

**Sociology 475: Classical Sociological Theory**  
Fall 2011

Lectures: Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 9:55-10:45am  
Classroom: Sewell Social Sciences Building 4308  
Course Website: <https://learnuw.wisc.edu/>

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A theory can be defined as an analytic structure that explains a set of empirical observations. Sociological theory attempts to explain the social world from the sociological perspective. This perspective has been developed over the past 150 years through the contributions of many scholars, yet a few pioneers of the social sciences (not necessarily sociologists) had a particularly influential role in shaping it. This class explores the work and ideas of some of these theorists, with special attention to the three thinkers at the core of the classical sociological canon: Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber.

The work of these authors can be difficult for the non-initiated, and it can seem irrelevant for the sociologist interested in the contemporary social world. What can three dead white guys who lived in Europe over one hundred years ago teach us about the world today? There are three main reasons to read and familiarize yourselves with Marx, Durkheim, and Weber: 1) It is impossible (or at least you would be making things very difficult for yourselves) to be a sociologist without being familiar with their work. Modern sociology was built upon the foundations established by these thinkers, and therefore navigating the discipline requires some knowledge of their work and how it influenced later developments. 2) The world that these authors studied and analyzed was, evidently, very different from contemporary society. However, some of the social factors and realities that they identified and theorized remain key building blocks of present-day society. We live our lives in a capitalist economic system, bureaucracies and science are crucial pillars of the current social order, and religion still plays a major role in social life. Some of the theories developed by Marx, Durkheim and Weber have been discredited nowadays, but they have all been very influential in determining how we see the world and, in many cases, we can still learn a lot about our societies from them. 3) Finally, – and in case that after 1 and 2 you still need another reason to study these authors – they are all top-notch social thinkers whose work is intellectually stimulating and exciting to learn, discuss and critique in its own right. In sum, I strongly believe that the study of Marx, Durkheim and Weber is a fascinating and rewarding journey that you will enjoy. The main goal of this class will be to provide you with information about these theorists and to help you absorb it and use it in a productive way.

### **Class organization**

It needs to be said from the outset: the theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber are not easy to engage with. Partly because of the difficulty of the ideas themselves, and partly because of their arid (from our perspective) writing style, reading, understanding and learning the work of these authors can be a daunting task for the uninitiated. The best way to do this is by reading their works directly, and this is what this class will revolve around. However, and given the difficulty

of this endeavor, the course will be organized in a way that will facilitate this process as much as possible. I believe that the most productive way to do this is to make our sessions a combination of lecture, in which I will give you the context and knowledge necessary to understand the readings, and discussion. I cannot emphasize enough how important the latter aspect is for this class. When confronted with difficult ideas, the only way of really understanding and learning them is by working through them. That requires 'interrogating' the readings, asking questions, making statements about what we think they mean and interacting with others who are doing the same. If when you have a doubt or are confused you do not voice that concern, you will not resolve it and the reading will have been a waste of your time. It is fundamental, then, that you come to class and that you verbalize your questions and comments so that we can have a clarifying discussion. For this reason, in the context of this class I establish the principle that **THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A STUPID QUESTION**. You should think of this class as a safe environment in which we all start from zero and we work together to make sense of the readings. Sometimes the simplest questions or the most misdirected comments are the most productive and illuminating ones, and we need to embrace that in this class.

In order to make our exploration of these authors and class discussion as relevant as possible to you, the common thread around which I have organized this class is: how can the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber help us make sense of contemporary society? As you will see, this will be a central element in the papers you have to write and I will try to make my lectures and our discussions revolve around this theme.

### **Assignments and workload**

I have designed a grading scheme aimed at encouraging and maximizing the core elements of this class: reading and discussion.

