

Foundations of sociological theory

(SOC 30900 Sec. 02; HESB 30512 Sec. 02)

(Preliminary Syllabus, some things will certainly change)

Thursdays 2:00p-3:15p

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1.1 Why have courses on the “foundations of sociological theory”? (Whatever that is)

Of all of the courses that you will take as part of your sociology major requirements this one is the most peculiar and toughest to provide a rationale for. Other courses focus on **specific** topics—i.e., social inequality, gender, race and ethnicity, social movements, marriage and the family, crime and deviance, popular culture, etc. These courses are designed to familiarize you with a clearly delimited set of issues and supply you with plainly digestible information on those issues. These substantive “area” courses are meant to provide you with *sociological* answers to *specific* questions. Other required courses in the major are designed to teach you equally specific skills and abilities—i.e. social statistics and methods—skills that very smart people have decided sociology majors cannot do without.

A course is “sociological theory” is not as easy to justify. This is for two reasons:

- **Problem #1:** As opposed to the substantive specialty and “area” courses this course is about no “area” in particular, but it is about something more abstract: “classical theory.” The main difficulty is that the classical theorists dealt with everything from culture, to marriage and the family, to social movements, to crime and deviance, etc. They did not “specialize” in any particular “area” of sociology. They talked about all of them, so this course cannot be about any of them in particular.
- **Problem #2:** As opposed to the methods and statistics courses that you may have already taken, there is not pre-specified “package” of skills and abilities that the course is designed to transmit and on which I can “test” you at the end of the semester to make sure that you indeed learned those skills and abilities. So this course cannot be about imparting you with skills and abilities.

1.1.1 Other people's approach to dealing with these problems

Some instructors, when faced with these two problems, opt to justify you being here taking this course by claiming that the foundations of sociological theory course is indeed designed to teach you specific skills and abilities (they deny problem #2). They claim that at the end of the course you will have learned to “think critically” or will have the ability and talent to “think theoretically.”

Some of these instructors claim that a course in sociological theory is a lot like methods and statistics courses—it is designed to give you a set of skills—and is also *qualitatively* different from the other substantive courses because it deals with its own “area” of research (denying problem #1). This area of research is usually referred to by this people as “theory.” Some of them go as far as to claim that there is such a thing as a “theoretical method” that can be taught like a recipe for how to make a good apple pie.

1.1.2 My approach to these issues

In this course, I will pursue a different strategy. I take seriously the two problems of justification that I outlined above. Instead of denying them, I try to confront them head on. The approach that I take in this course is informed by my attempt to deal meaningfully with these two problems.

First, I do not pretend (like the problem #1 deniers) that there is a special area of “research” called “theory” which is qualitatively different from other areas of sociology. Instead, I acknowledge that in this course we will be asking questions and dealing with subject matter that substantially **overlaps** with that which you have already encountered in your other courses in sociology. This should be a good thing, since that means that a lot of you have been exposed to some of the content that we will be dealing with in this course.

Second, I do not pretend (like the problem #2 deniers) that this course is all about teaching you specific methods, skills or styles of thinking (“critical,” “theoretical” or otherwise defined). Instead, you can do pretty well in this course with the very same styles and habits of thought that you have used in all of your other classes (assuming that you have done well in them of course). No “conversion” to some allegedly “theoretical” worldview is required to do well in this course.

1.1.3 Then what?

If the **subject matter** of this course does not make it different from other courses that you've taken and if you are not going to learn any **new set** of skills or abilities, then isn't this course redundant? Aren't we back to the original issue of: Why am I here in the first place?

My answer to that is that while the subject matter of the course is no different from that covered in your other courses, the **type of questions** that we will be asking are certainly different.

To put it in a nutshell: while in other courses you have asked and been exposed to sociological answers to “**small**” and “**medium-sized**” questions, in this course we will almost exclusively deal with “**big**” (and sometimes “**really big**”) questions. That's the only thing that makes this course different from other courses. Not the **subject matter**, nor the **way that we go about** trying to answer questions about that subject, but the **scope** of the questions that we will be asking.

