

SOCIOLOGY 301

Classical Social Theory

St. Francis Xavier University
Winter Term 2021
Wednesdays 9:45—11:00, Fridays 8:15—9:30
Schwarz 215

Peter Lenco
O Nicholson Tower 615 | T 4876 | E plenco@stfx.ca
Office hours: Mondays 12:00—14:00, Wednesdays 11:00—13:00 and Fridays 10:00—12:00

Course Description

This course critically engages with writers who are largely regarded as the key thinkers in the early years of sociology as a distinct area of study, namely Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim.

In this course we will critically engage with these writers as they were grappling with the changing conditions of their time, such as industrialization, globalization, division of labour and capitalism. They were also engaging with broader notions such as the nature of science, progress, social change and social stability, and it is important to emphasize that during these challenging and often bewildering times sociologists sought to serve as a guide to social change and social improvement. That the foundations of nineteenth century sociology were by no means secure on all this is highlighted with the inclusion of Gabriel Tarde in the course, a thinker who has been all but ignored in the English-speaking world. The slightly later thinker Georg Simmel will also be considered. All this will be done through a careful reading of original texts. It is important that students not only “learn” about these writers in an indirect way, but also go through the process of directly grappling with the bare ideas themselves.

As sociologists we benefit greatly from studying these classic authors because of the extent to which their work influences thinkers who came after. Thus we cannot understand the sociology of today without knowing them thoroughly, both for their positive influence and what subsequent thinkers reacted against. In other words, on the one hand there are ways in which we might say that these thinkers were “right”: Marx's theoretical insights and practical analysis show continued relevance and indeed a resurgence in recent years. Similarly, throughout the intervening decades many have found Weber's simple argument that culture matters compelling, Durkheim opened important avenues of inquiry and method, and Tarde's microsociology is now being revisited. On the other hand – and perhaps more importantly – we can study these thinkers in terms of how they were “wrong”. Not only did they hold views that do not bear up to today's moral standards, but their work contains theoretical and methodological weak points. One theme of this course will be to analyze the extent to which these weaknesses were embedded into the sociology of the twentieth century and beyond. Either way, these writers live on, for better or worse. Even if we were to try to ignore them, we could not ignore their affect on sociology.

By the end of the course students will have a greater knowledge of the context in which sociology was developed and a deeper understanding of the major ideas and nuances of classical social theory, as

well as a firm understanding of the relevance of these thinkers today. Students will improve their ability to grapple with technical, period texts, learn to present their analysis in an appropriate academic manner, and have ample opportunity to discuss complex and nuanced social theory.

Course Form

The sessions will consist of informal introductory lectures with room for questions and open discussion. Note that the lectures will not be summaries of the texts, but are rather meant to supplement the texts and initiate analysis. Indeed, the goal of the classes will be to critically analyse the texts considerably. We will also make use of group discussions and problem-based learning. Please note that all aspects of this course adhere to the principle of equitable learning. Therefore I invite each member of the class to strive to promote a respectful, safe and equitable learning environment, free from discrimination and harassment. Feel free to discuss any questions or concerns regarding our learning environment with me, either in or before/after class or during office hours.

Texts

There is one reader available for purchase at the Campus Store:

McIntosh, Ian. 1997. *Classical Sociological Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

All other materials will be available at the MacDonald Library (online or on course reserve), or via Moodle.

Evaluation

Attendance/Participation—10%

Memos—15%

Short Paper (due 19 February)—15%

Long Paper (due 1 April)—30%

Final Exam—30%

Attendance for the course is mandatory. Be sure to contact me in advance if you are going to be absent for any length of time (see Accommodation below). Participation is an important element of the course (not just for your participation mark), and students should make every effort to ask questions and to engage in discussions and group work.

For the memos, students are asked to write two pages on the reading for any five of the sessions. These are due before Wednesday's class for that session (i.e. when we begin the topic). These need not be formally structured; reflections on the readings are what I am looking for. What caught your interest in the readings? Why is it important? How does it relate to other sociological themes and other readings? Avoid summaries or "rehearsals". I am interested here in what you can do with the content, not with your ability to describe it. Important note: you can only submit one memo per session so my advice is to start early and get them out of the way.

The shorter essay (about 2000 words) should critically assess one of the thinkers covered by the course. This would mean assessing how a writer's position on a topic holds up in practice (i.e. how well does it do what it is meant to do?), or in its own internal consistency. Likewise two theories could be critically compared – or even three.

