Study Guide for Comps Exam in Sociological Thought and Theory

Students who wish to take the exam option need to read the required readings specified in the syllabus of Soc/Anth 330, and study well-taken lecture notes of the same course while thinking about applying those materials to the sample questions that are listed in this study guide. Exam questions are selected out of some combination or modification of the listed sample questions. In addition, reading some of the following basic texts in sociological theory can be very helpful:

Sociological Theory, by David Ashley et al
Ideology and the Development of Theory, by Irving Zeitlin
The Emergence of Sociological Theory, by Jonathan Turner et al,
Sociological Lives and Ideas, by Fred Pampel

Sample Questions:

Sociological Theory:
1. Marx, Weber and Durkheim conceptualize modernity in different terms and categories. What are the essential elements of such conceptualization by each of the three authors and the differences in their approach?

2. An important dispute in sociology pertains to the question of method. Compare and contrast Marx and Weber in their epistemological/methodological orientation.

3. Discuss Marxian thesis of the relation between humans and society (subject and object) as well as his method of understanding the truth of society by analyzing his following statement: Democracy is the truth of monarch; monarchy is not the truth of democracy…Monarchy cannot be understood in its own terms, democracy can.” (Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right)

4. Marx believes that it is only with the emergence of capitalism that we can begin to understand pre-capitalist societies. By analyzing his following statement explain why he thinks that way: Here (bourgeois society) then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labor,” “labor as such,” …becomes true in practice… Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations…also allow insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations. (Grundrisse)

5. Contrast and discuss Marxian and Weberian theories regarding the causes and conditions of the rise of capitalism in the West European societies.
6. Compare and contrast Marxian and Weberian conceptions of the basis of stratification under capitalism and communism.

7. Marxist theory of capitalism predicted a polarization of social classes which will lead to the communist revolution. Describe and evaluate this polarization theory.

8. According to Weber the concept of authority contains within itself the Marxian notion of the mode of production while at the same time going beyond a simple economistic concept of history. Explain Weber’s typology of authority and how it relates to Marxist thesis of the modes of production.

9. Compare and contrast Nietzsche and Weber regarding their conception of the relation between asceticism and the rise of modern society. How Nietzsche’s categories of Dionysian vs. Apollonian cultures, as well as Weber’s categories of traditionalism versus rationalization relate to this same issue.

10. According to Durkheim, contract is never an agreement between two individual wills. It is on the contrary a synthetic relation which requires the participation of the sacred. Explain what he means by such thesis.

11. For Durkheim, individualism has a unique meaning which is different from selfish pursuit of one’s individual interests. It is the moral basis of the organic solidarity which unites social determination and individual autonomy in the modern society. Explain types of solidarity and the concept of individualism in Durkheim’s theory.

12. According to Durkheim, those sociologists who have defined religion as a superstitious error devoid of any objective and rational basis are wrong. Explain the truth of religion in Durkheim’s view and the objective content of religious belief in his theory.

13. Compare and contrast Marxian notion of alienation, Durkheim’s idea of anomie, and Weber’s concept of disenchantment in regard to the nature of the present and future form of modern societies.

14. Durkheim has argued that apparently non-social phenomena are deeply social in their reality. Choose two of the following apparently non-social issues and explain how Durkheim perceives them to be social in nature: suicide, God, truth, individualism, human soul, and contract.

15. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber gave different ideas about the nature of social causation, whether various social institutions are interacting with each other or one of them is the cause of others. Contrast and discuss their views.

16. Classical sociological theorists had specific ideas regarding the relation between modernity and peace. Discuss Comte, Spencer, and Nietzsche’s conceptions of military vs. industrial society.
17. Compare and contrast Comte, Spencer, and Marx in terms of their position regarding the question of social evolution, progress and purpose in human history.

18. For Durkheim the appropriate method of understanding religion requires beginning the analysis with the most elementary form of religious life. But for Marx it is Christianity that should be the starting point of analysis to unveil the true nature of religion. Explain and evaluate.

19. Marx believes that true freedom of human beings requires the realization of the communist social order when capitalist anarchy of production is replaced by a conscious collective decision making on all economic issues. However, for John Stuart Mill, Marx has missed the most important question of political philosophy dealing with the true nature of liberty in society. Discuss and evaluate.

20. Regarding both Marx and Weber there are various disagreements concerning the presence or absence of a fundamental epistemological change of view between their early and later writings? Discuss and evaluate the main forms of these controversies.