FINAL EXAMINATION

Part I. In order to examine the relevance of classical sociological theory to contemporary sociological research, your assignment is to find a contemporary use of one of the classical theorists in a research area of interest to you. Using the vast resources of the University of California libraries, find an article on something that interests you published in a sociology journal since 2010 that makes use of ideas from Marx, Durkheim, or Weber in the service of empirical research. Drawing from the classical source, in conjunction with a close reading of the contemporary article, analyze how the contemporary author uses the classical theorist. What are the key concepts from the classical theorist that a contemporary researcher finds of value? What sorts of modifications has s/he made in order to make the classical ideas useable? (How different is the contemporary conception from the classical source?) What epistemological and methodological decisions has the contemporary researcher made to gather data? How useful is the contemporary piece to you? What adjustments or modifications would you make to improve the theoretical conception and empirical dimensions of the contemporary piece? Write your answer in a 4-6 page (double-spaced, reasonable font and margins) essay, with all outside materials appropriately referenced. Please be prepared to give a brief and preliminary oral report on the contemporary research for our last class, on December 3, 2015.

Part II. Compare the two remaining authors in their approaches to two of the issues listed below:

Social Science
Religion
State
Human Nature
Human Agency
Work
Family
Civil Society

In your answers (4-6 pages each, double-spaced, reasonable font and margins), outline the key differences and similarities in the theoretical conceptions offered. Then explain why the theorists differ. In other words, what assumptions or approaches lead each of the theorists concerned to come up with different conceptions of the same phenomena? Evaluate the adequacy of each approach, synthesizing what you find most valuable from each theorist, and explaining what needs to be reconceptualized for your own research.

Your final examination is due Thursday, December 10, 2015, by 12:00PM.
Part I: I have used the following article that relates with Karl Marx’s ideas to answer this part:


1. What are the key concepts from the classical theorist that a contemporary researcher finds of value?

The author finds Marx’s concepts of Asiatic Mode of Production, accumulation of capital, and private property of value to his research.

2. How the contemporary author uses the classical theorist?

The author uses Marx’ concepts of Asiatic Mode of Production, accumulation of capital, and private property to explain the successive modes of production using land through a case study in India.

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1 Marx formulated Asiatic Mode of Production in the 1850s while developing theories on capital and the Capitalist Mode of Production in the Critique of Political Economy. Through this body of work, he tried to understand “the specific characteristics which distinguish capital from all other forms of wealth - or modes in which (social) production develops” (Marx 2005; p. dxi), especially the “forms which precede capitalist production” (ibid, p.188). In this analysis, Marx distinguished the “Asiatic landforms” from all other pre-capitalist production forms, such as feudalism.

Amidst oriental despotism and the propertylessness which seems legally to exist there, this clan or communal property exists in fact as the foundation, created mostly by a combination of manufactures and agriculture within the small commune (...) A part of their surplus labor belongs to the higher community, which exists ultimately as a person, and this surplus labor takes the form of tribute etc., as well as of common labor for the exaltation of the unity, partly of the real despot, partly of the imagined clan-being, the god” (ibid, p. dxlv).

Braud (2015) argues that Marx’s notion of “Oriental despotism” explains the Asiatic Mode of production that is separate from but running parallel to feudalism in Europe. The Asiatic and Feudal modes can be best understood as precursors in a multilinear approach to the development of capitalism (ibid, p. 72). The features of Asiatic mode of production were: 1) communal labor; 2) villages acting as “small republics (...) : economically self-sustaining, conduct(ing) their affairs independently, entering into negotiations and disputes as a solitary, unitary and free contracting party, and (uninfluenced by the) monarch” (ibid, p.73)—meaning “separation of the village from the sovereign in terms of influence and physical location”; and these two features resulted in 3) non-alienation of labor from the land (ibid, p.74).
With the capturing of political and economic order of India by the British colonists in the 18th century, the western capitalism also made inroads into the Asiatic mode of agrarian production in India’s villages. The British Viceroy Cornwallis’ Permanent Settlement Act of 1973 installed *zamindars* for the purpose of collecting taxes from the peasants. But they ultimately turned into landlords by gaining “unrestricted capitalist-style ownership” over the land under the patronage of the British whereby they could pass their land rights to their heirs and evict the peasant families (now tenants) from the land that they were tilling for generations. The land was treated as private property by the *zamindars* which could be bought and sold—something unthinkable in the Asiatic mode because “land constituted a status symbol for its owner, or represented the community—the village, the kinship, the family, etc.” The peasant, thus, felt alienated from the land because they lost the control over their mode of production (ibid, p.74).