*Readings:* there will be a considerable amount of difficult reading to do for this class. We have an average of 57 pages per week (with significant variability), but given how hard some of these texts are you should think about the number of pages for each week as if it was twice the actual figure in order to plan for how much time you will need to devote to read and understand them. Remember, the point is not to be able to say that you did the reading, but actually getting something out of it, and that will require much more time than a mere superficial read. To make sure that you do the readings and that you do them well, I will give you a quiz every week (at the beginning of our Friday class) in which I will ask you basic questions about the readings for the week. Notice, then, that there will be at least some questions about texts that we have not explored in class yet. These questions will focus on making sure that you have read, not that you understood the readings. Part of my goal in doing this (besides ensuring that you do the readings) is to help you learn how to read difficult texts. This class, then, is not only about learning the theories, but also about learning to engage challenging material and being able to identify key arguments and ideas, even if you miss some of the more complicated details. I will distribute in class a document with some guidelines about how to do these types of readings, and I will send you a set of questions to guide your reading for each week in the semester. If despite that you still have trouble being able to perform in the quizzes after doing the readings properly, please come to see me during office hours. Of the 13 quizzes that we will have during the course of the semester I will drop the two lowest grades. You can only make up a missed quiz if your absence is completely justified, and you must take the quiz before the following session you can attend. Each quiz will be worth 10 points, so the total number of possible points for the quizzes will be 110.

*Participation:* I am a big fan of class discussion. For that reason, 15 points of your grade will be devoted to participation in our discussions. My main goal with this component of your grade is to encourage you to think critically about the readings and bring questions, comments, doubts, and observations to class. I am not expecting everyone to talk in every class, but to be generally engaged and contribute regularly. However, I am aware that it is hard to ensure everyone's participation and to evaluate you based on it in class because people have different personalities and it is hard for some of you to speak in public. For that reason, I have set up a discussion board on the Learn@UW website where you can post comments and questions about the readings and our sessions. I would not want you to think that writing online posts means that there is no need to participate in the classroom. My main goal is to have a lively class discussion, and thus you should think about the online posts as a way to complement your participation in class. If you are someone who is usually engaged and active in class you do not need to write anything online, but if you are on the quiet side and want to get the 15 points for participation you should regularly make meaningful contributions to the online forum. And notice that I say 'regularly'. Submitting several posts in the last week of class will not make up for no participation in the previous 14.

*Papers:* with the quizzes and the points for participation I will be making sure that you read and engage with the material critically. However, neither of these components will allow you to develop your thoughts at length, and it will make it impossible for me to assess the extent to which you are understanding the readings and using them productively. For that reason, the last required element for this class will be to write three 4 to 6-page papers (one for each of our three main authors: Marx, Durkheim and Weber) in which I will ask you to reflect upon the material that we have seen in class and to relate it to some contemporary problem. Each paper is worth 25 points, for a total of 75 points for this component of the course, and you have to submit all three in order to get a passing grade. I will distribute detailed instructions for the papers in class.

This is all you will need to do for this course. There are no midterm or final exams. There will be quite a lot of difficult reading, so I want you to focus on doing that properly and come to class ready to ask questions and discuss. Consistently, then, the only other requirement for the course will be attendance to class. Attendance is required and I will take attendance each and every class. I will allow up to 6 unjustified absences. These are supposed to cover illnesses and other uncontrollable circumstances, they are not a free pass to miss six classes without reason. Therefore, if anyone misses more than six classes I will need to see a justification for ALL the absences if you do not want to be penalized. With this, I am trying to avoid the cases of those who miss six classes without justification early in the semester, and then they get sick and feel entitled to miss more sessions. You are expected to be in class every day, and therefore any non-justified absence beyond the allowance of 6 will subtract 4 points from your final grade. And just to be clear: attending a class implies being there for all (or most) of the class and being 'active and engaged'. Showing up for a quiz and leaving right after it, as well as showing up late or leaving early without reason will be counted as an absence. In the same way, being in class watching videos or writing emails on your laptops (and believe me, it is obvious when you are not using them to take notes for the class) will also be counted as an absence, and I will be the only judge of whether you are 'active and engaged'.

The grading scheme, therefore, will be the following:

11 quizzes	x	10 points each	=	110 possible points (55%)
3 papers	x	25 points	=	75 possible points (37.5%)
Participation			=	15 possible points (7.5%)

The final letter grades, then, will be applied over the total possible 200 points for the class in the following way (the border grades, 186, 174, 164, etc., will be considered part of the higher interval, i.e. 186 is an A, 174 is an AB, and so on):

A	200-186
AB	186-174
B	174-162
BC	162-150
C	150-140
D	140-120
F	120-0

This scheme will be strict. If you get 185.9 points your grade is AB, not A. You are warned from the very beginning so if you want a higher grade work harder. Complaints of the “but I am so close!”-type at the end of the semester will not have any effect.