In fact, what makes this course distinctive is that there is no question that will be seemingly outside of our purview. The only restriction is that the question be answerable using “human and only human” means (empirical research and rational argumentation) and that the question has some relevance to the study of persons as social beings. In this course then, you can think of the word “theory” as meaning “answer to big, important question.” Some examples of “big, important questions” are:

- What is the *essence* of human beings?

- Where does religion come from?
- Is religion a good or a bad thing?
- Can there be a society without a religion?
- Why is Western European culture so different from other cultures?
- Why did Western European countries become so much richer and powerful than other countries?
- What keeps people in society together?
- Can there be a society without economic inequality?

You will soon realize that what makes the sociological classics distinctive is that they *expanded* the kind of questions that could be asked by these merely human means. They did this by taking those questions away from philosophy and theology (fields which had traditionally monopolized the answers to some of these questions) and by denying the claim of philosophers and theologians that those questions could **not** be answered by human methods, but that they required some sort of “super-human” and non-empirical source of knowledge (divine or “intuitive”) to be answered. Instead sociologists argued that we can use *the same empirical and rational means* accepted in science to try to get answers to some of these “big” questions.

1.1.4 What is required of you if you are going to do well in the course

I think that the main impediment against you doing well in the course is a very natural **reticence** to taking the questions that we are going to ask here **seriously**. Because the questions are “big” it is going to be a bit more difficult (but not impossible) to “relate” them to your experience. This is a challenge that I will attempt to help you with. It is easier to take small and medium sociological questions and make them relevant to your everyday life. So at first, some of the questions that we will be tackling are going to seem alien and incomprehensible. Some of them are not going to seem interesting because answers to those questions are not going to seem “practical” or “useful” in any way. A lot of the time you will stare at one of the questions and be tempted to dismiss it with a “so what?”

Because of this issue, the main things that I ask of you throughout the semester are 1) open-mindedness, 2) patience, and 3) willingness to entertain questions about things that are somewhat removed from your everyday experience and 4) willingness to invest some mental effort and time in coming to an understanding of the ways in which these big questions have been answered by the “classical” theorists.

- You need to be open minded because your first reaction to some of the questions that we will pose this semester will be that they are impossible or too hard to answer.
- You have to give yourself and others a chance to try to come up with an answer however impossible it may seem at first.
- Also, you have to be open-minded in that you may already think that you have the answers to these questions.
- You have to be prepared to change your mind and to listen to what sociology has to say. Of course, you can also keep your allegiance to your old answer, but this requires that you be explicit as to where that answer comes from and why it may be so appealing to you.
- You have to be patient because as opposed to “small” questions, the answer to “big” questions does not come all at once. Sometimes you have to go about it in a very indirect and circuitous way. In fact the *best* answers to big questions have come in this way, as you’ll soon find out.

- You have to have patience for abstraction and for armchair speculation. Answers to big questions require thinking “big” which means thinking with rather abstract concepts and coming up with what sometimes may seem like wild generalizations.
- You have to have some openness to give these speculations and generalizations a chance and to consider the way in which they might be right (as opposed to quickly dismissing them as being an over-stretch). It is much easier to find the quick exception to a general statement than to truly appreciate the grain of truth in it.
- Finally, you have to dedicate some perspiration to understanding previous big answers to these big questions. This is important, because it will sometimes seem as if a particular theorist is getting lost on some irrelevant detour. If you find yourself in this situation, just stop and remind yourself of the “big” question that this theorist began to answer in the first place. I think that you should be prepared to set aside at least 5-6 hours of work for this course every week (that’s both reading and writing).

1.1.5 Why all of this old stuff?

You may have noticed that a big part of the reason why this course is called “foundations” is because we are going to have to read a lot of stuff written by long-dead white males of European ancestry. There’s a reason for this, and is connected to what I have touched on above: coming up with good answers to big questions requires both skill and imagination, and the really good answers have been so good as to have stood the test of time. That’s why they are “classics” we read the old stuff, because that gives us some true and unsurpassed examples of incredibly creative answer to some really big and difficult questions. **They are examples for you and me to follow** in thinking about this big questions. That’s why we read them.

