

**Sociology 475: Classical Sociological Theory**  
Spring 2010

Lectures: Tuesday and Thursday, 1-2:15pm  
Classroom: Sewell Social Sciences Building 6240  
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 perceived and theorized remain as 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.

### **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 lot of reading to do for this class, between 30 and 50 pages for each session (that is between 60 and 100 pages each week). To make sure that you do the readings and that you do them well, I will give you weekly quizzes (at the beginning of class on Thursday) in which I will ask you basic questions about what you have read that week. 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 (i.e. before the following Tuesday class). Each quiz will be worth 10 points, so the total number of possible points for the quizzes will be 110.

*Discussion:* I am a big fan of class discussion. However, I am aware that it is hard to ensure everyone’s participation both because this is a relatively large class and 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 will be required to post a comment or question about the readings or lectures before each one of our sessions. The posts do not have to be long. In fact, they should be short and succinct, a short paragraph at the most. They should reflect what you are most interested in discussing in class. Was there a passage or an idea that you did not understand? Did you disagree with some point made by the author? Would you like to explore some argument in more detail? Did you catch an interesting parallel with what some other author said earlier in the class? Do you want to talk about how a specific idea is applicable to a contemporary problem? Anything will do as long as it is a genuine engagement with the readings. By ‘genuine’ I mean that you have to show that you have thought about what you are saying. For instance, it is not ok to post something like “I do not understand what the author is saying here”. However, it is perfectly fine to write something like “I am confused about Marx’s distinction between use-value and exchange-value. Are they two different things? Or are they two aspects of the same thing? Can a commodity have one without the other? Is exchange-value the same as price?” It is ok to write more than one question or comment (remember that this is what I will use to direct our discussion, so if there is something you want us to talk about you should bring it up) but the point here is not to show how smart you are or to write a lot. The point

is to make sure that you engage the readings critically. If you do so, there will be A TON of things that will need clarification or that you have comments on, so this part of the class should not be a problem at all. I want to emphasize this again: if you do the readings well, both the quizzes and the online posts should require little further effort.

Each post will be worth 2 points. I will need to have 20 posts from you (out of 28 lectures, not counting the introduction and conclusion), so the maximum number of points that you can get from the posts is 40. A satisfactory post will be 2 points. An acceptable post that shows little effort or weak engagement with the readings will get 1 point. Failure to submit a post or unsatisfactory posts will receive 0 points. Posts need to be posted by the midnight before class (i.e. Tuesdays and Thursdays at 00:01am). A post is submitted after the deadline but before the class will be accepted, but one point will be subtracted from the grade (so if it is a post deserving of 1 point, it will effectively count as a 0). No posts will be accepted after the beginning of the lecture. The posts are supposed to be a tool to make you think about the readings and to motivate discussion, so you are encouraged to submit them for all sessions, even if only 20 will be required for your grade. If you submit more than 20 posts, I will keep the 20 highest grades.

*Paper:* the posts will try to ensure that you do not just read, but that you engage with the material critically. However, the short nature of the posts will not 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 a 4 to 7-page paper 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. I will distribute detailed instructions for the paper in class.

This is all you will need to do for this course. There are no midterm or final exams. There will be 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 4 unjustified missed classes. After that, only very severe circumstances, like illness with a doctor's note or a death in the family will justify an absence. Even in those cases, the absence will not be automatically accepted. Experience tells me that there are people who will take unjustified absences early in the semester, and then they have no room to maneuver when legitimate reasons come later on. This is the result of lack of planning and does not justify absences. I will be the sole judge of whether an absence is justified. You are expected to be in class every day, therefore any non-justified absence beyond the allowance of 4 will subtract 5 points from your final grade.

The grading scheme, therefore, will be the following

11 quizzes	x	10 points each	=	110 possible points (63%)
20 posts	x	2 points each	=	40 possible points (23%)
1 paper	x	25 points	=	25 possible points (14%)

The final letter grades, then, will be applied over the total possible 175 points for the class in the following way (the border grades, 163, 152, 143, etc., will be considered part of the higher interval, i.e. 163 is an A, 152 is an AB, and so on):

A	175-163
AB	163-152
B	152-143
BC	143-131
C	131-122
D	122-105
F	105-0

This scheme will be strict. If you get 162.9 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 conversation or put someone else down is not acceptable and I will be strict about that.

### **Office hours, email**

I will hold office hours once a week, 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. I will also ask you to bring the book that we are using for each session to class, and I will sometimes refer to direct quotes by page number, so you should also be aware that the process of finding where we are will be harder if you are using an alternative edition of these books.

Finally, there will be other occasional readings required. These will be available in e-reserves (accessible from the Academic tab on the my.wisc.edu website).

