WHAT’S THE BIG IDEA?!

This course is about Big Ideas: Big Ideas in social theory, Big Ideas about inequality, Big Ideas that explain social change. The Big Idea of the course itself is this: What do you do when you encounter a Big Idea? My premise is that although raw brain power helps, fruitfully engaging with Big Ideas involves skills and strategies that university-educated people can learn and develop. It’s not just how smart you are but how you are smart. I want you to finish the semester better able to recognize, analyze, critically evaluate and appreciate, and develop and express Big Ideas in theoretical texts. The readings in this course are exclusively the Big Ideas of the classical social theorists expressed in their own words (albeit frequently in translation). You will have an opportunity to explore Big Ideas by both reading and talking about them. We will explore the conventions, expectations, and skills of reading and discussing social theory as a way of learning what it takes to encounter Big Ideas with intellectual appreciation and critical confidence.

WHAT’S THE POINT OF THEORIZING?

A theory in its most simple form is an idea that guides and explains observations of the world. Ethical philosopher Avishai Margalit notes: "In science the great divide is between theory and observation. Theory is tested by observation, and theory is our way of enlarging the scope of our knowledge beyond what we can observe directly" (The Ethics of Memory [Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2002], p. 177). Every discipline of observation – from astronomy to zoology – has theories that both guide observation (that is, “discipline” the observer about what to look for and what “counts” as data or knowledge) and provide characteristic or “disciplinary” explanations (these sometimes go beyond the data in Margalit’s sense). In sociology, the idea is to observe
and explain “social things” or “social facts” – the phenomena, character, and dynamics of the social world.

Each of us has the ability to theorize. Moreover, we do so regularly, often without realizing it. We theorize by asking and answering questions about the social world. We ask these questions because we must understand society in order to determine how we will act. Our answers are informal social theory. Often family, political, economic, or religious systems provide us with ready-made answers to our questions about why things are the way they are and our place in the social order. We may revise these answers based on our experiences, or the experiences of people we know, coming to our own conclusions. The answers are vitally important because our social actions are based on our understanding of how society works. It is much more difficult to act strategically – to preserve or change the world – without some sense of how things are and why.

This is where the Big Ideas come in. Formal social theorizing is a way to grapple systematically with questions about social life.

Theories are sets of logically interrelated statements that attempt to order, describe, and explain the causes and consequences of personal, social, or other relevant events. Powerful theories also try to predict the occurrence of events before they happen. Their power is measured by the robustness of their predictions under as many varied conditions as possible. This means that theories are generally abstract and use the interrelationships among general concepts rather than concrete variables. The more abstract a theory gets, however, the less it can be applied directly to any phenomenon that needs to be explained. Conversely, the more concrete a theory gets, the less it can be applied to complex phenomena under different social conditions. (Aysan Sev’er, *Fleeing the house of horrors* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002], p. 43)

Social theorists observe the social world and seek to explain it. The purpose of social theory is to provide a lens through which people can analyze and understand the social world. The Big Ideas at the root of social theories are important because they provide templates for understanding and action. Politics are always based on social theory, although political actors may not acknowledge their foundational theoretical assumptions or influences. We will discuss both the theory of politics and the politics of theory.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

The substantive objective of this course is to introduce you to some Big Ideas in the history of sociological theory. We will read excerpts from the “classics” by the “founding fathers” of sociology (Marx, Durkheim, and Weber). We will also read selections from the theoretical writings of some of sociology’s “other parents” – that is, contemporaries, followers, or challengers of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim who also developed theories
dealing with social change, but whose works have generally not been consecrated as part of the canon. Each of these thinkers, however, addressed themes that have become part of the central concerns of sociology, such as inequality, racism, women’s subordination, sexuality, or identity.

LEARNING GOALS

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify and explain the significance of many of the central concepts and arguments – the Big Ideas – in classical social theory.
- Use fundamental categories of theory to assess some of the most influential contributions to the sociological canon and to enhance your comprehension and appreciation of theoretical texts.
- Recognize some Big Ideas not generally included in the canon and understand the factors behind their exclusion.
- Compare and contrast the ways different theorists use the same or similar concepts to build or present their Big Ideas.
- Identify and use strategies for encountering Big Ideas related to the social world.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION, & PREPARATION

The above list of learning goals is ambitious. To help us all get there, you are expected to contribute your questions and insights to the class. The culture of the class will, I hope, be a congenial one. We will develop criteria for collegial and productive contributions and measures for participation, which will contribute significantly to your final grade. For the moment: Participation includes but is not limited to listening, asking questions, referring to textual sources, and formulating points in your own words.

