

SOC 8036: Sociological Thought and Explanation

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This module aims to introduce you to some of the classics of social thought, broadly conceived, via a focus on explanations of a variety of social processes and structures.

The historian of science Thomas Kuhn, in his classic book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), introduced the notion of scientific paradigms. By paradigm Kuhn meant, among other things,

- exemplary achievements, whether technical or conceptual, such as Lavoisier's discovery of oxygen
- frameworks of explanation and shared assumptions, which he sometimes called a 'disciplinary matrix'

This module uses Kuhn's notion of paradigm in an informal way to refer to some classic explanatory attempts in the history of sociology (broadly conceived), which have fed into distinctive styles of sociological thinking and explanation. I say attempts because none of them is accepted without question. But that's not the point; we're interested in them today as introducing ways of explaining things and setting theoretical agendas for later work.

Sociologists do not cluster round a single paradigm. Of those active today, some call themselves Marxists, others Weberians or Durkheimians. Others identify more strongly with Tocqueville, who enjoyed renewed attention after the democratic revolutions in communist Europe and elsewhere in the late twentieth century, or with Simmel. Tönnies' distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*) remains a central, if problematic, element in sociological thinking, while Sombart and Michels continue to inspire thought in the sociology of politics.

The following list of topics can be modified according to your intellectual backgrounds and interests. Each includes some elements of a classic approach and later responses to it. Finally, attempts to explain the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century, by Marxist sociologists and others, show some of these paradigms in their application to specific social catastrophes, and Theda Skocpol's influential theory of revolutions opens up the issue of state-centred versus society-centred explanations.

Structure of the Module

Sessions are weekly on Mondays for the first two weeks; then twice a week (Mondays and Wednesdays for the next three, which takes us into the New Year. Depending on numbers, I expect to give an informal lecture for the first part of the session, followed by seminar discussion. In the last weeks of the module, there will also be an opportunity to try out the themes of your papers.

The module is assessed by a 2000 word paper, to be submitted to the School Office by 1200 on Wednesday 13th February.

Core reading is marked with an * and will mostly be provided in photocopy form.

Background and general reading

a) Brief overviews of social thought

Anthony Giddens "Four Myths in the History of Social Thought", Economy and Society. 1972 (Reprinted in Giddens, Studies in Social and Political Theory).

William Outhwaite, Title essay from Heine Andersen and Lars Bo Kaspersen ,(eds), Classical and Modern Social Theory - an Introduction (1996).

Buford Rhea (ed) (1981) *The Future of the Sociological Classics*

Peter Baehr & P.O'Brien (1994) 'Founders, Classics and the Concept of a Canon', *Current Sociology* 42, 1.

You may also find it useful to read one or more of the standard histories of sociological theory, such as Alex Callinicos, Social Theory; An Historical Introduction (1999; 2nd edition, 2007)

b) Understanding and Explanation

* Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (1991) *Understanding and Explaining International Relations*, esp. Introduction.

Clifford Geertz The Interpretation of Cultures ('Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture')

* William Outhwaite, 'Laws and Explanations in Sociology' in R.J. Anderson et al. (eds.), Classic Disputes in Sociology (Allen & Unwin 1987) pp. 157-183.

William Outhwaite, 'Naturalisms and Antinaturalisms' in T.May & M.Williamson (eds), Knowing the Social World (Open University Press, 1998)

1) Introduction to the course and to Kuhn

Differences between the natural and social sciences. How far is the concept of paradigm applicable to the social sciences?

*Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds) (1970) *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (esp. chapter by Masterman and Kuhn's response)

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Herminio Martins (1971) 'The Kuhnian Revolution and its Implications for Sociology', in A.H.Hanson, T.Nossiter and Stein Rokkan (eds) *Imagination and Precision in the Sociological Analysis. Essays in Memory of Peter Nettl.*

John Urry (1973) 'Thomas S. Kuhn as Sociologist of Knowledge', *British Journal of Sociology* 24, 4, 462-473.

2) Early social theory in Europe.

Emergence of the idea of society or the social, of social determinants of political processes and social responses to political dilemmas.
Ideas of progress of knowledge, democracy etc.

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754) 'On the Origins of Inequality Among Men' (extract)

*Ralf Dahrendorf, 'On the Origins of Inequality Among Men', in André Béteille (ed), Social Inequality (1969)

Montesquieu (1748) *The Spirit of the Laws*

Raymond Aron (1965) *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*
Johan Heilbron (1995) *The Origin of Social Theory*

Auguste Comte (1830-42) *Course of Positive Philosophy*

Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) *Democracy in America*

3) Marx

- Hegel on his head
- materialist theory of history; primacy of production
- capital

Marx moves from a critique of Hegel's idealist philosophy to a materialist (productivist) theory of history and a method, applied in *Capital*, which may or may not have wider application.

