Classical Sociological Theory

经典社会理论 2221230 Preliminary Syllabus

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Introduction and Objectives

Classical sociological theory at the graduate level is usually concerned with introducing students to "the canon" in sociological theory. That canon is often taken to comprise the works of three nineteenth century European thinkers: Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. There is no doubt that these thinkers have exercised (and continue to exercise) a profound influence on social sciences. However, there is no justification in claiming that the sociological canon is exhausted by these thinkers. That is because a canon in any intellectual and artistic field (be it social science, literature, music, etc.) is a living thing. It keeps changing and it should keep changing, mainly because societies change, which necessarily requires that our engagement with the thought of the past changes as well. Hence, in this course, we will take a different approach to studying the classics in sociological theory. We will still examine the canonical writers because every sociologist has to have a firm engagement with what is widely considered to be the canon in the discipline. However, rather than surveying just the works of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, we will situate them in the particular historical era and intellectual currents that shaped their thought. Such a broad look into the nineteenth century thought will provide us the analytical tools to approach the sociological canon in a critical manner.

In taking such an approach to the classics, our objective is threefold:

- `context`: to understand the historical and intellectual context that gave rise to the thought of a particular thinker;
- `method`: to learn how to read sociological classics, rather than cataloguing what the classics say;
- `exposure`: to investigate the fundamental questions of sociology, of the philosophy of social sciences, and of scientific methodology by examining the foundational figures in sociology.

These objectives are motivated by my conviction that:

- engagement with past thinkers is a lifelong pursuit;
- the approach to the classics should be freshly construed depending on the research question and puzzles we aim to address;
- one should construct her own list of classics, or to put it more directly: you should make up your own mind about what constitutes the classics, and why the works you choose are "the classics."

The focus of this course is firmly on learning how to do close textual analysis by situating a particular text in its intellectual and historical context. For this purpose, the reading load for each lecture week is kept low compared to a survey of classical theory at the graduate level. The objective is that the student will acquire sufficient familiarity with the intellectual currents that shaped classical sociological theory and its key figures, which will enable the student to master the classics on his or her own.

Prerequisites

I expect no prior engagement with sociological theory, political economy, political philosophy, and philosophy. In fact, I recommend suspending all you know about the thinkers we cover in this course and approach the material with a fresh mindset and without any preconvictions.

Attendance and Participation

Attending the lectures is mandatory and expected. I will cover a great deal of additional material in each lecture and I will spend a considerable amount of time in providing background knowledge on what we read each week. Without such background information, you will have difficulty in understanding the texts you read.

I expect you to participate, and your participation will constitute 20% of your final grade. I will grade effort, rather than knowledge per se. In other words, if you make a conscious effort to show me that you have read the assigned material and if you continually strive to pose questions, you will be rewarded the full 20%.

Assignment

In this course, you are to gradually develop a `notebook`. The procedure for the notebook is as follows:

- you are to write an approximately 900-word analytical summary on a particular assigned reading or a set of readings each lecture week;
- this summary essay should be submitted to me by Friday for each lecture week;
- I will return the summary essay with commentary and feedback on how it can be improved;
- you revise the essay as you see fit;
- all your revised summary essays (8 in total) will be combined into a single notebook at the end of the course and will be submitted to me for grading;
- you will be graded only on the final submission.

The idea is for yo to learn methods of close reading, efficient note-taking, and systematic analysis. Unfortunately, these methods are more of an art than a set of formulae. Hence, you will learn by doing and you are expected to develop your own way of writing up analytical summaries. Each weekly exercise will give you an opportunity to improve your writing through close supervision and feedback.

Please note:

- `the final notebook will constitute 80% of your grade;`
- `you are srictly forbidden to read other students' analytical summaries;`
- `that is because you are expected to develop your own approach to and style of close textual analysis;`

- you will be graded for effort, improvement, and the quality of the final submission.

Course Readings & Lecture Notes

Mandatory readings will be distributed electronically. You are expected to study them closely before the lectures.

You will receive lecture notes (not slides) in advance, and you are expected to read the lecture notes before each lecture.

Readings under the *reference* category are for further study in the future. I do not expect, nor do I want you to spend time with these reference readings during this course, simply because you will not have sufficient amount of time to study them.

A sophisticated yet approachable introduction to classical sociological theory can be found in Giddens (1971), in case you wish to consult a more comprehensive survey of the classics.

SYNOPSIS

WEEK 1: Rousseau, German Idealism & Romanticism, Hegel

Although German idealism and romanticism were at the roots of Marx's thought, and although these currents played a fundamental role in shaping social sciences as they took form in the nineteenth century, they are rarely part of sociological curricula nowadays. In some ways, that is surprising. Hegel was, after all, a celebrity in the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, idealism and romanticism were dominant influences on learned people of the time. These currents of thought were much more than academic debates.

