**Classical Theory**
**SOC 6001H**

**Course facilitator:** Dr. Kristin Plys  
**Office:** Department of Sociology  
Room 326, 725 Spadina

**Class timing and location:** Thursdays 10am-12pm  
Room 240, 725 Spadina

**Office hours:** by appointment

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**Course Description**

This course explores the development of sociological theory, focusing on the primary texts of three social theorists who have had an enduring impact on contemporary sociology. Although we will consider the broader intellectual climate and key figures in the development of sociology as a discipline, we focus on the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. In addition to a consideration of the theoretical concepts and frameworks of these three theorists, we will delve into the biographical, intellectual, and institutional contexts within which these authors produced their works.

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**A note on the chosen readings**

You will likely find that the theorist(s) you like best and use most often in your work are not on this reading list. As you develop your own voice as a sociologist you will likely find that the theoretical paradigm that inspires the bulk of your intellectual work is something you will read on your own throughout your career. You are of course free to read whatever you like on your own! But having Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as a ever present theoretical cannon is what links sociologists together given the methodological, geographical, temporal, and topical diversity of the discipline. We are (and should be) unsettling the paradigms we inherit from this cannon, but just like Pablo Picasso who first demonstrated a mastery of representational painting before inventing cubism, we must be well versed in Marx, Weber, and/or Durkheim in order to unsettle these old white dudes from the privileged position they hold within social theory and develop our own new, creative paradigms within social theory.

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**Seminar format**

The bulk of each class will consist of collaborative and largely open-ended discussion of the work assigned for that day. You will be the discussion facilitator for at least one class session, typically but not necessarily with a partner who will serve as discussion critic. In addition to briefly summarizing the assigned material, your responsibility as a discussion facilitator will be to guide our discussions of the material. How you go about facilitating our discussions will largely be up to you, although the emphasis should be placed on class engagement and collaboration. I will sometimes give short lectures that provide introductory or background material to help to contextualize the work in its broader contexts. Everyone is expected to actively engage in open-ended discussions.
of the material. Do not rely solely on the discussion facilitator, or me, to provide comprehensive learning material. Your active participation in each of our meetings is the most important ingredient to pulling off an effective graduate seminar. Please come to each class fully prepared to engage closely and carefully with the material we are covering.

Your active participation does not require you to be correct. Learning involves making mistakes. As economist Kenneth Boulding once said, “Nothing fails like success because we don’t learn from it. We learn only from failure.” Unfortunately, too much of the educational system is oriented to memorization. Although recall is a key part of learning, it is a fairly superficial one. Rather than “learning all the facts,” in this class we will try to use facts to build up portable insights that help make sense of our social worlds. Building anew sometimes involves making mistakes along the way, but it forges critical thinking skills that will remain with you a lifetime.

Goals and outcomes
There are three main goals for this course. Firstly, there is the pragmatic goal of in-depth engagement with the core texts of classical theory as a group. This in-depth group engagement is critically important to fully experiencing the text and it is also one of the few opportunities you’ll have over the course of your career to engage with these theorists in this way. This is especially true for the theorists outside of your own tradition. For example, I’ve participated in many Capital reading groups and read all three volumes at least 7 times over, but have only read Durkheim’s Elementary Forms once—in my required grad social theory course.

Secondly, through this in-depth collective engagement with the classical theory cannon we’ll gesture at what sociology is all about. Theory is the intellectual, humanistic side of sociology where we get to ask big questions about the why our social world is the way it is. At the heart of classical theory is the struggle to describe, explain, and analyze the nature of capitalist modernity. Over the course of the semester, we will engage with various approaches of grappling with capitalist modernity.

Finally, and most importantly, the goal of this course is to learn to think sociologically. While sociology is a social science, its mode of inquiry is distinct from a more science-adjacent social science discipline like economics, in which the goal of research is a normative one—to promote economic growth. The analytical approach of economic research is deductive in that research in economics establishes the truth of theoretically derived principles by using the present to make predictions about the future through deductive models based on formal logic in order to derive assumptions along with advanced statistical methods to predict. Sociological research, in contrast, has as its goal to understand underlying causes for observed social phenomena. The analytical approach of sociology is either inductive or deductive—both building theory from observations and testing theory. To meet this goal of explaining underlying causes, we sociologists typically use the past to make sense of the present, and our methods are empirical (quantitative and/or qualitative) and/or historical. As Charles Lemert puts it,
“We want to know the why, we are dimly aware of the how, but we will settle for the when… Herein is found the special role of social theory. The first duty of social theorists is to ask fresh why questions.”

Responsibilities of course participants:

1. **Serving as discussion facilitator (15%)**
   
   Each week a different class participant will introduce the course readings. As part of your role as course facilitator you will produce a handout summarizing the week’s readings and provide copies for all course participants.

