This is a basic reading course in classical social theory. It introduces you to some of the most formative texts in the qualitative social sciences which have provided long term research agendas, concepts, models and methods for social inquiry. Throughout we will wonder how the authors in question define the social as object of study, that is, how they think it exists and what kinds of investigations they understand as yielding valuable social knowledge. In this sense, and putting it in more highfalutin language, this class is also an introduction into basic ontological and epistemological issues of the social sciences.

The reading strategy we will pursue is to read these authors as theorists of modernity, that is as intellectuals eager to develop a language capable of grasping what is relevant about social life at their time (and putatively: ours). We will use this as a jumping board to think about what it is that we needed to do, if we wanted to contribute to a theoretization of our present. In other words we will read the classics not only to become reflexively aware of the gaze and the blind spots of our contemporary language to talk about social life, but as inspiration to nourish our own sociological imagination.

There are a number of standard questions you may want to keep in mind while reading these texts.

1. What is the text’s underlying philosophical anthropology? What are the roles of reason, emotion, desire and imagination? What is the role of creativity in the model? How does suffering figure in? And hope? How are human beings social? What is the role of social relations for their life? How are human beings moral? How are human beings agents? What is the relationship between individual and larger social wholes?
2. What are the texts notion of social organization and modes of thinking, feeling, acting, that is what has traditionally been conceived as “social structure” and “culture” in our discipline? How are both related to each other?
3. Are there processes? What drives them? How do they relate to more stable cultures and social structures?
4. What is power for the author? What role does it play in his models? How important is conflict?
5. What is history for the author? Are there laws of development? What is the role of contingency? How is contingency theorized?
With all your thinking I would like to urge you to remain grounded in examples, in concrete social life. If you cannot translate concepts into scenes and happenings, into episodes of stories or even entire tales, the concepts fail to be helpful both for empirical research and for political practice. To benefit from theory you need to be able to know it when you see it, that is you need to learn to see “the state”, “class”, “surplus value” etc. in action ethnographically, in the precipitation of communication in the paper trails of archives, or in artificially created indices such as statistical data patterns.

Texts:

All texts are on Regenstein-Reserve. Most texts have also been ordered for purchase at the Seminary Coop (marked with an asterisk)

8. *Saussure  

Meeting and Reading Schedule:

WEEK 1

Rousseau

The Birth of Historical Consciousness
Rousseau, Second Discourse, pp. 124-188 (plus Rousseau’s notes # 9, 10, 15)

*Where does history go? How does it progress? And why does it lead to misery?*

**The Ideal Social Order: Solving the Problem of Democracy?**


*What are the preconditions for winding out of this misery?*

**WEEK 2**

**Marx**

History, Ideas Practice

Theses on Feuerbach (Tucker pp. 143-145)

*What does Marx mean with “practice”? Why does he introduce this concept?*

The German Ideology Part I (Tucker pp. 146-200)

*Focus here on three issues: first, as with Rousseau, the dynamics of historical development once more with a focus on the inducement of change on the ground; second the relationship*

**WEEK 3**

Capital


*Try to understand how most notions presented here intersect through conceptualizations of value. Now think how a capitalist can try to improve his position in the short run without extending the work day? What kinds of repercussions does this have and why can he not succeed in the long run?*
WEEK 4

Weber

Capitalism once more

Weber: Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (skip chapter one and sections on Baptism, Methodism)

Here is a culturalist understanding of the emergence of capitalism. Focus on the mechanisms or process dynamics that have led in Weber’s opinion to the spread of a particular religious mentality conducive to capital accumulation from its origins in radical Protestantism to the world as a whole? How can this mentality continue to exist without its religious foundation?

WEEK 5

Religion in Society

“The Social Psychology of World Religions” (G&M pp. 323-359)

The first essay provides a whole set of terms to analyze religion. How do these hang together? How does this vocabulary relate to his overall project articulated in the introduction to

WEEK 6

Durkheim

Society as Religion

Elementary Forms of Religious Life
Bellah: Civic Religion (e-reserve)

WEEK 7

Herder and Saussure

Language and Meaning
Herder: On the Origins of Language (Part I)
Saussure: Course in General Linguistics (selections)

**WEEK 8**

**Freud**

Desire

Introductory Lectures 17-23

**WEEK 9**

Thinking: Selves and Others

**Mead, Whorf, Vygotsky**

Mead: Mind, Self and Society (selections tba)
Whorf: The relation of habitual thought to language

**WEEK 10**

Return to the Primitive? Modernity gone awry? The Logical Consequence of Modernity?

**Arendt**

Origins of Totalitarianism (selections)