

KEY ISSUES IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY
Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology, CEU
Autumn 2015

Professor Dorit Geva

Office Hours: Wednesday, 9:30-11:30, by appointment

TA: Levente Polyak

Office hours: Thursday, 11-12:00, by appointment

Email: Polyak.Levente@phd.ceu.edu

This course is divided into two. Part I introduces some of the canon of “classical” sociological theories that continue to shape contemporary sociological theory and empirical research. We will read selections from Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. We will largely focus on their respective accounts of modernity, while also learning how to critically assess social theories.

Part II then engages in a reflective exercise, where we note which voices and processes have been silenced within the classical “canon.” We will read critiques by R.W. Connell and Gurminder K. Bhambra, and also the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon. This component finishes with group presentations where you present arguments for including other authors into “the canon,” or can make a defense of the so-called classics.

This class eschews overly simplistic labels like conflict theorists versus functionalists. Even if you have read some of these theorists before, you are strongly encouraged to read them with an open – and critical – mind. I also strongly encourage plain language in class and in your written assignments.

Pedagogical Goals: The goals of this course are to lay a foundation for sociological thinking, and of equal importance, for you to develop your oral and written argumentation skills alongside FAIR critical analysis. For some suggestions on how to critically assess sociological theories, see:

<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/jackson/calhoun.jackson.theory/GeneralSuggestions03.html>

Participation: Attendance and participation are mandatory. Your marks will suffer if you miss classes or fail to participate in class. You are expected to be conversant, to come to class having read the assigned reading, to offer critical commentary of the texts, to raise questions and concerns, and to engage in constructive conversation and debate with me and your class colleagues. Participation is assessed through a combination of attendance record and active, meaningful participation in class. By “meaningful” participation I mean contributions to class discussions that are based on having done the assigned readings, and which indicate

genuine consideration of the ideas from the texts along with ideas raised in class. Participation is also graded based on your activity in the small group work.

If you miss **three** classes or more, you cannot pass the course.

Online Critical Commentary: In addition to regular attendance and active participation, you are required to contribute **FIVE** comments to the course Moodle site by the semester's end. These need to be posted **by 6PM on Wednesdays**. You can determine how you will pace those five responses, but make sure to complete **five by December 2**.

The responses should be critical responses to that day's readings. They could raise questions you consider important. You could mention aspects that are genuinely puzzling to you, or comparisons or connections to prior readings. You could also respond to other people's comments. I will read your comments in preparing for class, and they will help shape the direction class will take.

I do not recommend commenting on all the things that an author does not write about without explaining why that omission is important. Additionally, "critical commentary" means that you should note the strengths of an argument, not just its weaknesses.

Mini-Essays: Rather than assign one big essay at the end of the semester, you will have two smaller, focused essays to write. This is to help you develop your sociological writing skills.

Group Presentations:

The final class (Dec. 10) will be devoted to group presentations about how we ought to critically assess the classics. Further instructions will be provided later in the semester.

How each class will be organized:

9:00-9:50 Small introductory lecture and collective discussion
9:50-10:20 Group work based on a guiding question (or questions) I pose
10:20-10:40 Reconvene for collective class discussion

The final grade will be composed as follows:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Class participation | 25% |
| 2. Five online responses (by Dec. 2) | 10% |
| 3. Mini-essay #1 (Due Nov. 15) | 25% |
| 4. Group Presentation (Dec. 10) | 15% |
| 5. Mini-essay #2 (Due Dec. 18) | 25% |

Late papers: Late papers will be penalized 10% for each day beyond the deadline. I will deduct marks if they are emailed even a few minutes late.

Extension policy: Extensions will be granted only under the following conditions:

1. Medical illness: A letter from a medical doctor must be provided.
2. A serious personal or family crisis. Please make sure to speak with me if such a situation arises.

Electronic devices in class: I reluctantly allow electronic devices in class (laptops, tablets, etc.). They are often a major distraction, but I recognize that many of you do not print readings and need your devices to access assigned readings during class. However, if I judge that specific students are misusing their electronic devices in class as a diversion, then I will disallow specific students from having any open device during class. Should that happen, I expect those students to bring printed readings to class at their own expense.