   This handout, however, should stake out an argument or position on the readings or the issues raised in them. Make an argument by articulating a critique of the reading or the theoretical and/or methodological approaches that have followed in its wake, by drawing connections across other theoretical frameworks, by posing thematic convergence, divergences, and blinders, or by raising issues that require further elaboration.

   In addition to creating a handout, the discussion facilitator will structure and facilitate the day’s coverage of the material. The handout should outline and set our discussion up. Please be responsive to discussions and issues raised by the rest of the class, however, which may or may not correspond closely to those raised in your handout. How you structure the day’s class is largely up to the discussion facilitator (a couple of weeks will involve more than one discussion facilitator). Emphasis should be on facilitating an engaging and lively discussion that deepens our critical understanding and appreciation for the texts at hand, their broader contexts, and how and where they remain relevant to contemporary sociological research.

   If you are not a discussion facilitator, your role is to come prepared to discuss the material, help formulate or re-formulate class discussion questions, speculate on answers, and in general be an active, engaged, and constructive participant in our seminar. Please keep in mind that crystalline understanding of the material is not an expectation for participation, but a willingness to learn is. Please conduct yourself in a professional and attentive fashion. Please respect your fellow course participants including the course facilitator. In the spirit of perhaps the most famously misattributed quote in all the humanities (was it Plato? Philo of Alexandria? Rev. John Watson? Ian MacLaren?), “Be kind to one another, for most of us are fighting a hard battle.”

2. **Serving as discussion critic (5%)**
   
   Each week, after the readings have been introduced another class participant will critically respond to the discussion facilitator’s introduction of the readings. These remarks will be off the cuff, as the discussion critic will not know in advance how the discussion facilitator will structure their introduction to the
readings. Being able to engage with dense texts and ideas off the cuff is an important skill to cultivate as a sociologist. Over the course of your career you will attend workshops, seminars, and conferences where you will not have advance knowledge of the project or ideas but have to engage with them nonetheless. The point of discussion critic is not to be mean, to ‘trash’, or to ‘destroy’ anyone, but to provide counterpoints, generate controversy, and constructively spark further discussion.

3. **Memos, attendance, participation (20%)**
   A seminar cannot function unless we show up and are prepared to discuss what we read. Each week class participants will prepare a short memo before class. The memo will contain (1) a one paragraph to one page summary of the readings; (2) a sentence or two applying the theories we covered that week to an experience or current event; (3) a discussion question on the topic of the readings. I have found that in writing literature reviews or theory sections of books/articles I often revisit the reading memos I wrote during my grad school coursework and find them incredibly useful in remembering key texts quickly. Keeping your notes brief will be a challenge, but one you will face throughout your professional lives. It is very difficult to be succinct while also comprehensive.

   Please bring a hard copy of the memo to class to hand in to the course facilitator.

4. **Essay on Marx and Weber (30%)**
   At the mid-term, course participants will write an 8-10 page theoretical analysis of a contemporary social problem of your choice. In it, you will focus on the theoretical perspectives of Marx and Weber. You can include as well Durkheim if you wish, but this is not required as we will not yet have covered Durkheim in class. The paper should move beyond summary by making a standalone theoretical argument. You might consider organizing the argument around which theorist provides a more enlightening framework or set of analytic concepts for analyzing the social problem at hand. Or consider which aspects of each theorist’s work best captures certain aspects of the problem. You might also consider frameworks and/or concepts can be synthesized so to better capture important or illuminating features of the social problem.

   This essay should be emailed to the course facilitator as a .pdf before class on Thursday, March 5th.

5. **Essay on ‘unsettling the cannon’ (30%)**
   At the end of term, course participants will write an 8-10 page theoretical analysis of a theorist not included in this course that you wish to add to the classical social theory cannon. This paper should focus on how that theorist provides insights that elude and/or improve upon Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. It
is perfectly acceptable to argue in this essay that there should be no social theory canon.

This essay should be emailed to the course facilitator as a pdf by 10am on Thursday April 9th.

General Guidelines for Papers:
• 12 point font, double spaced.
• At least 1” margins on all sides.
• Check spelling and read your work before turning it in.
• Use proper citation conventions.
• Avoid totalizing terms such as “always,” “never,” “totally,” and “completely,” or phrases like “since the beginning of time…”, which lead to weak theorizing because they oversimplify the human condition.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Due</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>Engage with course content, actively participate in discussions, and active listening</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memos</td>
<td>Summary, application, and discussion question for the week’s readings</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion facilitator and handout</td>
<td>Write and present a handout on the week’s reading and facilitate the discussion for that day’s class</td>
<td>Dates will be assigned in class</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion critic</td>
<td>Rebuttal to the discussion facilitator</td>
<td>Dates will be assigned in class</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marx &amp; Weber essay</td>
<td>Essay on Marx &amp; Weber</td>
<td>5th March 10am</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Unsettling the canon’ essay</td>
<td>Essay on a classical theorist of your choosing</td>
<td>9th April 10am</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
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Late assignments will be deducted a third of a letter grade for each day (24-hours) that the assignment is late. So for example, if you hand in an assignment after 10am on the date due, it will be deducted a third of a letter grade. If you submit an assignment at 5pm the day after it is due it will be deducted by two-thirds of a letter grade. Late assignments will not be accepted after 7 days.

