

SOC457 W: Sociological Theory

John A. Bernau, PhD

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MW 2:30–3:45pm

Location: White Hall 103

Department of Sociology

Emory University

Fall 2026

Office Hours: Th 2:30-3:30pm,

Gambrell Hall G323 or by appointment

Email: john.bernau@emory.edu

Course Description

How does the social world “work”? Why do people do things? How is coordination possible? What is a “social structure”, anyway? Theory is what unites the diverse discipline of sociology. Behind all the studies of inequality, fashion, crime, religion, norms, and culture lie underlying assumptions about how people operate, how society operates. Theory guides the types of questions sociologists ask and the type of answers they find acceptable.

This course is about the main questions (and answers) of sociological theory. It is partly a course on “the history of sociology” — where we will encounter some of the earliest sociologists and trace their influence to the present. And it is partly a course on theoretical problems that have (and continue to) puzzle social scientists: how should we understand free will within the “constraints” of our social environment? Do we obey social laws? Or, is this just a metaphor for aggregate patterns? What are social facts? How should we understand causation when thinking about human behavior? How is sociology different than history?

By the end of the course, you will have a good sense of several main lines of sociological thought and the way they shape research in sociology. You should also be able to address current issues with the intellectual tools provided by some major theorists and their successors. This writing-intensive course will help you to refine your academic skills.

Course Requirements

There are four requirements for this course: attend the class, read and think about the assigned material, participate in class discussion, and complete the writing assignments.

Attendance (20%)

Attendance is essential for doing well in this course. It is also the easiest requirement to fulfill. I will take attendance at the beginning of class. If you show up to class late, please see me after class to mark your attendance. Email notification of attendance after the fact will not count. Emory University allows excused absences for religious observance (see policy 10.17) and University-authorized activities (see policy 8.19). Other absences may require a self-certified absence form (<https://collegeconnect.emory.edu/register/self-cert-student-absence>). Please notify me in advance of planned absences or concerns about attendance.

Reading & Thinking

Reading the assigned material is essential for doing well in this course. This includes the act of *reading*, but also *thinking* about the ideas presented. I will often preview the assigned reading in the class before and may provide guided reading questions to help understand the main points. We will discuss portions of the readings in class, but lectures will provide background and build on the readings, not summarize them. Familiarity with the assigned reading will be necessary for class discussion and writing assignments. All readings will be posted to Canvas.

Discussion (30%)

Participating in class discussion is essential for doing well in this course. Talking with your instructors and your peers about complex ideas is one of the greatest joys of collegiate life. In class, you will be evaluated on the quality of your contributions, not just the frequency. Your grade will be on a three-point scale [0 = does not participate, 1 = occasionally participates, 2 = routinely offers competent comments and responses to classmates, 3 = often provides insightful comments and responses to classmates]. I will post your discussion grade to Canvas in three-week intervals so you may monitor and adjust your behavior.

Writing Assignments (50%)

Each week I will reserve the last 15-20 minutes on Monday or Wednesday for an in-class, closed book, offline, handwritten assignment. Often, these will be an opportunity to reflect

on what we've covered in the readings, lectures, and discussion. What did you learn? How might the material apply to your week, the news, etc.? I also may provide questions to respond to or short answer questions about the readings and lecture material. These will be about one handwritten page (two pages maximum) and graded on a four-point scale: 4 = excellent, 0 = not completed. Outstanding assignments have the possibility of a 5, or one-point of extra credit. At the end of the term, I will drop the lowest score.

This course fulfills the Continuing Communication & Writing (WRT) requirement and is designed with the following writing outcomes in mind: (1) Communicate to learn: use communication as a form of inquiry, invention, and reflection. (2) Communicate with evidence: use communication to inquire empirically into the merits of theories. (3) Communicate to contribute: use communication to contribute to a conversation in a field of study.

A Note on Grading

Your grade is calculated according to the tables below. To find your current (or projected) grade, for each section (attendance, discussion, writing) you can take your points divided by the total points multiplied by the percentage weighting. For example;

If you miss three classes: $25/28 = 0.89 \times 20 = 17.8/20$.

If your discussion grade is $12/15 = 0.8 \times 30 = 24/30$.

If your writing assignments total $52/60 = 0.87 \times 50 = 43.5/50$.

