

Sociological Theory
 Sociology 30001
 University of Chicago
 Graduate Class: Fall 2011
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Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:30 – 11:50, SS 404

Course Description

This is a required class in classical sociological theory. It has three main goals. The first is to give you a familiarity with canonical works. The second is to help develop your ability to read theories critically. The third is to introduce you to fundamental issues in how sociologists approach the phenomena they study, so that you don't find yourself thinking thoughts you'd rather not think.

Approach

The approach of this class is somewhat different from most, which are either decontextualized, historical or triumphalist in organization. We will be examining clumps of theorists, generally nationally delimited, who are (among many other things) struggling with a problem that was important then and there, and might still have some echoes today.

There is going to be a making-it-up-as-we-go-along character to this class, as it's the first time I've taught it (which is *good*—it's always fun to be in a “first class”). Page numbers to read might not be on this syllabus, because I'll try to be a week or so ahead of the class in figuring out where we're going....

Structure

Every now and then, including the first day, I will fill in context. But most of the time, we will be discussing texts, trying to reproduce

As well as evaluating these claims, and learning how one is to do these sorts of explicative evaluations ('explicative' here is an adjective, not a noun!).

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If you need to eat, please make sure that you bring enough for everybody. All entering food will be split 15 ways, with the exception of life-sustaining beverages or power bars for pregnant people of any gender.

Requirements

- 1) Active attendance. That means (a) coming prepared (doing “all” the reading); (b) discussing the works. Even when (i) you don’t think you understand them; (ii) you hate them; (iii) you are hung over; (iv) you are filled with rage at the injustice of the formation of the theoretical canon.

Discussion Rules! I forgot who I stole this idea from, but...we should always have all we need for discussion in the assigned reading. If you want to bring in something else you have read (from the same author, or a different one), that is okay, but you will need to begin by explaining the work in question to the class.

- 2) Writing up your weekly exercise. Each week, you need to do an exercise for one of the day’s readings. It can be for Tuesday or for Thursday, but it has to be done and handed in by the time class begins. You can skip one, but save your “get out of exercise free” card for when you really need it! The format of the exercise is below. You will hate writing them, I will hate reading them, and that’s the way these things go. They can be placed in my box or electronically submitted.
- 3) Completion of a final paper. This will also have a pedagogically oriented format that will be somewhat frustrating, but one that will repay you starting early and working on it throughout the course.

Required Books:

Gabriel Tarde, *On Communication and Social Influence*
 Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*
 Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*
 Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*
 Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*
 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*
 Max Weber, *From Max Weber*
 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*
 John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*

There are a lot of books to read, and the price adds up too. But a small investment in terms of the development of a methodological sense repays itself a thousand fold. As they say. The following books are going to be at the Seminary Co-Op book store. If you can't afford them, you can probably squeeze by using the library and borrowing from other people, but talk to me. Every one of these books is something any sociologist should have anyway. If anything else gets assigned, it will appear a bit before they are assigned on CHALK; if that doesn't work for you let me know.

Weekly Exercises (Exercises for the Weak)

There are three main uses of the word "theory" in sociology.

- 1) Whatever we think is so important that we make you read it even if it's wrong.
- 2) Bullshit.
- 3) A set of ideas that have some sort of internal coherence that we find puzzling, rewarding, inspiring, terrifying and tedious, but falls short of
 - a) Philosophy
 - b) Mathematics
 Which is what things turn into if you emphasize the coherence above all else.

I am hoping that we'll be able to find works that fit #3. And we're going to try to learn how to appreciate the degree of coherence, and why it has for substantively reasonable reasons fallen short of mathematics/philosophy, and learn how to read theory *as* theory, which means figuring out the nature of this coherence. (And not, say, simply computing its distance to our own preconceptions.)

So here's the exercise: a handy-dandy-random number generator will, for each of you, pick a page of the reading at random. You open the book to that page, and choose a sentence as close to the top as you can. You then want to try to embed this in the overall theory, coming as close as you can in *no more than two double spaced 12 point proportional font 8½ × 11" pages* to putting this puzzle piece into a vast structure reaching down into the most fundamental axioms about life, thought and the world and up to the most obvious human values held by the theorist in question. Now "as close as you can" may be very far away indeed. But it's the trying that counts.

Paper

You are to choose some fundamental puzzle over the nature of the task of explanation that at least some of our theorists have struggled with, and presumably one that you think might be important for you to resolve successfully to carry out your *own* work. Puzzle over this using the theorists who are relevant. What's your own sense of the best way to handle this? In no more than 10 double spaced pages, with unambiguous and concrete to the texts at hand but few long quotations, make your argument.