We will read from these books, and the excerpts are available on the course Moodle site:

Marx, Karl (1978) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (R. Tucker, ed., 2nd Edition). New York: Norton.

Weber, Max (1992) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (T. Parsons, Tr.). London & New York: Routledge.

Weber, Max (1948) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Gerth and Mills, eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Durkheim, Emile (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

Simmel, Georg (1971) *George Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms* (Donald L. Levine, ed.). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Fanon, Frantz (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

de Beauvoir, Simone (1988) *The Second Sex* (H.M. Parshley, Tr.). New York: Picador.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

Week 1, Sept. 24

Introduction to the course

PART I: THE CANON

Week 2, Oct. 1

Marx: Modernity, Labour, and Alienation

Is there such a thing as ahistorical human nature? What is the relationship between capitalism, labour, and human nature?

“Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” pp. 70-98

Week 3, Oct. 8

Marx: The Commodity Form and Mystical Modernity

What relations does the commodity form conceal? Are there fragments of Marx’s “young” analysis of alienation in his later analysis of the commodity form and the circuits of capital? Did Marx shift from an earlier metaphysical, universal, and ahistorical account of labour, to an historically specific one?

Capital, pp. 302-312, 319-336

Week 4, Oct. 15

Weber: Rationality, Modernity, and Historical Contingency:

How does Weber’s account of the “spirit of capitalism” compare to Marx’s account of the commodity form? What exactly is the iron cage? Is Weber suggesting that ideas and/or practice are the engines of history?

The Protestant Ethic, pp. 35-92, 155-183

Week 5., Oct 22

Weber: Modern Political Organization and Power

How does modern political organization shape the nature of modern politics and power? In what ways is class distinct from status?

“Politics as a Vocation,” pp. 77-96; and “Class, Status, Party,” pp. 180 – 195,” in Gerth & Mills, eds.

Essay questions for essay #1 posted on Sunday, Oct. 25

Week 6, Oct. 29

Durkheim: Religion and the Glue of Social Life

How is society possible? How do emotions and symbolic life bind us together? What role does religion play in this, and where does that leave modern society with the rise of science at the expense of religion?

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, pp. 1-18, 141-149, 216-241, 418-448

Week 7, Nov. 5

Simmel: Modernity, Rationality and Instrumental Social Relations

How is society possible? Is modern urban life, and its related money economy, liberating or enslaving?

“How is Society Possible?” pp. 6-23; “Metropolis and Mental Life,” pp. 324-340.

Week 8, Nov. 12: Class Cancelled

Mini-essay #1 due: Email me by 18:00 (CET), Sunday, Nov. 15

PART II: EXPANDING THE CANON?

Week 9, Nov. 19

What is the “canon” of classical sociological theory, how did we get here, and what is missing in these accounts of modernity?

R. W. Connell (1997) *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 102, No. 6: 1511-1557.

Bhambra, Gurinder K. (2007) “Sociology and Postcolonialism: Another ‘Missing’ Revolution?” *Sociology*, Vol. 41(5): 871-884.

Week 10, Nov. 26

Fanon: Race, Colonialism, and Emancipation

How does Fanon believe that we can achieve emancipation? Is Fanon embracing, or expressing skepticism of, the universal abstract subject? Does he offer a satisfactory account of racism, inequality, and equality?

Black Skin, White Masks, 17-40, 109-140, 216-232

Week 11, Dec. 3

Beauvoir: Embodiment and freedom

Why has woman been historically constructed as the Other? How can we attain freedom despite the facticity of the sexed body? How can human sexuality be a path to transcendence? Does she offer a satisfactory account of inequality and equality?

The Second Sex, pp. 13-29, 69-83, 93-97, 510-514, 725-741

Week 12, Dec. 10

Who else should be part of “the canon”? Or a defense of the canon?

Group presentations: With Part II of the semester in mind, who else ought to be included in this syllabus, and why? Or, is the canon just fine as is?

Paper #2: Email me by 18:00 (CST), Friday, Dec. 18