

# **SSC2028: Classical Sociological Theory**

## **Course coordinator**

*Dr. Kai A. HEIDEMANN*

*Assistant Professor, University College Maastricht of Sociology*

*Office: UCM Room #1.020, Tel.: 043.3885480*

*Email: kai.heidemann@maastrichtuniversity.nl*

## **Course Description**

In this course we will explore the origins of contemporary sociological thought and theory. We will consider some of the most influential theorists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries whose contributions continue to have relevance today. In particular we will pay particularly close attention to the works of four so-called 'founding fathers': Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Georg Simmel. The choice of who to include and thus exclude in a short seven week course is inherently limiting and thus problematic. Nonetheless, in making this course we have chosen to emphasize depth rather than breadth. While much of our attention will be focused on understanding the primary contributions of these 'core' theorists, we will also periodically apply their ideas to the study of current social issues and problems, such as crime and globalization. Nonetheless, some attention will be given to other influential theorists of the classical era, such as August Comte, Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, Antonio Gramsci, W.E.B. DuBois and Jane Addams. In addition, we will periodically question and reflect upon the relevance of learning 'old' classical theories in the contemporary era. Attention will also be placed on the general role of theory and theory-building in sociology and the social sciences. Throughout the course students will read a sample of original works by the classic authors as well as supplementary readings from a textbook and a series of articles. Reading classical sociological theory from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can be a difficult and frustrating endeavor. Hence, in order to get a better handle on the difficult, abstract and often opaque subject matter, the lectures will provide some analytical tools to help students navigate the materials with greater ease and purpose, such as a series of orienting questions and themes to be addressed every week.

## **Course Objectives**

- To be conversant in the theoretical foundations of classical sociology
- To evaluate and assess classical sociological theories in a comparative, critical and constructive manner
- To be able to apply classic theories to the study of contemporary social issues and problems
- To reflect on the relevance and utility of social theory in general

## Evaluation and Assessment

*There will be two main assessments:*

Final Paper (80%) Students will write a paper analyzing a contemporary social problem through the lens of classical social theory. Students will be assessed along four axes: Organization of ideas (15pts), Clarity of writing (15pts), Integration of data and evidence of research (15pts) Depth of analysis (15pts), and Comprehension of theory (20pts).

Oral Presentation (20%) Students will do one (20 min.) presentation that applies concepts from classical social theory to the study of a contemporary social issue or problem. The presentation is intended to demonstrate the logic and design of your final paper. The presentation is NOT intended to provide a comprehensive overview of a final finished paper, but rather an in-depth look at a work in progress. Students will work individually or (if approved) in pairs and be expected to hand in a detailed outline of this presentation as well as take substantive questions from the class. Students will be assessed along three axes: Organization (5pts), Clarity (10pts), and Comprehension of Theory (10pts).

*Other assessments:*

### Proposal for final paper (pass/fail)

At the end of Week 5 all students must submit a 500 word statement that summarizes the idea for their final paper. This must clearly address the main question(s) under investigation, the theorists who will be dealt with, the concepts to be operationalized and the type of data to be examine.

### Being a discussion leader (pass/fail)

Working in pairs, students will lead a post-discussion. Students will be assessed in terms of: cohesion , depth, direction and inclusion.

Participation in application workshops (pass/fail) = Starting in week#2 the second tutorial meeting will entail a workshop session whereby students will be asked to apply classical social theory to the study of contemporary social problems. Failure to regularly participate in these sessions in a clearly substantive and active manner will require successful completion of an alternative assignment to pass the course.

Resits: Please consult with the coordinator on this topic.

Participation/Attendance: The PBL system at UCM requires sustained levels of authentic engagement during the pre- and post-discussion sessions. Systematically poor levels of participation by a student can lead up to a 10% deduction from a student's final grade. The standard UCM absence policy (max. 20%) will be applied.

## Required Readings

*Understanding Classical Sociology: Marx, Weber, Durkheim.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. By Hughes, J., Sharrock, W., and Martin, P. (2003)Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. ISBN: 978-0-7619-5467-5

Selection of materials and case studies will also be available on EleUM via your student portal.

