

# SOCIOLOGY S340 SOCIAL THEORY

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Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne  
Sec. #22258 Thursday 6:00 – 8:45 pm KT 119

Spring 2004  
webct.ipfw.edu

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## ***What this course is about***

“Theory is not something set apart from our lives. Our assumptions about reality and change influence our actions constantly. The question is not whether we have a theory, but how aware we are of the assumptions behind our actions, and how conscious we are of the choices we make — daily — among different theories.”

*Charlotte Bunch*

“The most important thing to understand is that everything factual is already theory.”

*Goethe*

“We all have the capacity to see, and usually this is from the vantage point of our culture.”

*Molefi Kete Asante*

This is an introductory course in social theory. When many people think about theory, they think about it as something abstract, almost ethereal, unrelated to the mundane realities of everyday living. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Theory affects both how we live our lives and how we understand these lives. It also affects how we understand the lives of others. Understanding theory, I would argue, is one of the most practical things we can do. It will be the approach of this course to demonstrate the reality of this statement in an entertaining, but serious and pragmatic way. Throughout the course, the emphasis will be upon social theory and theorizing as a dynamic, living process that is highly relevant to the important issues of our day. In this sense the course has an applied focus, in which the goal is not merely to acquire knowledge of “famous dead theorists” or well-known theories of the past but to analyze and understand the contemporary situation based upon important insights transmitted to us by pioneering social thinkers. The goal is to facilitate each member of the class to develop competence in using social theory to critically analyze society and social life, i.e., to develop your own “theoretical toolbox.”

Our examination of social theory will proceed on two levels: what important social thinkers have thought, and what we think about what they have thought. In order to do this, we will have to root the various social theories in their intellectual, cultural and historical context, even as we examine how the ideas relate to our situation today. This approach is known as the sociology of knowledge. On the one hand, we want to examine the process of theorizing itself: what it is, why it is important, how to do it. On the other hand, we want to look at how social theorizing has been done, particularly with regard to variables determining the structure of society and shaping the lives of individuals within it. We will want to look both at what kinds of social theories have been constructed about these social processes, and what has been overlooked.

Specifically, when you have successfully completed this course you will be able to do the following:

1. Explain important sociological concepts and theories.
2. Compare and contrast theorists and theoretical ideas, and explain the implications of those ideas.
3. Appropriately apply both classical and contemporary theories to current events and contemporary society.
4. Develop and explain your own criteria for evaluating and applying social theories.

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## ***What you will be expected to do***

### ***1. Do the assigned reading in advance.***

You are expected to read all of the assigned material *before* the topic is covered in class and to come to class prepared to discuss it. Class time will be used to extend and supplement material in the readings and to clarify and discuss it in greater depth. All of these tasks require you to have read the material prior to discussing it. To a large extent, it is up to you, as part of your active learning process, to make the connections between the readings and in-class discussions — or to ask questions if you find these connections difficult, confusing, or absent. Assigned readings will be drawn from the following sources:

George Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics..* McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America.* Henry Holt, 2001.

These books are available at Follett's Bookstore in the basement of Kettler Hall.

A number of supplemental required readings will be made available on WebCT.

### ***2. Actively participate in class sessions.***

This course will be organized, to the extent possible, in a discussion format. Your active participation, on a class-by-class basis, is not only encouraged, it is required, as it is my view that theory can be most effectively learned through intellectual dialogue. Participation includes asking questions as well as raising points of clarification or debate. It also includes actively attempting to apply the theories to your own life experience. In order to participate, of course, you must be present. Attendance will therefore be taken. Each unexcused absence will lower your participation grade 12 points, or about one letter grade. Under unusual circumstances, and with instructor permission, you may be excused from one class. After that, each absence, *for whatever reason*, will result in a penalty.

**3. Participate in electronic class discussions.**

You will be required to make weekly postings to the class electronic bulletin board on WebCT. I will pose various issues, primarily from the readings, and you will need to respond with at least a paragraph of your own thoughts. The individual postings will not be graded. To get full credit, you must miss no more than one week's postings.

**4. Participate in a group presentation.**

The purpose of the group presentation is to give you a chance to (1) deepen your understanding of social theory; (2) apply it to developments in contemporary American life, and (3) increase your ability to comprehend and critically evaluate theoretical ideas by discussing them among yourselves and presenting them to the rest of the class in the form of an oral report. Since it can be intimidating to develop and deliver this type of report individually, and because I believe that theory is best comprehended through dialogue, this course requirement must be satisfied collectively. I realize, however, that it can be difficult for students at a commuter university like IPFW to get together outside of class. Thus I will provide time during regular class meetings for groups to form, meet, and consult with the instructor, as noted in the Topic Outline below. In addition, you are encouraged to communicate with other group members electronically through email and through real-time chat on WebCT.

Members of the class will divide up into groups of 3 to 4 members each before the end of the 3rd week of class (January 29). Each group will choose Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, or Veblen and make an oral presentation to the class in which you explain how your chosen theorist would explain the phenomena described in Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*.

During the 6th week of class, class time will be provided for members of each group to meet and plan your presentation. I will consult with each group, as needed, on both the substance and the format of the presentation. I encourage you to think creatively about how to present the ideas of your chosen theorist. Ultimately, the format of the presentation is up to the group. Visual supplements (e.g., handouts, posters, overhead transparencies, etc.) are encouraged; materials will be prepared or duplicated by the instructor if they are submitted *at least one day* prior to the scheduled presentation. *All members of the group will receive an identical grade* based upon the clarity, comprehensiveness, and depth of the oral report. The group presentations will be given in class on February 26, according to a schedule to be determined later.

