The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of our inquiry do not strike us at all. And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #129

My dear friend, all theory is dull and gray, And the golden tree of life is green.

Johann Goethe, *Faust*, Part 1, 11

We fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and powerful. In this deceptively simple insight, Wittgenstein has captured the whole of sociological thought. From the mid-nineteenth century until the present day, sociology’s most striking and powerful insights have come when we have at last attended to what had been hidden in plain sight. Marx, for instance, reminds us that rights are merely ideas unless they are embodied in real human lives; Durkheim clears away the fog of our inattention to let us see that even our ultimate choices are shaped by our social locations and our attachments; Weber clangs a cup on the bars of a cage that is so much a part of our lives that we’ve never even noticed it; and Du Bois invites us to the other side of the veil where what we took to be the “Negro problem” reveals itself as the “White problem.”

In one sense, our course is a tour of these moments and more – a museum, if you will, where the works of sociologists are on display. As with any museum’s collection, some of the exhibition will be familiar to you, other parts you will see for the first time. All of them, however, will give us a sense of the transformative power of “sociology-done-right.”

In spite of all this, much of this course, as Mephistopheles observes to the student, will strike you (and me frankly) as dull and gray, a faint halftone representation of a vibrantly green world. There doesn’t seem to be much life, green or otherwise, in Weber’s catalogue of Calvinist principles or Durkheim’s recitation of data relating to “suicide and madness in different European countries” or Marx’s barely comprehensible claim that poverty cannot be abolished until humanity is realized and that humanity cannot be realized until poverty is abolished. It all seems to boil down to mere words, inert ink on lifeless paper, the residue of dead men talking.
So whose social theory course is this? Wittgenstein’s, where glittering insights follow one after another? Goethe’s, where life itself is ignored in favor of austere and abstract formulations?

I know most of you now expect me to launch into all the reasons why Wittgenstein is right and Goethe wrong – after all who wants to acknowledge the substance of his course dull and gray? But I’m not going to do that.

Don’t worry, I am not going to banish the glitter of Wittgenstein so we can attend to the properly drab theory lampooned by Mephistopheles either. Rather, I want to acknowledge that social theory courses can and do become dull, even as I hold fast to the idea that sociology-done-right changes not only our lives but our world.

Seizing the Wittgensteinian opportunity and avoiding the Goethean danger is essentially what we’ll be about for the next three months. Doing this will require your sustained attention and some hard intellectual labor. You will, however, be well-rewarded. Come the end of the semester, when the bright green days of September have grown gray and cold, I think you’ll understand your own life, the lives of others, and our life together in new and strikingly powerful ways.

Course Work

It won’t be easy to accomplish what I have in mind. We’ll need to think and write and argue and write some more. We’ll need to read and re-read and re-read what we’ve re-read. In the sections that follow, I’ve tried to outline what I expect of you (a lot) and give you some sense of how it will all fit together in a coherent whole.

Class Sessions

Except for the fact that we will spend our time sorting through some fairly complicated ideas dreamed up by some even more complicated people, there won’t be too much unusual about our class sessions. Of course, I will spend some time talking to you, and you can expect my comments to range from exegesis to exposition, from interpretive generalization to intellectual gossip.

More important than my talking and your listening is, however, your talking and listening to each other. If this course is to succeed, each of you must be willing to take some chances by talking about things you might not understand, some things you think are stupid,
and some things you think are wrong. I’m not going to leave you on your own in this regard. Each class day we will engage in some sort of project or exercise designed to get you actively involved in talking and thinking and, if we’re lucky, arguing about our penchant for “cheap thrills,” the “ascetic but usurious miser and the ascetic but productive slave,” the capacity of the vast “cosmos of modernity” to erode the very essence of humanity, and who knows what else.

If you have been in my classes before, you are no doubt aware that I have a relatively open approach to class attendance. I assume that class is interesting, informative, and reasonably fun (given the other alternatives on weekday afternoons). For the most part, this approach has worked – students have attended regularly and have had fun doing so.

I don’t plan to change this approach this semester, but because this course is going to be heavily invested in class activities, attendance is probably more important than usual. Your attendance will have an impact on how rewarding this course is for you – the more you come, the more rewarding you’ll find it.

But there is more to class attendance than that. All of us, I think, tend to regard courses as essentially private matters, something we as individuals choose to attend and participate in independently of, and with little effect on, the actions of others. In fact, however, classes aren’t simply collections of individuals, some interested and engaged, others disinterested and disaffected. They are, rather, communities tied together by common purposes and shared practices. A course is a collective enterprise that produces goods that can be attained only in concert with others. Our pursuit of these social goods makes your attendance and your vitality crucial to the success of this intellectual community.

