Classical Sociological Theory: An Introduction

Florida International University • Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies
Spring 2024 • SYA 4010 • Mon/Wed 2:00–3:15 • PC 211 • Professor Zachary Levenson
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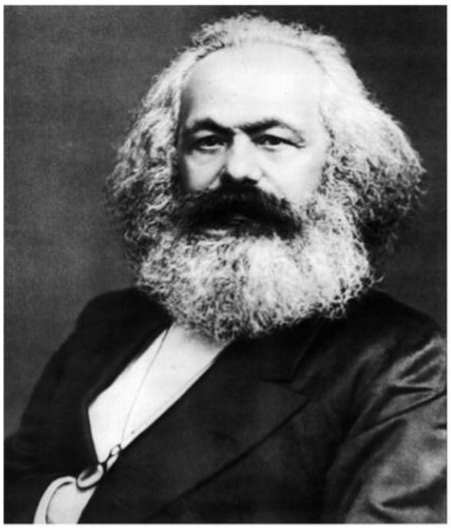
(https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/xpakt)

> "Abstraction from the local is, on the one hand, useful and necessary; on the other, it represents the failure to account for all the material claims and challenges local evidence presents." —Carolyn Dever, *Skeptical Feminism* (2004)





Welcome to classical sociological theory! As you may have heard by now, this is a very demanding course that requires the most difficult set of readings you are likely to have encountered in any class. But don't worry: if you put in the time and effort, you will do just fine. However, this is the very first thing I want to emphasize: this is not a class in which falling behind on readings or missing class is a viable option. I do not say this to intimidate you, but to indicate an important truth: if you do not keep up with the readings or if you miss more than a few lectures, you are not likely to pass. That means that attendance is a requirement, as are reading summaries that you will post for every single class. I will elaborate the details of these requirements below, but first, a note on SYA 4010.

The goal of this course is to provide you with a foundation in classical social theory. Why classical? You will encounter more contemporary theorists in subsequent GSS courses, or perhaps you already have. But we will spend this semester focusing on theorists who were largely writing in the period between the revolts of 1848 and the beginning of the Cold War. This is a period that corresponds with the birth of sociology as a discipline, and so we will encounter writers who are attempting to formulate some of the key concepts that subsequent sociologists would take for granted. Believe it or not, before Marx, no one had used the words "capitalism" or "alienation" before, at least not in their modern sense. Likewise, before Weber, few had tried to conceptualize the nature of bureaucracies, and before Du Bois and de Beauvoir, few had attempted to reconcile race and gender with capitalism, respectively.

Each of the five theorists covered in this course provides us with a theory of power. **Marx** and his longtime collaborator **Engels** thought about power in terms of classes: capitalists have more power than workers because they own the means of production. Workers can certainly withhold their labor-power – that is, they can strike – but this is effectively the only weapon in their arsenal. Meanwhile, capitalists appear to control the state (and therefore schools, police, and military), own the media, and have the capacity to refuse to hire unruly workers. This social relation between the two classes is the source of power for Marx and Engels.

But **Durkheim** gives us a very different account. In some ways, it's a bit odd to read Durkheim as a theorist of power, as he rarely uses that word. On the other hand, many of his concepts – solidarity, collective consciousness, norms, etc. – reveal what it is that binds society together. In this sense, we can think of Durkheim as a theorist of normalizing power. That is, if Marx wrote about material bases of power – money, property, and the like – Durkheim is covering symbolic bases such as norms, rules, and values. Why do people conform? We'll find out.

After the midterm, we encounter **Du Bois**, the only American we'll be reading this semester, though he did spend some time in Europe, most notably to collaborate with Weber, with whom we wrap up the semester. Du Bois was fascinated by what he identified as the central problem of the 20th century: the color line. In this context, we'll see how he develops his understanding of racialization over the course of his career. If he began with a largely experiential understanding of the veil and double consciousness, he soon shifts to thinking about how race and class intersect and how we cannot understand racism in the modern world without thinking about it in relation to capitalism. But Marxism alone is not up to the task, he insists.

Similarly, **de Beauvoir** is sympathetic to Marx, but she doesn't think his theory adequately deals with the subjection of women. Indeed, as we'll see, women were no better off in the Soviet Union than they were in the capitalist countries of Western Europe, so there is no reason to think that communism will automatically lead to the withering away of gendered domination. A Marxist might theorize the subjection of women as a way of providing cheap (or even free) reproductive labor to keep male breadwinners productive at work. But as she demonstrates, this isn't even close to the whole story. Marrying psychoanalytic and existentialist approaches, de Beauvoir shows how women are continually subjected to male power in their everyday lives from the moment of their birth.