But then, by 1850, both idealism and romanticism were part of the past and were discussed mostly in academic circles. For instance, Marx and Engels were surprised (and one thinks, dismayed) that the leading intellectuals on the left after 1850 did not know much about Hegel.

German idealism and romanticism were in the air that Marx breathed. The systematization of idealism by Hegel was a decisive influence on Marx, and his rejection of the Hegelian system is crucial to understand Marx's sociology.

In this week, we will focus on delineating the influence of Rousseau's ideas on freedom over German idealism and romanticism. Then we will focus on the fundamental problems of German idealism and romanticism: the desire to achieve freedom, the yearning for self-realization, the goal of achieving harmony between human beings and nature. We will then examine how these ideas led Hegel to view history as the unfolding of reason and how human beings can overcome alienation through such unfolding.

The mandatory reading for this week provides an overview of the intellectual environment that shaped Hegel's work. The Hegelian system and the links between the Hegelian system, German romanticism, and Rousseau will be outlined in the lecture.

Readings: Taylor (1977:3–50) (Ch 1 "Aims of a New Epoch").

Reference: Beiser (2008) offers a nuanced overview of German idealism, and it is accessible even for the uninitiated. Similarly, his study on German romanticism, Beiser (2003), is equally illuminating. Singer (2001) and Beiser (2005) provide gentle introductions to Hegel. For a more in-depth analysis, Taylor (1977) is authoritative, but it is also quite long. (A condensed version is Taylor (1979)). Kojève (1980) has been remarkably influential in the study of Hegel, but it is idiosyncratic and it offers a particular reading of Hegel. It should be approached cautiously. Lukács (1975) outlines the connection between the more radical aspects of Hegel's thought, left Hegelians, and Marx's historical materialism. For the link between Rousseau and Marx, a useful entry point is Colletti (1973:143–93), although his arguments are heavily contested.

WEEK 2: Classical Political Economy

One of the reasons why Marx was such an original thinker was his mastery of the economic thought of his time and his synthesis of economics with the analysis of socio-historical dynamics. Today, we call the economic thought until Marx (including Marx himself, who was in many ways the culmination point), classical political economy.

Like the intellectual gulf that separates us from German idealism and romanticism of the nineteenth century, a seemingly insurmountable barrier exists between us and classical political economy. That is because contemporary economics, the neoclassical school, which took shape in the 1870s, continues to provide a highly misleading picture of what classical political economy of Quesnay, Smith, and Ricardo was all about.

Hence, in this week, our objective is to understand the gist of classical political economy and why many of the ideas of classical political economy continue to be highly relevant to understanding the economy even in today's world. We will focus on the notion of social reproduction, the notion of physical surplus, subsistence wages, and most importantly, on the notion of distribution.

This week's readings involve some mathematics, mostly at the level of simple calculus and simple system of equations. I will spend a sufficient amount of time to illustrate the ideas of the authors we examine without recourse to mathematics.

Readings: Pasinetti (1977:1–24) (until the section on the marginalists); Garegnani (1984:292–98) (items 3 to 7, excluding 7); Roncaglia (2006:126–34) (Section 4 "The Wealth of Nations" in Chapter 5).

Reference: Roncaglia (2006) is the best introduction to classical political economy and history of economic thought. Another good reference book on the history of economic thought is Rima (2001). Blaug (1997) is the standard history of economic thought textbook in most universities across the world, but it is written, in many places, from the perspective of an orthodox economist. I profoundly disagree with much of what he says about classical economists such as Smith, Ricardo, and Marx. Smith (1976) should be quite readable after our introduction to classical political economy. Ricardo (1821), in contrast, is a more compact and difficult read. Pasinetti (1960) remains the key to unlocking the logic of the Ricardian system. However, it requires familiarity with linear algebra and multi-variable calculus.

WEEK 3: Karl Marx

Marx is, much more than any other thinker covered in this course, current and contemporary. His ideas continue to exercise influence not just in social sciences, but obviously in the real world as well. Our

objective will be to build a comprehensive overview of Marx's thought and showing the continuities as well as ruptures between what we have read in the previous two weeks and Marx's own body of thought. That requires examining (1) Marx's philosophical writings on alienation, emancipation, freedom; (2) Marx's ideas on history; and (3) and Marx's formulations on class dynamics, surplus value, and relations of production.

Readings: (All Marx readings are from Tucker (1978).) *Estranged Labor*, pp. 70-81; *Theses on Feuerbach*, pp. 143–145; *The German Ideology*, pp. 155–163 ("History"); *The Grundrisse*, pp. 222–250 (until "The Development of Exchange and Capital"); *Capital, vol I* pp. 351–361 ("The Production of Surplus Value"); *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 473–483, until "Proletarians and Communists".