The post-independence land reform laws of the Government of India after 1947 on land ceiling, redistribution of land, and tenancy intended to protect the indigenous modes of agricultural production and reduce the alienation of peasants under the colonial laws on land. But their lax enforcement ensured that the capitalist powers continued to have their grip on the land.

Sections five and nine of the Indian constitution, The Panchayat Act, and the Estates Acquisition Act can be seen as attempts to move back to economic and political formations reminiscent of the Asiatic Mode of Production. They specifically give a degree of autonomy to village areas and limit the amount of land a *zamindar* can own. However, these laws are blatantly disregarded by both the Indian government and transnational corporations, especially in the mining sector (ibid, p.75).
As a consequence, the process of alienation from land continued. The alienated peasant classes found their allies in the native Indian tribes. They, too, were exploited first by the British and then by the transnational and mining corporations in their process of acquiring the forest lands which was their home. Sporadic incidents of unrest started in the 1960s which turned into a coordinated unrest of marginalized communities after May 25, 1967 when a protest in Naxalbari, a village community in the state of West Bengal turned violent (ibid, p.76). After this incident, the agrarian and tribal unrest on land assumed the name of “Naxalite” insurgency (named after the Naxalbari village). The author argues that the three features of Asiatic mode of production: non-alienation of labor from the land, communal labor, and the “separation of the village from the sovereign in terms of influence and physical location” explains the appeals of Naxalite insurgency in India to bring change in the ownership of land as means of production (ibid, p.74).

3. What sorts of modifications has s/he made in order to make the classical ideas usable? (How different is the contemporary conception from the classical source?)

While Marx used his concepts of accumulation of capital and private property in the context of industrial mass production, the author extends those concepts to explain the agricultural and tribal land (more importantly, agricultural land) as means of production in the socioeconomic settings of India. As a result, the definition of “capital” gets modified in the author’s case study to include only land-- from being land and technology (factory, machines, tools, etc.) in the industrial economy-- because the technology used for production in rural and tribal India is primitive and mostly non-mechanized. Hence, he hardly makes any reference to technology in his case study. Similarly “private property” also means only land (and estate) in the author’s case study.
The author also modifies Marx’s conceptualization of Asiatic Mode in the agrarian mode of production in India. The author’s “Asiatic mode” in the Indian context acknowledges the authority of ruling class (the king and their administration that ruled the territory) on village economies, contrary to the “village republic” thesis of Marx wherein villages are autonomous units and have no monarch. He contends that the “difficulty with the village republic thesis is the complexity of India” and that all villages operating in the Asiatic mode may not operate in the same way (ibid, p. 73).