## **Week #1**

**Lecture #1:** On the Origins and Development of Sociological Theory

**Tutorial #1:** Introductions + Pre-Discussion

*(No Readings Due)*

**Tutorial #2:** *(Task 1)* Getting started with theory

Readings: [i] “Introduction” pp1-16 in Hughes, Sharrock and Martin + [ii] Abend, G. 2008. “The Meaning of ‘Theory’”. Sociological Theory, 26(2):173-99

## **Week #2**

**Lecture #2:** Key theorists and themes in Classical Sociology

**Tutorial #3** *(Task 2)* Durkheim, pt.1

- Readings: Discuss “Ch.4” from Hughes, Sharrock and Martin textbook  
+ Extracts from “What is a Social Fact?”, *The Functions of Crime*, and “Two Laws of Penal Evolution”

**Tutorial #4:** *(Task 3)* Durkheim, pt.2

- Readings: *Selected case studies available on-line*
- + PBL Task: Applying Durkheim to questions of crime

## **Week #3**

**Lecture #3:** Guest lecture by Prof. Dr. Ana Cecilia Dinerstein (Bath University, UK)

**Tutorial #5:** *(Task 4)* Marx, pt.1

- Readings: Discuss “Ch.2” in Hughes, Sharrock and Martin  
+ Extracts from “*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*”, “*The German Ideology*”

**Tutorial #6:** *(Task 5)* Marx, pt.2

- Readings: *Selected case studies available on-line*
- + PBL Task: Applying Marx to economic globalization

## **Week #4**

**Tutorial #7:** (Task 6) Weber, pt.1

- Readings: Discuss “Ch.3” in Hughes, Sharrock and Martin  
+ Extracts from “Bureaucracy”, “The Distribution of Power Within the Political Community” and “The Types of Legitimate Authority”

**Tutorial #8:** (Task 7) Weber, pt.2

Readings: *Selected case studies available on-line*

- + PBL Task: Applying Weber to political populism

## **Week #5**

**Tutorial #9:** (Task 8) Simmel, pt.1

Readings: Discuss “Ch. 7: G.Simmel” by Goodwin and Scimmeca + “The Problem of Sociology”, “The Stranger” and “Metropolis” (All available on-line)

**Tutorial #10:** (Task 9) Simmel, pt.2

Readings: *Selected case studies available on-line*

- + PBL task applying Simmel to racism

## **Week #6**

**Lecture:** An extra lecture timeslot has been created for student presentations (!attendance mandatory!)

**Tutorial #11 :** Presentations + Discussion

**Tutorial #12 :** Presentations + Discussion

**!! FINAL PAPER IS DUE DURING EXAM WEEK !!**  
(time/date to be announced)

### **Task #1) A Theory of Society?**

The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) once wrote: “Mankind are to be taken in groups, as they have always subsisted. The history of the individual is but a detail of the sentiments and the thoughts he has entertained in the view of his species: and every experiment relative to this subject should be made with entire societies, not with single men”. The quest to cultivate a modern science of society basically originated during the latter part of the Enlightenment. While we have come to understand that human life and behaviors are strongly shaped by natural and biological processes, we also know that the social environments we inhabit, encounter and create have a profound impact on our lives. One of the most primary and general tasks of sociology has long been to understand how people are shaped by their social environments as well as how social environments are shaped by individuals. Despite years and years of research and theorizing, however, sociologists have never devised a single definition of society, one common method for studying society, or a single unitary theory of society.



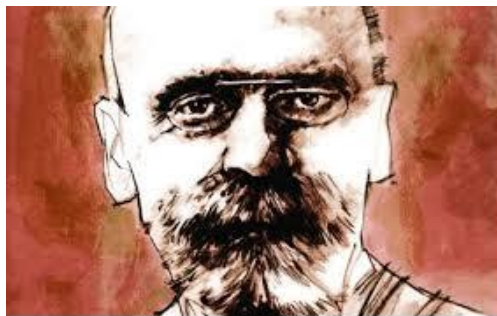
**NOTES:**

## **Task #2) How does this whole ‘society’ thing work anyway?**

*"...Man is double. There are two beings in him: an individual being which has its foundation in the organism and the circle of whose activities is therefore strictly limited, and a social being which represents the highest reality in the intellectual and moral order that we can know by observation---I mean society. This duality of our nature has as its consequence in the practical order, the irreducibility of a moral ideal to a utilitarian motive, and in the order of thought, the irreducibility of reason to individual experience. In so far as he belongs to society, the individual transcends himself, both when he thinks and when he acts."*