Ideally the longer paper should deploy one of our authors/topics (one author; one of the readings – which must be different from the first paper) to a more contemporary aspect of sociological study, in effect connecting the selected author to sociology today. How does the theorist or theory determine or change our way of thinking about sociology? What sorts of foundational discussions does it imply; what does it preclude? Is the continued influence warranted or even welcome? There is considerable leeway here and students may develop their own topics. You may check with me for help with this. In all cases be sure to have a clear thesis statement and do not forget that papers that argue or try to establish a point are easier to write and easier to read. I am looking more for clarity and quality rather than quantity (of pages, of material covered). The long papers should be approximately 2500 words in length.

A closed-book, essay-style exam will be scheduled during the regular examination period.

Guidelines for Submission

All assignments must be submitted in electronic copy via Moodle fifteen minutes before class on the due date. Late assignments without valid (e.g. verified medical) excuse will be penalized five percentage points per business day. Follow the layout guidelines on the department website (under “Current Students”) and as per department guidelines, I urge you to use the American Sociological Association's citation and referencing system. Otherwise use one clear referencing system consistently, but I insist that you include page numbers when citing sources. It is up to you to track your own grades; they will not be posted electronically nor will I respond to email queries regarding them.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the use of *any* source without acknowledging its author/creator and will not be tolerated in this course. Not only is it a serious breach of academic integrity, but it undermines the efforts of other course participants. Cases of plagiarism will be dealt with in the strictest possible manner and the instructor reserves the right to use all available technical assistance to discover plagiarists. You can read more about academic integrity in the current academic calendar in section 3.8. If you are unsure of anything, please come see me. Remember: there is no justification for plagiarism.

Contact

Please only email me (with “SOCl 301” in the subject line) if I can quickly read your email and then answer with a word or two. For any communication more complex, students are welcome to phone or MS Teams during office hours. Generally no appointment is necessary. If you have difficulty with these times, simply contact me to set up an alternative arrangement.

Copyright

There will potentially be considerable online content for this course. I remind you that course materials are designed exclusively for use in SOCl 301 at StFX University only and are the property of the instructor, unless otherwise stated by the instructor. Copying any material for distribution, online posting, or selling of this material to third parties without permission is strictly prohibited subject to Canadian copyright law.

Accommodation

Any student that requires accommodation of any kind should contact me at the earliest opportunity so that the appropriate arrangements can be made. Also, please contact me at the outset of any prolonged illness or personal matter that might detract from your performance in the course. My goal is to help students navigate this course to a successful conclusion but you are responsible for communicating any potential challenges to me. I am here to support you but I cannot advocate for you if I do not have all the information in a timely manner.

Outline

Session One (13, 15 January) – **Introduction, Why study classical social theory?**

McIntosh, *Introduction: "Marx, Weber and Durkheim: Why Bother?"*

Session Two (20, 22 January) – **Marx's Early Thought**

McIntosh, §1.1–1.4

Session Three (27, 29 January) – **Marx's Political Economy**

McIntosh, §1.5–1.7

Session Four: (3, 5 February) – **Marx: Primitive Accumulation**

McIntosh, §1.8, 1.9

Session Five (10, 12 February) – **Durkheim: The Division of Labour**

McIntosh, §3.1–3.3

Session Six (17, 19 February) – **Durkheim: Rules and Religion**

McIntosh, §3.4, 3.6

► Attention: Short paper due on 19 February

Session Seven (24, 26 February) – **Durkheim: Suicide**

McIntosh, §3.5

Session Eight (3, 5 March) – **Tarde: Monadology**

Tarde, Gabriel. 2012. *Monadology and Sociology*. Melbourne: re.books. § I–III, V, VI.

Session Nine (10, 12 March) – **Simmel: Form and Content**

Simmel, Georg. 1909. "The Problem of Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 3: 289–320.

Session Ten (17, 19 March) – **Weber: Culture and Capitalism**

McIntosh, 2.1, 2.3

Session Eleven (24, 26 March) – **Weber: Modern Society**

McIntosh, 2.2, 2.4, 2.6

Session Twelve (31 March) – **Weber: Social Action**

McIntosh, 2.5

Session Thirteen (1, 3 April) – **Conclusion**

No Reading

► Attention: Paper due on 1 April