4. What **epistemological and methodological decisions** has the contemporary researcher made to gather data?

The author refers to Krader (1975) and the post-independence Indian land legislations to establish the epistemological linkages between Marx’s Asiatic mode of production and the traditional agrarian production system in India. Though Indian villages were autonomous political units and the peasants had ownership towards their means of production through their intergenerational ties with the land, the surplus labor was indeed being collected by a village “headman” for the public infrastructural development works. Krader (1975) draws parallels between the two systems by arguing that “the ruling class [of village headmen] and the agricultural workers who did the planting and harvesting represent the beginnings of the class society [in the Indian agrarian systems]” (Braud 2015, p.73). The author also refers to the sections five and nine of the constitution of India and the post-independence Indian laws such as The Panchayat Act and the Estates Acquisition Act to argue that these legal mechanisms aimed the post-colonial Indian agrarian system to move back to the reminiscent of its Asiatic mode of production (ibid, p.75).
The author chooses a case study method to explain the traditional agrarian system of India, its destruction under the colonial rule, and the Naxalite insurgency to restore back the original system through Marx’s “progressive epochs in the economic formation of society” enumerated through stages such as the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist modes of production (Tucker, 1978, p.5). For Marx, Asiatic mode could lead to a socialist society without being necessarily having to go through the capitalist mode (Braud 2015, p. 83). The author uses his case study to drive the point that the Western capitalism did not arrive in the Indian agricultural system through a progression of stages, and rather it was imposed by the British colonists. The Naxalite insurgency, though not equivalent to the proletariat movement for several reasons (explained in the next question), attempts to restore the vestiges of the Asiatic mode that could ultimately lead to a communist society (ibid, p.82).

5. How useful is the contemporary piece to you? What adjustments or modifications would you make to improve the theoretical conception and empirical dimensions of the contemporary piece?

This contemporary piece serves as a useful starting point to evaluate the historical changes in the agrarian production system in India through the Marxian approach of dialectical materialism. However, it is deficient in its theoretical and methodological approaches to do that successfully. I would also take into account the progress of Asiatic mode towards the feudal mode that several Indian sociologists (example, Gupta, 1980) have argued for. I would also gather more empirical evidence to refine and substantiate my theoretical arguments and trace the evolution of class relations and struggles related to agricultural production during the pre-British times. The land records of pre-colonial times could serve as a valuable data to plug this gap in the article.
Also, though the article attempts to inform about the Naxalite insurgency, insufficient references to Marx’s proletariat movement makes the positioning of this insurgency dubious in the Marxian approach. I would also want to rewrite this case more analytically. Though the author mentions that the Naxalite insurgency “has not developed links with other revolutionary movements that Marx sees as necessary for a communist society based on the model of the Asiatic mode” (ibid, p.83), he does not explain what “linkages” he is referring to. At the same time, he equates the Russian revolution with Marx’s proletariat movement and though he argues that Russia had a similar system of land distribution as in India, he is not able to make a comparative analysis of the Russian revolution with the Naxalite insurgency. I would refer to the classical and contemporary studies on these areas to make this article a more informed piece of literature.

Part II.

I would compare Durkheim and Weber in their approaches to: 1) Social Science, and 2) Religion

----- SOCIAL SCIENCE -----

1. Outline the key differences and similarities in the theoretical conceptions offered.

Following the positivist traditions of natural sciences, both Durkheim and Weber approach Social Sciences-- and Sociology in particular-- as a discipline that can be subjected to scientific inquiry. They both view quantitative and qualitative methods as valid scientific tools available to the social scientists. They both give social sciences precise epistemological tools to
understand the society scientifically without resorting to any philosophical or metaphysical approaches.

Durkheim builds his narrative around social facts which he describes as the “multifarious aspects of collective life” that do not exclude any category of societal phenomena. Weber calls his perspective as interpretative sociology which is “understanding the union of the more comprehensive totality with its parts” – documenting, manifesting, and expressing individuals, institutions, act or style of work as “larger morphological units that underlie particular data.” He argues that this understanding (Verstehen) can be created by building ideal types that refer to the “construction of certain elements of reality into logically precise [and unambiguous] conception[s]” (Durkheim 1982, pp. 177, 182, 230; Gerth and Mills 1991, pp. 56, 59).

