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 class will meet for lecture and discussion. The third meeting of the week will be primarily devoted to discussion.

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.

Your participation grade is based on attendance and contributions to class discussion. You should also help shape the agenda for Thursday discussion by posting, on Latte, passages from the readings that confuse you or that you think merit in-depth discussion. I expect you to do this at least four times over the course of the semester. Your post needs to be up at the latest by 8:00 PM on the evening before the class in which the reading is being discussed. It does not count if it comes in after the class is held.

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. Each week, I will make available on Latte two or three news articles. Three times during the semester, you will choose one of these articles and, in 2-3 pages, explain how sociological concepts derived from Durkheim, Mead, Goffman, Marx, or
Weber 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 state which article you are analyzing. Each analysis should address a different theorist's set of sociological ideas (i.e., you cannot do both Analysis 1 and 2 on Mead, and you cannot do both Analysis 2 and 3 on Marx). It is up to you to decide which three of the five theorists to discuss, and exactly when to do each analysis. However, you need to space them out according to the following schedule:

- Analysis 1 (on Durkheim or Mead): submit anytime between Jan 28 and Mar 3
- Analysis 2 (on Mead, Goffman, or Marx): submit anytime between Feb 29 and Mar 24
- Analysis 3 (on Marx or Weber): submit anytime between Mar 21 and May 2

Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (doing readings, papers, discussion sections, etc.).

I expect courtesy in the classroom. That means arriving to class on time, staying put once you are there, 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.

No laptops or other electronic devices are to be used during class meetings. They present a distraction for you, for me, and for those sitting around you.

**Evaluation**

- Midterm paper (4-6 pages) 25%
- Newspaper analyses 30% (10% each)
- Participation 15%
- Take-home final 30%

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:


These books are also on reserve in the library.

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

All other readings are contained in a custom course packet. Information on how to purchase this will be announced in class.

**Course Schedule**

**Introduction: What Is the Sociological Perspective**

week 1
Jan 13-14
no assignment

week 2
Jan 20-21

**The Individual, Community, and the Nature of Society**

week 3
Jan 25-28
Durkheim, *Suicide*, Preface (pp. 35-39); Book 2, chaps. 1-3 (pp. 145-216).

week 4
Feb 1-4
Durkheim, *Suicide*, Book 2, chaps. 4-5 (pp. 217-276).

week 5
Feb 8-11
# Socialization: The Formation of the Social Self

**week 6**  
**Feb 22-25**  

# The Sociology of Everyday Life

**week 7**  
**Feb 29-Mar 3**  

Midterm paper due Wednesday, March 2nd

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

**week 8**  
**Mar 7-10**  
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. 53-54).

**week 9**  
**Mar 14-17**  
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 21-24**  

# Rationalization: Power and the Loss of Meaning

**week 11**  
**Mar 30-31**  

**week 12**  
**Apr 4-7**  

**week 13**  
**Apr 11-14**  
Collective Action and Social Change

week 14-15  Reread Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (pp. 473-491).
Apr 18-May 2

Take-home final due Friday, May 6th (seniors)
Wednesday, May 11th (all others)