COURSE STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES

In Social Theory, many ideas from introductory Sociology courses will be developed into more complex propositions; and ideas from specialized classes will be broadened into the general theories that form much of the foundation of the field. Broadly, this course presents a primary set of theories and theoretical principles that guide Sociology; and develops examples of how they have been applied in modern research. Specifically, the course will be based on the notion of theory as a generalizable form of explanation structured around, and applicable to, empirical data.

Sociological theories set the stage for the questions asked by sociologists and other social scientists. By providing an orientation towards both the levels of analysis and processes at play, social theories establish the topics of research and basic explanations of the complex events in the social world. In particular, these theories serve to focus attention on society and groups as units of study; and to identify features such as inequality, power, social integration, and specialization as key forces that define societies and explain conditions within them. The set of theories presented in this course are starting points for most social research that has occurred in the past century: most sociological research directly links, or can be readily traced, to the ideas presented in this course. Thus, Social Theory is an essential part of understanding the field of Sociology, the nature of sociological questions, and the basic ideas from which sociological answers are derived.

As a course with a broad base, the material covered is designed to be a general overview of the field and not a specific presentation of any one aspect of sociology. The readings and lectures will provide introduction to many arenas of sociological theory, with the greatest depth placed on classic theory and the works of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Adam Smith, and Max Weber. Practical applications, analyses, and modern developments of theories (e.g. evolutionary, exchange, and structural theories) will also be studied. The theories and theorists presented in this course are broadly applicable. While you may be particularly interested in a particular variable or topic of social inquiry (e.g. gender, education, or business), you will find that readings in this course do not consistently analyze any one of those topics. Instead, the theories presented here will more frequently be general perspectives on social relationships that can be applied in a variety of settings – for example, an initial study of racial discrimination may produce a theory which can cross over into an analysis of organizing social movements.

Lectures and class discussions are designed to provide information supplemental to the assigned readings, in addition to analyses and clarification of those course materials. Examinations and papers will cover objective aspects of the course (definitions, specific theories and authors, etc.), in addition to analytical elements (the compatibility of different theories, their validity and accuracy, etc.). This is a reading and writing intensive course intended for majors and minors, thought it will be richly rewarding for those with less focused interest in Sociology as well.

COURSE PREREQUISITES

There are two sufficient methods of fulfilling the prerequisite for this course: 1) having successfully completed Principles of Sociology – Soc 151 – in a prior semester; or 2) having successfully completed any other Sociology course in a prior semester and enrolling in Principles of Sociology – Soc 151– simultaneously with Social Theory.