### **A note on participation in class discussion**

As I mentioned above, your active participation will be a key element of the learning experience in this class, so I want to make sure that it is clear what I mean by that: participating properly in class is not a function of speaking a lot or of making only brilliant points. My main criterion for evaluating participation is: is this contribution bringing the conversation forward? This can happen by asking a very simple question of clarification, or by saying something that is completely wrong yet allows us to confront an issue that we had not considered before. Someone who speaks non-stop or who shuts other people off is in fact stifling debate, and that is the exact opposite of what I am looking for. As I said before, I want to encourage you all to participate, thus the principle that there is no such thing as a stupid question or comment in this class. But I do ask you to be mindful: you are part of a group, and our goal is to move forward and learn together. Using participation to disrupt the conversation or to put someone else down is not acceptable and I will be strict about that.

### **Office hours, email**

I will hold office hours for an hour after our Wednesday session, and I am happy to see you by appointment at other times if you cannot make the office hours. You should see this as a resource to which you have access in order to seek clarification, to discuss issues both with the material and the functioning of the class, or simply to make your views known about specific topics and readings. Given the difficulty of some of the material that we will be covering this semester you should definitely make use of office hours!

You can also contact me by email at any point during the semester. I will try to reply to your messages promptly. However, you should always allow 24-72 hours for my replies. Therefore, you should not wait until the last minute to ask me important questions. Plan ahead!

### **Required texts**

Most of the readings that we will do during the class will come from the following list of books, which you can buy from Rainbow Bookstore (426 W Gilman St, just off State St). They are also

on reserve at the College Library:

- Democracy in America, by Alexis de Tocqueville. Harper Perennial Modern Classics (2000). ISBN-13: 978-0060956660.
- The Marx-Engels Reader (Second Edition), edited by Robert Tucker. W. W. Norton (1978). ISBN-13: 978-0393090406.
- The Division of Labor in Society, by Emile Durkheim. Free Press (1997). ISBN-13: 978-0684836386.
- The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, by Emile Durkheim. Free Press (1995). ISBN-13: 978-0029079379.
- From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Books LLC (2009). ISBN-13: 978-1443253338.
- The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Second Edition), by Max Weber. Routledge (2001). ISBN-13: 978-0415254069.

For all of these books several editions (and translations) are available. I am not opposed to the use of other editions, but notice that in many occasions I am asking you to read specific page numbers, so you will have to figure out exactly what the correspondence is.

Finally, there will be other occasional readings required. These will be available in e-reserves (accessible from the Learning tab on the my.wisc.edu website or from the Library/Reserves link on the Learn@UW website), or I will just email them to you.

### **Calendar of sessions and readings**

In the reading list below, whenever specific page numbers are mentioned without any further indication it means that in that page there is a section or chapter break, so it should be completely straightforward to figure out where you should start/stop reading. For the cases where there are no such breaks I have indicated – between brackets after the page number – the sentence at which I want you to start/stop.

#### **Introduction / Philosophical and Historical Background**

Fri 9/2            The syllabus (no reading)

**Week 1**  
Sep 7-9            Overview of Sociological Theory

Robert A. Nisbet, “The Two Revolutions,” in *The Sociological Tradition*, pp.21-44. E-reserves

Randall Collins, “The Rise of the Social Sciences,” in *Four Sociological Traditions*, pp.3-25, 38-46. E-reserves

**Week 2**  
Sep 12-16        Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*. Selections. E-reserves

Alexis de Tocqueville: Introduction

*Democracy in America*, Author’s Introduction (9-20); Vol I, Ch 3 (50-57)