We will conclude the course with a very different theory of power, one **Weber** describes as rooted in bureaucracy. This bureaucratic power is nearly impossible to destroy, and it constitutes a formidable machine that can be wielded by whoever gains control over it. For Weber, power is simply the ability to realize one's will against the resistance of others. We will examine how Weber thinks about increasing one's ability to realize their will – whether this is in terms of wealth (class), honor (status), legitimacy, violence, or perhaps most effectively, an elaborate matrix of rules, laws, and codes. In the latter case, do people obey bureaucratic rules because it would violate social norms not to, as Durkheim might argue? Or are controllers of bureaucracy identical to capitalists, as Marx might insist? Neither! Weber will insist. We'll make sense of his answer in due time.

A Note on Reading

Reading is a central component of this class. As such, it is imperative that you complete your biweekly assignments. Because you are likely unfamiliar with most of the material we will be covering, this reading can be daunting. It is *very* important that you make time for it. There is not a single skimmable reading in this course, and with the exception of our first reading assignment, it's all going to be far more difficult than what you're used to. I've read this stuff dozens of times, and it's still difficult every time I revisit it. If you're not planning to do the readings, I'd choose another class.

With that said, you do not need to buy a single book for this class. I will make every reading available on Canvas free of charge. You may decide to purchase some of the books if you want more, however. I'm happy to help you strategize in case you're wondering what to buy. The key texts to purchase (if you're so inclined) are the *Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. Tucker), Marx's *Capital* (Penguin edition), Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society*, *From Max Weber* (ed. Gerth and Mills), de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Vintage edition), and du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* and *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (ed. Lewis). All of these are in print and widely available used. My recommendation is to use bookfinder.com to find the cheapest copy. But remember: I'll also provide PDFs free of charge on Canvas.

However, just because the texts are available online doesn't mean that you should skim them on your phone. You need to give them the same attention you would if you were actually holding a book. For me, this means printing it out, underlining important sections, and writing notes in the margins. Annotating your texts is absolutely crucial. If you want to do this on your computer or

tablet instead, fine. But please do learn to mark up the text. It's central to learning how to read in an academic context, which is very different from reading for pleasure. Of course, many of these readings are immensely pleasurable. But you should also be able to extract their central arguments, and this means marking them up.

I therefore require you to bring these texts to class. Bringing them up on your phone is not acceptable. You will need to either print them out and annotate them, or else mark them up on a tablet or laptop. If you read on a desktop, fine, but then print them out and bring them to class. This is not optional. Please do not bring your phone and assume that I won't mind. I absolutely will!

Requirements

1) **Participation (40%):** While this may be a lecture class, but you'll quickly learn that my style is fairly Socratic. I don't want to hear the same half dozen people in every meeting. *If you're shy or reluctant to speak for other reasons, please come see me in office hours. I'm happy to make accommodations as needed.* But if you never speak in class *and* you never visit me in office hours, consider most of these points lost. Here's a further breakdown of your participation score:

    a) **Showing up (10%):** Yes, you get 10 percent of your final grade just for showing up. However, this requires actually showing up, and I do mean *requires*. I keep attendance, and in this class, you each get three excused absences, no questions asked. After that, if you are planning to miss class, you need to let me know 24 hours in advance via email or in person during office hours or after class. If I do not approve your excuse, you will lose three points from your final grade for every absence beyond the initial three. Once you've missed six classes, that's a full ten points lost from your final grade.

    b) **Participating (10%):** This is an *introduction* to social theory, meaning that I doubt any of you are particularly familiar with it. Please do not feel deficient or inadequate in the face of these admittedly intimidating texts. Ask questions, raise critiques, highlight your favorite sections – but please do participate. I will be combining lecture with a good deal of discussion. If you're shy, that's fine. But that means your time to shine is during group work and in my office hours.

    c) **Canvas posts (20%):** Before every single class, you need to summarize the readings in 2-4 sentences on Canvas. This means identifying what you think is the main argument of the reading. These will begin with our first Marx reading. As you'll see, a lot of the writing is convoluted. That's fine. Just extract what you think is the central thesis and move on. Don't worry if you feel uncertain; everyone will! But you learn by doing, and I will give you points just for trying.

