, you formulate a research question about the phenomenon of your interest. Since we cover nine theorists, you will have nine different research questions in total;
(2) Rationale—You elaborate how the research question you have formulated derives logically from the theorist’s argument. By using at least one direct quote, justify the connection between the research question and the theorist;
(3) Evidence—You explain what kind of data you would need to answer the research question. Specify which method(s) you would choose to collect the data and justify your choice.

REQUIRED TEXT


Recommended Text

All assigned readings (except for the required text) are uploaded on Laulima; however, I highly recommend you purchase the following book because it can help you throughout your graduate studies (and two chapters from the book are assigned in the course):


COURSE SCHEDULE
Week 1: What Does It Mean To Construct a Theory?


Classics

Week 2: Karl Marx


Week 3: Karl Marx and Max Weber


Week 4: Max Weber


Suggested Reading: Philip Gorski. The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe

Week 5: Emile Durkheim


Suggested Reading: Jeffrey Alexander. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*

Week 6: Emile Durkheim + How to Construct a Cogent Argument


** The first analytic paper is due in class on 10/05 (Tue)

**Interaction and Self**

Week 7: Georg Simmel

10/05: Georg Simmel. “Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality.” Pp. 251-293 in *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*


Suggested Reading: Ronald Burt. *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital*

Week 8: George Herbert Mead


Suggested Reading: Alan Gary Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*
Week 9: Erving Goffman


** The second analytic paper is due in class on 10/28 (Thu)

Week 10: How to Theorize Mechanisms


System and Structure

Week 11: Talcott Parsons

11/02: Election Day


Suggested Reading: Niklas Luhmann. *Ecological Communication*

Week 12: Robert Merton


11/11: Veteran’s Day

Suggested Reading: George Steinmetz and Ou-Byung Chae. “Sociology in an Era of
Fragmentation.” The Sociological Quarterly 43(1): 111-137

Week 13: Robert Merton


Week 14: Harold Garfinkel


11/25: Thanksgiving

Suggested Reading: Bruno Latour. Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory

** The third analytic paper is due in class on 11/30 (Tue)

Reflection

Week 15: Hidden Assumptions of Sociological Theory


Week 16: Preparing for a Final Paper

12/07: Andrew Abbott. “Explanation.” Pp. 3-40 in Methods of Discovery

12/09: I will be available in my office during regular class hours

** A final paper is due 5PM on 12/14 (Mon) in my mailbox in the sociology department