- Week 3**  
Sep 19-23
- Alexis de Tocqueville: Perils of Individualism and Taste for Material Well-Being
- Democracy in America*, Vol II, Part II, Chs 1-8 (503-528)
- Democracy in America*, Vol II, Part II, Chs 10-13, 17, 20 (530-538, 547-549, 555-558);  
Vol II, Part III, Chs 17, 21 (614-616, 634-645)
- Week 4**  
Sep 26-30
- Alexis de Tocqueville: Democratic Despotism
- Democracy in America*, Vol II, Part IV (entire) (667-705)
- Karl Marx: Introduction and the Young Marx
- Mark-Engels Reader*, 12-15, 3-6, 53-54 (...into the criticism of politics), 143-145, 70-81
- Week 5**  
Oct 3-7
- Karl Marx: The German Ideology and Capital (i)
- Mark-Engels Reader*, 149 (The premises from...)-166 (...dissolved by circumstances),  
172 (History is nothing...)-175, 184 (The concentration of trade...)-187 (...actual laws),  
189-193, 196 (Nothing is more common...)-200
- Mark-Engels Reader*, 302-329
- Week 6**  
Oct 10-14
- Karl Marx: Capital (ii)
- Mark-Engels Reader*, 329-361
- Mark-Engels Reader*, 361-364, 373-400 (end of page)
- Week 7**  
Oct 17-21
- Karl Marx: Capital (iii) and Contemporary Relevance
- Mark-Engels Reader*, 403-411, 419-438
- Week 8**  
Oct 24-28
- Émile Durkheim: The Division of Labor in Society (i) – Paper 1 due on Oct 24
- The Division of Labor in Society*, xxv-xxx, 1-7, 11-29
- The Division of Labor in Society*, 31-52, 60-64
- Week 9**  
Oct 31-Nov 4
- Émile Durkheim: The Division of Labor in Society (ii)
- The Division of Labor in Society*, 68-86, 101-106, 172-174, 200-205
- The Division of Labor in Society*, 291-322
- Week 10**  
Nov 7-11
- Émile Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (i)
- The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1-8, 33-44
- The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 207-241

- Week 11**      Émile Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (ii) - Contemporary Relevance  
Nov 14-18  
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 418-448
- Week 12**      Max Weber: Class, status groups and Bureaucracy – Paper 2 due on Nov 21  
Nov 21-23  
*From Max Weber*, 180-195, 196-209  
*From Max Weber*, 209-235, 240-244
- Week 13**      Max Weber: Power, legitimacy and the State & Rationalization and Science  
Nov 28-Dec 2  
*From Max Weber*, 77-87 (...for objective goals), 90 (The development of politics...)-92 (...from one case to another), 94 (The significance of the lawyer...)-96 (...of the demagogic species), 99 (If the journalist as a type...)-104 (...described by Ostrogorsky), 114 (Therefore, today, one...)-128  
*From Max Weber*, 129-153 (...must rebel against this), 155 (The fate of our times...)-156
- Week 14**      Max Weber: The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism  
Dec 5-9  
*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Chs 2 (13-38) and 4 (53-72 (...be proved))  
*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Ch 5 (102-125)
- Week 15**      Weber Contemporary Relevance & Wrap-Up and Conclusions - Paper 2 due on Dec 14  
Dec 12-14

Week	Topic	# of pages
Sep 2 (F)	Syllabus	
Week 1	Overview of Sociological Theory	56
Week 2	Adam Smith and Tocqueville: Introduction	68
Week 3	Tocqueville: Perils of Individualism and Taste for Material Wellbeing	56
Week 4	Tocqueville: Democratic Despotism and Marx: Introduction and the Young Marx	61
Week 5	Marx: The German Ideology and Capital i	60
Week 6	Marx: Capital ii	65
Week 7	Marx: Capital iii & Contemporary Relevance	29
Week 8	Durkheim: The Division of Labor in Society i – <b>Paper 1 due on Oct 24</b>	59
Week 9	Durkheim: The Division of Labor in Society ii	67
Week 10	Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life i	55
Week 11	Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life ii & Contemporary Relevance	31
Week 12	Weber: Class, Status Groups and Bureaucracy – <b>Paper 2 on Nov 21</b>	62
Week 13	Weber: Power, Legitimacy and the State & Rationalization and Science	62
Week 14	Weber: Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism	69
Week 15	Weber: Contemporary Relevance & Wrap Up – <b>Paper 3 due on Dec 14</b>	
	Total number of pages	800
	Average number of pages per week (15 weeks)	53.33