

MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Sociology
SOC 4153: Sociological Theory
Fall 2026

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Office:	O'Donohoe Hall (PY), Room O134
Office Hours:	Monday 12:30–1:30 and 3:30–4:30; Tuesday 10:00–12:00; Wednesday 8:45–9:45 and 12:30–1:30; Thursday and Friday by appointment
Class Meetings:	Monday & Wednesday, 2:00–3:20
Location:	PY100
Date:	8/24/2026–12/12/2026

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course starts from a problem you can see anywhere you look. Every one of your decisions feels like yours, made privately and for your own reasons, and yet the aggregate patterns those decisions produce are so regular that a stranger can predict them: what names parents choose, when people resolve to change their lives, who quits a job and when. What kind of fact is a pattern like that? The three founding figures of sociological theory, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, gave incompatible answers, and the contemporary theorists we read carried those answers forward into arguments about work, health, power, intimacy, and the algorithmic present. None of the three positions has won. By the end of the semester you will be able to state each one, say what evidence bears on it, and defend the one you side with.

The course runs as a small seminar and is built around three things. You will write briefs, short weekly papers that are the writing requirement and the core of the grade, almost always about a case: a real, documented pattern presented in class for the theories to compete over. In week four you will be assigned a Lineage, one theoretical tradition running from a classical founder to a contemporary heir, and you will become the person in the room responsible for representing it at its strongest. And in the second half of the course, each session holds the Roundtable on one case: the case goes on the table, the day's lead lineage argues its explanation, and the room questions the argument and judges it by stated criteria.

This is a writing-intensive course. You will produce roughly 20 to 25 pages of graded writing across the semester, with revision built into the design, because the final paper is assembled and revised from briefs you have already written and received comments on.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- State the three classical positions on the relationship between individual action and aggregate social patterns, attribute them to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and identify what evidence bears on each
- Evaluate any social explanation against stated criteria: mechanism, renaming, levels, scope, and refutation
- Read difficult primary texts closely, reconstruct their arguments, and identify the premises those arguments depend on

- Represent one theoretical tradition, from its classical founder to its contemporary heirs, at its strongest, in writing and in live argument
- Apply classical and contemporary theory to a real, documented social pattern in sustained written work
- Revise analytical writing substantively in response to feedback

REQUIRED TEXTS

There is no textbook to buy. Every reading is an excerpt or article posted to D2L: Mills, Sutton and Staw, Abend, and primary texts by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber in the opening unit; shared case readings in the second half; and from week five, readings assigned by lineage that differ by student.

GRADING

Grade Distribution

Component	Points	% of Grade
Briefs (weekly writing)	180	45%
Roundtable performance	60	15%
Closing Argument and defense	100	25%
Final Exam	60	15%
TOTAL	400	100%

Grading Scale

A: 90–100% B: 80–89% C: 70–79% D: 60–69% F: Below 60%

BRIEFS (180 PTS)

Briefs are short analytical papers: about one page each in the opening unit, then written about the cases from October on. Twice in the semester your lineage leads a case. Your lead brief runs a page and a half to two pages and is circulated to the class by 5:00 pm the evening before your case, because your classmates prepare from what you write. In the other case weeks through November 11 you write about a page giving your own tradition's angle on one of that week's cases, due at that case's session; in the final two case weeks that writing time goes to the Closing Argument instead. Every brief is graded against the five criteria on the reference card distributed in week one.

LINEAGES AND THE ROUNDTABLE (60 PTS)

On September 16 each student is assigned one theoretical tradition to represent for the rest of the course. From October on, each session puts one documented case on the table, with one lineage leading its explanation; every lineage leads twice across the twelve cases, and every tradition is expected to question every argument. Roundtable performance is graded on three stated criteria: you represent your tradition accurately, you engage the strongest version of the opposing arguments rather than a convenient version, and you concede points when the argument goes against you.

CLOSING ARGUMENT AND DEFENSE (100 PTS)

The Closing Argument is a six to eight page paper plus an oral defense to the class in the last week of the semester: the argument for and against your tradition, built from its performance across the semester's cases, where it

explained best and where it failed, judged by the five criteria. Because it is assembled and revised from briefs you have already written and received comments on, the end of the semester is spent revising rather than starting from scratch.

FINAL EXAM (60 PTS)

The final exam is Wednesday, December 9, 5:45–7:45 pm, in our regular classroom (PY100), and it is open note: printed or handwritten notes, printed texts, and your reference card are allowed. No electronic devices of any kind, including phones, laptops, and tablets, may be used during the exam, so bring paper copies of whatever you want at hand. You will receive a documented case you have not seen in the course, write the strongest available explanation of it from one tradition, and then write the strongest rival explanation. Both parts are graded by the five criteria. The exam asks for the same work the Roundtable practices all semester, done alone and in writing.

