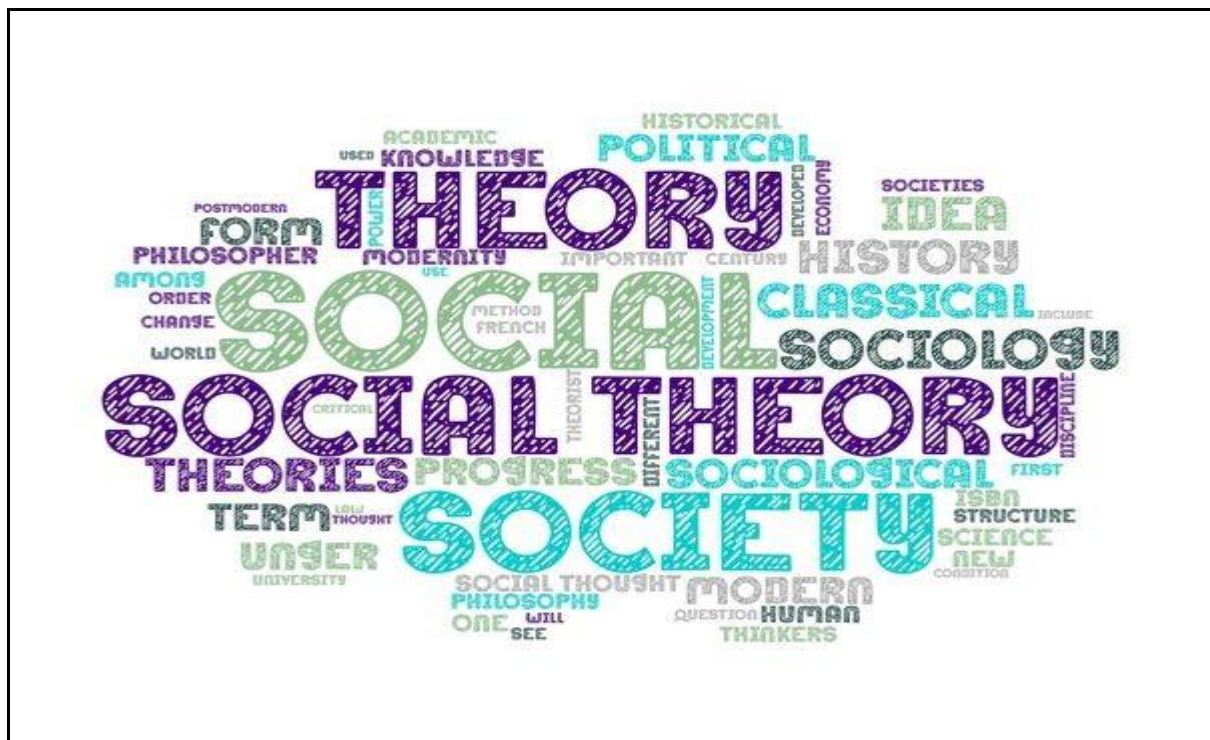




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2026: First Term



1

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2026 academic year and the module on social theory. This module runs from 9 February to 20 March. You need to draw insights from the first year modules that introduced you to sociology as a discipline.

This course is an introduction to the classical sociological tradition. It will introduce students to some of the most prominent intellectual forbearers of the discipline of sociology whose work is now being regarded as classics, or ‘the canon’. The word ‘canon’ is derived from ancient Greek *κανών*, *kanōn*, meaning a measuring rod, or standard. Alexander (1987) defines a classic as a work that is given privileged status, establishes some ‘fundamental criteria in the field’ and helps integrate the discipline. The current situation found today (of what is regarded as a persistent Eurocentric hegemonic canon) is itself in motion, as we are now situated within *this* cultural context that we must now critically analyse.

Classical sociological theory is a product of the social, political and economic transformation occurring in Western Europe from the mid-19th century to early 20th century. This module focuses primarily on Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Max Weber (1864-1920), as three eminent theorists considered to represent the classical tradition. These theorists are usually posited as the ‘Founding Fathers’ (of sociology) and their (social) theories have gained such proliferation as to be known collectively as “the canon”. Credit must be given to the intellectual forebears that inform the scholarship of these classical theorists.

