REVISED (Sept. 2000) Course Outline

Introduction

At seven-plus mostly single-spaced pages, this is going to be a longish read; longer than you might expect for a course outline. But it will save us time, and that is something we have to do from the start or we will have big problems later.

The outline begins with a discussion of the course’s method—for method is all, and all is method (a fine note to start a theory course on!); it then proposes an elementary classification of some key hypotheses of classical sociological theory; and closes with discussions of the course requirements and the course schedule. Our first item of business at our first meeting (September 18) will be to examine anything here that may, for any reason whatever, attract special attention.

Course Method

Soc 501 is an introduction to the work of twelve classical sociological theorists: Comte, Marx, Engels, Veblen, Mannheim, Spencer, Durkheim, Pareto, Freud, Weber, Simmel, Mead. In principle, then, the scope of this course is huge. Combine that with a tiny amount of time in which to tour it all—only 36 hours of class time (plus many more hours of reading and contemplation outside class, of course)—and we have our rock and our hard place. Since the time allotment is fixed far beyond our poor power to add or detract (especially to add), some drastic narrowing of focus is called for—and method is what answers such calls.

Accordingly, not only have I, your more or less methodical guide on this tour, mapped the route we will take and framed some scenes of special interest along that route but, except for the first reading, everything I ask you to read here comes directly from the horses’ mouths (in translation where advisable). This means we shall not even glance at what could all by itself take up every moment of our time—namely, the social and personal situations in which the theories were written and in which they have been commented on and acted on since then. Instead, we train our sights here on only one objective: to develop an analytically useful (and, especially, comparative or “relational” as Mannheim would say) understanding of what our mighty double handful-plus wrote—without trying to figure out why, or with what subsequent effects, they wrote it. Hempel’s assignment of priority to description over explanation (not excluding the feedback of the latter to the former) is fundamental here: “requests for an explanation of the aurora borealis, of the tides, of solar eclipses in general or of some individual solar eclipse in particular . . . have a clear meaning only if it is understood what aspects of the phenomena in question are to be explained.”

So let us think of Soc 501 as a course in the substantive hypotheses, not the history (or the sociology or psychology), of classical sociological theory.

You probably know, however, that a focus-narrowing strategy of this sort is often opposed. Lewis Coser, for example, argues that “a correct appraisal of a particular thought is often difficult, if not
impossible, if the social context in which it took root cannot be understood”; “You cannot understand Weber’s thought if you fail to place yourself, through an imaginative leap, in the intellectual and social climate in which he wrote” (Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context, second edition, 1977, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp. xiii, xv; see also David Ashley and David Michael Orenstein, Sociological Theory: Classical Statements, 4th edition, 1998, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, p. v). This position implies that we ought to meet the necessity of narrowing our course’s focus not by ignoring the historical situations in which our theorists lived, as proposed above, but by ignoring some theorists and/or by substituting abbreviated textbook interpretations and commentary for reading the original texts.

I would not be surprised if some or even all of you expected the latter strategy to be followed in Soc 501, so let me say a bit more about why I choose not to go this route.

Two considerations, though important, may be quickly stated and then set aside so that we can get to something still more important. First, it seems clear that no one can fully understand even their own writing (not to mention their thought!), insofar as that would require fully understanding all its possible implications. Here I buy Whitehead’s view that “a complete understanding [of anything] is a perfect grasp of the Universe in its totality. We are finite beings; and such a grasp is denied to us.” Second, regarding the ‘correctness’ of any given appraisal of some such imperfect attempt at understanding, Popper tells us (and I buy this view, too) “every scientific statement must remain tentative for ever” (his italics). Together, Whitehead and Popper imply there is no possibility of completeness and no room for dogma anywhere, any time, in natural science—no matter how strong the evidence and/or logic in support of some particular claim may seem to be.

Speaking of dogma: Students should always feel free to reject or otherwise criticize, in class or elsewhere, any position that their instructor happens to espouse. I tell you my positions on various issues not because I want you to think of these positions as indisputably “correct” (and not because I think of them that way, which I don’t) but partly because you have a right to know who is sitting on the other end of the log, and partly because the reactions of those on the student end of the log—negative reactions as well as, and actually more than, positive ones—have always contributed, in one way or another, to my teaching and writing. So a hearty welcome to controversy! More light! More light!

