

College of Social Studies

CSS Sophomore Colloquium: Modern Social Theory

CSS 271

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I. Introduction

During the sophomore year your tutorials and the colloquium all focus on the emergence and functioning of industrial society, a form of social life that first emerged in northwestern Europe, with roots as early as the 15th century, and coming into full flower in the 19th and 20th centuries. The tutorials approach this theme from their own disciplinary perspectives. In History, for example, you will examine the modern history of Western Europe, including the industrial revolution, the rise of nationalism, the emerging role of women in society, and the development of modern, democratic politics; in Economics you will study the history of economic thought, and in Government the emergence of the modern state. As you can see from the general syllabus of the colloquium, the principal academic content of this course is a selection of the major social and political theories published between 1650 and 1920. In Social Theory, we will begin with Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532). As you will learn in your tutorials, the processes of modernization and industrialization involved enormous changes in every aspect of life. While the changes were in many ways liberating, and welcome to some social groups, they were deeply threatening to others, and disruptive to all. It is most important for our purposes, although they resulted from the conscious and intentional actions of men and women, that the changes themselves were generally unplanned, often quite unexpected, and no one at the time had a clear understanding of the kind of society or way of life that was emerging. In many ways one can see these theories as attempts by philosophers and social thinkers to grasp the dramatic transformations that were occurring in their societies. By coming to understand their own societies better, they were able to analyze the different forms of society that were possible and to prescribe a particular form which, in light of their theories, could be seen to be superior to other attainable forms. These theories, then, were *critical* reflections on society, intended both to explain what was going on, and to criticize social reality, in part by articulating an ideal of social order and by specifying what must be done to achieve it.

Because of the critical dimension of these theories, they are important not only for what they teach us about how society works and the causes of modernization and industrialization, but also because they themselves become part of the very process of social change itself. For men and women take up these theories, or the ideas inspired by them, draw up political programs,

create institutions, and conduct their lives according to them. As these theories become part of society in this way, they often have consequences that are unintended by the theorists who drew them up. Thus, to understand our history and our own form of life requires that we understand the theories that have in part shaped it. As John Maynard Keynes wrote in his *General Theory*:

the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.¹

Thus, when you study the consolidation of the modern state, the development of the institutions of political and legal sovereignty, and the growth of new forms of the state and law, you will be studying social and political processes whose ideas were first articulated by Hobbes; when you investigate the growth of the constitutional state of the 19th century, you will find the ghost of Locke; and when you learn about the socialist movement and the creation and operation of non-market industrial economies, you will not have to look hard to see the influence of Marx.

If we must study these theories because they have become integral parts of our world, and the history of the creation of that world, we must also study them because they continue to provide the essential ideas we use to understand and explain that world. One of the principal aims of the social sciences is to develop theories that explain the widest possible range of social phenomena in terms of a few basic principles. Ultimately, the idea is to create a unified theory that could account for many aspects of social life, including such things as war, the structure of families, the level of prices and employment, political revolutions, and the forms of religious practice. Social theories ultimately rest upon certain very basic assumptions regarding human motivation, rationality, sociality and needs. In other words, they presuppose a conception of human nature and society, some image of what it is to be a person and the relationships of people to one another. In order to understand these theories, it is essential that we grasp the basic assumptions upon which they rest and the fundamental concepts they put forward.

The theories that we will be studying in this course all rest upon some conception of the person and society on the basis of which social scientists have continued to develop theories even to this day. In Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Hobbes sets out a conception of the person and of

¹J.M Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, n.d.), pp. 383-384.

society that will be familiar to many of you, for in many ways it resembles the ideas that underlie much of modern economics, political science, and sociology – not to mention our ordinary, unreflective ways of talking about society. Another theory we will study is from Marx, and the connections between his theories of society and contemporary Marxist ideas are obvious. There will be such connections for all of the theories we will study this semester.

These theories also provide the frameworks within which normative issues have been and continue to be posed. If we want to understand such concepts as liberty, equality, solidarity, democracy, the public interest, justice, or alienation, then the best place to begin is with the thinkers who first enunciated them, or who first thought about them in a systematic, rigorous, way.

This course, then, has a number of intellectual objectives. First, it will provide a background for the other work you will be doing in the College by presenting some of the theories that are important components of the social and historical processes you will be studying in tutorials. Second, by studying these theories and analyzing their structures and basic assumptions, you should come to see some of the presuppositions that underlie the theories contemporary social scientists use to explain society. This should help you become more self-conscious about your own assumptions about what is involved in understanding social life. Third, you should come to see, at least in an impressionistic way, the connection between thinking about society in a certain way and holding certain values or principles regarding how society ought to be organized. And fourth, you should come to see that there are a number of fundamentally different and competing ways of thinking about modern society, and what some of these differences involve.