Your total score would be $17.8 + 24 + 43.5 = 85.3$, rounded to 85 / B.¹

Requirements	% of grade	N	Pts	Total Pts
Attendance	20	28 total	Yes / No	28
Readings	—			
Discussion	30	5 total (every 3-wks)	Graded 0-3	15
Writing Assignments	50	15 total (wkly)	Graded 0-4	60

A 95-100	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69
A- 90-94	B 84-86	C 74-76	D 60-66
	B- 80-83	C- 70-73	F Below 60

If you are concerned about your grade, please speak with me. Extra-credit may be offered at my discretion.

¹In fewer words, $y = 0.71a + 2b + 0.83c$, where y is your total grade, a is your attendance, b is your discussion, and c is your writing assignments.

Course Policies

Office Hours

I am available to meet during office hours and at other times by appointment to discuss issues pertaining to the course or anything else you would like to bring up. My office is Gambrell Hall G323 in the law school. I have posted a map on Canvas.

Honor Code

The Emory Undergraduate Academic Honor Code is in effect throughout the semester. The Honor Code applies to any action or inaction that fails to meet the communal expectations of academic integrity. Students should strive to excel in their academic pursuits in a just, honest, and fair manner, and avoid all instances of cheating, lying, plagiarizing, or engaging in other acts that violate the Honor Code. Such violations undermine both the individual pursuit of knowledge and the collective trust of the Emory community. Students who violate the Honor Code may be subject to failing the course, a reportable record, suspension, permanent expulsion, or a combination of these and other sanctions. Website: <http://catalog.college.emory.edu/policies/honor-code.html>

Recording (audio or video) is not allowed in the classroom. This includes mobile phone recording or laptop applications (including transcription software). If you are found recording in the classroom you will receive a zero for this course.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Using an artificial intelligence program to generate any content for any assignment in this course (including, but not limited to examinations, papers, homework, and creative work) constitutes plagiarism and is a violation of the Honor Code. The use of an artificial intelligence program in this course without permission from the instructor may also constitute seeking unauthorized assistance or violate other provisions of the Honor Code. Any suspicion of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Council.

Reasonable Accommodations

Emory University is committed to providing equal access to course content, programs, activities, and services for students with disabilities. Students who anticipate or experience barriers to full participation in this course due to a disability are encouraged to connect with the Department of Accessibility Services (DAS) to request reasonable accommodations. Students who are already approved for accommodations should follow the Department of

Accessibility Services process to ensure I receive a copy of their accommodation notification letter. Students are also expected to communicate in a timely manner with me regarding how approved accommodations will be implemented in the course. Accommodations are determined through an interactive process and are designed to provide access while maintaining the essential requirements and learning objectives of the course. Students who are interested in learning more about disability-related accommodations should visit the Department of Accessibility Services website.

Emory Writing Center and English Language Learners (ELL) Program

Tutors in the Emory Writing Center are available to support students in Emory College as they work on papers, discussion posts, websites, and other projects. Writing Center tutors work on idea development, structure, use of sources, grammar, and word choice. They do not proofread for students. Instead, they discuss strategies and resources students can use as they write, revise, and edit their own work. Tutors also support the literacy needs of English Language Learners; several tutors are ELL Specialists. Website: <http://www.writingcenter.emory.edu/>

Emory Libraries

Emory Libraries offers services and resources to ensure academic success and student flourishing. As emerging scholars and researchers, students can find books, articles, videos, other materials through Library Search, Articles+, and the Libraries' collection of databases. The subject librarian for this course can help students form research questions, develop search strategies, evaluate sources, and cite sources properly. Website: <https://libraries.emory.edu/>

Emory College Academic Success

Emory College Academic Success provides learning assistance, academic coaching, and peer tutoring to support achievement across all majors and disciplines in Emory College. Website: <https://oue.college.emory.edu/programs/success/index.html><https://oue.college.emory.edu/>

Recommendations

I trust you have (or are beginning to have) a system for taking notes and organizing your thoughts. There is a lot of research about the benefits of taking notes by hand and the distraction of laptops in class. For these reasons, I recommend not using a laptop in class, but this is not a requirement. I reserve the right to revisit this policy if it becomes an issue. If

you don't use a citation management system (Zotero, Mendeley, etc), I strongly recommend you do so. Most are free, open-source, and well-worth the time investment.

For books on improving your writing, I recommend:

Becker, Howard S. 1983. "Freshman English For Graduate Students: A Memoir and Two Theories." *Sociological Quarterly* 24(4):575–88.