**4. Write two analytical papers.**

These papers will give you a chance to discuss and apply the theories we cover in class. Specific guidelines for each paper will be handed out separately. All papers must be typed or computer printed and stapled in the upper left corner *only*. Late papers may be subject to downgrading. The first paper will require you to compare and contrast the application of the theories developed by Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Veblen to the phenomena described by Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed*. These papers will be expected to be 6-7 pages in length.

For the final paper you will be asked to explain in sociological terms significant aspects of social life portrayed in the film *American History X*. You will choose the aspects that need to be explained as well as determine what theories are appropriate to the explanation. This is very comparable to the task faced most often by most practicing sociologists. Specific

guidelines for the paper will be handed out separately. The papers will be expected to be approximately 8-10 computer-printed pages in length. The final papers are due Thursday, May 6 by 10:00 pm at my office or in the Sociology Department office.

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## ***How you will be evaluated***

The elements of evaluation in this course will be weighted in the following way:

Class Participation	10% of final course grade
Electronic discussion postings	20% of final course grade
Analytical Papers	50% of final course grade
Paper #1 @ 20%	
Final Paper @ 30%	
Group Presentation	<u>20%</u> of final course grade
	100%

Final grades for the course will be assigned according to the following scale:

A = 90% – 100%	
B = 80% – 89%	
C = 70% – 79%	
D = 60% – 69%	
F = 59% and below	There will be no curve.

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## ***What I will do***

- Take responsibility for organizing the syllabus and the general design of the course.**

I've had the time and training to think about this topic, so it's appropriate that I take the lead. Your input, however, is always welcome.

- Take responsibility for ensuring a safe, productive, and fun learning environment.**

Classes that involve a lot of participation can be anxiety-provoking for many students. Will someone (me?) say something embarrassing or confrontational? Will conflict occur? What happens if the class gets off on some unproductive tangent? What if I don't find other students' contributions useful or educational? These are all concerns for which I, as instructor, take ultimate responsibility. Along the way, however, I hope that you will learn some productive techniques for learning and interpersonal interaction. And why shouldn't learning be fun, at least part of the time?

- Be enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and organized.**

Within reason, of course.

- Accommodate any disability, if at all possible.**

If you have or acquire any sort of disability that may require accommodation, I urge you to discuss it with me (preferably after class or during office hours). I want to do everything that

I can help everyone who wants to succeed in this course. If you want to find out what special services and accommodations are available on campus, you are encouraged to contact Services for Students with Disabilities in Walb 118 (481-6657, voice/TDD).

<http://www.ipfw.edu/ssd/>

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## ***How to contact me***

If you have any questions or concerns about the subject matter or your performance in this course, I urge you to contact me (sooner is better than later, but anytime is better than no time). One of the easiest ways to communicate with me is through electronic mail. You can also leave a voice-mail message on my office telephone if I'm not there. For a question or an issue that just can't wait, or in an emergency, call me at home and leave a message on the machine if I'm not there.

**My office:** CM 235      **Phone:** 481-6669      **Home phone:** 485-6314

**Sociology Office:** CM 241      **Phone:** 481-6842      **Fax:** 481-6985

**email:** Please email me through WebCT. Also check "Who's Online."

**Office hours:** TR 12:00 noon – 1:30 pm, or by appointment

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## ***Schedule of topics and assignments***

**General Comment:** Finish Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* by February 19.

<b>Wk</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Reading Assignment</b>	<b>Class Topics</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>1</b>	Jan 15		Overview & Organization of the Course / Introductions / Individual & Mutual Expectations	
<b>2</b>	Jan 22	Ritzer, Chapter 1	Definition of Theory / Exploration of Science & Ideology	
<b>3</b>	Jan 29	TBA on WebCT	Brief History of Social Theory	Choose Groups
<b>4</b>	Feb 5	Ritzer, Chapter 2	Classical Grand Theory	
<b>5</b>	Feb 12	Ritzer, Chapter 3	Classical Everyday Theory	
<b>6</b>	Feb 19	(Finish Ehrenreich)		Group Project time
<b>7</b>	Feb 26		GROUP PRESENTATIONS	
<b>8</b>	March 4	Ritzer, Chapter 4	Contemporary Theory	
<b>9</b>	March 11	<b>NO CLASS MEETING</b>	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	

<b>10</b>	March 18	Ritzer, Chapter 5	Contemporary Grand Theories	Paper #1 due
<b>11</b>	March 25	Ritzer, Chapter 6	Contemporary Theories of Everyday Life	
<b>12</b>	April 1	Ritzer, Chapter 7	Contemporary Integrative Theories	
<b>13</b>	April 8	TBA on WebCT	NO CLASS MEETING this week	
<b>14</b>	April 15	TBA on WebCT	View <i>American History X</i>	
<b>15</b>	April 22	Ritzer, Chapter 8	Contemporary Feminist Theories	
<b>16</b>	April 29	Ritzer, Chapter 9	Postmodern Grand Theories	Course Evaluations
	May 6	Final Paper due by 10 pm	Turn in to my office or SOC office	