* Marx (1843) 'Critique of Hegel's Theory of the State' in Marx, *Early Writings* (1975)

Marx and Engels (1845-6) *The German Ideology* (ed. Chris Arthur)

Marx (1867) *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 1

For examples of Marx explaining historical processes in detail, see, for example, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

G.A.Cohen (1978) *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*

Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright (2000) 'Sociological Marxism',

<http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Soc/Marx.pdf>

Michael Mann (1979) 'Idealism and Materialism in Sociological Theory', in

J.W.Freiberg (ed), *Critical Sociology*.

Michèle Barrett. (1992). 'Words and things: materialism and method in contemporary feminist analysis', in M. Barrett and A. Phillips (eds) *Destabilizing Theory: contemporary feminist debates*.

4) Herbert Spencer/Ferdinand Tönnies/Emile Durkheim

'Who now reads Spencer?', wrote Crane Brinton in 1933, quoted by Talcott Parsons in 1937. Not so many people, then or now, but he does offer a theory of social evolution which can be compared to Marx's and a theory of social harmony which sparked off Durkheim's alternative approach to the division of labour. With Tönnies in Germany and Durkheim in France, we encounter the classic anxiety of the late nineteenth century about community and social solidarity.

Spencer: extracts

Maureen O'Malley, (2007) 'Evolutionary Theory', in William Outhwaite and Stephen P. Turner (eds), *Sage Handbook of Social Science Methodology* (I'll provide copies)

Tönnies, extract from G & G.

Durkheim, extract from Division of Labour

5) Durkheim again: suicide and religion

Durkheim also offered classic explanations of suicide and of religion, to which it has been objected that the former doesn't explain why people do it and the latter (not the 'savage') "makes society into a god" (E.E.Evans-Pritchard). They remain however paradigmatic or exemplary attempts which continue to inspire sociologists.

Durkheim (1897) *Suicide*

Durkheim (1912) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

For Durkheim's methodological reflections, see also his *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895).

The best secondary source on Durkheim remains Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim* (1973). See also Gianfranco Poggi's shorter and more recent book, *Durkheim* (2000).

6) Georg Simmel and Max Weber

Both offer analyses of more cultural aspects of capitalism: Simmel of the effects of a money economy and Weber of the alleged contribution of a version of protestant Christianity to the emergence of 'modern' capitalism in Europe. Simmel saw himself as offering a sociological complement to Marx's economic analysis: Weber a hypothetical alternative to historical materialism. Both provide implicit accounts of identity in capitalist modernity, and Simmel's other essays are the inspiration for much interpretive sociology (Schutz, Goffman, Garfinkel etc).

Simmel (1900) *Philosophy of Money*

(1896) 'Money in Modern Culture', *Theory, Culture and Society* 8, 3, August 1991

(1908) 'The Stranger', in Kurt Wolff (ed.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*

(also on the web: <http://condor.depaul.edu/~dweinste/intro/stanger.htm>)

Or in Craig Calhoun et al (eds) *Classical Social Theory*

Alfred Schutz 'The Stranger', *Collected Papers Vol. 2*

Steven Vaitkus 'Phenomenology and Sociology' in Bryan Turner (ed) The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory

P. Berger & T. Luckmann The Social Construction of Reality (1967)

H. Garfinkel Studies in Ethnomethodology (1966)

Weber (1904-5) *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism*

(1920) *Economy and Society*, vol 1, ch. 1.

Stephen Kalberg, Introduction to Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2001)

Larry Ray 'The Protestant Ethic Controversy', in R.J. Anderson et al. (eds.), *Classic Disputes in Sociology* (1987)

Theorizing Classical Sociology (1999), ch. 8

7) Werner Sombart and Robert Michels

Each moved politically from far left to far right. Along the way they asked two precise questions. One is the title of Sombart's book: Why is there no socialism in the United States? Michels' question is why a democratic organisation such as, in this case, a socialist party, should tend towards oligarchical rule by officials. ('What do you expect?', replied Weber, who had his own theory of bureaucracy.

Sombart (1906) *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?*

Michels (1910) *Political Parties*

David Beetham 'Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratisation', in David Held (ed) *Prospects for Democracy* (1992)

Martin Albrow, *Bureaucracy* (1970)

8) Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century

‘Anyone who does not wish to speak about capitalism should be silent about fascism’, wrote the Frankfurt neo-Marxist Max Horkheimer. But both fascism and capitalism, for him and for Marcuse and Adorno, involved crucial psychological as well as economic processes. More was needed to explain why some European states became fascist and others did not. They were also sensitive to the parallels between fascism and Soviet communism, and for that matter liberal democratic capitalism.

* Max Horkheimer ‘The Authoritarian State’, in A.Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*.

Herbert Marcuse *Negations: ‘The Struggle against Liberalism...’*

Hannah Arendt (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

David Beetham (ed) (1983) *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*

Stephen P. Turner and Dirk Käsler (eds) (1992) *Sociology Responds to Fascism*, chs 1 & 8.

C.Lefort ‘The Concept of Totalitarianism’, *Warwick/Sussex Papers in Social Theory* 2, 1998

9) State and Society

Theda Skocpol (1979) *States and Social Revolutions*

* (1985) ‘Bringing the State Back In’, in *Bringing the State Back In* edited by Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Theda Skocpol.