COURSE POLICIES

Late Work

Late assignments are not accepted without prior arrangement and appropriate documentation. Please communicate early; do not wait until after a deadline has passed.

Academic Integrity

All submitted work must be your own. Plagiarism and academic dishonesty will result in a zero on the assignment and may be referred to the university for further action. Use of AI tools to generate submitted work is not permitted unless explicitly approved for a specific assignment. When in doubt, cite your sources.

Americans with Disabilities Act (Accommodations)

If a student has an established disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADAAA) and would like to request accommodation, please contact me as soon as possible. Any student requesting accommodations should first contact Disability Support Services at 940-397-4140, Clark Student Center room 168, to document and coordinate reasonable accommodations if they have not already done so. I am committed to ensuring full participation for all students.

Religious Observance

Students who must miss class due to religious observance should notify the instructor at least one week in advance. Reasonable accommodations will be made without penalty.

Communication

I will reply to emails within 24 hours on weekdays and 48 hours on weekends. Please include the course number in your subject line. For anything complex or time-sensitive, office hours are a better option than email.

Classroom Environment

This course covers real social phenomena: inequality, work, power, health, intimacy. These topics matter, and they can be uncomfortable. I expect all students to engage with course material and with each other with intellectual curiosity and mutual respect. Debate and disagreement are welcome; in this course they are the method. Disrespect is not.

Recording Classes

Recording classes is generally prohibited without the professor's explicit permission. Such recordings, when permitted, are for personal use only and may not be uploaded to the internet or otherwise shared, transmitted, or published without the professor's prior consent. When it is feasible and appropriate, students may record classes to accommodate disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act, with prior approval of Disability Support Services; such recordings may not be uploaded to the internet or otherwise shared, transmitted, or published.

Title IX: Obligation to Report Sex Discrimination

Midwestern State University is committed to providing and strengthening an educational, working, and living environment where students, faculty, staff, and visitors are free from sex discrimination of any kind. State and federal law require University employees to report sex discrimination and sexual misconduct to the University's Office of Title IX. As a faculty member, I am required to report to the Title IX Coordinator any allegations, personally observed behavior, or other direct or indirect knowledge of conduct that reasonably may constitute sex discrimination or sexual misconduct, which includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, or stalking, involving a student or employee. After a report is made, the Office of Title IX will reach out to the affected student or employee in an effort to connect them with resources and options for addressing the allegations in the report. You are also encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Title IX directly.

Contact: Laura Hetrick, Title IX Coordinator, Sunwatcher Village Clubhouse, 940-397-4213, laura.hetrick@msutexas.edu.

You may also file an online report 24/7 at cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?MSUTexas. Should you wish to speak with someone about your experience in confidence, you may contact the MSU Counseling Center at 940-397-4618.

For more information on the University's policy on Title IX or sexual misconduct, visit msutexas.edu/titleix.

Campus Carry

Senate Bill 11, passed by the 84th Texas Legislature, allows licensed handgun holders to carry concealed handguns on campus, effective August 1, 2016. Areas excluded from concealed carry are appropriately marked, in accordance with state law. For more information regarding campus carry, please refer to the University's Campus Carry webpage.

Emergency Aid Resources for Basic Needs

Unexpected life circumstances can affect anyone. If you are experiencing challenges meeting basic needs, such as housing, utilities, food, transportation, healthcare, technology, or textbooks, resources may be available to help. Visit the [Student Emergency Support and Resources webpage](#) to learn more and explore emergency support opportunities through MSU. For additional information, contact the Office of Student Affairs: Clark Student Center 108, (940) 397-7500, student.affairs@msutexas.edu.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Readings should be completed before the class session for which they are listed. ★ indicates a deadline or exam. Shared readings are listed here and everyone reads them; from September 16 each student also carries an individually assigned lineage reading list alongside. This schedule is subject to change with two weeks' notice via D2L.

Date	Topic, Readings & Assignments
WEEK 1	The problem of the course
Mon Aug 24, 2026	Does aggregate regularity require its own kind of explanation? No reading due. Brief 0 assigned.