By the way, you might, if you are reading carefully, recognize this as something that is often hidden in plain sight.

The Usual Suspects

All the work I will require you to submit in our course will be completed outside class. Some assignments will be short, others more extended; some will be straightforward, others more complicated; some will be what you are used to in sociology courses; others quite unusual.
Written Question Sets

Ordinarily, I would let the previous discussion of community and how important you are to the success of this community suffice. There is, however, another obstacle that threatens the success of the course. Reading social theory, even the breeziest of it, is hard and demanding work. I know from experience (both as a beginning social theory student and as an graying – not in Goethe’s sense I hope – social theory instructor) that even the best students are tempted to skim or even skip the assigned reading in the hopes that a more comprehensible oral account will be provided in class. Although I understand (and to some extent even share in) this temptation, I don’t want it to turn our course into a mere oral history of sociology in which I discuss those texts you should have read.

Accordingly, I have developed a system of written assignments that will require you to read regularly. These assignments will be due in class throughout the semester. For the most part, these assignments will ask you to use the assigned texts in a fairly straightforward manner – summarizing, outlining, or identifying the argumentative structure of the passages assigned. Occasionally, however, the assignments will ask you to respond to the reading or to apply the arguments in the reading to current issues and problems.

There will be ten of these assignments during the course of our semester, each of them worth 2 points. I know students have legitimate reasons for missing class, and I will take those into account by allowing you to miss two assignments without penalty. I will use your best eight assignments in calculating your grade.

In addition to encouraging you to do your reading regularly and thoughtfully, these assignments are also designed to encourage you to come to our class sessions prepared to talk about the material we are working through. In order to ensure the timeliness of your participation, I will not accept written question sets after the date they are due.

Critical Responses

I have assigned six overtly sociological texts as part of our required reading. We will read all of five of them (Goffman, de Beauvoir, Freud, Weber, and Marx) and part of another (Durkheim). I am most interested in your ability to use the ideas you encounter in these pages to think about our own lives and times. There is no need to memorize definitions, theoretical schema, or master diagrams of various frameworks (that’s the gray stuff). You will need to turn the ideas you encounter over and around so you can see all sides of them, and you will need to make some effort to extend those ideas into new areas of inquiry.
For each of the six sociological texts you will be required to write a critical response to the ideas presented in what we have read. These responses will build on the work you do to complete the question sets. As we finish our consideration of each text, I will distribute an assignment that will ask you to use the ideas you’ve encountered in a context designed to bring the gray theory to dramatically green life. For example, in Spring 2011, when we finished with Durkheim’s Suicide and had viewed the Palestinian film Paradise Now, I asked students to do this:

In Paradise Now, Said and Khaled make a number of oblique references to the quality of their lives. On several occasions, one or the other dismisses the obvious personal consequences of a suicide attack by saying that life as they know it is like being “dead already.” Other times, “boredom” seems to be the most salient aspect of their existence as they idle away the days in desultory labor mingled with listlessness. Said’s response to Suha’s question about how he spends his time is telling in this regard: the only activity he mentions – and remember he has been outside the West Bank only once and then as a child – is smoking.

Some questions:

1. Is there something similar in Said’s and Khaled’s circumstances (or, more properly, the circumstances that are the context for oh-so-many Saids and Khaleds) to the life of Nora Grey (or those oh-so-many Noras whom Friedan found caught in a “problem that had no name”)?

2. Said and Khaled occasionally express the “tactical logic” of suicide attacks: the weakness of the Palestinians in conventional military terms – “if we had airplanes…” – produces a radical asymmetry with the Israeli Defense Force (Israeli Army) that can only be balanced when “my life becomes a weapon.” Does this “logic” make the deaths of Saids and Khaled’s something other than suicide as Durkheim thinks about it? To put it another way: There have “always” been attacks by the occupied against the occupiers. Does the “addition” of “suicide” to the (acceptably effective) tactics mark the kind of “disturbance” of normalcy that Durkheim would take as an indication an indication of “social pathology”?

3. In his book On Suicide Bombing, Talal Asad claims that:

   Durkheim would almost certainly have included suicide bombing in his category of “altruistic suicide.”
   Indeed, he was the first theorist to problematize the notion of “the individual” through an identification of the social determinants of that most personal of acts: suicide.

   Is this “classification” of the actions of the Saids among us correct? How would we describe suicide attacks in terms of Durkheim’s structural forces – integration (knowing to whom have obligations) and regulation (knowing how to go on)?