Reference: For intellectual and conventional biographies, see McLellan (2006) and Sperber (2013). Avineri (1968) and Sayer (1983) are good introductions to Marx's method and social philosophy. Ollman (1976) provides an extensive study of alienation, and it can be used as an alternative starting point in understanding the philosophical underpinnings of Marx's thought. For another useful source on Marx's philosophy and how it is related to the intellectual environment of his time, see McLellan (1971). Foley (1986) is a useful source on Marx's economics, but do note that his approach to labor theory of value has many critics (see Foley (2000) and Garegnani (2018) for an extended discussion of the issue). A less mathematically-demanding book on Marx's economics and historical analysis of capitalism is Howard and King (1985). A selective reading program on Marx's own writings might begin with *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, continue with *Theses on Feuerbach*, *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Note that *The German Ideology*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* are essential for understanding Marx's political sociology and historical materialism. All of these works can be found in Tucker (1978). A serious student of Marx should make a point of reading Marx (1976) alongside Marx (1993) and Marx (1904).

WEEK 4: Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, & W. Robertson Smith

Comte is the thinker who coined the term sociology in its modern sense, but his influence over the subsequent history of the discipline has not been commensurate. Furthermore, his positivism and social evolutionism are tenets that are widely rejected in contemporary sociology. Spencer, perhaps one of the foremost thinkers of his time, is rarely read today. Similarly to Comte, Spencer's utilitarianism and embrace of social evolutionary ideas put him at odds with sociology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In contrast, W. Robertson Smith, a foundational figure in the comparative study of religion, is still an author of interest, despite the fact that his generalizations on the comparative study of religion are outdated.

We are interested in these authors mainly because Durkheim was in close dialogue with them at various stages of his intellectual career. Durkheim's sociological methodology owes a great deal to his critical reading of Comte. His focus on social cohesion, anomie, and morality are inspired by an outright rejection of Spencer's individualism and utilitarianism. And his focus, in later stages of his life, on social knowledge, religion, and collective representations bears the influence of Smith's comparative study of religion.

Readings: Heilbron (2018:23–32) (until "The Cours in Context"); Smith (1923:28–48); Spencer (1877:465–80) (Part II, Ch 1 "What is a Society?", Ch 2 "A Society is an Organism").

Reference: For an introduction to Comte, see Gane (2008). The essays collected in Wernick (2018) offer in-depth survey of various aspects of Comte's thought. For Comte's own writings, a good starting point is Comte (1988). Note that many works of Comte are only partially translated into English. On Smith, see the book by Beidelman (1974). For an overview of Spencer, see Wiltshire (1978).

WEEK 5: Émile Durkheim

In contemporary sociological research, Durkheim is cited less frequently than Marx and Weber. One might be tempted to think that this is a sign of Durkheim's waning influence. That would be a mistake. Durkheim the theorist of social solidarity, social knowledge, collective representations, and institutions is as alive as he has ever been. Likewise, many of Durkheim's rules on sociological method are deeply ingrained in the practice of a significant portion of empirical research in sociology. Our goal in this lecture is to understand the continuing relevance of Durkheim's sociological programme, and the parts of his thought that speak less and less to contemporary sociologists.

Readings: Durkheim (2013:158–80) (Book I, Ch 7 "Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity"); Durkheim (1982:50–59) (Ch 1 "What is a Social Fact?"); Durkheim (2005:xl–lii, 201–39) ("Introduction", Book II, Ch 5 "Anomic Suicide"); Durkheim (1995:1–18) ("Introduction").

Reference: Lukes (1973) is the authoritative intellectual biography of Durkheim. Emirbayer (2003) is a sophisticated overview. See Parsons (1960) in addition to Parsons (1968) for Parsons's interpretation of Durkheim as a sociologist of social integration. Alexander and Smith (2008) collects a good selection of essays on various aspects of Durkheim's thought. Gofman (2014) offers a compact overview of Durkheim's theory of social solidarity. On suicide, see the brilliant book by Atkinson (1978). See Rawls (2009) for an introduction to Durkheim's theory of religion and knowledge. The recent book by Smith (2020) is crucial reading for mapping the influence of Durkheim and the Durkheimian school in sociology.

WEEK 6: German Historicism & Neo-Kantianism

We owe much of our current thinking on historical change and historical method to German historicism, which was the dominant tradition in social sciences in Germany until the early twentieth century. Max Weber is usually taken as the last thinker in the German historicist tradition. German historicism, in fact, exercised an even greater cultural effect. It is commonplace now to accept that societies, cultures, philosophies, and subjectivities (the list can go on) are historically particular and that it is necessary to study the historical context of any social phenomenon to truly understand its causes and development. We owe such an approach to social phenomena to German historicism.