–The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, (1912)

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) was one of the pioneers of modern sociology. He is basically the architect of what eventually became known as ‘functionalist’ theory; e.g. a theoretical framework basically intended to understand how society works and why it works in particular ways. We start our in-depth exploration of social theory with Durkheim because he was one of the first scholars who explicitly tried to develop a scientific approach to the study of ‘society’. In his work Durkheim typically stressed the need to approach the study of society from an ‘objective’ perspective based upon the systematic collection, correlation, analysis and explanation of ‘social facts’. In addition, one of his fundamental concerns was to understand the factors determining social order and structure. His work was especially influential in shaping the study of crime, deviance, morals, work and religion.



### **Task #3) A Durkheimian Perspective on Crime**

The term crime does not, in modern times, have any simple and universally accepted definition, but one definition is that a 'crime' is an act harmful not only to some individual, but also to a broader community or society and that acts designated as 'crimes' should be forbidden and punishable through formal laws or codes. Certain acts like murder, rape and theft are defined as 'crimes' and prohibited in many corners of the world. In general the variety of acts that become defined as 'criminal' in a given society are usually defined by the particular cultural norms and beliefs which dominate that society at a particular moment in time. Most modern European nations, for instance, have a catalogue of official crimes that constitute a standard code of law. While every crime violates the law, it is interesting to note that not every violation of the law counts as a crime. What constitutes a crime in one society or community may not be perceived as such in another. Moreover, acts or behaviors which may be regarded as morally irresponsible or repugnant may not be recognized as criminal. Also, it is important to note that notions of crime and criminality change over time.

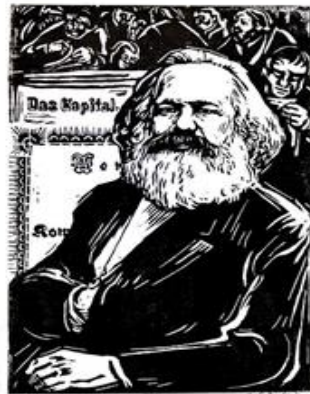


**Notes:**

#### **Task #4) It's the economy stupid!**

*"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."— Karl Marx, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is perhaps best known for his political convictions and writings linked to international communism. Many people, however, do not realize that Marx was first and foremost a social historian and political economist. Although he did not identify himself as a sociologist, Marx has achieved a very central place in the classical sociological literature, particularly for his 'materialist' theory of society. Marx was especially concerned about the link between social life and economic processes. As with Durkheim he was broadly concerned with understanding the large scale forces that variously shape, sustain and transform society over time. But he differed from Durkheim in his approach to the study of society as well as in many of the conclusions he drew from his research. Marx's work has been especially influential in shaping the study of inequality, poverty and conflict.



**Notes:**



### **Task #5) Toward a Marxist Analysis of Economic Globalization**

Economic globalization is the increasing economic interdependence of national economies across the world through a rapid increase in cross-border movement of goods, service, technology and capital. Economic globalization is the process of increasing economic integration between countries, leading to the emergence of a global marketplace or a single world market. Economic globalization comprises the globalization of production, markets, competition, technology, and corporations and industries. Some see the phenomenon negatively as an excessive promotion of corporate commercial interests over that of general human wellbeing. They claim that unrestricted free trade unjustly benefits those with more financial leverage and mobility. Others argue, however, that higher degrees of political and economic freedom in the form of free trade around the world are positive ends in themselves which ultimately produce higher levels of overall material growth which in turn promote the global spread of liberty and prosperity. How might Marx approach this?