Topping the importance of both the above considerations is the double role that theory plays in every scientific discipline. In one role (inductive), theory faces the past and integrates what is already known; in the other role (deductive), it faces the future and points toward (predicts) what can become known in future times and other contexts—if what is already known is truly universal. In the latter role, obviously, theory goes beyond its originating contexts to inspire new research in new contexts, and for that, new interpretations (often called simply “applications,” more rarely “insights”) are required. But interpretation is also unavoidable in carrying out the knowledge-integrating, past-oriented, role of theory—especially when fresh recruits to the discipline encounter the discipline’s existing theories, as you will do in Soc 501 and 502. Such encounters are never mechanical meetings between rubber-stamps and blank slates (too late to block that mixed metaphor!); interpretation is always at their core—a matter about which Mead has something to say, as we shall see.

It almost seems unnecessary to add that every interpretation of an existing theory (regardless of whether the past- or the future-oriented function of theory is being pursued) should—in the interest of knowing exactly what is being interpreted, and also simply in the interest of non-plagiaristic fairness—be grounded, explicitly, in the published and thus collectively verifiable words of the theory in question. This is the case, of course, whether or not the interpretation also takes into account the social contexts and intellectual climates to which Coser refers. The claim just made—that an interpretation of any existing theory should be “grounded, explicitly, in the published words of the theory in question”—opens the way to the focus-
narrowing assumption proposed above, namely, that Marx and Engels’ words, for example, may be understood in the context of Comte’s words, and vice-versa, and also that some of Marx and Engels’ words may be understood in the context of other words of theirs. And all this without any delving into, or any imaginative leaping into, these theorists’ lives or the larger sociocultural contexts thereof than the theorists’ own words provide. Note, in addition, that the a-historicity of this strategy permits us to ignore time’s arrow and treat all our theorists’ words as though they were written at the same moment (as, with the lengthening future flight of that arrow, they will increasingly come to be treated anyway), and that, too, is a big reduction in scope.

But what if we find that one of our theorists actually meant something different from what we now mean by a given word? Strictly speaking, such a discrepancy does not matter to a natural science (unless the science in question specializes in how and why the meanings of words change). What matters is whether the meaning we apply to that word helps make sense, to us, of the theorist’s work—and of course ultimately whether that meaning helps make sense of the world as we experience it (“we” meaning the members of whatever cohort is functioning in the discipline at the time). It seems precisely this normatively determined cohort self-centeredness that underlies the notion that scientific knowledge is “accumulated,” including Kuhn’s notion of “revolutions” in such knowledge, and it also underlies Whitehead’s remark that “A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost” (no one would say a science which hesitates to forget its current practitioners is lost).

Of course, if there is reason to think our theorist and we actually meant/mean the same thing by a given word, our own interpretation is strengthened thereby and we can say “As the great so-and-so once said . . . ”—thereby adding the great so-and-so’s consensus-building weight to what we ourselves want to say. It is therefore important to note that our theorists, and we their readers, are very likely to share roughly the same meanings of the words we find in their works. After all, none of our theorists was separated from the others, or from us, by great spatiotemporal or sociocultural distances. In fact, all twelve of them lived out their lives within the very short, and very recent, span of the 150 years immediately prior to the middle of the just-now-departing 20th century—Engels’ lifetime overlapped to some degree with all the others’ lifetimes—and all twelve were literate products of that same western European culture of which we ourselves, in varying degrees, are literate products. (It is also true, however, that all our theorists were White Judeo-Christian middle class males, and these are just the sort of social status characteristics that Mannheim says we should expect to limit the generality of at least some of their words. But then the generality of some of everybody’s words is similarly limited—and we shall see what practical remedy for this Mannheim proposes.)

Even with these focus-narrowings, however, we shall still have our plates full. So at this point, we play the ‘progress’ card: We do not have to swallow and digest the whole meal at once. As we read more and more, the context of everything we have read will expand, and with that, our understanding of the whole shebang will grow—hopefully without breaking our heads.

Now our several individual understandings will inevitably differ, all along, to one degree or another. Therefore, in line with your tour guide’s Know Your Tour Guide policy, you should know that my own readings of classical (as well as contemporary) sociological theory have by now led me, tentatively, to (or toward) what seems to me a fairly integrated understanding both of the whole shebang and of its several parts. That understanding cannot help but do much to guide my guidance of Soc 501. The following section, then, is supposed to forewarn you of the way I view of the substance of classical sociological theory just as the section now ending forewarned you about my view of the method of Soc 501.
In the beginning was the act (physiological body). In the beginning was the thought/emotion (psychological mind). Materialism versus idealism: a crude but long-lived philosophical opposition and dialectic that, for our theorists, seems translated into social structuralism (preference for hypotheses claiming the causal priority of “social structure” over “cultural structure”), versus cultural structuralism (preference for hypotheses claiming the causal priority of “cultural structure” over “social structure”; see the first assigned reading for discussions of these terms).