1.2 Course Website

The primary non-face-to-face interface that we will use this semester is the Concourse course website. You can get there by pointing your browser to:

<https://concourse.nd.edu/webct/logon/62375802011>

We will use the website to submit weekly questions, and other comments regarding class and the readings and to submit your formal weekly assignments. In addition any and all readings that are referenced below which are not available via JSTOR will be available (in pdf format) in the Concourse website. I recommend that you go to website as soon as you get a chance and explore it.

1.3 Requirements

- ✓ **Attendance and Active Participation in Class Discussions.** An important part of class discussions involves raising questions about the readings. Don’t be shy to ask a question or say “I didn’t understand what Durkheim meant by…” most of your classmates are probably as clueless as you are. You will also have an opportunity to raise issues and question (anonymously) in our online discussion forum at the concourse web site.
- ✓ **Electronically Submitted Daily Reading Summaries.** Each student will be required to submit a short (about one paragraph) summary of the readings scheduled for that day through the Concourse site before class meets for that day (no later than 12:00pm on the day of class; this deadline will be inflexible since it will be set by the electronic submission system on Concourse).
- ✓ **In Class-Essays and Group-Work.** Occasionally, I will ask you to write short in-class essays in response to specific issues that we will be dealing with that week. You may also be asked to work

on coming up with an answer to a specific question as part of an in class group project. A member of your group will then be in charge of presenting your answer to the rest of the class.

- ✓ **Short Take-Home Essays.** Every week I will assign a short (2-3 pages double-spaced) essay on one of the questions that we will be dealing with that week. The essay will ask you to summarize the answers offered by that particular theorist as well as your evaluation of that answer. You are required to submit a short essay for ten (10) out of the fifteen (15) weeks that we will be meeting throughout the semester. This essay should be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins in a 12-point *serif* font (a *serif* font is a font that looks “old fashioned” like this one; this kind of font is *sans serif*, and **shouldn’t** be used). In addition your name (and the name of the course) should be on the *header* of the page **not** on the actual *body* of the paper.
- ✓ **Final Paper Assignment.** This is the main assignment for the course. You will be asked to write an 8-10 page “theory” paper. This paper will address a “big question” of interest to you, using ideas from the readings that we will be doing throughout the semester as a resource in coming up with a preliminary answer to that question. An early “idea” draft will be due early in the semester, a draft “introduction” and reference list will be due at the time of the midterm and the final draft will be due the date of the final for the class. I will distribute more specific instructions when the time comes.

1.4 Grading policy

- ✓ **Electronically Submitted Daily Reading Summaries.** These will be graded on a simple 0, 1, 2 scale. Zero (0) means that you gave *no indication* of having done the reading (I’m the sole judge of that), One (1) means that you gave *some indication* of having done the reading, and two (2) means that you gave *full indication* of having done the reading.
- ✓ **In Class-Essays and Group-Work.** In class essays will be graded on a 0-5 scale, with zero (0) indicating *no appreciable effort* to deal with the question, and five (5) indicating an *outstanding level of effort* (most of the time, expect a grade in-between). I will return in-class essays back to you as soon as they are graded. Written material that results from group work will be submitted but not returned.
- ✓ **Short Take-Home Essays.** The short take-home essays will be graded on a 0-10 scale with zero (0) indicating *no appreciable effort* in connecting the question to the assigned readings and explicating the issue from the point of view of the theorist in question, and ten (10) indicating an *outstanding level of effort* in both comprehending and summarizing what the theorist said, as well as connecting what the theorist said to the relevant question.
- ✓ **Final Paper Assignment.** Your final paper will be graded according to a simple letter scale going from A through F. You will receive a “running-grade” on this paper. The first grade will be assigned at the midpoint of the semester, and then a final-grade will be assigned at the end of the course. If you want to translate the letter grade to “numbers” you can use the following guide (This is also the grading scheme that I will use to determine the final grade in the course):

Letter Grade	%	Letter Grade	%
A	>94%	C+	77-79%
A-	90-94%	C	73-76%

B+	87-89%	C-	70-72%
B	83-86%	D	60-69%
B-	80-82%	F	<60%

The weight of each required component in determining your final grade is as follows:

Assignment	%
Attendance and Active Participation in Class Discussions	5%
Electronically Submitted Daily Reading Summaries	15%
In-Class Essays and Group-Work	20%
Final Paper Assignment	25%
Short Take-Home Essays	35%

1.5 Policy on Handing-In Homework/Writing Assignments/Projects, Etc:

If students know that they will have to miss a paper deadline (e.g. due to involvement in a college sporting event or performance, or certain religious holidays not acknowledged by the university), they must inform me before-hand. **Late papers will not be accepted for any other reason.** Papers will ONLY be accepted if submitted through the electronic submission system available in concourse.

