RETHINKING DEMOCRACY:
THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Purpose:

There are a number of ways to introduce sociological theory to undergraduates. The way I have chosen to teach this course is to place sociological theory in the historical and social context of its creation. In so doing, I want to stress the complex relationship between the theorist and his or her intellectual environment, a relationship that has direct and indirect bearings on the theories themselves.

The historical and social setting that I have selected for this course is the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, roughly from 1880-1920. This is the time when, and the place that, sociology became an established social science discipline. I should note that many textbooks in sociological theory depict the “forefathers” of sociology as being the European triumvirate: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Yet if we examine the history of sociology carefully, we will see that this conventional depiction is not only poor history, but also poor sociology. Even though Americans took the idea and the term of “sociology” from Europeans, sociology, as a discipline of academic study, began in the United States. It is this formative period of sociology that we will examine in this course. I believe you will find that there is much to learn about our lives and our social thinking today from this examination of an earlier time.

Required Readings:

There are two required readings:
1. A reader.

As you will see from the readings listed below, these selections are all original works by the thinkers we will be considering in this course.

Course Requirements and Grading:

It is important that you keep up with the readings and to attend class. These two tasks are essential because the lectures will provide the historical and social context for the theorists and an interpretation of the readings. Without attending class, you will not understand the readings. Without doing the readings, you will not understand the lectures. All lectures and discussion sections will involve assigned readings, and
everyone should be prepared to discuss the assigned readings for each class period. Participation in class and discussion sections will count 20% of the grade. Participation will be assessed through a series of classroom quizzes and attendance in discussion sections.

The other requirements consist of an examination at the end of the 6th week, a final, and two research papers, each no more than three pages long. The first research paper will be due at the beginning of the 6th week of class. The second research paper will be due the last day of class. Both papers will be on some topics suggested by the readings. A special assignment sheets will be handed out for the research papers.

The grading will be as follows: The two examinations will each count 20% of the grade, research papers 20% each, and the class participation 20%.

Course Outline and Reading Assignments

I. DEMOCRACY ASTRAY

Week One: Literary and Journalistic Interpretations

Looking Backward
Edward Bellamy, first published in 1888 and still in print. This selection is the introductory chapter.


“Wealth”


Week Two: The Sociological Interpretations

“Sociocracy”
Lester Ward, first published in 1893 as Chapter 38 in Psychic Factors of Civilization (Boston: Ginn and Co.), pp. 319-327.

“The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over”

Menand, The Metaphysical Club, pp. 49-96
II. REVISING EUROPEAN THOUGHT

Week Three: Social Darwinism and Herbert Spencer, Socialism and Karl Marx

“Spencer-smashing at Washington”

“Reflections Upon the Sociology of Herbert Spencer”

“Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence”

“What Makes the Rich Richer and the Poor Poorer”

(Not Required, but Recommended)
“The Socialist Economics of Karl Marx and His Followers”

Menand, The Metaphysical Club, pp. 97-150.

III. REDEFINING INDIVIDUALISM: FROM ECONOMIC ACTOR TO SOCIAL SELF

Week Four: A. Society as Organization

“Advancing Social and Political Organization in the United States”

(Recommended but not required)
“The Mechanics of Society”


Week Five: B. Social Organization as the Basis of Individualism
Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals

“Primary Groups”

“Social Organization and the Individual”


Week Six: C. The Individual and Society

“The Consciousness of Self”

“The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”

Human Nature and the Social Order

“The Social Self”


IV. DEMOCRACY, ROLES, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Week Seven: A. Social Responsibility and Social Control

“Private Business is a Public Trust”

“Rational Control through Standards”

(Not Required but Recommended)
“The Genesis of the Self and Social Control”

Menand, The Metaphysical Club, pp. 337-408.

Week Eight: B. Social Ethics

Democracy and Social Ethics

“The Public Will”

“The Philosophical Basis of Ethics”

Menand, The Metaphysical Club, pp. 409-442

Week Nine: C. Practical Action

“What Pragmatism Means”
William James, first published in 1907 as a chapter in Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (New York: Longmans, Green and Co.)

“The Working Hypothesis in Social Reform”

(Recommended but not required)
“Rational Control in Social Life”

Week Ten
No additional reading. Review and examination preparation