Neo-Kantianism was the dominant philosophical school of thought in Germany from the 1870s until the early part of the twentieth century. Neo-Kantians developed highly sophisticated views of science as part of human culture. In particular, they examined both philosophy of science and methodology of science, with a particular attention to the issues of objectivity, validity, and the role of values in both natural and social sciences.

Our objective in this week is to acquire a sufficient amount of background knowledge so that we can better understand the Weberian concepts that are often mystifying to contemporary readers. Hence, we will focus on theory of values, historical individuals, historical laws, objectivity, and the question of whether social sciences are inherently different from natural sciences.

Readings: Beiser (2011) ("Introduction: The Concept and Context of Historicism"); Oakes (1987).

Reference: Unfortunately, many of the original writings that defined the historicist tradition and neo-Kantianism have not been translated into English. On the historicist tradition, Beiser (2011) is the most valuable source on historicism, and it contains an extensive bibliography on the English translations of the relevant authors such as Dilthey, Lask, and Rickert. Another useful overview is Bambach (1995). An overview of neo-Kantianism can be found in Willey (1978) and Schnädelbach (1984). A wide array of translations from the key authors of neo-Kantianism can be found in Luft (2015).

WEEK 7: Max Weber

Weber, like Marx, continues to influence a significant amount of sociological practice. His ideas on social action, values, rationality, state, power, domination, legitimacy, religion, material as well as ideational interests, and sociological method constitute some of the most fundamental conceptual toolkit of sociological research in fields as diverse as economic sociology, social stratification, and sociology of religion.

However, the Weber that is canonized in sociology is, in some ways, a caricature of the complex, fascinating, and at times frustratingly ambivalent thinker that we find in Weber's own writings. We will see that many of the ambivalences, but by no means all of them, disappear once we read Weber with an awareness of historicism and neo-Kantianism that shaped his thought.

Hence, our objective is to uncover the complexity of Weber's thought by investigating some crucial, and often misunderstood, concepts in Weber. We will, in particular, discuss (1) the notion of ideal type and Weber's historical method; (2) rationality and values; (3) *Verstehen* as a method; and (4) social power.

Readings: Weber (1978a:4–26, pp. 53–54, pp. 212–216) ("The Definitions of Sociology and of Social Action – Methodological Foundations – Social Action", "Types of Social Action", "Power and Domination", "Domination and Legitimacy", "The Three Pure Types of Authority"); Weber (1978d); Weber (1948).

Reference: Bendix (1960) is an indispensable intellectual biography of Weber, and it should be the starting point in the English-language literature for a serious student of Weber. Ringer (2004) is a much shorter intellectual biography. Radkau (2009) provides a conventional biography, but it is quite long. Mommsen and Osterhammel (2013) is useful in understanding the intellectual environment that shaped Weber. Mommsen (1989) collects some excellent essays on different aspects of Weber's thought. For the political environment that shaped Weber, see Giddens (1972). Oakes (1988) is a useful starting point in understanding Weber's methodology and intellectual debt to Rickert. The little-known article by Fahey (1982) is superb in deciphering some of the subtleties in Weber's sociology of religion. For Weber's own writings, a good starting point is the historical analyses that can be found in Weber (2013). Familiarity with the selections in Gerth and Mills (1948) is necessary, since these selections are widely known. Another important set of essays, again widely known in the English-language academia, is Weber (1978c). After the essays on religion that can be found in Gerth and Mills (1948), Weber (1952) is the appropriate entry point to Weber's comparative study of religion, but the full scope and importance of the comparative project can be appreciated only after reading Weber (1958) and Weber (1964). Weber (1978a) and Weber (1978b) are taxonomical and encyclopedic, and can be appreciated best after acquiring considerable mastery of Weber's thought.

WEEK 8: Recapitulation, or How to Engage the Classics

Our basic task in this week is to reiterate what we have seen in the previous seven lectures. However, we will do that in a particular fashion. Rather than simply recapitulating what we have seen, we will review the material we have seen in light of the following question: what makes Marx's, Weber's, and Durkheim's ideas still resonant in contemporary sociological practice? And are their ideas obsolete? These are big questions, and we will certainly not have enough time to answer them adequately. Nonetheless, they will give us precious anchors to recapitulate what we have learned, and to compare Marx, Durkheim, and Weber on the structure of society.

In addition, as part of answering the questions we just posed in the above paragraph, we will discuss how to engage and how not to engage classics in the sociological tradition.

Readings: Giddens (1971 Ch 15, "Social Differentiation and the Division of Labor", pp. 224–242).

Reference: Levine (1988) is a model of clarity and depth. See also Levine (2017). For an example of how not to engage the classics, see Parsons (1968). In general, textbooks on classical sociological theory should be avoided. However, Giddens (1971) is an exception to this rule. *Journal of Classical Sociology* is a journal dedicated to exploring classical sociological theory. It is a treasure trove for new works on the classics.

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