Date	Topic, Readings & Assignments
Wed Aug 26, 2026	What distinguishes a theory from a description or a hunch? Read: Mills, "The Promise" (12 pp). ★ Brief 0 due. Reference card distributed.
WEEK 2	Marx and Durkheim
Mon Aug 31, 2026	Does the organization of production structure subjective experience? Read: Marx, "Estranged Labour" and the 1859 Preface excerpt (18 pp).
Wed Sep 2, 2026	Can a social fact be a cause? Read: Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, excerpts from chs. 1 and 5 (20 pp). ★ Brief 1 due.
WEEK 3	Weber
Mon Sep 7, 2026	NO CLASS: Labor Day
Wed Sep 9, 2026	Must social explanation reconstruct subjective meaning? Read: Weber, Economy and Society ch. 1 excerpt; The Protestant Ethic, closing pages; "Bureaucracy," opening section (24 pp).
WEEK 4	The first Roundtable
Mon Sep 14, 2026	The Roundtable: three explanations, one case. No new reading; bring all three readings, your notes, and your reference card.
Wed Sep 16, 2026	Studio: puzzle workshop, lineage assignment, conference sign-ups. ★ Brief 2 due.
WEEK 5	The remaining lineages, part one
Mon Sep 21, 2026	Lineage introductions I: interaction and the self (Mead and Simmel, toward Goffman). Read: Mead excerpts and Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (20 pp).
Wed Sep 23, 2026	Lineage introductions II: standpoint and difference (Du Bois and Gilman, toward Crenshaw and Collins). Read: The Souls of Black Folk, ch. 1, and a Gilman excerpt (18 pp). Conference round 1 this week.
WEEK 6	The remaining lineages, part two, and the launch
Mon Sep 28, 2026	Lineage introductions III: valuation and markets (Simmel on money, toward Zelizer and Fourcade), plus the contemporary heirs of the first three lineages. Read: Zelizer introduction excerpt (10 pp).
Wed Sep 30, 2026	Lineage launch: each owner presents their tradition; Roundtable on the shrinking sociology major. ★ Brief 3 due Tuesday Sep 29 by 5:00 pm, circulated that evening.
WEEK 7	The case method begins
Mon Oct 5, 2026	Case 1: Emotional labor and the commercialization of feeling. Lead: interaction and the self. Read: Hochschild, The Managed Heart, excerpt (8 pp), plus BLS occupational employment data.
Wed Oct 7, 2026	Case 2: Ritual and the sacred in secular life. Lead: solidarity and ritual. Read: ter Kuile and Thurston, "How We Gather," excerpt (8 pp), plus Global Wellness Institute figures.
WEEK 8	Commodity chains and the world system
Mon Oct 12, 2026	Case 3, development. Lead: political economy. Read: Rivoli, The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy, ch. 1 (15 pp), plus the Planet Money t-shirt video series.
Wed Oct 14, 2026	Case 3, Roundtable: efficiency, dependency, and development. Optional fieldwork assigned for Monday.
WEEK 9	The interaction order; consumption and desire
Mon Oct 19, 2026	Case 4: The interaction order and the enforcement of informal norms. Lead: interaction and the self. Read: Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, introduction excerpt (8 pp), plus the Candid Camera conformity segment (1962).

Date	Topic, Readings & Assignments
Wed Oct 21, 2026	Case 5: Consumption, advertising, and manufactured desire. Lead: political economy. No new reading. Viewing: The Century of the Self, Part 1, excerpt.
WEEK 10	The social gradient in health
Mon Oct 26, 2026	Case 6, development. Lead: standpoint and difference. Read: Chetty et al., JAMA (2016), abstract and figures, plus Marmot, Status Syndrome, excerpt (12 pp together).
Wed Oct 28, 2026	Case 6, Roundtable: explaining the gradient.
WEEK 11	Valuation: intimacy and the priceless
Mon Nov 2, 2026	Case 7: Intimacy and market rationality. Lead: valuation and markets. Read: Illouz, Cold Intimacies, excerpt (10 pp), plus the Rosenfeld et al. (PNAS 2019) figure and Pew findings. Conference round 2 this week.
Wed Nov 4, 2026	Case 8: Valuation and the priceless. Lead: valuation and markets. Read: Zelizer, Pricing the Priceless Child, introduction excerpt (8 pp), plus the EPA mortality risk valuation page.
WEEK 12	Discipline and medicalization
Mon Nov 9, 2026	Case 9: Discipline and the design of modern institutions. Lead: rationalization and discipline. Read: Foucault, "Panopticism," excerpt (8 pp), plus Bentham's Panopticon drawings.
Wed Nov 11, 2026	Case 10: Medicalization and the politics of diagnosis. Lead: standpoint and difference. Read: Conrad, The Medicalization of Society, excerpt (10 pp), plus CDC data on ADHD diagnosis trends.
WEEK 13	Surveillance and prediction
Mon Nov 16, 2026	Case 11: Surveillance capitalism and behavioral prediction. Lead: rationalization and discipline. Read: Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, excerpt (10 pp), plus Duhigg, "How Companies Learn Your Secrets" (2012).
Wed Nov 18, 2026	Library and reading day, no class meeting. ★ Closing Argument draft due to D2L by 5:00 pm.
WEEK 14	Integration and solidarity
Mon Nov 23, 2026	Case 12: Social integration and loneliness. Lead: solidarity and ritual. Read: Putnam, "Bowling Alone" (1995) (12 pp); Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) on collective efficacy and crime, abstract and key figure; and the U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on loneliness (2023), key figures.
Wed Nov 25, 2026	NO CLASS: Thanksgiving
WEEK 15	Defenses
Mon Nov 30, 2026	Revision clinic on the drafts, then Closing Argument defenses begin.
Wed Dec 2, 2026	Remaining defenses. ★ Revised Closing Argument due at your defense.
FINALS WEEK	
Wed Dec 9, 2026	★ Final exam, 5:45–7:45 pm, PY100. Open note (paper only): printed notes, texts, and reference card; no electronic devices.