### **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 few 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**

Tue 1/19	Introduction (no reading)
Thu 1/21	Overview of Sociological Theory  Robert A. Nisbet, “The Two Revolutions,” in <i>The Sociological Tradition</i> , pp.21-44. E-reserves.
Tue 1/26	Adam Smith  Adam Smith, <i>Wealth of Nations</i> . Selections. E-reserves.
Thu 1/28	Alexis de Tocqueville (i): Introduction  <i>Democracy in America</i> , Author’s Introduction (9-20); Vol I, Ch 3 (50-57)
Tue 2/2	Alexis de Tocqueville (ii): Perils of individualism  <i>Democracy in America</i> , Vol II, Part II, Chs 1-8 (503-528)

Thu 2/4 Alexis de Tocqueville (iii): Taste for Material Well-Being  
*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)

Tue 2/9 Alexis de Tocqueville (iv): Democratic Despotism  
*Democracy in America*, Vol II, Part IV (entire) (667-705)

### **Karl Marx (1818-1883)**

Thu 2/11 Introduction and the young Marx  
*Mark-Engels Reader*, 12-15, 3-6, 53-54 (...into the criticism of politics), 143-145, 70-81

Tue 2/16 The German Ideology  
*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

Thu 2/18 Capital (i)  
*Mark-Engels Reader*, 302-329

Tue 2/23 Capital (ii)  
*Mark-Engels Reader*, 329-361

Thu 2/25 Capital (iii)  
*Mark-Engels Reader*, 361-367, 373-403

Tue 3/2 Capital (iv)  
*Mark-Engels Reader*, 403-415, 419-438

Thu 3/4 Marx Conclusions and Contemporary Relevance

### **Émile Durkheim (1858-1917)**

Tue 3/9 The Division of Labor in Society (i)  
*The Division of Labor in Society*, xxv-xxx, 1-7, 11-29

- Thu 3/11      The Division of Labor in Society (ii)  
*The Division of Labor in Society*, 31-64, 68-86
- Tue 3/16      The Division of Labor in Society (iii)  
*The Division of Labor in Society*, 101-109, 149-165, 172-174, 200-205
- Thu 3/18      The Division of Labor in Society (iv) – Elementary Forms of Religious Life (i)  
*The Division of Labor in Society*, 291-322  
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1-18
- Tue 3/23      The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (ii)  
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 21-44, 99-126
- Thu 3/25      The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (iii)  
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 190-193, 207-241, 303-306
- Spring Break -----
- Tue 4/6      The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (iv)  
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 330-331, 340-344, 418-448
- Thu 4/8      Durkheim Conclusions and Contemporary Relevance

### **Max Weber (1864-1920)**

- Tue 4/13      Class, status groups and socialism  
*From Max Weber*, 180-195  
 “Socialism,” E-reserves
- Thu 4/15      Bureaucracy  
*From Max Weber*, 196-244
- Tue 4/20      Power, legitimacy and the State  
*From Max Weber*, 77-128
- Thu 4/22      Rationalization and science  
*From Max Weber*, 129-156

Tue 4/27	The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (i)  <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> , Chs 1-3 (3-50)
Thu 4/29	The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (ii)  <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> , Chs 4 (only 53-80) and 5 (102-125)
Tue 5/4	Weber Conclusions and Contemporary Relevance
Thu 5/6	Wrap-Up and Conclusions

Session	Topic	# of pages
Jan 19 (T)	Syllabus	
Jan 21 (R)	Introduction	24
Jan 26 (T)	Smith	48
Jan 28 (R)	Tocqueville: Introduction	20
Feb 2 (T)	Tocqueville: Perils of individualism	26
Feb 4 (R)	Tocqueville: Taste for material well being	30
Feb 9 (T)	Tocqueville: Democratic despotism	39
Feb 11 (R)	Marx: Introduction and the young Marx	22
Feb 16 (T)	Marx: The German Ideology	32
Feb 18 (R)	Marx: Capital i	28
Feb 23 (T)	Marx: Capital ii	33
Feb 25 (R)	Marx: Capital iii	38
Mar 2 (T)	Marx: Capital iv	33
Mar 4 (R)	Marx conclusions and contemporary relevance	
Mar 9 (T)	Durkheim: The division of labor in society i	32
Mar 11 (R)	Durkheim: The division of labor in society ii	52
Mar 16 (T)	Durkheim: The division of labor in society iii	35
Mar 18 (R)	Durkheim: DLS iv & EFRL i	51
Mar 23 (T)	Durkheim: The elementary forms of religious life iii	52
Mar 25 (R)	Durkheim: The elementary forms of religious life iii	43
---- Spring Break ----		
Apr 6 (T)	Durkheim: The elementary forms of religious life iv	38
Apr 8 (R)	Durkheim conclusions and relevance	
Apr 13 (T)	Weber: Class, status groups and socialism	43
Apr 15 (R)	Weber: Bureaucracy	48
Apr 20 (T)	Weber: Power, legitimacy and the state	51
Apr 22 (R)	Weber: Rationalization and science	27
Apr 27 (T)	Weber: Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism i	48
Apr 29 (R)	Weber: Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism ii	52
May 4 (T)	Weber conclusions and relevance	
May 6 (R)	Wrap-up and conclusions	
	Total number of pages	945
	Average number of pages per session (28 sessions)	33.75