**Notes:**

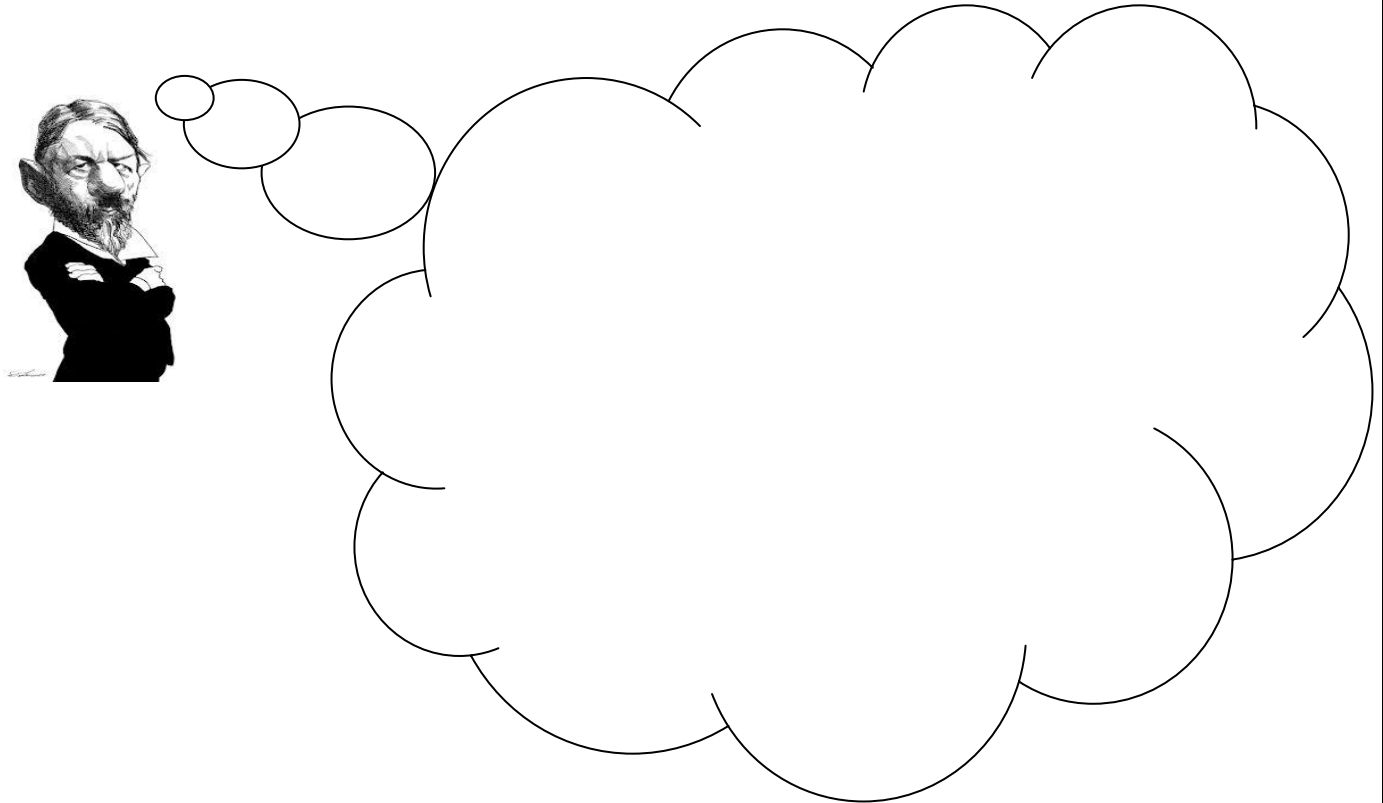
### **Task #6) It's all about the structuring of the structures... Get it?**

*"Sociology is the science whose object is to interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which the action proceeds and the effects which it produces..."*

*"The capacity to distinguish between empirical knowledge and value-judgments, and the fulfillment of the scientific duty to see the factual truth as well as the practical duty to stand up for our own ideals constitute the program to which we wish to adhere with ever increasing firmness."*

- Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy (1904)

While Max Weber (1864-1920) was strongly influenced by Karl Marx's materialism he did not totally agree with many of Marx's perspectives or conclusions. Like Durkheim, Weber was more concerned with the place of ideas, values and culture in the shaping of social life. He was particularly interested in how ideas influence actions, and how this dynamic gives shape to structures of power. Yet, Weber also differed from Durkheim in how he approached the study of culture. In particular, Weber was skeptical about the place of objectivity in sociology. Some argue that Weber's work can be seen as bringing together of Marx and Durkheim. Weber's work has been especially influential in the study of politics, and especially the analysis of organizational dynamics.