2) **Theory in everyday life (10%):** You are required to submit two short writing assignments (1 page, double-spaced, 12-point font, 1" margins – no spacing or titles, just *text filling the*

entire page – please put you name in the header) via Canvas. Each is worth 5% of your final grade.

a) The first (due March 6) should use Marx and/or Durkheim to identify the workings of power in a personal experience or current (or historical) event of your choice. If you're having trouble selecting something, please see me: I'm happy to help.

b) The second (due April 17) should use Du Bois, de Beauvoir, and/or Weber to do the same thing. You have two options here. You can either use these theorists to reanalyze the same experience/event, or else you can choose a different one entirely.

3) **Midterm (25%):** There will be an in-class midterm on March 11. *If you require special accommodations, please let me know as soon as possible.* The content of the midterm will not be a surprise and will draw on all of our readings from Marx and Durkheim. We will review in class, and I will discuss the format extensively.

4) **Final (25%):** As with the midterm, this will be in class, this time on April 22. Again, there will not be any surprises. It will be very similar to the midterm but will focus on material from the latter portion of the class. But unlike the midterm, *it will also be cumulative*. But don't worry; we will go over this in some detail before it's time to begin studying. If you have done the course readings, attended lectures, participated in discussion, and turned in the writing assignments along the way, you will be very well prepared.

Other Things to Note

On plagiarism: If you are currently enrolled at FIU – and you are – then I expect that you know what constitutes plagiarism. If you do not, I urge you to consult the Student Conduct and Honor Code, available at https://regulations.fiu.edu/regulation=FIU-2501. I don't play when it comes to plagiarism. If I catch you plagiarizing on an assignment, it should go without saying that I will fail you on that assignment. If the case is sufficiently egregious, I may decide to fail you for the entire class. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me via email or preferably, in person during office hours. I promise I don't bite. I wish these sorts of unpleasantries did not require addressing, but after more than a decade of teaching, I've realized that they absolutely do. Please do not be that person. It's 2023, and the plagiarism detection software will catch you before I have to even lift a finger. The same goes for AI software detection: I don't even have to try.

On attendance: This course requires attendance. You can miss three classes without letting me know. But after that, you need a documented excuse. I don't do this in all of my classes, but in this one, attendance is crucial. If you plan on missing more than three, this probably isn't the class for you. Once you've missed six classes, you will lose your entire attendance score, or 10 percent of your final grade, and I will very likely drop you another 10 percent for lack of participation. But please don't miss class. Not only do you need to show up to comprehend the material, but it's difficult to hold discussions when people don't show up, and that's unfair to your classmates.

On the lecture format: This is a lecture course. In general, it means I will be talking quite a bit, though as you will quickly learn, I also include group work in my repertoire. In addition, I tend to adopt a Socratic approach to lecturing to encourage active learning. This will not be one of those snoozefests where a professor reads slides to you, and you dutifully copy down their every word. Instead, I plan to facilitate discussions in this class. This means that I expect you to discuss. And in order to do that, I expect you to come to class prepared. Doing the reading does not mean that you skim the assigned text and put a check next to it on the syllabus. It means that you think deeply about the reading and come to class with a number of questions, thoughts, and criticisms.

Without further ado, let's move on to the schedule of readings...

Weekly Reading Schedule:

Preface: Toward a Theory of the Social

January 8: Physicists don't read Einstein, so why must we read Marx?

- *What is "social" about social theory?*
- *What does it mean to call something a "theory"?*
- *Why is conceptualization so central to the entire sociological enterprise?*
- *Why are 19th and early 20th century writers relevant today?*

January 10: Derek Thompson (2019), "Workism Is Making Americans Miserable." *The Atlantic*, February 24.
Eric Levitz (2017), "Inequality Is Rising across the Globe – and Skyrocketing in the U.S." *New York*, December 15.

- *What is "workism" and how would you account for its rise? If we apparently hate it, why do it?*
- *Why do you think inequality is rising both domestically and globally?*
- *Is there a relationship between workism and rising inequality?*
- *What would it take to reverse either (or both!) trends? Is it possible to reverse one without reversing the other?*

January 15: Martin Luther King Day – No Class

Part I: Capital as Power – Karl Marx (1818-83) & Friedrich Engels (1820-95)

January 17: Marx (1843), "On the Jewish Question." Pp. 2-21 in *Selected Writings*.