Preparation is paramount. To meet the learning goals of this course, and to participate at the level required, you will need to read the materials for every class session carefully and thoughtfully. Most of the readings are quite short, but do not be fooled. As a general rule, the shorter the reading is, the more challenging it is! Most selections require more than one reading. Be sure to allot enough time to go through each reading at least twice BEFORE class and to take notes (in the margins, on 3x5 cards, in a notebook, on your computer, or however you prefer). Use these notes – and any informal writing assigned as homework – to prepare yourself for participation, so that you will have something to say (or at the very least some question to ask) when you
come to class. You are also likely to find it helpful to read over the text, your reading notes, and your notes from our class discussions AFTER each class. Bring your text to every class session for ready reference.

Long experience tells me that participating in this course will reward you in direct proportion to what you put into it. Whatever you do, don’t just sit there. Say anything you can defend against reasoned argument. Treat your colleagues’ contributions with respect. That means taking them seriously and challenging them as well as extending basic courtesy. You have my professional pledge that I will do the same for you.

Attendance is mandatory. Over the course of the semester, you are allowed three free passes. That is, you may skip class, withdraw from the question pool (by not handing in a Q-card), or decline to answer when I call on you three times over the course of the semester without penalty. If you have more than three classes for which you either passed or were physically absent, you will lose two (2) points from your accumulated total toward your final grade for each additional absence. I do not care why you miss class or choose to pass. Being bedridden with the flu, caring for a child or friend, working mandatory overtime, missing the bus, representing the University of Pittsburgh in athletic competition, attending a funeral, or taking a mental health day to ice skate or sit in the sun are all your business. I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Use your passes wisely, especially if you are a scholar-athlete and know you will miss some classes in order to compete or a parent and know you are likely to miss some classes to fulfill your familial responsibilities.

Participation will contribute 25% of your total grade. Perfect attendance without participation will NOT earn you full participation points. If you attend faithfully but sleep through class, or seldom contribute appreciably to our collective intellectual endeavor, you will only earn partial credit for attendance and participation. Yes, in a way this means drawing attention to yourself and your ideas; this can be a formidable task for shy persons, or for those not raised in a culture that emphasizes discussion. I guarantee you the best remedies are preparation and continuous incremental increase in your willingness to take risks and to contribute your thoughts and queries. If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodation to enable you to meet this requirement, please see me promptly.

Q-CARDS

To help organize your participation and preparation, and to allow you to help set the agenda for discussion, you are required to maintain a collection of Q-Cards. On a file card (I will provide these), write your name (along with any preferred nickname, if that is how you want us to address you, Sparky!) in the upper left corner of one side. On the both sides, keep a neatly-written record of key questions about the readings. Date each question and be sure to give a specific page reference to the passage that is the source of
your question or comment. You may ask questions of fact, context, clarification – anything that gives articulate form to your curiosity and engagement with the text. Take for granted that this will get easier as we go along. Also assume that if your Q-Card is drawn, you may have to elaborate the question as well as suggest a tentative answer.

At the beginning of most class sessions, I will collect the Q-Cards, which we may use to shape the discussion. I may call at random on people from the submitted questions. I may address questions in a subsequent class session. I will take attendance by checking the Q-Cards. This means you will need at least two cards "in circulation" at any given time (one to leave with me and the other to have with you as you read).

EXAMINATIONS

Your main opportunities to demonstrate your grasp of the materials covered in this course and your progress toward meeting the learning goals will be the three examinations I will administer. There will be two examinations held during class periods (see schedule below for dates) and a final exam administered during the scheduled final exam period. The two mid-term examinations are each worth 25% of your final grade. The final exam is also worth 25% of your final grade. You must pass these examinations in order to pass the course. They will consist of a combination of short answers and essay questions, and you will have some choice. They will be administered at the testing center in the old Alumni Hall building on Fifth Avenue.

