This class will explore some of the major texts of French social thought since the end of the nineteenth century—the moment of the institutionalization of sociology as a distinct field. We will discuss many of the main concepts, methodological debates, and empirical engagements of texts which have shaped the intellectual horizon of social scientists in France and elsewhere since the end of nineteenth century. The seminar will be more than a series of isolated readings by major authors. It will describe the historical trajectory of a “science of the social” in France. It will identify common themes, such as the ongoing reflection on the nature of the “social question” (and, later, “social problems”), the use of categories in science and society, the ‘scientific’ status of social science, the relation between science and politics, among others. It will explore their continuities and ruptures over time, and insist on the dialogues, cross-fertilizations and rifts between authors. The seminar will also attempt to relate texts to the social context of their production and thus also constitute a social history of the social sciences in France. This will lead us to question the very notion of a French “national tradition” in the social sciences and address the difficulties of translation/appropriation of those texts in the American context.

Course Requirements

Class participation: 20%

Class memos: 30%
During the course of the semester, students will be responsible for writing three memos that analyze the core issues in the week's readings (NO MORE THAN THREE PAGES). These must be sent by email to all participants on Monday before 12:00 am. Memos should not be a summary of the readings but a spur to discussion. They should be organized as an argumentative discussion of ONE of the readings' main analytical and empirical points.

Research Paper (15 pages maximum): 50 %
In order to prepare for the paper, you will have to submit a 2-3 page research proposal by April 14. The proposal should state the research topic (formulated as a question rather than as just a theme) and a provisional bibliography. You will have the opportunity to discuss the proposal with me during office hours. The research paper is due on Thursday, May 8 at 10:00 am.

Suggested Purchases (NYU bookstore):


Class 1: Presentation
January 22

Class 2: From the Social Question to the Science of the Social
January 29


[Chapter 4, pp. 196-247; Chapter 5 in part, pp. 283-313]


Recommended readings

Class 3. Emile Durkheim (1). Instituting the Science of the Social
February 5


Recommended reading
February 12


Recommended readings

Class 5 : French Sociology between the Wars.
Assessing the Legacy of Durkheim: Maurice Halbwachs
February 19


Class 6. French Sociology between the Wars.
Marcel Mauss (1): Social structures and Mental Structures
February 26


Recommended reading

Class 7 : French Sociology between the Wars.
Marcel Mauss (2): The Total Man
March 5


Recommended reading

Class 8 : Structuralism and the Science of Man: Claude Lévi-Strauss.
March 12


Recommended reading:


Class 9 : Foucault (1). Genealogy of the Individual as Object.
March 26

[Preface, chapter 1; part II, Chapter 7, 9 and 10]

[Part I chapter 1; part III chapter 3, Part IV, chapter 3.]
Class 10: Foucault (2). Genealogy of the Individual as Subject.
April 2

[Part I, II and IV]


Recommended readings

Class 11: Pierre Bourdieu (1). Toward a Theory of Practice
April 9


Recommended readings

Class 12: Pierre Bourdieu (2). Classes and Forms of Capital
April 16

Introduction; Part 1 (“The Aristocracy of culture”); Conclusion (“Classes and classifications”) (pp. 1-96 and 466-484)

[Chapter 1 (“Social Space and Symbolic Space”) without the appendix (pp. 1-13) and chapter 2 (“The New Capital”) with the appendix (pp 19-34)]

[Chapter 11 (Social Space and the Genesis of ‘Classes’”) pp. 229-251.]

April 23

[Chapter 1 (“From Order to Disorder”), Chapter 6 (“The Creation of Order out of Disorder”) and Postscript to the Second Edition (1986).]

[Introduction 1 (“One man’s story”) Introduction 2 (“A question of Sociology”) Conclusion (“the Cohesion of a fluid Group”)]


Recommended readings
Beaud, Stéphane and Michel Pialoux 2001 “Between 'Mate' and 'Scab': The contradictory inheritance of French workers in the postfordist factory”, Ethnography, 2 (3): 323-355

Class 14

April 30

Wrap-up session. Students present their projects in class.