Becker, Howard S., and Pamela Richards. 2007. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goldberg, Natalie, Bill Addison, and Julia Cameron. 2016. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala.

Jensen, Joli. 2017. *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pinker, Steven. 2015. *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.

Ritzer, George. 1998. "Writing to Be Read: Changing the Culture and Reward Structure of American Sociology." *Contemporary Sociology* 27(5):446–53.

Silvia, Paul J. 2018. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. Second edition. Washington, DC: APA LifeTools.

Trimble, John R. 2000. *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. Second edition. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall.

Course Schedule [*outline*]

The course is organized in two parallel parts. Each Monday we will cover a topic from UNIT I. Each Wednesday we will cover a topic from UNIT II.

INTRO

The Idea of Social Science

UNIT I: THE STORY OF SOCIOLOGY (*Mondays*)

1. Thomas Hobbes (2)
2. John Locke
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau
4. Revolution!
5. Adam Smith
6. Karl Marx
7. Auguste Comte
8. Ferdinand Tönnies
9. Émile Durkheim (3)
10. Max Weber and Beyond

UNIT II: THEORETICAL PUZZLES FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS (*Wednesdays*)

1. **WHO** is doing the action? (3)
2. **WHAT** are social things? (4)
3. **WHERE** / **WHEN** do our theories apply? (1)
4. **WHY** do things happen the way they do? (3)
5. **HOW** do theories explain phenomena? (2)

Course Schedule [*detailed*]

Introduction

W 8.26 — The Idea of Social Science

NOTE: This schedule is split into Unit 1 (Mondays) and Unit 2 (Wednesdays).

UNIT I: The Story of Sociology (M)

M 8.31 – Thomas Hobbes

Levine, Donald N. 1995. “The British Tradition.” Pp. 121-151 in *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Read 121-128, the rest of the chapter is optional.]

M 9.7 – LABOR DAY

M 9.14 – Thomas Hobbes

Hobbes, Thomas. [1651] 1994. *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. [Ch13: Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as Concerning their Felicity, and Misery]

M 9.21 – John Locke

Locke, John. 1689. *Second Treatise of Government*. Public domain. [Excerpts: Ch 2: Of the State of Nature (sect. 4, 6-8). Ch8: Of the Beginning of Political Societies (sect. 95-99). Ch9: Of the Ends of Political Society]

M 9.28 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1755. *A Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*. Public domain. [Excerpts]

M 10.5 – Revolution!

Clark, Christopher. 2023. *Revolutionary Spring: Europe Aflame and the Fight for a New World, 1848-1849*. New York: Crown. [Excerpts from Chapter 1: Social questions]

M 10.12 – Fall Break

M 10.19 – Adam Smith

Lechner, Frank. 2018 DRAFT. *On Adam Smith*. PDF.

M 10.26 – Karl Marx

WATCH: *The Young Marx*, (2018) directed by Raoul Peck. Available on Canopy via Emory Library.

Menand, Louis. 2016, October 16. “Karl Marx, Yesterday and Today.” *The New Yorker*.

OPTIONAL: Jones, Gareth Stedman. 2004. “Introduction.” Pp. i–lxxi in *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin.

M 11.2 – Auguste Comte

Lechner, Frank. 2018 DRAFT. *On Auguste Comte*. PDF.

M 11.9 – Ferdinand Tönnies

Christakis, Nicholas A. 2019. *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*. New York: Little, Brown Spark. [Ch3: Intentional Communities]

OPTIONAL: Adair-Totef, Christopher. 2016. “Ferdinand Tönnies and the Development of Sociology.” Pp. 11–32 in *The Anthem Companion to Ferdinand Tönnies*, edited by Christopher Adair-Totef. New York, NY: Anthem Press.

M 11.16 – Émile Durkheim (DOL)

Durkheim, Emile. 2014. *The Division of Labor in Society*, edited by Steven Lukes. Free Press. New York: Free Press. [Read three introductions: Coser 1984, Lukes 2014, Durkheim 1893]

OPTIONAL: Aldous, Joan, Emile Durkheim, and Ferdinand Tönnies. 1972. “An Exchange Between Durkheim and Tönnies on the Nature of Social Relations,

with an Introduction by Joan Aldous.” *American Journal of Sociology* 77(6): 1191–1200.

