

Graduate Seminar: Social Theory (SOC/CRM 503)

Professor John Rice

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(course page link at bottom of my department page)

Office Hours: MW, 9:00-9:30, 11:00-11:30; T, 4:20-5:00 (and by appointment)

I. Course Description

In virtually all literate societies throughout human history, there have been those that have attempted to think systematically about society and social dynamics. (There were undoubtedly those that did so in pre-literate societies, as well, but we have no written record of such attempts.) How is society possible, at all? How does it come about and why? Of what, as Plato examined in The Republic, does the just society consist? And so on.

Modern sociological theory, however, dates back to the late 18th century and continued its development throughout the subsequent centuries. The foundational elements comprising sociological theory, and the discipline of sociology more generally, were assembled during the 19th and 20th centuries, in the works of such seminal thinkers as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and George Herbert Mead. As the work of these thinkers defined the discipline of sociology, it is essential that we understand and master their distinctive approaches to thinking systematically and carefully about the nature of social reality. As an intellectual discipline, the phenomena we study, the questions we ask, the ways that we do our work can all be traced back to their efforts. As we will see, far from being – as so many students mistakenly assume – the now-irrelevant postulations of “dead white guys” (and Western European white guys, to boot) their ideas continue to define and shape contemporary sociological research and to provide insight into the machinations of human societies.

A few further words, by way of orienting you to the approach we will be taking to sociological theory, are in order. First of all, ideas and idea systems, are never independent of their historical, social-structural, and cultural context. This observation holds true for sociological theory, as well. It was not an accident that modern sociological theory was “born” when and where it was: a full understanding of the issues that drove, for example, Karl Marx to devise “historical materialism,” as the lens through which one must examine the origins, nature, and consequences of societies, is impossible without recognizing the nature of the social reality that was emerging in his productive years. As we will see later in the semester, it was no accident that structural-functionalist theory rose to a position of dominance when and where it did so. Nor was it a fluke when Neo-conflict and Symbolic Interactionist theory became ascendant.

Secondly, throughout the semester we will give special attention to the ways in which each theory can (or cannot) be profitably employed to guide and shape research in both public sociology and criminology. In my years of teaching theory, I have seen that one of the hardest things for students to grasp is that theory is not some abstract entity, separate from research. (Often, this is expressed in terms of a [false] dichotomy between “theory” and “practice.”) Indeed, it is helpful to understand theories as lenses, if you will, each of which brings the world into focus in different ways. Theory drives the kinds of questions we ask of the social world and provides us with a disciplined and systematic way of thinking about that world. Theory also guides methodological approaches, research designs, the selection and creation of conceptual and operational definitions. We will, then, devote some time each week of the seminar to addressing these issues.

Finally, it is a very unwieldy task we confront. To try to cover the entire body of sociological theory in a single semester would force us to sacrifice depth for breadth of coverage. Depth of understanding is my, and our, principal goal. As such, we will not be able to cover every theory or theorist. To me, however, the beauty of mastering – learning to read (you cannot “look over” or “skim”)

and understand the theories we will cover will give you the intellectual skills to learn and understand the theories we will not be able to cover.

II. Course Requirements/Texts

A. There are two required texts for the course:

Sociological Theory (7th Edition), by George Ritzer.
Social Theory: Roots and Branches (3rd Edition), by Peter Kivisto

B. It is possible to earn 100 total points in this course. As this is a graduate-level seminar, there will be no examinations; rather your scores will be based upon your performance on the following criteria.

1. Consistent preparation for and regular, meaningful participation in the intellectual life of the course, throughout the semester: 20 points. This means, among other things, that everyone needs to do the assigned readings for every week's meeting.
2. In lieu of exams, you will receive weekly written assignments, in which you will respond to questions I will provide to you one week in advance, regarding each theorist &/or theoretical approach. 28 points.
3. A term paper worth 30 points, (5 of these points will be decided by a preliminary draft, to be submitted about 1/3 to 1/2-way through the semester – both the draft and the paper requirement are described in more detail below).
3. Lead a lecture/discussion: During the course of the semester each person in the seminar will, for one class, have principal responsibility for leading the discussion and analysis of one of the assigned readings for that evening's class: 10 points.
4. Presentation of Term Paper: The last 2 seminar meetings of the semester, students will do a 10-15 minute (maximum) presentation, providing an overview of their research paper, and a cogent, concise summary of their key findings. (12 points).

The preliminary draft referred to in #2, above, will be a 6-8 page, typed, double-spaced paper, in which you will provide evidence of serious preliminary efforts towards completing a more substantial work of scholarly sociological/criminological analysis. This draft will cover the following topics: (1) the subject you have chosen to study and the theoretical approach (e.g. historical materialism, Weber's rationalization thesis, etc.) you will be taking and why; and, (3) a complete list of some of the relevant references you will be using. The prospectus/draft will be due at the beginning of class on October 16th. The early draft will be handed back to you, with detailed suggestions for improving your final papers, early enough in the semester that you will have time to make changes or select a new topic if the need arises. You will be expected to incorporate those suggestions into the final paper.

