Course Description

This course is designed as an intensive examination of key texts in the “canon” of classical social theory. In addition to conducting a survey of the main “schools” of classical social theory – structural functionalism, Marxist and Weberian versions of conflict theory, and “early” critical theory – we will read selected texts very closely in an effort to combine breadth with depth as much as possible in just one semester. Close readings will involve consideration of the philosophical background of particular theorists, which means that where appropriate, we will discuss theorists not usually considered part of the canon of classical social theory e.g. Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. We’ll also consider the political context of each theorist as a way to provide historical background and biographical information of each theorist to an understanding of the development of classical social theory.

Classical social theory developed out of the Western tradition of social and political philosophy in the 17th and 18th century, and each figure in the canon of Sociology – namely, Marx, Durkheim and Weber – developed their particular perspective out of these specific traditions in Western philosophy. For the survey section of our course we will trace Durkheim’s influences back to Montesquieu, Rousseau, Comte and Descartes, Weber’s roots in Kant and Nietzsche and lastly, Marx’s intellectual roots in Spinoza, Hegel and Feuerbach. We’ll also discuss the British Empiricists including Hume, Locke, Hobbes and Spencer and their impact on the development of Sociology. The survey background will give us the necessary material for a rich, intense examination of key texts by Durkheim, Marx and Weber. In terms of the specific content of this course, we’ll discuss at great length, main themes in social theory including, but not limited to: the problem of how to understand the relationship between the individual and society, the possibility of self-consciousness, the unique nature of the “social” as an object of study - what Durkheim called a social fact - the question of what gives direction to historical development in modern society, the issue of progress and social change as well as the particularly complicated issue of freedom.

Social theory seeks to understand the massive and profound changes in everyday life that follow the transition from traditional to modern society including urbanization, the Enlightenment, the transition to capitalism, the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. Social theory bridges the gap between the social sciences the humanities. In a social scientific manner, social theory seeks to explain both the possibility of, and the fundamental elements and structure of society, and following the tradition of the humanities, social theory also asks what kind of society would we want to live in, or how to define the “good” society. Hegel referred to this question as the problem of the transition from the “is” to the “ought,” an issue we will discuss at length this semester. Such an understanding provides one with the skills needed to become a critical thinker and an active agent in the processes of change in society.
Goals:

The goal of this course is twofold: first, to develop a well-rounded, complete understanding of the main issues in classical social theory, which includes a knowledge of the historical development of the various “schools” of classical social theory. The other main goal of this course, and of social theory more generally, is the development of a critical perspective, which means you should be able to analyze and criticize competing viewpoints on key issues and take a position on those issues. In short, social theory involves both representing the social world and intervening in the social world. Social theory is, as Charles Lemert suggests, a “basic survival skill,” and if practiced properly, a “source of uncommon pleasure.” I hope at the end of this course, you will agree.

Course Requirements

There are two requirements for this course, and one of them involves an option. The first requirement involves weekly papers (3-4 pages minimum/you can go over if need be) that both summarize and critically interpret the assigned reading. In other words, after providing a brief summary of the main points, provide an explanation of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented by the author. Feel free to emphasize one more than the other if you desire. The second requirement involves an option: (1) answer two of the questions below with a 8-9 page essay per question, or (2) write a 15 page term paper based on a topic of your choosing. The topic you choose must involve a discussion of at least one of the theorists we will be reading and discussing in class. Option two is mainly for those of you who already have a background in social theory and know what you would like to pursue in more depth/detail. All of these essays are due at the end of the semester.

Term paper topics are up to each individual student, and can be focused on an interpretive/deconstructive reading of one theorist, a comparison of key concepts between two or more theorists, a history of the changes and development of one tradition in social theory, or an analysis of a particular empirical issue as seen through the eyes of two or more theorists. These are just some options for the paper. I encourage you to consider using material from some of the main journals in social theory for your term paper. You should be able to find good material for your term paper by examining key discussions/debates from a few of these journals. Of course, secondary sources are appropriate, but you should include material from a few of these journals in your bibliography. Terms papers will be assigned a letter grade.

