

# Social Theory (SOC 360)

## Spring 2011

Dr. John Rice

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Office Hours: MW 9:00-10:30; 12:00-12:30; R 1:00-2:15, or by appointment

### I. Course Description & Purpose

This course is designed to ground students in the major approaches to sociological theory, as they have developed throughout history. Although social theory, in general, derives from and is one integral part of the human race's enduring philosophical conversation with itself about, *inter alia*, the meaning of human existence, what constitutes a good and just social order, what is truth, and so forth, we will restrict ourselves to covering sociological theories from the past two centuries (and we will not be able to cover all of those, for that matter). But it is crucial to remember that all social and sociological theory, as just indicated, has its roots in philosophy (consider, for example, Plato's *Republic*); this is crucial to remember not least because, as one theorist has put it, "a discipline that refuses to remember its founders will not realize when it is being merely silly." It is our theory, after all, that distinguishes sociology as a unique and vital intellectual discipline: without it, we have nothing distinctive or valuable to offer by way of insight or understanding. We will, then, devote our efforts throughout the semester to cultivating a solid understanding of sociological theories from the "classical" era of the discipline up through contemporary theories.

By way of further orientation, it will be helpful to introduce a couple of general themes. In addition to understanding the theories themselves, an integral part of the work before us entails a consideration of the relationship between historical context and the emergence of particular types of theory. One of the core premises of our discipline is that ideas are *never* independent of social and cultural context: this premise also applies to sociology itself. This, of course, is an application of the sociology of knowledge to an understanding of the history of sociological theory: thus, throughout the semester, we will focus on, and you should be attuned to, the question of why particular kinds of theories emerge when they do — why, for example, structural-functionalist theory dominated American social science in the mid-20th century; or, why conflict theory came to dominate in subsequent decades; or, why post-modern theories emerged in the 1980's and have now come to be taken quite seriously.

An additional consideration that will be of ongoing importance to the course centers on the question of what theory is "for" — i.e., what purposes does it serve? This admittedly somewhat vague question can nonetheless sensitize us to such crucial matters as: what things are assumed to be true in order for this theory (whatever theory is under discussion) to be viable? Are these assumptions legitimate? Why? Why not? If we grant these assumptions, do we then exclude alternative possibilities that should not or cannot be excluded? What kinds of methods are implied and required by a given theoretical orientation? And so forth. The key point, here, is that a sophisticated use of sociological theory depends upon a solid understanding of the analytical "commitments" one makes by adopting one theoretical approach rather than another. We will work to cultivate such an understanding throughout the

semester.

One final point: Not all theories are created equal. Some explain more about the social world than others; some are more exercises in semantics than serious attempts to make sense of the origins, nature, and consequences of particular forms of social organization. As sociologists – and, for that matter, as citizens – you would do well to maintain a healthy skepticism about received wisdom, handed down from the lofty and ethereal heights of some intellectual Mount Olympus. It never hurts to remember the air is thin at those lofty heights: what sounds inspired may just be the babbling of an oxygen-deprived mind!

## II. Course Requirements/Texts

A. There are two required texts for the course. Given the absurd cost of college text-books these days, and in the interests of trying to save you all a little money, additional readings from various theory sites on the internet will be assigned. I have screened these sites, trying to weed out the lunatic-fringe element that roams quite freely on the net.

1. *Selected Readings from Classical & Contemporary Sociological Theory*, by Ritzer & Goodman (Note: This is a “Custom” Text)
2. *Illuminating the Social World*, edited by Peter Kivisto.

For understanding the most current social theories, I strongly recommend – but will not require – *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, by Krishan Kumar. Anyone thinking of eventual graduate work in sociology can benefit from reading this book. Kumar is a first-rate thinker and writer, and does a better job of analyzing contemporary sociological theory than anyone else with whom I’m familiar.

B. **Course Learning Objectives:** By the end of the semester, students will:

- Understand the ways in which sociological theory and concepts comprise a unique way of thinking about human social behavior, and demonstrate the ability to use sociological theory to analyze the workings of society
- Understand the methods of research used by sociologists to provide empirical support for sociological theory and concepts, and the close connection between sociological theory and methods
- Understand the history and continuing evolution of sociological theory and the societal, cultural, and historical conditions contributing to that history and continuing evolution

C. It will be possible to earn 100 points in the course, which will be broken down by your scores on the following:

1. *Three Examinations, each worth 25 points.* The exams will be essay examinations.

2. *Attendance & Participation, worth 10 points.* I have given substantial weight to this dimension of student performance, because a solid grasp of social theory is often the product of ongoing and vital intellectual exchange among all of the participants. A key part of a university

education is the students' progressive mastery of the key premises and practices in the discipline in which they are working: such mastery requires students to take responsibility for doing the work, and grappling with the ideas with which they are presented. As such, I expect each of you to do the readings, to write down and then raise questions you have from the readings, to work through complex ideas and issues – both on your own and in class itself – and to engage in critical and thoughtful discussion.