- *What is the difference between political emancipation and human emancipation?*
- *What is relationship between religion and the way a society's economy is organized?*

- *How does Marx think the emancipation of Germany's Jews might be accomplished?*

January 22: Marx (1844), "Estranged Labor." Pp. 70-81 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

- *Marx provides four aspects of alienation. What are they?*
- *What is species-being? Is it just Marx's theory of human nature?*
- *What causes alienation?*
- *How might alienation be overcome?*

January 24: Marx and Engels (1846), "The German Ideology." Pp. 146-63 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

- *What is Marx and Engels' beef with the Young Hegelians?*
- *What are the premises of all human history?*
- *What forms of ownership have existed in the world? How do Marx and Engels explain why each form is superseded by another?*
- *What role do ideas play in their conception of history?*
- *What is civil society?*

January 29: Marx and Engels (1848), "Communist Manifesto." Pp. 473-83 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

- *We usually think of Marx as despising the bourgeoisie. Why is he singing their praises here? In what sense does he mean that they are "progressive"?*
- *How does capitalism transform modern society?*
- *What forces compel individual workers to become members of a class?*
- *What are the stages of working-class formation?*
- *If capitalism produces its own gravediggers, then why did Marx need to write the* Manifesto *in the first place?*

January 31: Marx (1847) "Wage Labor and Capital." Pp. 203-17 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

- *Where does value come from?*
- *What is the difference between labor and labor-power?*
- *How did labor-power become a commodity? What are the consequences?*
- *Why do capitalists try to maximize their profits?*

February 5: Marx (1867), "So-Called Primitive Accumulation." Pp. 896-926 in *Capital, Volume I.*

- *The bourgeoisie are bourgeois for one reason: because they own the means of production. But they didn't own them under feudalism. How did they come to possess them?*
- *Why is the extreme violence in capitalism's origin story so surprising?*
- *What is the significance of peasants being separated from their land (dispossession)?*
- *In theory, workers are supposed to work because otherwise they no longer have a way to afford food and shelter. But in practice, capitalists still need to compel them to work. How do they do so?*
- *What is the significance of slavery and colonization in Marx's analysis of capitalism's origins?*

February 7: Engels (1878), "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" and selection from *Anti-Dühring*. Pp. 700-24 in *The Marx-Engels Reader*.

- *What is the difference between "socialized production" and the "anarchy of production"?*
- *What is the "rebellion of the productive forces"?*
- *What are crises and why do they emerge in capitalist societies?*
- *If capitalism is so crisis-prone, why does the proletariat still need to play a political role to bring about its demise?*

Part II: Normalizing Power – Émile Durkheim (1885-1917)

February 12: Durkheim (1893), Pp. xxv-xxx, 1-30 in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

- *How have we simultaneously become more independent of others* and *more dependent upon them?*
- *What is solidarity for Durkheim?*
- *Why would he study law as a way to understand solidarity?*
- *What is the difference between repressive and restitutive law?*

February 14: Durkheim (1893), Pp. 31-67 in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

- *What is mechanical solidarity?*
- *What is the relationship between mechanical solidarity and the division of labor?*
- *How does Durkheim define crime? How is related to punishment?*
- *What is the relationship between punishment and collective consciousness?*

February 19: Durkheim (1893), Pp. 68-72, 77-87, 149-75 in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

- *What is organic solidarity?*
- *What is the relationship between organic solidarity and the division of labor?*
- *How are legal responses in the context of organic solidarity different from how they were under mechanical solidarity?*
- *What happens to collective consciousness as an advanced division of labor develops?*

February 21: Durkheim (1893), Pp. 200-25 in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

- *What causes a division of labor to arise in the first place?*
- *What is the relationship between mechanical and organic solidarity?*
- *Why is Durkheim's theory of history evolutionary?*

March 4: Durkheim (1893), Pp. 291-328 in *The Division of Labor in Society*.

- *What are the abnormal forms of the division of labor?*
- *Under which circumstances do they arise?*
- *What does Durkheim suggest we do in the face of these abnormal forms?*

Interlude: Midterm

March 6: Review

March 11: Midterm

Part III: Racializing Power – W. E. B. Du Bois (1869-1963)

March 13: Du Bois (1903), "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." Pp. 2-7 in *The Souls of Black Folk.*
Du Bois (1920), "The Souls of White Folk." Pp. 17-29 in *Darkwater*.
Du Bois (1923), "The Superior Race." Pp. 55-60 in *Smart Set* 70(4).