M 11.23 – Émile Durkheim (Suicide)

Jones, Robert Alun. 1986. *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*. Newbury Park, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc. [Excerpt: Suicide (1897)]

M 11.30 – Émile Durkheim (EFRL)

Jones, Robert Alun. 1986. *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*. Newbury Park, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc. [Excerpt: Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912)]

M 12.7 – Max Weber and beyond

Weber, Max. 1958. “Science as a Vocation.” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press.

UNIT II: Theoretical Puzzles for Social Scientists (W)

1 WHO is doing the action?

W 9.2 – The Grammar of Causation

Kolln, Martha, Loretta S. Gray, and Joseph Salvatore. 2016. *Understanding English Grammar*. Tenth edition. Boston: Pearson. [Chapter 3]

Sword, Helen. 2013. ”Beware of Nominalizations (AKA Zombie Nouns)”. TED-Ed. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNlkHtMgcPQ>)

Rogers, Jonathan. 2025. ”What is Nominalization in Writing? — Grammar for Writers Lesson 9”. Compass Classroom. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7mxknDUxw0>)

OPTIONAL: Kolln, Martha, Loretta S. Gray, and Joseph Salvatore. 2016. *Understanding English Grammar*. Tenth edition. Boston: Pearson. [Chapter 2]

W 9.9 – Action in Sociology

Martin, John Levi. 2021. *The Explanation of Social Action*. Second edition. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. [Excerpts]

Hayes, Edward Cary. 1911. “The ‘Social Forces’ Error.” *American Journal of Sociology* 16 (5): 613–25.

W 9.16 – The Problem of Agency

Wrong, Dennis H. 1961. “The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology.” *American Sociological Review* 26 (2): 183–193.

Guhin, Jeffrey, Jessica McCrory Calarco, and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. 2021. “Whatever Happened to Socialization?” *Annual Review of Sociology* 47: 109–29.

OPTIONAL: Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Ann Mische. 1998. “What Is Agency?” *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (4): 962–1023.

2 WHAT are social things?

W 9.23 – What is a Group?

Risjord, Mark. 2023. ”Reductionism: Structures, Agents, and Evolution”. Pp 137-168 in *Philosophy of Social Science: A Contemporary Introduction*. Second edition. New York: Routledge.

Epstein, Brian. 2015. ”The End of Social Science as We Know It” — TEDxStanford. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLbEKpL-5Z0>)

W 9.30 – What is (a) Social Structure?

Merton, Robert King. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Enlarged edition. New York, NY: Free Press. [Ch12: Patterns of Influence: Local and Cosmopolitan Influentials]

W 10.7 – What is a Person?

Hobbes, Thomas. [1651] 1994. *Leviathan*, edited by Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. [Ch16: Of Persons, Authors, and Things Personated]

Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc., 573 U.S. 682 (2014).

W 10.14 – Review / Catch-up

(No assigned reading. Review prior material.)

3 WHERE / WHEN do our theories apply?

W 10.21 – Scope Conditions

Walker, Henry A., and Bernard P. Cohen. 1985. “Scope Statements: Imperatives for Evaluating Theory.” *American Sociological Review* 50 (3): 288–301.

Healy, Kieran. 2017. “Fuck Nuance.” *Sociological Theory* 35 (2): 118–27.

4 WHY do things happen the way they do?

W 10.28 – Causation in Sociology

Risjord, Mark. 2023. “Causality and Law in the Social World”. Pp 244-265 in *Philosophy of Social Science: A Contemporary Introduction*. Second edition. New York: Routledge.

W 11.4 – Hunting for Causes

Stinchcombe, Arthur L. 2005. *The Logic of Social Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Excerpts]

Goldthorpe, John H. 2001. “Causation, Statistics, and Sociology.” *European Sociological Review* 17 (1): 1–20.

W 11.11 – Are Reasons Causes? Or; Agency, Revisited

Martin, John Levi. 2021. *The Explanation of Social Action*. Second edition. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. [Excerpts]

5 HOW do theories explain phenomena?

W 11.18 – When are we done explaining?

Watts, Duncan J. 2014. “Common Sense and Sociological Explanations.” *American Journal of Sociology* 120 (2): 313–51.

W 11.25 – THANKSGIVING DAY

W 12.2 – What are explanations good for?

Martin, John Levi. 2021. *The Explanation of Social Action*. Second edition. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. [Excerpts]

6 Concluding Thoughts

W 12.9 – LAST CLASS

(No assigned reading. Review prior material.)