Their scholarship was an attempt to grapple with this rapid social change referred to by Royce (2015) as the ‘modern condition’ or ‘modernity’. Modernity is defined as consisting of the following concepts “a belief in the possibility of human progress; rational planning; belief in the superiority of rational thought compared to emotion; faith in the ability of technology and science to solve human problems; a belief in the ability and rights of humans to shape their own lives; and a reliance on manufacturing industry to improve living standards” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004: xiii). Modernity according to Giddens (1971, 1973) “has three essential characteristics: a set of attitudes towards the world involving its transformation by human intervention; a range of political institutions, including the nation-state and democracy; and a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy”. This period of modernity coincided both with the emerging discipline of sociology as well as Durkheim, Marx and Weber’s attempts to explain the development of modern society.

Theorists of modernity come from different theoretical orientation. However, it is possible to draw similarities but also contrasts in their scholarship. This module’s focus is to examine both the building blocks of their scholarship but, also, offer a critique, including their relevance in contemporary society.

It has been suggested that “courses in sociology and the other social sciences generally do not attempt to correct the Orientalist bias by introducing non-Western thinkers. If we take the 19th century as an example, the impression is given that during the period that Europeans such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others were thinking about the nature of society and its development, there were no thinkers in Asia and Africa doing the same” (Alatas, 2012: 1). To

explain, convention traces the rise of classical theory to a predominantly European core, consisting of the work of the likes of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, among others. The critique of these classical theorists goes beyond the argument that they have been canonised and based on the westernisation and Eurocentric understanding, but their understanding of social change is incomplete and poorly contextualised. Central to these arguments is the focus on other social forces such as colonisation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course requires you to read the prescribed readings. A general learning outcome is to demonstrate that you have read widely, understood and synthesised the information. Thus, have a critical understanding of classical social theory.

At the end of the course, you should:

- Understand the social and intellectual context / forces of the development of classical sociological theory.
- Understand the contributions of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber to the development of the classical sociological tradition.
- Understand the key concepts in classical sociological theory, in particular, those relevant to Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber scholarship.
- Be able to compare and contrast Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber.
- Be able to critically assess the relevance and shortcomings of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber scholarship in contemporary society.
- Develop an understanding of the debates and critique of the classical canon.

COURSE STRUCTURE

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY

It is important for students in any discipline to have a solid understanding of the historical foundations of that discipline. Therefore, in this first section we will examine the most prominent social conditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that influenced the development of classical sociological theories. By the end of this section, you should be able to describe:

- What is theory?
- The social and intellectual forces that led to the emergence of sociology.

Prescribed Readings

Abend, G. (2008). The meaning of 'theory'. *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 26(2), pp.173-199.

Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00324.x>

Appelrouth, S & Edles, L. (2008/11). *Sociological theory in the contemporary era: Text and*

readings. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge/SAGE. [Chapter 1]

Ritzer, G. (1992). *Classical sociological theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill. [Chapter 1]

Royce, E. (2015). *Classical social theory and modern society*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. [Chapter 1]

SECTION TWO: KARL MARX (1818-1883)

Karl Marx had arguably the most significant influence on the critical analysis of society. For Marx, the most important part of society is its economic system - the way in which people work and produce goods and services - and he saw this aspect as underlying all social relationships. These relationships were for him based largely on inequality and oppression, which therefore made it inherently unstable and contradictory. History, Marx believed, was divided into a series of distinct epochs, or modes of production, each characterised by a specific set of social relationships.

In this section, we will focus on Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism, the capitalist mode of production (commodity production, labour theory of value, labour power, the exploitation of labour, the concept of class and class conflict, theory of alienation etc).

SECTION THREE: EMILE DURKHEIM (1858-1917)

Emile Durkheim was deeply concerned with the impact of the large-scale structures of society and society itself, on the thoughts and actions of individuals. His view on the division of labour is guardedly more optimistic than Marx's pessimistic analysis of the division of labour in 18th and 19th century capitalist societies. While Marx saw the specialisation of labour as enslaving workers in their occupational role and causing acrimony between social classes, Durkheim believed that the promise of the division of labour outweighed the problems. Durkheim was most influential in shaping structural functional theory, with its emphasis on social structure.