- *What is the "White Imperial Industry"?*
- *What is the basis of white supremacy for Du Bois? How does it work?*
- *What is "double consciousness" (or "twoness")?*
- *The veil is clearly a consequence of living in a racist society, yet Du Bois seems to suggest it has an unexpectedly beneficial side. What is it?*

March 18: Du Bois (1921), "The Class Struggle." Pp. 151-2 in *The Crisis* 22(4).
Du Bois (1944), "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom." Pp. 610-18 in *Du Bois Reader*.
Du Bois (1953), "Negroes and the Crisis of Capitalism." Pp. 622-25 in *Du Bois Reader*.

- *How does Du Bois view the relationship between Marxism and Black liberation struggles?*
- *How is Black liberation fundamentally different from class struggle?*
- *To what extent is Black liberation possible* without *class struggle?*
- *How would you characterize his strategy?*

March 20: Du Bois (1935), Pp. 3-54 in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*.

- *How does Du Bois characterize slaves in relation to the capitalist mode of production?*
- *If poor whites are largely proletarian, why don't they tend to unify with Black laborers as members of the working class?*
- *How is the Southern planter class different from Northern industrial capitalists?*
- *How are all three groups – Black slaves, white wage laborers, and white planters – interrelated?*

March 25: Du Bois (1935), Pp. 55-70, 694-708 in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*.

- *What is the significance of Du Bois' analysis of emancipation in terms of a general strike?*
- *How does he complicate the standard narrative, i.e. that a virtuous North went to war to emancipate the slaves?*
- *Despite the outcome of the Civil War, Du Bois describes a situation of intensified exploitation of Black labor under Reconstruction. But if the South lost, how did such a situation come about?*
- *Why didn't white labor unite with Black labor against capitalists and planters?*
- *What does he mean when he describes whiteness as a "psychological wage"?*

Part IV: Gendering Power – Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

March 27: de Beauvoir (1949), Pp. xix-xxxvi in *The Second Sex*.

- *What does de Beauvoir mean by "Othering"?*
- *On what basis are women subjugated to patriarchal rule in modern societies?*
- *Why don't women attempt to overthrow the patriarchal order?*

April 1: de Beauvoir (1949), Pp. 273-77, 716-31 in *The Second Sex*.

- *What is the difference between sex and gender for de Beauvoir?*
- *What does she mean that women are not born but* become *women?*
- *Why is childhood so central in her account? What do you make of her psychoanalytic approach?*
- *What are authentic responses (as opposed to inauthentic) to patriarchy?*
- *How would you characterize her strategy for women's liberation? What does she propose?*

Part V: Bureaucratic Power – Max Weber (1864-1920)

April 3: Weber, "Class, Status, Party." Pp. 180-95 in *From Max Weber*.

- *How does Weber's definition of class compare with Marx's?*
- *How would you distinguish status from class?*
- *Do you think race in Du Bois and/or gender in de Beauvoir qualify as statuses in Weber?*
- *What do you make of the awkwardly situated "party" as the third key basis for power in Weber?*
- *What does he mean by power anyway?*

April 8: Weber, "Politics as a Vocation." Pp. 77-87 in *From Max Weber*.

- *What are politics for Weber?*
- *How does he define the state?*
- *Why do people obey the state?*
- *Weber spends a good deal of time describing the "separation" of staff from the means of administration. How would you relate this to Marx's account of primitive accumulation?*

April 10: Weber, "Bureaucracy." Pp. 196-209, 214-16, 221-24, 228-30, 240-44 in *From Max Weber*.

- *What is a bureaucracy? How does Weber characterize the relationship between bureaucracies and those who control them?*
- *What does he mean when he describes office-holding as a vocation?*
- *Why is bureaucracy so resistant to threats, and really, change?*
- *Why are bureaucracies so efficient?*
- *Efficiency only concerns the means, but not the ends toward which this bureaucracy is set. Who or what determines the ends?*

April 15: Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority." Pp. 245-52 in *From Max Weber*.

- *In what sense is charismatic authority antithetical to bureaucratic power?*
- *In what sense is it the very basis of bureaucratic power?*
- *Herbert Marcuse writes, "Among all of Weber's concepts, that of charisma is perhaps the most questionable. Even as a term it contains the bias that gives every kind of successful, allegedly personal domination an almost religious consecration." What does he mean?*
- *How would you square the seemingly irrational character of charisma with the formal rationality of bureaucracy?*

Coda: Final Exam

April 17: Review

April 22: Final exam