The final term paper itself will be 18-20 pages (including the appropriate references and end-note sections). The content of the paper should develop a sociological/criminological analysis of some empirical phenomenon. The analysis may (**AND MUST**) employ any of the major **social theories** we will be covering during the semester. (The papers must present a coherent, well-organized, and carefully-written sociological-criminological analysis of the phenomenon you have chosen to study.

The topic for your paper should be the topic you will use for your thesis or internship report.

III. Due Dates, and Policies Regarding Absences, Late Papers, Grading, and Other Important Matters.

- A. The term paper draft will be due October 16th.
- B. The final term paper will be due on the last class meeting of the semester.
 - 1. **Late Drafts/Papers will be docked one letter grade for each day late**

C. Grades: Your Course Grades will be based upon a standard conversion of the total points you have earned into a corresponding letter grade. (Because you can earn 100 points, your scores are your percentages.) **Note:** *The general custom in graduate school is that grades below a “B” are considered inadequate. (Indeed, a “C” in graduate school is the equivalent of an “F” in undergraduate school.) This is not a matter of grade inflation, but of the expectation of academic mastery and excellence: hence, the term, master’s degree. I have included the full grading scale here because, in past experience, I have occasionally given a D or F in a graduate class.*

A = 93 and above	B+ = 87-89	C+ = 77-79	D+ = 67-69	F = 59% or less
A- = 90-92	B = 83-86	C = 73-76	D = 63-66	
	B- = 80-82	C- = 70-72	D- = 60-62	

E. Cheating, Plagiarism: All work – tests, papers – must be the product of your own efforts. Any attempt by a student to represent the work of another as his or her own is considered plagiarism. Plagiarism includes copying the answers of another student on an examination or copying or substantially restating the work of another person or persons in any oral or written work without citing the appropriate source, and collaborating with someone else in an academic endeavor without acknowledging his or her contribution.

Pay close attention to this definition, **because if you are guilty of plagiarism you will receive an “F” for the entire course.** This, in turn, will result in your washing out of the master’s program. It is not difficult to tell when a term paper or exam has been plagiarized, and **I do take the time and make the effort to apprehend cheaters.** Academic dishonesty is nothing other than lying and stealing; if you choose to lie or steal you will be treated accordingly.

Course Outline

Date	Topic and Readings
<p>Aug. 24</p>	<p>Course Introduction Historical Overview of Sociological Social Theory</p> <p>Readings: <i>Note: assigned readings are for the following week’s classes. They must be read <u>before</u> the class meeting.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapters 1 & 2 2. Marx (in Kivisto): Readings 1, 2, 4 & 5
<p>Aug. 31</p>	<p>Karl Marx Alienation & Species Being</p>

	<p>Commodities Historical Materialism Surplus Value & Exploitation</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 4 2. Max Weber, <u>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</u> <u>Chapter 1</u>, <u>Chapter 2</u>, <u>Chapter 3</u>, <u>Chapter 4</u>, <u>Chapter 5</u>
Sept. 7	<p>Max Weber Ideal Types Social Action & Interaction Verstehen, Value-Neutrality & Value Relevance Types of Rationality Culture & Religion & The Marx-Weber “Debate”</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 3 2. Durkheim (in Kivisto), Readings 6, 7, 8, 10
Sept. 11	<p>Emile Durkheim Social Facts Moral Regulation & Social Integration & Solidarity Anomie & Suicide Religion</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 5 2. Simmel (in Kivisto), Readings 16, 17, 18, 19
Sept. 14	<p>Georg Simmel Sociation Conflict & Group Formation Social Types Fashion</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, pp. 98-103 (The Chicago School); Chapter 7 2. Kivisto, Readings 30, 31, 33, 35
Sept. 21	<p>Brief Overview of The Chicago School Functionalism & Neo-Functionalism Conflict Theory & The Power Elite (Mills)</p>

	<p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 8 2. Kivisto, Readings 60, 70, 58
Sept. 28	<p>Neo-Marxian Theory</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 10 2. Kivisto, Readings 38, 39, 40
Oct. 12	<p>Symbolic Interaction</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 11 2. Kivisto, Readings 43, 44
Oct. 19	<p><u>NB: Draft of term paper due in class</u></p> <p>Ethnomethodology</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 12 2. Kivisto, Readings 46, 48, 51
Oct. 26	<p>Exchange and Rational Choice Theory</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 13 2. Kivisto, Readings 52, 54, 55
Nov. 2	<p>Feminism and Intersectionality</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 14 2. Kivisto, Readings 65, 76
Nov. 9	<p>Theories Integrating Micro-Macro & Agency-Structure</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 17 2. Kivisto, Readings 66, 67, 69
Nov. 16	<p>Structuralism, Post-Structuralism & Post-Modernism</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ritzer, Chapter 15 2. Kivisto, Readings 63, 64
Nov. 23	Contemporary Theories of Modernity
Nov. 30— Dec. 7th	Student Research Paper Presentations
(NB: TERM PAPERS DUE BY FINAL CLASS)	