The readings for this course are all classical texts of political and social theory, and many of them try to set out overarching views of human history, though necessarily based on information that is limited due to the time in which these authors lived. You may wish to read or look at more recent efforts to describe the large sweep of human history, drawing on advances in the natural and social sciences in the last century or two. If so, I would recommend three texts: Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1997); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011); Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015). Pinker's text is less sweeping than the other two, and focuses particularly on the decline of violence in human life in the last 800 years or so, and so is most directly germane to the concerns of our class.

One final note about the role of this colloquium in the CSS. This is the first occasion when your whole class will meet and work together on a common academic project. Thus, it is an opportunity to learn not only about the subject, but also about your classmates. Ideally the colloquium will contribute to the development of a shared sense of membership and common purpose within your class, which can be one of the most valuable and rewarding aspects of the College experience, and something that is hard to find outside of the College setting.

N.B. Most of this syllabus was written, developed, and refined across the years that this class has been offered. All the Social Theory tutors, myself included, have contributed but Don Moon deserves the most credit.

II. Class Procedures and Assignments:

Carlotta (Lottie) Gidal will be the preceptor for this class. She will hold a preceptorial on Sunday evenings and will also work with individual students to help with the readings and the written work. I strongly encourage you to participate actively in the Sunday sessions. The readings for this class are complex, often rather difficult texts, and you will find them more intelligible and intriguing if you talk about them with other students and with the preceptor before class. The first preceptorial meeting will be Sunday, September 4th. Lottie will be in touch with you to confirm the details, about place and time, for the first preceptorial.

The Social Theory class will meet in Woodhead Lounge, in Exley—following the CSS Monday Lunch on Monday—on Monday and Wednesday, 1:20 to 2:40.

Almost every week, on Monday, you will turn in reading notes on the assigned reading for the week. There will be two kinds of writing assignments for Social Theory: almost weekly, short (2-page) reading notes and 2 tutorial-length (5-page) papers. The reading notes are due, by email to me, on Monday at 11:00 a.m. This will give you time to get to the the CSS Monday Lunch at noon.

See the Instructions for Reading Notes.

Later in the semester, you will get the Instructions for Papers. There will be one paper due mid-semester and one at the end of the semester.

All written work is due to me by email, and in Word, 12 pt.

In general, you will get more comments about the writing and structure of your reading notes in the first weeks. Later in the semester, my comments and Lottie's comments will be much more focused on the ideas, as your ideas will be clearer at that stage.

The longer, tutorial style paper will require you to engage critically with the readings from several weeks, and will be similar to the kind of essay you will be writing at the end of the year for Comps.

I encourage you to work together outside of class to discuss the readings. However, each student must write her or his reading notes/paper individually.

During the class you may be called on to discuss some of the points from your notes. I expect to hear every voice every class time.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Attend all classes. If you must miss a class, it is your responsibility to explain the situation to me, preferably before the class starts.
- Be on time. Unless in case of emergency, do not leave the classroom during the class.
- Mute all electronic devices.
- Bring a copy of the text to class.
- Come to class prepared to discuss the material. During the class, you may be called on to discuss some of the points from your reading notes. I expect to hear every voice several times during the class time. At all stages, be gracious but determined.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS

1. **Read all the required reading.**
2. **Reading Notes.** See the Instructions for Reading Notes, including sample reading notes.
3. **2 Papers.** Later in the semester, see the Instruction for Papers.
4. Active **Class Participation** is expected from every student every class time.

Disability Resources

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disabilities as soon as possible.

In addition, let me know directly if you need to receive disability accommodations. We will want to alert your other CSS tutors as well.

Books (all paperback)

All the readings are available, in a mixture of hard copies and ebooks/pdf's, at Course Reserves/Online Course Reserves, Olin Library.

The books are also available for sale at Wesleyan R. J. Julia Bookstore on Main Street.

Feel free to buy the books wherever you can get the best prices.

Let me know if you have problems getting ahold of the books.

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Book List

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Penguin.
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Broadview Press.
Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation*, Prometheus.
John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Hackett.
John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Hackett.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Fundamental Political Writings*, Broadview.
Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, Cambridge.
Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications*, Broadview Press.
Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Norton.
Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, Free Press.
John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Hackett.
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, Hackett.
Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, Hackett.
Max Weber, *From Max Weber*, Oxford.
Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic*, Penguin.
Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Norton.

N.B. If you get these books from different publishers, not the ones listed above, make that that you buy complete (not abridged) editions.

Final Comments

There are a number of excellent guides for good writing. Strunk and White is a classic, especially for grammar and word usage; it also offers a useful set of “principles of composition.” I especially recommend Joseph Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. His work is particularly helpful in offering examples of how awkward passages can be rewritten, using rules

or principles that are fairly concrete and address specific issues such as clarity, cohesion, emphasis, etc. (these are chapter headings in his book). Anthony Weston, *Rulebook for Arguments*, offers a helpful discussion of how to develop (and express) an argument in a tight, logical way.