**Academic Integrity**
The University of Toronto is committed to the values of independent inquiry and to the free and open exchange of ideas. Academic integrity underpins these values and is a core part of the University’s commitment to intellectual life. Copying, plagiarizing, falsifying medical certificates, or other forms of academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Any student caught engaging in such activities will be referred to the Dean’s office for adjudication. Any student abetting or otherwise assisting in such misconduct will also be subject to academic penalties.

Students are expected to cite sources in all written work and presentations. See this link for tips for how to use sources well: (http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize). By enrolling in this course, you agree to abide by the university’s rules regarding academic conduct, as outlined in the Calendar. You are expected to be familiar with the **Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters**. This document identifies academic offences that are in opposition to the University’s mission to foster internationally significant research and excellent programs—a mission that can be realized only if members of the University appropriately acknowledge sources of information and ideas, present independent work on assignments and examinations, and complete and submit group projects in accordance with the standards of the discipline being studied. Please visit academicintegrity.utoronto.ca for smart strategies and information on processes and procedures surrounding academic integrity matters at the University Toronto. The website includes a link to decisions of the University Tribunal (http://www.adfg.utoronto.ca/processes/acdiscipline/Case_Summaries.htm) in cases involving academic integrity.

Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.

**Accessibility Services**
Please see the University of Toronto Governing Council “Statement of Commitment Regarding Persons with Disabilities” at http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppnov012004.pdf It is the University of Toronto's goal to create a community
that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner. In creating such a community, the University aims to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity and worth of all persons.

In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participate in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community. We take seriously our obligation to make this course as welcoming and accessible as feasible for students with diverse needs. We also understand that disabilities can change over time and will do our best to accommodate you.

Students seeking support must have an intake interview with a disability advisor to discuss their individual needs. In many instances it is easier to arrange certain accommodations with more advance notice, so we strongly encourage you to act as quickly as possible. To schedule a registration appointment with a disability advisor, please visit Accessibility Services at http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as, call at 416-978-8060, or email at: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca. The office is located at 455 Spadina Avenue, 4th Floor, Suite 400.

Additional student resources for distressed or emergency situations can be located at distressedstudent.utoronto.ca; Health & Wellness Centre, 416-978-8030, http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc, or Student Crisis Response, 416-946-7111.

**Equity and Diversity**

The University of Toronto is committed to equity and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. As a course instructor, I will neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual in this course and wish to be alerted to any attempt to create an intimidating or hostile environment. It is our collective responsibility to create a space that is inclusive and welcomes discussion. Discrimination, harassment and hate speech will not be tolerated. Additional information and reports on Equity and Diversity at the University of Toronto is available at http://equity.hrandedquity.utoronto.ca.

**Required texts:**


**Course Schedule and Reading List**

**Session one**
9th January:
Introduction to the course

**Marx**

**Session two**
16th January:
*1844 Manuscripts* in Tucker pp. 66-125

Discussion facilitator: 
Critic:

**Session three**
23rd January:
*The German Ideology* in Tucker pp. 146-200
*18th Brumaire* in Tucker pp. 594-617

Discussion facilitator: 
Critic:

**Session four**
30th January:
*Capital* in Tucker pp. 294-442

Discussion facilitator: 
Critic:

**Session five**
6th February: Neo-Marxists


Discussion facilitator:
Critic:

**Weber**

Session six
13th February:
“Politics as a Vocation”, in Gerth and Mills pp. 77-128  
“Science as a Vocation”, In Gerth and Mills pp. 129-156  
“Class, Status, Party”, in Gerth and Mills pp. 180-195  
“Bureaucracy” in Gerth and Mills pp. 196-244  
“The Sociology of Charismatic Authority” in Gerth and Mills pp. 245-252

Discussion facilitator:
Critic:

Session seven
27th February:
*Protestant Ethic*

Discussion facilitator:
Critic:

Session eight
5th March:
“Basic Sociological Terms” in *Economy & Society* pp. 3-62  
“Sociological Categories of Economic Action” in Economy & Society pp. 63-211  
“Patriarchalism and Patrimonialism” in Economy & Society pp. 1006-1069

Discussion facilitator:
Critic:

**Essay on Marx & Weber due**

Session nine
12th March: Neo-Weberians


Discussion facilitator: Durkheim
Critic:

Session ten
19th March:
Division of Labour

Discussion facilitator: Durkheim
Critic:

Session eleven
26th March:

Discussion facilitator: Durkheim
Critic:

Session twelve
2nd April: Neo-Durkheimians


Discussion facilitator: Durkheim
Critic:

9th April: Essay on unsettling the canon due