**3. Term Paper & Prospectus/Draft, 15 points total.** Students are to write an original research paper, examining any current social phenomenon that piques your interest, using one of the theoretical perspectives we will cover during the semester (or one we have not been able to cover, if you so choose). Thus, e.g., you may choose to analyze “down-sizing” from, say, a conflict perspective, or para-military organizations from a symbolic interactionist perspective, or advertising from a post-modernist perspective, etc. The papers will be 8-10 pages in length (typed, double-spaced), including reference pages. They *must* have a clearly developed theoretical perspective, and the link between and among subject matter, methods of analysis, and theoretical orientation must be clearly and logically specified. The papers must also be grammatically and syntactically sound: no misspellings, no sentence fragments, no run-on sentences, etc. ***Term Papers are due on Monday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>.***

a. ***Prospectus (worth 3 of the 15 points): due at beginning of class on February 28<sup>th</sup>.*** In order to provide you with early feedback (suggestions, criticisms) on your term papers (and to get you started on your papers), I will expect each of you to turn in a prospectus, of 3-5 pp. (again, typed, double-spaced) in length. The prospectus should: (1) identify the topic about which you will write your term paper, (2) explain the theoretical framework you will employ, and why you will employ it, (3) identify the methodological approach you will take (field observation, interviews, archival work, statistical analysis) and why you will take that approach, and (4) a list of likely references. (The references must be complete: follow the citation style used in any of the major sociological journals – ASR, AJS, SQ, etc.) **Treat the prospectus as the beginning draft of the term paper, in essence.**

### **III. Exam and Assignment Dates and Policies**

**A. Exam #1 will be February 11<sup>th</sup>**

**B. Exam#2 will be March 11<sup>th</sup>**

**C. Final Exam will be Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup> - @ 11:30**

**D. Paper Draft due February 28<sup>th</sup>**

**E. Term Papers due May 2<sup>nd</sup>**

**F. Except in cases of an emergency, you must notify me in advance if you have to miss an exam or assignment deadline.** If you fail to notify me in advance, and you do to have a legitimate excuse, you will not be allowed to take a make-up exam or turn in the assigned work.

**G. Make-up Exams** will only be given at one time: **Reading Day: May 3<sup>rd</sup> at 10:00 a.m.** Do NOT miss a make-up exam. There will be no other opportunity to make up the work.

**H. Late Papers, Presentations:** Policy, here, is the same as for an exam: contact me in advance, have a legitimate excuse, or lose the points. Un-excused late papers lose one letter grade for each day they are late.

**I. Cheating/Plagiarism:** An unpleasant matter, to be sure. All work – tests, papers, presentations – 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. This 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. *Any student caught cheating/plagiarizing on any work will receive an F for the course!!! And I do take the time and make the effort to uncover cheating/plagiarism.*

**THERE WILL BE NO OPPORTUNITY FOR EXTRA CREDIT WORK! YOUR COURSE GRADE WILL DEPEND UPON YOUR PERFORMANCE IN THE REQUIRED COURSE WORK ONLY!**

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#### **IV. Course Outline**

Date	Topics/Readings
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**Jan. 12**

Introduction and Overview

**Readings:** (all readings are for following week's class) Ritzer & Goodman, "Karl Marx"; Walsh (in Kivisto): "Working Longer, Living Less . . ."

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**Jan. 14–26**

**NO CLASS ON JAN. 17<sup>TH</sup>: MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY**

The Birth of Modern Society & the Birth of Modern Social Theory

Karl Marx: Historical Materialism

**Readings:** Ritzer & Goodman, "Max Weber"; Ritzer (in Kivisto): "McDonaldization"

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**Jan. 28-Feb. 9**

Max Weber: Intersubjectivity, Rationalization (and the Marx-Weber Dialogue)

Review

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**Feb. 11**

**EXAM # 1**

**Readings:** Ritzer & Goodman, "Emile Durkheim"; Hornsby (in Kivisto): "Searching the Net for

Community”

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**Feb. 14-25**

Return, go over exams

Emile Durkheim: Scientific Sociology, Social Facts, Anomie, Solidarity

**Readings:** Ritzer & Goodman, 167-194: “Structural Functionalism & Neo-functionalism”

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**Feb. 28-Mar. 9**

**NOTE: TERM PAPER DRAFT DUE IN CLASS FEB. 28<sup>TH</sup>**

Structural-Functionalist “Consensus” (Post-WW II theory)

Talcott Parsons

Robert Merton

The “Consensus” Erodes: Conflict Theory

Review

**Readings:** Ritzer & Goodman, 195-206: “Conflict Theory”

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**Mar. 11**

**EXAM #2**

**NO CLASS THE WEEK OF MARCH 14<sup>TH</sup>: SPRING BREAK!!**

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**Readings:** Ritzer & Goodman, “Symbolic Interactionism”; (in Kivisto) Schweingruber and Burns: “Organizing Door-to-Door Sales”

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**Mar. 21 - Apr. 6**

Return, go over exams

The “Consensus” Further Erodes

Symbolic Interactionism

Mead, Blumer

**Readings: Readings:** Kivisto & Pittman (in Kivisto): “Goffman’s Dramaturgical Sociology”; Ritzer and Goodman, pp. 145-182

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**Apr. 8 - Apr. 22**

The “Consensus” Further Erodes:

Dramaturgy (Goffman)

Phenomenology (and a note on Ethnomethodology)

**Readings:** Lorber (in Kivisto), "Gendered Bodies"

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**Apr. 25 - May 2** (*last day of class*)

Feminist Theory  
Post-Industrial Society

Summary and Review: Theory

***MAKE-UP EXAM DATE IS WEDNESDAY, MAY 3<sup>RD</sup>, 10:00 AM, SB 208D***

**Term Papers due in Class May 2<sup>nd</sup>**  
**Final Exam: Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup> @ 11:30**