1.6 A Request

I would like to know throughout the term how the course is going, what we should change, and how the course can best meet your needs. To this end I will administer a short evaluation during the middle of the semester and your feedback is greatly appreciated. If you have a problem, bring it to me BEFORE course evaluations at the end of the semester. That might help people in the next class, but it will be too late to correct things for you.

- ✓ Important: If at any point during the course you find that you are doing less well than you hoped or expected, you are encouraged to seek immediate counsel with me. We'll work together to adjust your work/study habits and explore other ways that I might approach material that would be more helpful.

1.7 Code of Conduct Policy

Students are required to read, understand, and follow all aspects of the University's Code of Conduct mentioned in the academic code of conduct handbook: <http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code>. You should be familiar with most punishable forms of cheating. To clarify more ambiguous forms, we will discuss plagiarism, original work, and citation requirements before the first paper assignment. Any infractions, including, but not limited to, cheating on the exams, plagiarizing written material, or the copying of computer material, will be treated very seriously. Such offenses could result in severe sanctions, including failure in this course or even dismissal from the University. Some of the infractions listed under the University of Notre Dame's code of conduct include (but are not limited to) all forms of student academic dishonesty, including cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty and plagiarism.

1.8 Class Conduct

Because of the subject matter, we are bound to cover topics that people might look at from different points of view. Discussion is an important aspect of this course. Let people have their say. You will have yours. Please respect the views, experiences, and opinions of others. Treat others as you would like to be treated; trying to avoid destructive criticism and offering constructive criticism instead. Following these guidelines will make this more enjoyable to everyone.

Also, as a sign of respect to your fellow classmates, please avoid walking in late or leaving early. Please turn off cell phones and pagers before class. Please don't read the paper, talk to your friends, or pass notes during class. Not only are those things disrespectful and disruptive to your classmates and to me, but they also limit your ability to participate in class discussions and understand the material. Tardiness is disruptive. It is not professional, nor will it be appreciated. If you are more than 15 minutes late, that will count as an absence.

1.9 Attendance Policy

I will take attendance each day. A semester grade of F is the only grade possible after three (3) UNEXCUSED absences, for any reason. Furthermore, attendance rates, as an objective measure of student participation, will be used as a deciding factor in the determination of final grades, should a student's point total place her/him "on the line" between letter grades. Students will be allowed to make up work missed due to absences ONLY if they are EXCUSABLE, such as a DOCUMENTED debilitating or highly contagious personal illness, illness of dependents, death in the immediate family, or legal obligations. To be excused for an absence the student must either notify me in advance of the class and receive my approval, OR document the absence in writing (by a doctor's note, letter from the Dean's office, etc.) on the first day the student returns to class. Evidence for excused absences will NOT be accepted at any later date.

1.10 Readings

There will be two primary sources of material in class: required texts and assigned readings. All of the assigned readings that are not in the required text will be available in the course website in *pdf* format.

1.11 Required Texts

These are the books that we will be using throughout the semester and which are available for purchase at the bookstore:

1.11.1 General

- ✓ Levine, Donald N. 1995. *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Press.

1.11.2 Marx

- ✓ Tucker, Robert C. (Editor). 1972. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton.

1.11.3 Weber

- ✓ Heydebrand, W. (Editor). 1994. *Max Weber: Sociological Writings*. New York: Continuum.
- ✓ Kalberg, Stephen. 2009. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1.11.4 Durkheim:

- ✓ Giddens, Anthony (Editor). 1972. *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- ✓ Pickering, W. S. F. (Editor). 1994. *Durkheim on Religion*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- ✓ Traugott, Mark (Editor). 1978. *Emile Durkheim on Institutional Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1.11.5 Simmel

- ✓ Levine, Donald N. (Editor). 1972. *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press