Some of the main journals you should consider – in no particular order - are:

Theory and Society,
Telos,
Sociological Theory,
See me early in the semester to get an approval of your paper topic if you choose that option. Term papers should be roughly 15 pages in length.

The shorter papers (8 pages) are position papers where you compare and contrast key concepts of different theorists, and then take a position. In other words, if appropriate, make a case for which theorist you find the most useful and most persuasive. Also, please cover what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the theorists you choose to write about. Short papers will be graded as follows: high pass, pass, and no pass.

List of questions for short paper:

1. Compare the concepts alienation, anomie and rationalization as they appear in Marx, Durkheim and Weber. In what ways are the concepts similar? In what ways do they diverge? Do the theorists compliment or contradict each other? Which concept/thinker do you find the most useful/persuasive?

2. Compare Marx and Weber on the issue of class. How do they differ and where do they seem to agree on the question of class? Do you find the theorists complimentary of contradictory? Which one do you find more persuasive and why?

3. Compare Marx, Freud and Durkheim on the question of the division of labor and work. In what ways are their analyses similar and different? Do you find the theorists complimentary of contradictory? Why? Which theorist do you find the most persuasive/useful?

4. Compare Freud and Durkheim on the question of the relationship between desire, the self and society. In what ways are they different and similar?

5. Compare Marx, Weber and Freud on the issue of the emergence of capitalism. How does each explain how social change is possible and under what conditions it takes place? How are the similar and different? Do you find the theorists complimentary of contradictory? Why? Which theorist do you find the most persuasive/useful?

6. Explain Marcuse’s critique of Freud. How does Marcuse use Marx to reconfigure Freud’s theoretical framework? Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?

7. Explain Firestone’s articulation and critique of Marx and Freud. In what ways does she use Marx and Freud in her analysis? In what ways does she criticize
Marx and Freud? What do you find to be the strengths and/or weaknesses in her appropriation of the two theorists?

8. Discuss Roediger’s critique of Marxism and his appropriation of psychoanalysis. In what ways does he use Freud to add to the framework of historical materialism? What role does race play in the formation of the American working class? What are the strengths and/or weaknesses of his analysis?

9. Compare and contrast the ways in which Roediger and Rawick combine historical materialism and psychoanalysis in their interpretation of how race and class are interwoven in the development of the American working class consciousness. How are they similar and how are they different? What do you find to be the strengths and/or weaknesses of each position?

10. Compare and contrast the interpretation of the master/slave relation in Hegel and Nietzsche. Then discuss the influence of Hegel on Marx and the influence of Nietzsche on Weber. Do you find the two intellectual traditions complimentary or do you find them at epistemological odds with one another? Discuss why and then discuss the strengths and/or weaknesses of each.

11. Compare the theory of self in Mead, Marx and Freud. How are they similar and how are they different? Discuss the influence of Hegel on Mead and Marx and the influence of Nietzsche on Freud. Do you find the different theories complimentary or incommensurable? Why?

Lastly, regular participation in discussion of all class sessions is required from everyone. The reading load will be quite intense, since this is a graduate course, so make a strategy to find ways to get all of the reading done. I can tell who has done the reading and who has not based on the quality of the class discussion, and the quality of the summary papers, so keep that in mind. Each week I will assign individuals to lead the class discussion, but everyone is expected to participate. Discussion leaders should bring a few questions to class to generate discussion and be prepared to present key issues from the required reading. Required books are:

Freud: *Civilization and Its Discontents*
Durkheim: *Selected Writings*
Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*
Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*
Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals
Marx: *Capital Vol. 1*
Marx: *The Marx/Engels Reader*
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
Marcuse: *Eros and Civilization*

Recommended:
Giddens: *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*