If you are *sure* that your own plan of research involves *no* theoretical problems (problems of “how do we think about this”) dealt with by our authors in the assigned readings, you may write about this very different problem. But woe to you if you failed to make a connection between your own problem and problems dealt with in our texts. (And so don’t think you can squeak by via the claim that the problem in your field is a statistical problem or a data problem – there are no ‘statistical problems’ or ‘data problems’ for sociology – there are *substantive* problems. Statistics and data are supposed to be the *answer*.)

And if you are even more gutsy, feel free to claim that there are *no* puzzles in conceptualization in your chosen field. Here you may (a) identify those that are most often believed to be puzzles and argue that there really is no plausible puzzle at all; (b) identify what a competent theorist would see as the puzzles in your discipline and argue that there really is no plausible puzzle at all because one side is so obviously correct; (c) make the claim that no one has, and no sensible person could, ever believe there to be any such problems. If you take this tactic and turn out to be wrong, you might get a bad grade, but you’ll also probably have learned something incredibly valuable by the end!

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

A. Mechanics

#1 Tuesday, September 27

B. Where does sociology take off from?

1) Political philosophy;

- a) England
- b) France

2) Biology;

- a) England
- b) France
- c) America

3) History;

- a) Germany
- b) Italy

4) Psychology

- a) Germany
- b) France
- c) America

II. WHAT IS SOCIETY (BRITAIN, FRANCE)

Is society an organism? Is it alive?

#2 Thursday, September 29

A. Comte

We’re not going to read Comte. You can thank me later.

B. Spencer

The Study of Sociology, Chapters 1 and 2

Sub question – How does aggregation and emergence work?

III. SOCIAL INFLUENCE, CONSTRAINT AND SOCIAL FACTS (FRANCE)

If the social is something outside, beyond, the individual, what is the relation to individual acts? Is it just one person affecting another? Or is it something transpersonal affecting all?

#3 Tuesday, October 4A. Tarde, *Laws of Imitation* and other selections

Sub question – Can interaction have lawfulness?

B. Durkheim

#4 Thursday, October 61) *Suicide*

Sub question – How is there an effect of social facts?

#5 Tuesday, October 112) *Rules of Sociological Method*

Sub question – What is normal?

#6 Thursday, October 133) *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

Sub question – Can we separate form and content in genetic accounts?

IV. FORM AND CONTENT (GERMANY)

What is the relation between the conceptual structure we use to understand reality and the story of the development of that reality? Do we remain within the limits of the given? Do we posit our own conceptual structure? Or does something posit us?

A. Marx

#7 Tuesday, October 181) *Germany Ideology*

Sub question – How many sub questions can I come up with?

#8 Thursday, October 202) *The Grundrisse*

Sub question – Is anyone really reading this?

#9 Tuesday, October 253) *Capital*

Sub question – You do understand that this is a provisional copy, right?

B. Simmel

#10 Thursday, October 27

1) Formal Sociology

Sub question – Can there be one? What does this mean?

#11 Tuesday, November 1

2) Superordination

Sub question – How do we understand tendencies?

#12 Thursday, November 3

3) Metropolis and the Stranger

Sub question – What is the relation between relation and essence?

V. VALUES, ACTION AND EXPLANATION (GERMANY)

What is the role of values in human action? What about in social explanation? Is science good, that is, good in itself? Is it good for something? Is it good for nothing?

A. Simmel

#13 Tuesday, November 8

Philosophy of Money

Sub question – How do we understand the difference between valued objects and the objects' values?

B. Weber

#14 Thursday, November 10

1) Economy and Society, Beginning

Sub question – How do we make concepts?

#15 Tuesday, November 15

2) Methodology Essays

Sub question – How do we understand causation?

#16 Thursday, November 17

3) Religious Rejections of the World

Sub question – How do we understand valuation?

VI. CORPOREAL SOCIOLOGY (AMERICAN)

Instead of thinking thoughts about the social, if the social itself is thought, how does it get made by a bunch of educated animals? How do we understand the nature of the “self” as an element of action?

#17 Tuesday, November 22

A. Mead

Mind, Self and Society

Sub question – How do we understand the difference between human and animal?

#18 Tuesday November 29

B. Dewey

Human Nature and Conduct

Sub question – How do we understand the difference between conscious and unconscious action?