To this I add a complication (Waiter, there’s a complication in my dichotomy!) springing from the logical independence of hypotheses regarding how a given phenomenon is maintained from hypotheses regarding how that same phenomenon got started. That is to say, the things that keep something going may be quite different from the things that initiated it (Newton founded his view of the mechanics of the entire universe on a distinction between inertia and force).

The result is a two-dimensional (social structure-versus-culture structure-by-initiation-versus-maintenance) map in which our theorists may be located on either side of a distinctly fuzzy (!) boundary as follows: On one side, we have the land of Comte, Pareto, Freud, Weber, Simmel, and Mead—where cultural structural variables are favored when hypothesizing how social life started, but social structural variables are favored when hypothesizing how social life is maintained. On the other side, we have the land of Marx, Engels, Veblen, Mannheim, Spencer, and Durkheim—where just the opposite holds: social structural variables are favored when hypothesizing how social life started, but cultural structural variables are favored when hypothesizing how social life is maintained. Sort of a Little-Endian/Big-Endian map in which the boundary is fuzzier and there is a freer choice of citizenship than Gulliver had (if memory serves me right).

Before drawing a couple of conclusions from this elementary map, let us pause to note just one of many possibilities of infusing it with further systematic detail (that the detail is systematic, and not random, is essential): Durkheim asserts that “when one undertakes to explain a social phenomenon the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills must be investigated separately” (page 123 in the very last reading of this course—please look at it the first chance you get). Initiation hypotheses are thus distinguished from maintenance hypotheses, but Durkheim says nothing here about a third type—namely, termination hypotheses. For classical acknowledgement of this third type we have Marx and Engels’ claim that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles . . . that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (pages 473-74 in the assigned reading—look at this, too). Once we take termination hypotheses into account, it becomes easy to see that a fourth type—namely, change hypotheses—combines features of termination and initiation hypotheses, and that this type will also implicate maintenance hypotheses to the extent that we usually take greater interest in lasting than in transient changes. Introducing this complication, then, enables us to differentiate our theorists not only according to the sorts of variables they favor in explaining the initiation, and the maintenance, of social phenomena, but also according to the sorts of variables they favor in explaining changes in, and terminations of, such phenomena.

Now for the ‘couple of conclusions from [the] elementary map’ that were promised above. Mapped this way, classical sociological theory implies the claim that all sociologists confront two sets of analytical problems, whether consciously or unconsciously, every day of their lives as sociologists: First, in formulating a hypothesis about how some particular social phenomenon was/is/will be initiated, maintained, terminated, and/or changed, should one think first of cultural structural variables, or first of social structural variables, or of both simultaneously and equally—or, perhaps, should we think first of other sorts of variables entirely? Second, assuming that that choice has been made, how should one then connect the identified variables causally and/or
hierarchically? Now of course we need systematically interrelated and operationalizable
definitions of all the key terms here—“cultural structural,” “social structural,” and “other types”
of explanatory/predictive variables; “initiation,” “maintenance,” “termination,” “change”; “social
phenomenon”; “causal,” and “hierarchical” connections (the first assigned reading is the only one
known to me that attempts a set of such definitions—which is why I ask you to read it first). But
once we have these definitions in hand, the persistent timeliness of the problems just mentioned
seems undeniable. Indeed, this is exactly why we call it “classical” theory: because the analytical
problems and choices this body of work exposes have seemed up to date ever since this work first
appeared (which, of course, does not mean they will continue to be so regarded). It is this hitherto
persistent timeliness that saves the study of classical theory from being merely an obeisance, an
arbitrary initiation ritual, to be gotten over just as fast as possible. Whitehead’s “A science which
hesitates to forget its founders is lost” was mentioned above, but Whitehead might well have
added the other side of the coin, that a science that hastily forgets its founders—well, actually not
its founders, because what difference does it make who does something?, but its founding
problems—is also lost. (Equifinality here; more than one way to get lost.)