Yet, there are stark differences in their theoretical conceptions--

For Durkheim, Sociology is a “science of social facts [--) […] the science of those phenomena which shows the life of societies itself.” Like Physics and Biology, the social facts have their own laws-- but not “directly reducible” to those in the natural sciences (Durkheim 1982, pp. 178-9). Whereas, Weber’s approach towards Social Sciences is to understand or interpret the professed or ascribed intentions of the individual through introspection of their motivated actions. Thus, the interpretative methods’ “point of departure and […] ultimate unit of […] analysis is the individual person [einzelindividuum].” Instead of developing or even believing that any laws exist in social sciences, he argued that the “real meat of history” is the “multiplicity of specific historical situations” explained by various type concepts that would fall in between any “extreme” or “pure” cases that a social scientist would imagine to be an ideal case. In this sense, his “ideal type” does not really mean that these represent any exemplary
prophets or harlots that “should be imitated as representatives of an ideal way of life” (Gerth and Mills 1991, p.55-60).

While both Durkheim and Weber were occupied with using their social sciences methods to develop the subject matter for sociology, Durkheim aimed at using his methods also to develop a “synthetic science” or a “philosophy of social sciences” [that would] disengage from the different specialist disciplines […] [and] guide and illuminate [their] researches [for the] further progress of philosophical thought” and the “renewal of philosophical questions.” He thought that would “provide philosophy with the indispensable foundations which it […] lack[ed]” (Durkheim, 1982, pp. 9-11, 43). On the other hand, Weber uses his methods of interpretative understanding and ideal types for purposes “closely geared to the empirical world”, such as studying religion and capitalism from a comparative approach and developing the concept of bureaucracy (Gerth and Mills 1991, pp. 59-61).

2. Explain why the theorists differ. In other words, what assumptions or approaches lead each of the theorists concerned to come up with different conceptions of the same phenomena?

The theorists differ because of their differing assumptions and approaches toward deciding the course that Social Scientists should take while conducting scientific inquiry.

Durkheim assumes that social facts, being objective, cannot be explained by any method other than “an experimental method which proceeds slowly and objectively” (Durkheim 1982, p. 213). Weber goes diametrically opposite by assuming that individual’s actions can never have any objective meanings. He endeavors to understand and interpret the subjective meanings of individual actions (Gerth and Mills 1991, p.55-59).
Durkheim takes the approach that “the objective every sociologist sets himself is the construction of a complete theory of the society” (Durkheim 1982, p.194, emphasis added).

Weber’s approach does not take him any closer to developing any grand theories.

Weber draws the line between his interpretative sociology and the ‘physique sociale’ in the tradition of Condorcet, which Comte called sociologie and Durkheim worked out in such an eminent manner… It is understandable that Weber felt it equally wrong to consider his work as an idealist interpretation of history as it was to consider it as a case of historical materialism (Gerth and Mills 1991, pp. 57-59).

Thus, he emphasizes the understandability of human conduct as opposed to the universal causal explanation of social facts (ibid, p.57).

3. Evaluate the adequacy of each approach, synthesizing what you find most valuable from each theorist, and explaining what needs to be reconceptualized for your own research.

Durkheim’s approach of objectivity of social facts and deriving the laws of society is valuable in extending the positivist traditions of the natural sciences like physics and biology that assert that materials and processes are governed by a set of universal laws. This approach is adequate in furthering the Comtian view that “different fundamental sciences are irreducible to one another, although as a whole they form a homogeneous system.” As result of the Durkheimian approach, sociology could place itself in its formative stages at par with the natural sciences, asserting its own individuality (Durkheim 1982. p. 178).

However, this approach is inadequate in addressing the ongoing sociological debate on agency versus structure. Durkheim’s theory ignores that the social facts can also be within us,
and they could be the product or creation of the present generation. They are not always given, pre-existing condition for human agency and they can also be known by introspection and reflection. The human agency can also produce social facts. And social facts can also be pursued by individuals that pursue individual goals².

Weber’s “interpretative sociology” and “ideal type” are valuable towards filling the above gap. Weber envisions the social phenomena, motives of individual actions, and institutions as chaotic, even atrophic, and inundation of subjective values³. However, this approach is inadequate to explain “how structures determine the places into which agents are inserted by determinate processes… If the Weberian project were to prove scientifically valid, then there would be no theoretical space in which structuralism could be erected” (Turner, 1977, pp.1-2).

