

## Social Conditions of the Self (04-328) Spring 2001

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Office Hrs: Tues. and Thurs. 11:15 - 1pm, Wed. 2-4 pm. C107 #3932

### Seminar Statement

The purpose of this course is to explore what is perhaps the most primary concern in sociology - *sociality*, the inherently social condition of human existence. To say that we are inherently social is to say that self understanding, and the understanding of any aspect of our existence, must address the implications of our social condition. In contemporary theoretical language this concern is addressed in terms of the concept of the "situated subject," a subject or self that is unavoidably affected by the situations in which we are thrown and positioned. The situations or conditions that shape the self are historical, linguistic, cultural, and social. We will read a number of cross-cultural selections that illustrate the structural import of these conditions, thereby raising our own awareness of the conditions of our contemporary American existence.

Having said that the self is always-already conditioned by social forces, it would be a mistake to view sociality as a completely determinant force in the existence of the self. The self is a subject and has agency - the capacity to act deliberately and intentionally and to define the meaning of its experience and situations. Sociality is thus dialectical, and so too must be its study. We must account for the social-psychological and existential responses to conditions as well as the structural dimensions of the conditions themselves. When both of these levels are considered together we have a truly sociological study of the human condition. Several of our readings evidence the profound effect agency can exert on meaning and experience in response to difficult or oppressive conditions.

This course will be conducted as a seminar. I will teach dialogically, facilitating seminar discussions capable of providing clarity and insight regarding the questions at hand. Each week you will be given a work sheet consisting of several questions and/or exercises. You must complete the work sheet and bring it to the subsequent class meeting. Discussing the worksheets will provide an outline for discussing the week's reading assignment. There will be eleven worksheet assignments. 50% of your final grade will be based on the average of these eleven assignment grades (with the lowest grade dropped). There will be a midterm essay exam, and a final exam, each worth 20% of your final grade. The remaining 10% of your grade will be based on the quality of your seminar participation.

Required readings

Viktor Frankl, 1984 [1959]. Man's Search for Meaning.

Václav Havel, 1986. Disturbing the Peace

Milan Kundera, 1992 [1967]. The Joke.

Milan Kundera, 1978. The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

Erich Fromm, 1969 [1941]. Escape From Freedom.

Erving Goffman, 1986 [1963]. Stigma.

(Excerpts from the following works)

Herbert Marcuse, 1964. One Dimensional Man.

David Riesman, 1956. The Lonely Crowd.

Milan Simecka, 1978. The Restoration of Order.

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- January 10                      Overview of seminar.  
Read for next week: pp. 7-100 in Frankl.  
Complete worksheet #1 for 1/17.
- January 17                      The case for agency.  
Read for next week: pp. 103-154 in Frankl.  
Complete worksheet #2 for 1/24.
- January 24                      Meaning and the primacy of order.  
Read for next week: pp. ix-102 in Fromm.  
Complete worksheet #3 for 1/31.
- January 31                      Historical situatedness, agency and freedom.  
  
Read for next week: pp. 103-204 in Fromm.  
Complete worksheet #4 for 2/7.
- February 7                      Social conditions, character types & the  
self.  
  
Read for next week: pp. 205-296 in Fromm.  
Complete worksheet #5 for 2/14.
- February 14                      Nazism: A case study of social conditioning.  
Read for next week: pp. 1-104 in Goffman.

Complete worksheet #6 for 2/21.

February 21 Social conditions as social controls: Stigma.  
Read for next week: pp. 105-147 in Goffman;  
Riesman handout (excerpt from The Lonely Crowd).  
Complete worksheet #7 for 2/28.

February 28 Group alignment, ego identity and self  
directedness  
Read for March 14: Kundera's Unbearable Lightness  
of Being.

March 7 Spring Break

March 14 Our dialectical social existence.  
Read for next week: Kundera's The Joke.  
Complete worksheet #8 for 3/21.

March 21 Social controls and self determination.  
Read for next week: pp. in Havel.  
Complete worksheet #9 for 3/28.

March 28 Historicity and agency.  
Read for next week: pp. in Havel.  
Complete worksheet #10 for 4/4.

April 4 Integrity and self conviction.  
Read for next week: handout on Milan Simecka  
(excerpts from the The Restoration of Order.)  
Complete worksheet #11 for 4/11.

April 11 Social and political oppression and the self.  
Read for next week: handout on Herbert Marcuse  
(excerpt from One Dimensional Man.)

April 18 Our social condition

April 25 Implications