Durkheim is well known for his functional analysis of society even though he separated function from cause in his analyses. Durkheim argued that society evolved from a simple mechanical to a complex organic structure and that the change was caused by a range of factors including an increase in population. Furthermore, he insisted that society has an existence that was separate from the individuals who constitute it. Paradoxically, he attempted to provide a sociological explanation of individuality in the modern world.

The key themes and concepts that will be covered in this section include: what is a social fact? Durkheim's theory of the division of labour, collective consciousness, mechanical and organic solidarity, and his study of suicide.

SECTION FOUR: MAX WEBER (1864-1920)

Max Weber produced an account of the early years of capitalism in the *Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1905) and, in *Economy and society* (1920), a political-economic account of the spread of capitalism around the globe. Weber's work can be seen as a critique of the deterministic bent of Marx and Durkheim's materialist and structural functional view of individual agency in a capitalist society. As was the case with Durkheim and Marx, Weber was primarily concerned with the emergence of modern capitalist society and the human relationships surrounding them. Similar to Marx, Weber was interested in the issue of class, although he believed it was the product of a wider range of forces than simply the ownership of property.

Weber also explored the relationship between the Reformation and the ultimate rise of capitalism, as well as the increasingly complex administrative structures of the modern age. However, he pointed out limitations of Marx's analysis of social class. He argued that class (as determined by money and property) was only one dimension of socioeconomic status, and that power (or political influence) – and especially status (or prestige) – also determines an individual's social ranking. Weber developed a sociological method known as “verstehen” that requires the sociologist to put aside their own values in order to subjectively understand the meaning behind other people's actions. Another contribution of Weber's is the notion of “ideal-types” - conceptual abstractions that people employ in trying to understand the complexities of the social world. He applied this concept most famously to his study of modern bureaucracy.

In this section, we will focus on Weber's concept of scientific rationality and its relationship to bureaucratic forms of organisation, Weber's theory of class and the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism

Prescribed Readings

Curato, N. (2013). A Sociological Reading of Classical sociological theory. *Classical Sociological Theory in Contemporary Practice*, Vol. 61 (2), pp. 265-287. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43486376>

Giddens, A. (2006). *Sociology* (fifth edition). Cambridge: Polity Press. [Chapter 1 & 4]

Haralambos, M. & Holborn, M. (2004). *Sociology: Themes and perspectives* (eighth edition). London: Collins Educational. [Chapters 1 & 15]

Ritzer, G. (1992). *Sociological theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Ritzer, G. (2003). *Blackwell companion to major social theorists*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/200027196_The_Blackwell_Companion_to_Major_Social_Theorists

Royce, E. (2015). *Classical social theory and modern society*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. [Chapters 1,2,3,4,5]

Romm, N. & Sarakinsky, M. (1994). *Social theory*. Isando: Lexicon.

Stewart, P. & Greenstein, R. (2015). Class. In: P. Stewart & J. Zaaïman (eds.) *Sociology: A concise South African introduction*, pp. 199-208. Cape Town: Juta.

Ollman, B. (1976). *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in capitalist society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [pp. 129-149]

Additional Readings

Allen, K. (2004). *Max Weber: A critical introduction*. London: Pluto Press.

Avineri, S. (1980). *The social and political thought of Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Borgatta, E.F. (1992). *Encyclopaedia of sociology*. New York: MacMillan.

Bottomore, T. (1983). *The dictionary of Marxist thought*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Boudon, R. & Bourricaud, F. (1989). *A critical dictionary of sociology*. London: Routledge.

