**Sociological Theory**

Sociology 235

Spring 2015

Wednesday, 4:15-7:05, LC 20

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 1 to 4pm by appointment

**Course Description**

This course introduces students to the basics of sociological theory. It does not assume prior knowledge of sociological theory. Sociological theories are the written attempts of intellectuals to answer questions about the social world. Many of these questions revolve around the changing ways that we lead our lives. Unlike empirical studies which seek to answer or explore specific questions about society, sociological theories question the taken for granted categories through which we construct our social realities.

Social theory is important to learn for two main reasons. As a student of sociology, theorists are referenced frequently as short hand for major ideas. For example, when someone says that they believe in Marxist interpretations of history, as a student of sociology you should know what they are taking about. Second, it helps you as a citizen of the world to expand your imagination about what the world around you looks like, or could look like. Sociological theory is filled with questions about who has power, what power looks like and explorations of how those dynamics shift. These questions are very relevant today.

The course is organized by types of sociological thought. We will start with the classical fathers of sociology, reading Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Then we will transition into more contemporary theories by both American and European social theorists. We will be reading a mix of the actual writing of the theorists themselves and broader contemporary explanations of the original theorist’s work to gain a fuller understanding of the material. Classes will be broken up with lectures, class discussions, small group work and occasional films or movie clips.

**Learning Objectives**

Through participation in this course, students should:

* Have the ability to identify the difference between a theory, a fact and an opinion.
* Be able to articulate the main arguments of the theorists that we covered in class. What are the key claims of each theory and the general views of society that they espouse?
* Be able to compare and assess how the social theories we are learning about inform the current state of our social world.
* Improve in critical reading skills as evidenced through reading responses and class examinations.

**Readings and Materials**

For this course you will be required to obtain *Contested Knowledge 5th Edition* by Steve Seidman. You can purchase it from the college bookstore, MaryJane Books, or online. All other readings will be posted on Blackboard.

You must bring at least one piece of paper to each class and something to write with in the event that we have an in-class writing assignment. Either a pen or pencil is fine with me.

**Course Requirements and Grading**

Your grade will be based on **two exams**, **ten short writing assignments and a final paper**. Exams will not be cumulative.

First midterm exam 20 Points

Second midterm exam 20 Points

6 page paper 30 Points

Ten Short writing assignments 30 Points (3pnt extra credit for handing in all 10)

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100 possible points (103 with extra credit)

**How to do a short answer assignment**

There will be ten short writing assignments of about one page in length which will either measure if you have done the day’s reading **or** ask you to critically engage with the material presented in class. The writing assignments are meant to encourage you to think about the theories that we have been covering critically. For these you will either walk into class and see that I have put a series of questions on the board or I will put up a few questions at the end of class. You will take out a piece of paper, a writing instrument and write down roughly a one page response to the questions in your most legible handwriting (please).

The writing assignments will be graded as follows:

1. Not completed (0 points)

✓- Did not meet basic requirements (1 point)

✓ Adequate (2 points)

✓+ Very Good (3 points)

If you hand in all ten assignments you will receive an extra 3 points to your overall grade. There will be **no additional extra credit**.

The grading scale is as follows:

A 92-100 C 72-77

A- 90-91 C- 70-71

B+ 88-89 D+ 68-69

B 82-87 D 62-67

B- 80-81 D- 60-61

C+ 78-79 E Under 60

I reserve the right to bump borderline grades up for exceptional effort or in-class participation. I will not bump any grades down.

**Other Class Policies**

**Missed exams:** Students may make up exams or assignments past the due date only with documentation of a legitimate excuse for missing the assignment or exam, such as serious illness or death in the family. See <http://www.albant.edu/undergraduatebulletin/regulations.html> for general university policy on absences and <http://www.albany.edu/healthcenter/medicalexcuse.shtml> for policy on medical absences in particular. Please see me if you have any questions.

**Academic integrity:** Any student who engages in academic dishonesty (e.g. cheating on exams, plagiarism, copying assignments) will automatically receive a failing grade for the exam or assignment. In addition, that student will be referred to the University Judicial System, which can administer more serious punishments (including suspension or expulsion). You are responsible for knowing the university’s Undergraduate Academic Regulations ([http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate \_bulletin/regulations.html](http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate%20_bulletin/regulations.html)) and complying with them.

**Schedule**

­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­Please be aware that the schedule of readings and lectures in subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class so if you miss class, please make sure you find out possible changes from classmates. I have listed study questions below some of the day’s readings which may be used to construct the in class reading assignments or may help you to structure your reading.

