Social Theory and Contemporary Society

This course provides an introduction to the sociological perspective by examining the relationship between social theory and the institutions and processes of society. The course will focus on several of the classic sociological thinkers and texts, including works by Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and George Herbert Mead. We will additionally be reading some more recent theoretical and empirical studies to gain a sense of the different ways in which core concepts in sociology have been used to understand social interaction, social problems, and social change. Throughout the course, we will also be looking at contemporary society to consider the current relevance of classic theory and how these ideas can be applied to our own world.

This course fulfills the sociology major's introductory sociology requirement.

Learning Goals

Students who complete this course will:

1. Learn about fundamental concepts and areas of study in the field of sociology.
2. Gain familiarity with classic theoretical perspectives in sociology.
3. Improve the ability to comprehend, evaluate, and discuss theoretical statements.
4. Learn how to apply abstract theoretical ideas to concrete social phenomena.

Requirements

Twice a week, the entire class will meet for lecture and discussion. On the third meeting of the week, students will be divided into discussion sections.

I expect courtesy in the classroom. That means arriving to class on time, turning cell phones off before class begins, no texting, and no side conversations. Please recognize how distracting these latter behaviors are for your classmates and your instructor. If you bring food or drink to class, remember to clean up after yourself.

My policy on laptops is that they should be used only for class-related purposes. Other uses are highly distracting for you, for me, and for those sitting around you. If we notice you reading email, checking Facebook, watching a broadcast or anything else not related to class, we will call you on it. If these behaviors become a persistent problem, then laptops will be prohibited in class.

Students are expected to keep up with the readings, attend lectures, and participate in class discussion. You will complete a short (4-6 page) paper based on course material, three newspaper analyses, and a take-home final consisting of essay questions about course readings.

The newspaper analyses are meant to help you think about how a sociological perspective can be
used to understand the world in which we now live. These assignments are also intended to show you the value of regularly reading a newspaper (if you do not do so already) in order to be informed about current affairs. Three times during the semester, you will choose a *New York Times* article and, in 2-3 pages, explain how sociological concepts we have discussed in class can be used to understand the issues and events described in the news article. In your analysis, you may want to point out how a sociological perspective is included in or is missing from the journalist’s account. Be sure to attach the article that you are analyzing. For each analysis, the news article used must not be more than two weeks old. Each analysis should address a different set of sociological ideas. It is up to you to decide when to do each analysis (however, you cannot do more than one per week, and the last one must be turned in by April 30th), but I strongly advise you to space them out evenly over the semester.

**Evaluation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midterm paper (4-6 pages)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspaper analyses</td>
<td>30% (10% each)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take-home final</td>
<td>30%</td>
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Students are expected to uphold standards of academic integrity. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently. It is not acceptable to use the words or ideas of another person without proper acknowledgement of that source. This means that you must use references and, where appropriate, quotation marks to indicate the source of any phrases, sentences, or ideas not your own -- whether they are found in written materials or on the Internet, and whether they are created by a published author, another student, or your parent. Violations of University policies on academic integrity may result in failure in the course or on the assignment, and could end in suspension from the University. Students with questions about standards of academic integrity are advised to consult Section 4 of Rights and Responsibilities from the Brandeis Student Handbook and/or speak to your instructor or TA. If you are in doubt about the instructions for any assignment in this course, you must ask for clarification.

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, you should contact me, and present your letter of accommodation, as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Undergraduate Academic Affairs at 736-3470 (brodgers@brandeis.edu). Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

The following books are available for purchase from the university bookstore:

- Timothy Black, *When a Heart Turns Rock Solid: The Lives of Three Puerto Rican Brothers*

These books are also on reserve in the library.

In addition, you should be regularly reading the New York Times. Limited access to the New York Times is available online at no cost at www.nytimes.com. Alternatively, you can purchase a digital subscription at the discounted college rate by going to www.nytimes.com/collegeds, or if you live off campus, you can purchase a discounted print subscription by going to www.nytimes.com/student. All three links can be accessed through the Latte site for this class.

The reading for Week 2 is on Latte. Look at the section titled "Readings."

All other readings are contained in a custom course packet.

Course Schedule

Introduction: What Is the Sociological Perspective

week 1  no assignment
Jan 18-19

Jan 23-26

The Individual, Community, and the Nature of Society

week 3  Durkheim, Suicide, Preface (pp. 35-39); Book 2, chaps. 1-3 (pp. 145-216).
Jan 30-Feb 2

week 4  Durkheim, Suicide, Book 2, chaps. 4-5 (pp. 217-276).
Feb 6-9

Feb 13-16

Socialization: The Formation of the Social Self

Feb 27-Mar 1

### The Sociology of Everyday Life

**week 7**

Mar 5-8


Midterm paper due Thursday, March 8th

### Labor: The Intersection of Power, Meaning, and Inequality

**week 8**

Mar 12-15

Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (pp. 70-101); "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction" (pp. 53-65).

**week 9**

Mar 19-22

Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, "Wage Labour and Capital" (pp. 203-217); "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" (pp. 473-491); German Ideology" (pp. 155-175).

**week 10**

Mar 26-29


### Rationalization: Power and the Loss of Meaning

**week 11**

Apr 2-5


**week 12**

Apr 16-19


**week 13**

Apr 23-26


### Collective Action and Social Change

**week 14**

Apr 30

Reread Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (pp. 473-491).

Susan Eckstein, "Poor People versus the State and Capital: Anatomy of a Successful
Community Mobilization for Housing in Mexico City." In Susan Eckstein, ed.,
*Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, updated and

Take-home final due Friday, May 4th (seniors)
  Wednesday, May 9th (all others)