LINEAGE READING LISTS

From September 16 each student owns one lineage and reads its list across the rest of the semester, roughly 15 to 25 pages a week alongside the shared case readings; you may pause your list in a week you lead. Core readings run

from the founder to the heir and are sequenced roughly in that order; contemporary extensions are read in the back half of the semester (about weeks 10 to 14) and feed the Closing Argument; further readings are optional depth. All readings are posted to D2L as excerpts.

Political Economy and Conflict: Marx to Wallerstein

- Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 1, sec. 4 (1867).
- Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), part I, "Bourgeois and Proletarians."
- Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital* (1847).
- Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (2004), chs. 1 and 2.
- Wright, "Understanding Class: Towards an Integrated Analytical Approach," *New Left Review* 60 (2009).
- Dubal, "On Algorithmic Wage Discrimination," *Columbia Law Review* 123 (2023), excerpt.
- Further, optional: Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System" (1974); Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974), ch. 1.

Solidarity and Ritual: Durkheim to Randall Collins

- Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), introduction and conclusion excerpts.
- Durkheim, *Suicide* (1897), introduction and egoistic suicide excerpts.
- Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), mechanical and organic solidarity excerpt.
- Mauss, *The Gift* (1925), introduction and ch. 1 excerpt.
- Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), ch. 1 excerpt.
- Klinenberg, "Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Living Alone," *American Journal of Public Health* 106 (2016).
- Further, optional: Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967); Hirschi, *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), ch. 1, "A Control Theory of Delinquency."

Rationalization and Discipline: Weber to Foucault

- Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), ch. 5, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism."
- Weber, "Science as a Vocation" (1917), excerpt.
- Weber, "The Types of Legitimate Domination," *Economy and Society*, excerpt.
- Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), "Panopticism" (full chapter) and "Docile Bodies" excerpt.
- Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (1998), introduction.
- Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor," *HAU 2* (2012), excerpt.
- Further, optional: Foucault, "The Subject and Power" (1982); Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, ch. 1; Lupton, *The Quantified Self* (2016), excerpt.

Interaction and the Self: Mead and Simmel to Goffman

- Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), the sections on the self: the I and the me, play and the game, the generalized other.
- Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902), ch. 5, "The Social Self" (the looking-glass self), excerpt.
- Simmel, "The Stranger" (1908).
- Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), introduction and ch. 1, "Performances."
- Goffman, "On Face-Work" (1955), in *Interaction Ritual* (1967).
- boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014), introduction.

- Further, optional: Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), breaching demonstrations excerpt; Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* (1983), chs. 1 and 2.

Standpoint and Difference: Du Bois and Gilman to Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins

- Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," *Darkwater* (1920), excerpt.
- Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898), chs. 1 and 2 excerpts.
- Dorothy Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," *Sociological Inquiry* 44 (1974).
- Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), excerpt.
- Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within," *Social Problems* 33 (1986).
- Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology* (2019), introduction, "The New Jim Code," excerpt.
- Further, optional: Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), matrix of domination excerpt; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" (1991); Criado Perez, *Invisible Women* (2019), excerpt.

Valuation and Markets: Simmel to Zelizer and Fourcade

- Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), excerpt on money and individual freedom.
- Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money* (1994), ch. 1.
- Rossman, "Obfuscatory Relational Work and Disreputable Exchange," *Sociological Theory* 32 (2014).
- Fourcade and Healy, "Seeing Like a Market," *Socio-Economic Review* 15 (2017).
- Espeland and Sauder, "Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds," *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (2007), excerpt.
- Fourcade and Healy, "Classification Situations: Life-Chances in the Neoliberal Era," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 38 (2013).
- Kiviat, "The Moral Limits of Predictive Practices," *American Sociological Review* 84 (2019).
- Further, optional: Espeland and Stevens, "Commensuration as a Social Process" (1998); Fourcade, "Cents and Sensibility" (2011), excerpt; Mears, *Very Important People* (2020), introduction.

At five students, the valuation lineage folds into political economy: that owner adds Zelizer's ch. 1 and "Seeing Like a Market" to the Marx-to-Wallerstein core, and the rest of the valuation list becomes optional.

This syllabus is a living document. Any changes will be announced in class and posted to D2L.