According to the course Schedule (below), we take up our doughty dozen in a sequence that is
broadly determined by the two-territory partitioning described above: Auguste Comte leads off,
as designated founder of sociology (at least, he coined its name; the 14th century Tunisian, Ibn
Khaldûn, not to mention Aristotle, and Plato, also have strong foundership claims), and Comte is
followed, not by the rest of his camp, but by the joint chiefs of the opposing staff—Karl Marx and
Friedrich Engels. This first face-off might be thought of as a clash (too strong a word) between
the two camps’ prime champions before their respective seconds take the field—as when Freud,
Pareto, Simmel, Mead, and Weber present their elaborations on the culture-structural-initiation-
plus-social-structural-maintenance theme, and then these are followed by Spencer, Veblen,
Mannheim, and Durkheim, who do the same for the social-structural-initiation-plus-cultural-
structural-maintenance theme. Sing, O muse.

**Course Requirements**

Reading is the name of this game. (Surprise.) Complete, close, integrative, comparative, critical
reading—reading supported by cross-referencing text-marking and note-taking—of all assigned
material (and more material than this, whenever possible), preferably in the sequence indicated in
the Schedule below, and always, if at all possible, in advance of the relevant class discussion, is
the most required of all course requirements. All readings except the first one, and those by
Comte, Pareto, and Spencer are on sale at the University Bookstore. All readings, without
exception, are on reserve in the Sociology Graduate Student Reading Room at Firestone. Always
try to bring to class a copy of the assigned material to use as empirical check on wild claims that I
am sure to make in class about what some poor classical theorist said or didn’t say (not to
mention claims about what they thought or didn’t think).

The second requirement pertains to that one-quarter (more or less) of each theorist’s allotted time
which will be given over to class discussion aimed at encouraging you to formulate, express,
compare, and adjust your own reactions to that work. Such discussions will be distributed at
various points in a theorist’s allotted time as we go along (but most likely at the beginning of our
consideration of the theorist’s work as a whole, and at the beginning of our consideration of each
major work by that theorist). I will try to stay out of this discussion as much as possible, so
leading each discussion will be a volunteer team of at least two student presenters. These
presenters, working together and having conferred beforehand, will identify for the rest of us one
or more ideas in some part of the reading assigned for that theorist—ideas that the presenters
themselves select for whatever reason suits them—and conduct class discussion on these ideas.
Each student is expected to participate in presenter teams on the work of at least two (preferably three or four) different theorists—one scheduled before, and the others after, October 18. At our first class meeting (September 18) we will set the schedule of presentations for the entire semester, so think about your preferences beforehand. I will make the presentation and lead class discussion on the first reading (September 19 for sure; maybe part of September 18 too).

For the rest of the time allotted to each theorist, I will put on my tour guide hat, pick up the mike, and point out various scenes of interest that pass by our bus windows—always with the help of your questions and comments. (Note, in connection with the latter, that everybody here except undergraduates calls me Wally and I am comfortable with that; you be, too.)

Third requirement: Each student is expected to write two, maximum 1250 word, double-spaced, papers comparing some aspect(s) of the work of at least 2 theorists studied in this course in some respect(s) of interest to the writer. The first paper is due 5 PM, Tuesday, October 27, in my hand, mailbox, or office in-basket. The second paper is due 5 PM, January 16. The theorists that a paper compares may or may not be the same as those on whom the paper’s author presents. However, at least one of the theorists compared in the second paper should be different from those compared in the first paper. And do not be undone if you are asked to rewrite one or both papers—more than once, even. (It is never enough just to have a good idea. Sharing is all. Before, I said method is all: Empirically based sharing is the method of every natural science.)

One further note on course requirements: If you have already covered some or all the reading assigned for Soc 501 in some other graduate course, just let me know and I will be happy to excuse you from doubling your pleasure if such be the nature of your wish for punishment.

Course Schedule

Things have a way of happening, so flexibility is our best policy and remember we can always talk face-to-face, or via telephone, or e-mail, about whatever—especially if you run into a problem of any sort at any point.

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<td>__________, <em>The Methodology of the Social Sciences</em>: 49-112.</td>
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|               | __________, *The Study of Sociology*: Chapter VIII: The Educational Bias (different editions have different paginations). Not everything in this chapter is important to us, but bits and pieces throughout are.  
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<td>__________, <em>Suicide</em>: 35-52, 168-170, 201-228, 246-258, 276.</td>
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<td>__________, <em>The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life</em>: 13-33, 235-272, 398-413, 469-496.</td>
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