EVALUATION

Grades for this course are based on a point system. A total of 100 points are possible. Your final grade will be based on the total points you earn out of the possible 100. You will earn points based on how well you can demonstrate, by meeting the course requirements, having learned and understood the material. Grading will be criteria-based, not norm-based, and there will be no curve. That is, if you demonstrate (through your accumulated points on the essays and participation in discussions) mastery of 90 percent or more of the material (that is, accumulate 90 or more points), you will earn an "A."

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<tr>
<td>90 or more</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>87-89</td>
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<td>80-86</td>
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Attendance and participation = 25%

Mid-term examinations = 2 @ 25% = 50%

Final examination = 25%

Remember, after your three (3) “free” absences or passes, each time you miss class or withdraw from participation you will lose two (2) points. You can easily turn a passing grade into a failing grade by failing to attend. I can’t tell you how cranky this will make me – I dislike failing students, especially when it is so clearly avoidable.

Note: You may accumulate up to 5 bonus points for significantly contributing to the learning community. This includes contributions to class discussions, questions to the instructor during lectures, suggestions for learning strategies, or challenges to the instructor or your classmates. To be considered, your comments must be relevant to the discussion and delivered with respect for your classmates.

COURSE MATERIALS

The required text for this course is:


The book is available in paperback at the University Book Center. Unfortunately, it is not in the library and I have not been able to put it on reserve. Fortunately, it is not prohibitively expensive. It is an excellent collection of excerpts from what are essentially primary source documents. In the Schedule of Readings and Meetings below, I refer to assignments from this book as CST, pp. xx-xxx.

We will be supplementing CST with selections from Frederich Engels, John Stuart Mill, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. For reasons we will explore in discussion, these selections are not included in the book. These materials are available in a course pack available for purchase at minimal cost at the Book Center.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR COURSE PACK


**SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND MEETINGS**

- 5 January – Organizational meeting.
- 12 January – CST, pp. 19-33.
- 17 January – CST, pp. 34-43.
- 26 January – Class cancelled. Review with study partners.
- 31 January – Exam 1 at Center.
- 2 & 7 February – CST, pp. 103-127.
- 9 February – CST, pp. 128-149.
- 14 February – CST, pp. 150-161.
- 21 February – CST, pp. 188-205.
- 2 March – Reader, Engels.
- 14 March – Reader, Mill.
- 16 March – Reader, Gilman, from *Women and Economics*.
- 21 March – Reader, Gilman, from *Androcentrism*.
- 23 March – Review and discussion.
- 28 March – Exam 2 at Center.
- 4 April – CST, pp. 235-252.
- 11 April – CST, pp. 281-286.
- 20 April – Review and discussion.
- Final Exam at Center by Wed Apr 26 4:00 p.m.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Enrollment in this course makes you a member of an academic community. The University of Pittsburgh enforces expectations for the members of its academic communities. These standards are designed to ensure the integrity of your education and
of the evaluation process. Read the Guidelines on Academic Integrity: Student and Faculty Obligations and Hearing Procedures with great care. The expectations of academic integrity are central to the intellectual liveliness and standards of this academic community. As a student, you have a responsibility to be honest and to respect the ethical standards of your chosen field of study. You will have violated these standards if you:

- Refer to unauthorized materials (in other words, don't cheat).
- Provide unauthorized assistance (in other words, don't help someone else cheat).
- Receive unauthorized assistance (in other words, don't cheat).
- Possess, buy, sell, copy, or use unauthorized materials (in other words, don't buy a draft of your assignments from a “paper mill”).
- Act as or use a substitute in an evaluation setting (in other words, although you may work in pairs or small groups, don't write an assignment for someone else, or have someone write an assignment for you).
- Present as your own, for academic evaluation, the ideas or words of another person without proper acknowledgement and citation of sources (in other words, don't plagiarize).

Academic integrity is not limited to these points, but these are the most important elements. They will be enforced without fail in this course. Do your own work. Figure out what you want to say and say it in your own words. Cite your sources when you quote or paraphrase. Violate these community standards and you will flunk so fast your head will spin.

**REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION**

If you have a disability that makes it impossible for you to complete the requirements for this course in the manner specified in the syllabus, please see me with documentation from the Office of Disability Resources and Services (216 William Pitt Union; x8-7890) and we will make appropriate arrangements.