For my research, I think conceptualizing the confluence of Durkheim’s structural approach and Weber’s interpretative approach is valuable. For example, in one of my studies that is based on the LGBTQ activism in India, I find that the leaders of these activist organizations align their goals with those of the Western funding agencies such as the HIV/AIDS targeted intervention programs, sterilization programs to control fertility, and shelter houses for “homeless” LGBTQ individuals. While these goals fit their activism into the “respectable” structural parameters of the Western LGBTQ activism, they also interpret their goals in terms of the socio-cultural realities of India and link their advocacy with the “queer” goals of integration of Hijra (intersexed) communities, advocacy for deconstructing the “public versus private”

² http://www.colorado.edu/Sociology/gimenez/soc.5001/durk1.html; Accessed on November 27, 2015
binary in reading down the anti-sodomy laws, and nondiscrimination of queer communities in education and employment (Ghosh 2015).

In another work where I apply Mary Bernstein’s concept of identity deployment (Bernstein, 1997) in the LGBTQ activism at workplace in the US, I account for the structural constraints these employee groups face in their advocacy in terms of limited involvement with the external movement organizations (like ACT-UP and NGLTF) and aligning their goals with the profit motives of their employers. But I also try to emphasize the agency of these individuals by conceptualizing “discretion strategy” whereby as individuals, they choose the appropriate time for coming out at workplace instead of being completely dictated by the diversity climate and perceived inclusion of LGBTQ at their workplace (Ghosh 2012).

Hence, I find that in my study conceptualizing both approaches are important for explaining the sociological phenomena of LGBTQ activism in India and identity deployment by LGBTQ employee activists in the US.

----- RELIGION ----- 

1. Outline the key differences and similarities in the theoretical conceptions offered.

Both Durkheim and Weber offer pragmatic, non-theological, and logical standpoints to understand religion.

Durkheim’s conception of religion is very straightforward: “let us consider the various religions in their concrete reality, and attempt to disengage that which they have in common; for religion cannot be defined except by the characteristics which are found wherever religion itself is found” (Durkheim 1995, p.24; emphasis added).
What are these characteristics?

Durkheim departs from Spencer, Max Muller, Reville, and Tyler to argue that religion is neither supernatural (mysterious) nor divine (ibid, pp. 24-35). He argues that religion is eminently social. Religious representations are social affairs and the product of collective thought. These are collective realities that “excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states” in the groups that assemble to participate in the religious congregations (ibid, p.10). According to Durkheim,

Religion [acts] as a source of solidarity and identification for the individuals within a society, especially as a part of mechanical solidarity systems, and to a lesser, but still important extent in the context of organic solidarity. Religion [provides] a meaning for life, it [provides] authority figures, and most importantly […], it [reinforces] the morals and social norms held collectively by all within a society (Thompson 1982, p.1; emphasis added).

Durkheim conceptualizes religion as a “unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1995, p.47; emphasis added).

Weber, on the other hand, occupies his thesis on religion to explain the “economic ethic” and social stratification in society. Economic ethic refers to the “practical impulses for [economic] action which are founded in the psychological and pragmatic contexts of religions.” He argues for a two way relationship between religion and economic ethic by arguing that “the religiously determination of life-conduct [is one of the] determinants of the economic ethic. […]
[But the] religiously determined way of life is itself profoundly influenced by economic and political factors operating within given geographical, political, social, and national boundaries” (Gerth and Mills 1991, pp. 267-8).

Weber extends his concept of economic ethic to explain stratifications in the society by arguing that the religious way of life has determined the occupational segregation in the modern capitalist economies.

On the other hand, it is a fact that the Protestants (especially certain branches of the movement to be fully discussed later) both as ruling classes and as ruled, both as majority and as minority, have shown a special tendency to develop economic rationalism which cannot be observed to the same extent among Catholics either in the one situation or in the other. Thus the principal explanation of this difference [in occupational segregation] must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs, and not only in their temporary external historico-political situations (Weber 1930, p.39)

He thus asserts through the case of higher proportions of Protestants, as compared to the Catholics, as business leaders and high grade technically skilled professionals in modern enterprises that the religious ways of life, amongst other factors, determine social stratification (ibid, pp. 35-46).