### **Task #8) Toward a Weberian Theory of Populism**

*“Today the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one. In the past, the most varied institutions beginning with the family-have known the use of physical force as quite normal. Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory... It is understood that, in reality, obedience is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope of the vengeance of magical powers or of the power-holder, hope for reward in this world or in the beyond and besides all this, by interests of the most varied sort. Of this we shall speak presently. However, in asking for the 'legitimations' of this obedience, one meets with these three 'pure' types: 'traditional,' 'charismatic,' and 'legal.'...”*

– Politics as Vocation (1921)

Populism is a mode of political action and communication found in democratic nation-states that is primarily focused on establishing contrasts between the "common man" or "the people" and a real or imagined group of "privileged elites". Populists are usually located on the fringes of the left or right ends of the political spectrum. Populists are generally identifiable by a common condemnation of “elites” as having somehow “hijacked” or “corrupted” the democratic process at the expense of “everyday people”. Distinctions between the left and right-wing varieties of populism are generally found in the diagnoses or solutions that they propose to political problems and issues posed by elite power. Established political parties and politicians along with mainstream news media often use the terms “populist” and “populism” as pejoratives directed against opponents or outsiders. Such a view sees populism as a form of demagoguery or deception which merely appears to identify with the public through the use of rhetoric intended to increase appeal for purposes of electoral gain. Some scholars see populists as a largely democratic and positive force in society. They suggest that populism helps to keep democratic politics authentic and engaged with the concerns of citizens. For instance, C. Mudde wrote that "Many observers have noted that populism is inherent to representative democracy; after all, do populists not juxtapose 'the pure people' against 'the corrupt elite'?" Others, however, contend that populism are generally irrational and introduce instability into the political process. M.Fisher and A.Tuab (2017), by contrast, argue that populism is “a path that, at its outset, can look and feel democratic. But, followed to its logical conclusion, it can lead to exclusive or regressive policies and even outright fascism or authoritarianism.

**Task #8: We are all individuals!... Well, sort of anyway.**

*“Society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction...Interaction always arises on the basis of certain drives for or for the sake of certain purposes” - G. Simmel Fundamental Problems of Sociology (1917)*

Interestingly enough the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) retained only a rather marginal status in sociology during his time. It was not until much later that sociologists recognized the value and integrity of his work. Simmel's approach to the study of society differed considerably from that of his more influential counterparts: Durkheim, Marx and Weber. One of the issues he was most fascinated with, for instance, was how to theorize the role and place of the individual in social theory. In this context, he was especially interested in understanding how people experience and internalize the broader society within which they live. Simmel was interested in studying the “inner world” of people, but neither in a psychological manner concerned with thought and cognition nor in a purely philosophical manner concerned with objective truth and reality. Thematic elements of Marx and Durkheim are evident in Simmel's work, but he clearly takes these themes in different directions. His work has been very influential in shaping the sociological study of culture, identity, aesthetics, manners and emotions.



### **Task #10: A Simmelian Perspective on Race and Racism**

Racism can be defined as a systematic set of views, practices and actions reflecting the belief that humanity is divided into distinct biological groups called 'races' and that members of a certain race share certain attributes which make that group as a whole more or less desirable, superior or talented. The exact definition of racism is controversial both because there is little agreement about the concept "race", and because there is disagreement about what does and doesn't constitute "racism". Some argue that any assumption of a person's behavior that is influenced by racial categorization is racist, regardless of whether the action is intentionally harmful or not. There is also debate on whether to include symbolic forms of 'passive' racism such as the circulation of ethnic stereotypes in the media. In history, racism was a driving force behind the transatlantic slave trade, and governmental regimes of racial segregation such as the US and South Africa. Today, explicit practices and ideologies of racism have been formally condemned by many nation-states as well as transnational bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations. In contemporary Western Europe, migrants from non-western regions of the world such as Africa and the Middle East are typically victims of both material and symbolic racism. The causes and consequences of such racism have long been a topic of concern for sociologists.

