Professor Jamie McCallum
Four Questions or “How to Critically Read Sociological Texts” ¹

These questions may be helpful to guide your reading and critical engagement with the material.

The questions are:
1. What does the author want to know?
2. Why does the author want to know it?
3. What does the author think the answer is?
4. How does the author find out?

1. What does the author want to know?
   1.1 That is what the author really wants to know. This often takes the form of a broad theoretical issue.
   1.2 The central question. This is a question that states the problem or agenda of this particular study, and links that question to the originating question.
   1.3 The specific questions. These are the sets of issues or specific relationships.

2. Why? (What is the rationale for the author’s study)?
   2.1 The author needs to be able to explain why finding an answer to the central question matters intellectually. Generally this takes the form of a ‘review of the relevant literature’ in which the author situates the study with respect to what other important scholars have argued.

3. What is the author’s working hypothesis or general argument?
   3.1 What is the author’s tentative answer to the central question?

4. Sources and methods. What did the author do (what materials were collected, and how were they analyzed) in order to answer the central question?

¹ This memo is adapted from a handout created by Maurice Zeitlin and Dylan Riley