Callinicos, A. (2007). *Social theory: A historical introduction* (second edition). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Law, Alex (2012). *Key concepts in classical social theory*. Available at: <https://sk.sagepub.com/dict/mono/preview/key-concepts-in-classical-social-theory.pdf#>

Nisbet, R.A. (2017). *The sociological tradition*. New York, NY: Routledge. Available at: https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781351473743_A30546347/preview-9781351473743_A30546347.pdf

SECTION FIVE: CRITIQUING THE CANON

In order to move beyond the argued provinciality and hegemony of ‘Northern’ social theory but also avoid the trap of a ‘plethora of particularisms’ or binary essentialism (North–South for example), we will seek out the intellectual offerings from diverse social groups, attempting to trace the relationship between the individual and society more inclusively. Stepping back and gaining a more inclusive knowledge, means considering how the situation that currently exists came to be, by using a macro historical lens. From this vantage point, we can then arguably learn from the theorising of others, and we can even apply some of it to deepen our understanding of the complexity of *multiple modernities*. This is only the beginning of the journey. To question what insights and voices are missing, have been lost or even silenced, suppressed and marginalised, we examine the critical debates surrounding the need for a diversity of knowledge systems.

Prescribed Readings

Alatas, S.F. & Vineeta, S. (2001). Teaching classical sociological theory in Singapore: The context of Eurocentrism. *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 29 (3), pp. 316-331.

Alatas, S.F. & Vineeta, S. (2017). *Sociological theory beyond the canon*. London: MacMillan.

Burawoy, M. (2021). Why is classical theory classical: Theorising the canon and canonising Du Bois. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, pp.1-15. Available at: <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Canon/Classical%20Sociology.Connell.pdf>

Connell, R.W. (1997). Why is classical theory Classical? *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 102 (6), pp. 1511-1557. Available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/epdf/10.1086/231125>

READINGS AND MODULE REQUIREMENTS

It is important to read the module outline to familiarise yourself with the core themes that will be covered and to understand the general message and direction of this course. You are encouraged to read widely and critically on the subject using the prescribed texts. Throughout the course relevant references will be added to the RUconnected page and you will be directed to relevant readings (including page numbers and chapters) for each of the topics. The prescribed texts are on the SHORT LOAN section of RHODES LIBRARY. Full-text readings (including the course outline) have, also, been posted on the library's webpage. *Check under Course support --- Course materials ---Scroll down the list of Course guides --- Click Sociology 2*. To access these online texts via RUconnected, click RU Library on the main menu and follow the path as indicated above.

You are welcome to consult me in my office in the mornings (up to 13h00) if you have any questions or want to discuss any aspect of the course. No consultation on Tuesdays. Contact details are on the front cover of this course outline. *I am unavailable for any consultation an hour before lectures*. Special arrangements should be done in advance if you are unable to communicate with me during the consultation times.

We will use the Friday lecture slots (14:15–15:55) for writing workshops, tutorials and tests. These are compulsory and form part of the DP requirements.

As a department, we are committed to reflecting on our teaching practices and module content to strengthen our courses. Towards the end of the term, you will be asked to participate in a module evaluation process. Please take this seriously and evaluate the module honestly and comprehensively. Your input will be highly appreciated and make a real contribution to enhancing teaching and learning in the department.

Please consult the *Sociology Handbook* for an outline of the University's policy on plagiarism, guidelines on the formatting and writing of assignments, the departmental rules regarding citations and referencing, and the criteria for assessing written work. A copy of the Assignment Cover Sheet, which must accompany all assignments submitted to the Department, is also available in the Handbook. Rhodes University's *Common Faculty Policy on Plagiarism* has also been uploaded on this module's page on RUConnected.

ASSESSMENT

There will be two forms of assessment for this module:

1. In-term assessment: 40%
 - a) Test (essay) on 27 February, 14:15-15:55
 - b) Tutorial write-up, on 6 March, 14:15-15:55
 - c) Essay due on 12 March at 16:00. Submit on RUConnected.
2. An examination in June: 60%

REVISION QUESTIONS

Please note: Various texts provide review questions at the end of chapters

1. What were the social and intellectual forces that informed the scholarship of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber? Critically discuss these forces.
2. What is modernity?
3. What is Karl Marx *or* Emile Durkheim *or* Max Weber's contribution to modern social theory? In answering this question, you need to identify and describe the key sociological concepts that are associated with the chosen scholar.
4. Discuss Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy. Your answer should include a critique of his conception of bureaucracy.
5. Compare and contrast the writings of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.
6. Using Max Weber's theoretical constructs, provide a critical discussion of the McDonaldisation of society. Use various examples to substantiate your answer.
7. Is the classical sociological tradition relevant in contemporary society? Provide reasons for your answer.