A crucial word about class expectations: The structure of the CSS week means that some of you will think about leaving your work for Social Theory until after you have finished your tutorial on Friday. This does not leave enough time for the Social Theory reading and for doing the reading notes by Monday. This shortcut would impact your understanding of the Social Theory thinkers. It would hurt you overall and in particular when it comes to Comps in the spring. Long before Comps, you need to be able to incorporate the ideas from Social Theory into your tutorials and other classes. If you are having difficulty keeping up, please do not hesitate to contact me or Lottie. Figure out, with our help, how to pace your reading and the writing of the reading notes throughout the week.

III. Schedule of Social Theory Classes and Assignments

Week 0

(Monday, September 5th): Introduction

First Class -- No Assignment.

(Wednesday, September 7th) – Niccolò Machiavelli.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*. Read the whole book.

No Reading Notes in Week 0.

Week 1 (September 12th, 14th): Thomas Hobbes

Reading Assignment: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Parts I, II, and "A Review and Conclusion." This is a very long reading assignment, one of the longest you will have this semester. It is possible to skim some of the chapters especially in Part II, particularly chs. 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, and 31. In these chapters Hobbes takes up a variety of topics; you might want to pay particular attention to the first couple of pages where he identifies his topic and defines key terms (see, e.g., the first couple of pages of ch. 27). The rest of the chapter elaborates his position and addresses opposing views. Because of the length of the reading, you might want to skim those sections, using the notes printed in the margins as a guide.

First set of Reading Notes, on Hobbes, due to me by email on Monday by 11:00 a.m.

This will be the routine for every week of the semester, unless noted otherwise.

Week 2 (September 19th/21st): Jeremy Bentham and James Mill.

Reading Assignment: Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chs. 1-5, 13, 14, 17. James Mill, *Essay on Government*, available in many editions and at <http://studymore.org.uk/xmilgov.htm> though unfortunately this edition does not include Mill's chapter headings.

Week 3 (September 26th/28th): John Locke

Reading Assignment: John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, particularly chs. 1-11, 15, and 19, and his *Letter Concerning Toleration*.

Week 4 (October 3rd/5th): Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Reading Assignment: J.-J. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men*.

Week 5 (October 10th/12th): Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Reading Assignment: J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*.

Week 6 (October 17th/19th): Immanuel Kant

Reading Assignment: Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784); "What is Enlightenment?" (1784); *Perpetual Peace* (1795), "The Right of Punishment," (1797) pp. 154-60, in *Kant's Political Writings*.

No Reading Notes on Kant

Paper 1 due to me, by email, on Wednesday at 11:00 a.m.

**No other assignment, beyond Paper 1, on Wednesday.
Class will meet as usual.**

Bring all your books for Weeks 0-6 to this class.

Week 7 (No class on Monday, October 24th – Fall Break)

(Wednesday, October 26th) Mary Wollstonecraft

Reading notes due on Wednesday this week.

Reading Assignment: Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 99 - 343, skipping chs. 3, 5, 11, and ch. 13, sections 1 to 5 (324-340).

Week 8 (~~October 31st/November 2nd~~): Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

These two classes will be rescheduled (probably for the following Sunday, November 6th, 12:00-2:40), as a double class.

The reading notes on Marx will be due on Monday, October 31st, by 11:00 a.m. as usual.

Reading Assignment: Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in Tucker, pp. 26-52.
Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction," in Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 53-65.
Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," in Tucker, pp. 66-105.
Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in Tucker, pp. 469-500.
Marx, "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Tucker, pp. 3-6.
Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Tucker, pp. 143-145.
Marx, *The German Ideology*, Part I, in Tucker, pp. 146-200.
Marx, *Grundrisse*, sections E and F, in Tucker, pp. 261-78.
Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in Tucker, pp. 683-717.

Week 9 (November 7th/9th): Émile Durkheim

Reading Assignment: Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, Book I, chs 1, 2, 3, 5.1-5.3, 5.5, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 7.1, 7.4; Book II, chs 1, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 3 and 5.3; Book III, chs. 1, 2; Conclusion; Preface to the Second Edition. (N.B. The "Preface to the Second Edition" will be most intelligible if you read it last.) Émile Durkheim, *Suicide*, pp. 246-257. The final reading will be available from Online Reserves, Olin Library.

Week 10 (November 14th/16th): John Stuart Mill

Reading Assignment: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

Week 11 (November 21st—Double Class on the Monday before Thanksgiving):
Friedrich Nietzsche

Reading Assignment: Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*.

(No class on Wednesday, November 23rd – the day before Thanksgiving)

Week 12 (November 28th/30th): Max Weber

Reading Assignment: Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," "Science as a Vocation," "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," "The Meaning of Discipline," "Bureaucracy," all are in *From Max Weber. The Vocation Lectures* only has the first two.

Weber, "Bureaucracy and Political Leadership."

Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Week 13 (Monday, December 5th): Sigmund Freud

Reading Assignment: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

No Reading Notes

(Wednesday December 7th): Last Class – Conclusion

No Reading or Reading Notes

Bring all your books and readings for Weeks 0-13 to class

Second Paper due to me, by email, on Monday, December 12th, 2022, by 11:00 a.m.