Introduction and Modernity

January 21 Introduction (No reading for today)

January 28 Chapter 1 Seidman “The Idea of a Science of Society: The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte”

Mills “Personal and Public Issues” from *The Sociological Imagination* [Blackboard]

\* After this first week of class and readings what do you believe sociological theory is? How is theory different than a fact or an opinion? What do you think sociological theory has to offer you? Why should you spend a semester learning this material? What do you hope to get out of the material?

Precursors to Sociological Theory

February 4 Rousseau “The Social Contract” [Blackboard]

Wollstonecraft “Vindication of the Rights of Women” [Blackboard]

Marx (1818-1883)

February 11 Chapter 2 Seidman “The Revolutionary Theory of Karl Marx”

Marx “Manifesto of the Communist Party” [Blackboard]

\*Do you see any differences between the way society talks about “communism” today and the way Marx originally wrote about it? If so what are some of those differences. Either way, please write about your opinion of Marx’s communism. Do you think it would be a good idea or a bad idea? Do you think parts of it are better than others? Why do you think you think the way that you do about Marxism?

Marx cont.

February 18 Marx “German Ideology” [Blackboard]

Marx “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” [Blackboard]

\* Pretend that you are discussing Marx with your friends and they have never heard of him. In a few sentences summarize what the “German Ideology,” the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” and the ‘Eighteenth Brumaire” are about. Draw a line on your paper. Get in groups of two or three and discuss your various definitions of the three readings. Use a section of your own paper to jot down what ideas your initial definitions may have been missing. Draw another line after the jottings and write either improved definitions of the three readings based on your conversations. For those that miss this class write summaries of each reading.

EXAM 1

February 25 EXAM 1

Durkheim (1858-1917)

March 4 Chapter 3 Seidman “The Promise of Sociology: Emile Durkheim”

Durkheim “The Division of Labor in Society” [Blackboard]

\* Explain Durkheim’s idea of the “division of labor.” Make sure in your explanation to include what the difference is between mechanical and organic solidarity. Additionally, please discuss which kind of solidarity you think is most important for the kind of society you want to live and why.

Durkheim cont.

March 11 Durkheim “The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life” [Blackboard]

Durkheim “Suicide” [Blackboard]

\*\*SPRING BREAK MARCH 18\*\*

Weber (1864-1920)

March 25 Chapter 4 Seidman “The Ironic Social Theory of Max Weber”

Weber “Bureaucracy” [Blackboard]

\* What is a bureaucracy and are bureaucracies good or bad? Briefly summarize what Weber

argued a bureaucracy if he thought they were good or bad for society. Then briefly discuss if you

believe bureaucracies are good or bad for society.

Weber cont.

April 1 Weber “Charisma” [Blackboard]

Weber “Class, Status, Party” [Blackboard]

\* Briefly summarize the three kinds of legitimate authority and provide

current examples of each. Take the time to explain why you think your examples fit in Weber’s

framework of authority.

EXAM 2

April 8 EXAM 2

American and European Theory

April 15 G.H. Mead “The Self” [Blackboard]

W.E.B. DuBois “The Souls of Black Folks” [Blackboard]

\* This is a two part small essay. 1) What is the difference between the “I” and

the “me” for Mead? 2) According to DuBois what is the “problem of the color line” and in your

opinion do you think that this problem still exists today? Whatever your argument is, make sure

to use DuBois’ definitions of the problem to make your case.

April 22 Part II Seidman “Rethinking the Classical Tradition: American Sociology”

Part III Seidman “Rethinking the Classical Tradition: European Theory

\* Which theorist do you most like reading or (if your favorite is a bad writer, as

many of them are) whose ideas do you think are most interesting and why? If you do not think

any of the theorists are interesting please discuss the three that you find most trivial/bad and

argue why I should remove them from the course.

April 29 Part IV Seidman “Revisions and Revolts: The Postmodern Turn”

\* Which theorist in this section do you most like reading or (if your favorite is a bad writer, as

many of them are) whose ideas do you think are most interesting and why? If you do not think

any of the theorists are interesting please discuss the two that you found most trivial/bad and

argue why I should remove them from the course.

Identity Politics and Theory

May 6th Part V Seidman “Revisions and Revolts: Identity Politics and Theory”

\* Congratulations on reading an entire semester of theory! For this last essay please pick a news

article in the New York Times which reflects any of the topics Seidman covers in chapters 14

through 17 of his book. Discuss how the news article relates to the theoretical topic chosen and

how your knowledge of theory makes you more informed about the news topic. Be sure to

clearly discuss the differences between the theory you are using, the facts of the article and any

opinions the writer may have put forward. Make sure to summarize the theory in your own

words as part of the essay.