4. Bruno Étienne in Les Combattants Suicidaires asks the following question:

   But at what moment does an actor – whether manipulated or not – go on to the act of self-destruction?
   And in what “objective” conditions does an entire society become “mad” to the point of massacring its own children…

   If we rephrased Étienne’s question in the more austere prose of Durkheim – …where young men find themselves willing to sacrifice themselves and their futures – how might he go about answering it?
5. Is there any hint of the transformative intent of sociology-done-right in any of this Durkheimian analysis? Is any of it revelatory? Is it generative, or is the usefulness of *Suicide* limited to the tables of musty data on which it depends?

Please select one of these questions and provide a thoughtful and thorough answer. You don’t need to go on and on, but you do need to deal with the substance of Durkheim’s sociology-done-right in the context of the all-too-real contemporary phenomena of “suicide bombers.”

The critical responses will be due approximately one week after we have completed our reading of each text. I’ll expect you to demonstrate some familiarity with text itself as well as critical and creative capacity to employ the ideas to actually do sociology. Each of these responses will be worth fourteen points, as will your blog partipation in our collective responses (see below).

Don’t let the fact that all your work will be “take home” fool you into thinking that the assignments will be easy or that they won’t require too much effort. The issues that we need to explore are difficult and challenging. Every assignment will reflect that fact.

**Collaborative Criticism**

There has been much jabbering about the effects of various new media – blogs, texts, wikis, etc. – on how courses are conducted and much speculation about whether the assignments that involve “papers” fit with the electronic discourse to which all of us are becoming accustomed. As you might surmise from the previous section, I’m not entirely convinced that the thoughtful, reflective, and revised essay is completely passé, but I am also interested in seeing what we can do to enhance our learning through other (more modern?) means of expression.

So, here’s what we are going to try: for two of our critical responses (de Beauvoir and Weber) we’ll dispense with the single-author paper in favor of a collaborative blog. I’m not quite sure yet of just how and how often you’ll need to contribute to this collective enterprise, but we’ll use the Wiki function on our Sakai site (see below) to compile our thoughts, reactions, questions, and responses to these portions of the course. We’ll work out the details together as we get underway. I think this will be an interesting experiment, fun for both you and me. We’ll see.

**The Unusual Suspects**

So far, much of what I have talked about is standard fair in sociological theory courses – the reading, certainly Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, is what everyone would expect. And other parts – the critical responses and perhaps the question sets – are just a bit off the beaten path, substituting as they do for the more common essay exam.
But if you look carefully at the reading list, you’ll find something unique in the context of a social theory course: four plays, a short story, and contemporary film.

Each playwright – Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, David Mamet, and Peter Shaffer – manages, with some dramatic license, to bring to embodied life some of the same struggles that have occupied sociology since it first emerged from the shadows of philosophy in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Bartleby*, Herman Melville sketches a haunting portrait of a young man who prefers, it seems, nothing to almost anything. And *Paradise Now* takes us on a harrowing journey through a world where life itself becomes a weapon. We’ll use these bits of literary and cinematic culture the green companions to the various éminences grise of the course: Goffman (*Bartleby*), de Beauvoir (*A Doll’s House*), Durkheim (*Paradise Now*), Freud (*Equus*), Weber (*Glengarry Glen Ross*), and Marx (*Death of a Salesman*).

Each literary piece will serve as the prompt for your critical review of the theorist who has been the topic of our most recent discussions. I think you’ll find these assignments fun and provocative – more fun than say straightforward essay exams and more provocative than the usual paper assignments you are used to.

**Envisioning Theory**

We will be able to watch cinematic presentations of each of the literary pieces we’ll be using, as well as the original Palestinian screenplay, *Paradise Now*. I think these films will bring some green life to ideas that can easily become gray. I am hopeful we can find some Wednesday during the semester when we can watch these films in one setting. We’ll see what our collective obligations look like and then work out that schedule.

**Grading**

I have tried to weigh each of the assignments in terms of their relative importance. To determine your grade at the end of the semester, I will use the following point distribution:

- Critical Responses (14 points each) 84 points
- Written Question Sets (2 points each) 16 points

I will assign points to each of your graded activities based on my judgment about how well you have met the stated requirements. This process is far from flawless, but it is not so flawed that I
feel compelled to look for an alternative. Nevertheless, if you are disgruntled with the grade I assign to your work, please voice your dissatisfaction and the reason for it to me. I’ll reconsider.

When the semester is completed I will use the following scale to assign your course grades.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82</td>
<td>D</td>
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Critical Response Due Dates

- Goffman/Melville: September 28
- de Beauvoir/Ibsen: October 12
- Durkheim/Paradise Now: October 31
- Freud/Shaffer: November 14
- Weber/Mamet: November 28
- Marx/Miller: December 14

Required Reading


Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll’s House*. Coursebook (1879).