Hence, while there are similarities, there are epistemological differences in the way Durkheim and Weber conceptualize religion. Durkheim explains religion as a means of social regulation, solidarity, moral consciousness, and collective norms that members of a society adhere to. Whereas, Weber conceptualizes religion as a concrete way to organize the economic ethic and social stratification in a society.
2. Explain why the theorists differ. In other words, what assumptions or approaches lead each of the theorists concerned to come up with different conceptions of the same phenomena?

While both theorists take scientific and pragmatic approach toward religion, they differ in their epistemological approaches towards religion.

Durkheim takes a more universal and deterministic approach towards religion. He says:

At the roots of all our judgments [...] [, the categories of understanding: ideas of time, space, class, number, cause, substance, personality, etc.] dominate all our intellectual life [...] . They correspond to the most universal properties of things. They are like the solid frame which encloses all thought; this does not seem to be able to liberate itself from them without destroying itself [...]. Now when the religious beliefs are systematically analyzed, the principal categories are naturally found. They are born in religion and of religion; they are a product of religious thought. *This is a statement that we are going to have occasion to make many times in the course of this work* (Durkheim 1995, p.9, emphasis added).

As suggested above, Durkheim *assumes* that his several “categories of understanding”—time, space, class, number, cause, substance, and personality emanate from the religious facts. In other words, his *deductive approach* asserts that his categories are contingent upon the religious facts.

Weber’s categories that are determined by the religious life -- such as the economic ethic and social stratification (Gerth and Mills 1991, pp. 267-8; Weber 1930, pp. 35-46)-- are concrete
and substantive to the modern human life. While he asserts that religion determines economic ethic, instead of arguing deterministically that “they are born in religion and of religion; they are a product of religious thought” (Durkheim 1995, p.9), he asserts that “no economic ethic has ever been determined solely by religion.” Hence he accounts for factors other than the religion that determine economic rationality. Unlike Durkheim, he assumes a two way relationship between religion and other categories by arguing that “the religiously determined way of life is itself profoundly influenced by [the] economic and political factors operating within [the] given geographical, political, social and national boundaries” (Gerth and Mills 1991, p.268). In contrast to Durkheim’s deductive approach, Weber’s approach is both deductive and inductive.

3. Evaluate the adequacy of each approach, synthesizing what you find most valuable from each theorist, and explaining what needs to be reconceptualized for your own research.

Durkheim’s approach is adequate in explaining the universalistic appeal of religion—why all religions have church, why religion supersedes magic in all advanced societies, and why social regulation through religion brings social order in all societies.

On the other hand, Weber’s approach is adequate in understanding the qualitative differences between each religion and the different outcomes each form of religious life have to offer. It helps in understanding why some forms of religious life lead to more economic progress than the others, and how social stratification explains the success of some religions over the others (Gerth and Mills 1991, p.274).

In my research on cultural competence at workplace, theoretical conceptualization using both approaches is valuable in explaining the role of religious diversity at workplace. In my study of culturally competent behaviors at workplace (Ghosh 2014) I find that in a religiously
diverse workplace most business leaders follow the religious non-harassment policy. Bantering anyone at work due to their religious symbols was scorned off in a modern enterprise. Yet, in another study where I try to qualitatively explore the role of cross-cultural encounters in making the workers culturally competent (Ghosh 2013), I find that this policy is not able to curb the religious prejudice towards some religions like Islam. Taking time off for namaz and growing beard during Ramzan was seen suspiciously because of the stereotypes that associated Islam especially post 9/11. Hence while a universal approach of Durkheim towards religion helps me understand why modern workplaces have non-harassment policies covering all religions, the social psychological approach of Weber toward the world religions helps me understand the prejudices that some religions face over the others.

References


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