Our External Classroom

Throughout the semester, I will post those materials I distribute on our Sakai site. You should regard these postings as backup to the paper distribution in class. This course is challenging enough without frequent or extended absences. Use the Sakai site wisely.

Our Itinerary

We’ll start our visit to the museum in the American wing and very nearly in the present with the seductive vision of a keen sociological eye, Erving Goffman and his The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. As we thumb through the guide we picked up at the entrance, we’ll come across Herman Melville’s strange tale of Bartleby. When we finish with that, we’ll head to French section to listen to the path-breaking Simone de Beauvoir as we read her short essay The Ethics of Ambiguity. We’ll stay there to spend some time with the progenitor of all contemporary sociology: Emile Durkheim and his landmark study On Suicide. We will also peek around the corner into the Scandinavian exhibition to catch a glimpse of Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House and on our way out well stop in the museum screening room to see Paradise Now.

Our magical mystery tour continues with a stop in the Austrian room to confront one of the most profound influences on how we see and construct our world: Sigmund Freud and one of his last essays, Civilization and Its Discontents. We’ll also poke our heads into the British gallery to take in the disturbing story told by Peter Shafer in Equus. We’ll then go downstairs to the jam-packed German exhibition to consider a complex thinker and his trenchant critique of the culture of modernity: Max Weber and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. We’ll also trace Weber’s critique in the anger and suppressed rage of David Mamet’s Glengarry Glen Ross, a piece we merely glimpsed as we exited the American wing. We’ll conclude our visit in conversation with a messianic figure and the author of sociological theory’s most famous tracts: Karl Marx and a selection of his Early Writings. On the way out, we’ll stop one last time in the American wing to view Arthur Miller’s Death of Salesman through the passionate lens of Marx’s early humanism.

This is a rather unusual approach, and not just because of the literary and cinematic materials. Most history of social thought courses, particularly those taught in sociology departments, proceed chronologically (from say 1500 CE to the present) or scholastically (looking first at functionalists, then conflict theorists, then interactionists), or nationally (touring Europe,
especially France and Germany, before crossing the channel to Britain and then the Atlantic to the United States).

Instead of all of that, we are going to trace the history of social thought in our own way, zigzagging through the museum of sociology-done-right, while dispensing entirely with the idea that there are schools of thought. Nevertheless, there is rhyme and reason to our visit and one of our jobs during the semester will be to tease out just what it is.

### Reading and Assignment Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 7</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 12</td>
<td>Goffman, 1-76</td>
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<td>September 14</td>
<td>Goffman, 77-166</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 19</td>
<td>Goffman, 167-255</td>
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<td>September 21</td>
<td>Melville, 2-22</td>
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<td>September 26</td>
<td>de Beauvoir, 7-73</td>
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<td>September 28</td>
<td>de Beauvoir, 74-159</td>
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<td>October 3</td>
<td>Ibsen, 24-78</td>
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<td>October 5</td>
<td>Review</td>
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<td>October 10</td>
<td>Columbus Day Recess</td>
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<td>October 12</td>
<td>Durkheim, 115-178</td>
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<td>October 17</td>
<td>Durkheim, 262-305; 329-361</td>
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<td>October 19</td>
<td>Durkheim, 403-437</td>
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<td>October 24</td>
<td>Review</td>
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<td>October 26</td>
<td>Freud, 3-35</td>
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<td>October 31</td>
<td>Freud, 36-59</td>
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<td>November 2</td>
<td>Freud, 60-82</td>
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<td>November 7</td>
<td>Shaffer, Acts I and II</td>
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<td>November 9</td>
<td>Weber, 1-36</td>
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<td>November 14</td>
<td>Weber, 67-122</td>
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<td>November 16</td>
<td>Mamet, Acts I and II</td>
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<td>Marx, 80-96</td>
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<td>Marx 80-110</td>
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<td>November 30</td>
<td>Miller, Act I</td>
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<td>December 5</td>
<td>Miller, Act II</td>
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<td>December 7</td>
<td>Review</td>
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Your critical reviews should be submitted one week after we conclude our discussion of the relevant texts and topics (September 28, October 12, October 31, November 14, November 28, December 14).

December 16 is the last day I will be able to accept work from you. Please keep this in mind as you make your plans for the busy holiday season.

The specificity of the reading assignments is somewhat misleading. In listing these pages, I have tried to space out amount of material you will need to digest in a way that is manageable. Our class discussions will be in the neighborhood of these assignments but not precisely aligned with them.

x
The assigned dates for the literary pieces are essentially placeholders. Once we schedule our viewing of the performances, you should adjust the timing of that reading to coincide with curtain time.

The page numbers refer to the editions listed above. If you have other editions, you will need to make adjustment to stay in sync with your classmates and me.