University of Cambridge  
Faculty of Human, Social, and Political Science  
HSPS Tripos Part IIA, Soc 2, for the academic year 2020-2021

Social Theory

Paper Contacts

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Outline of the Course

Aims and Objectives

- To provide students with a comprehensive introduction to the major traditions and key contributions to contemporary social theory.
- To enable students to read the work of major authors in some depth.
- To develop analytical skills and intellectual understanding so that students can engage in an analysis of theoretical debates in an informed and rigorous manner.
- To explain the relevance of contemporary social theory for substantive problems of social and political analysis.

Course content

This paper introduces students to a range of well-defined topics, from the Frankfurt School to the most recent work on risk, identity, difference, sexuality and feminist theory. Students should acquire a firm grasp of key theoretical approaches enabling them to read the work of contemporary social theorists in some depth. The period covered runs from 1920 to the present day, but the emphasis is on recent (post-1960) developments. The traditions and orientations are situated in their social and intellectual context, and the writings of key thinkers are examined textually in detail. The strengths and limitations of different perspectives are discussed and, where appropriate, their relevance to social research explored. Among the perspectives and authors covered are the following: pragmatism, Mead and symbolic interactionism; Goffman; existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism; Bourdieu; Latour; Foucault; theories of sexuality; Arendt; the Frankfurt School and critical theory; Habermas; Bauman; the development of Marxist thought in the twentieth century; the cultural turn; the post-human; feminist theory; decolonial, postcolonial and subaltern studies.

Modes of teaching and assessment
The paper is taught by lectures, supervisions and revision classes around themes and texts. Lectures will provide an overview of issues and debates and detailed discussions of key texts. Supervision is essential for this paper and should be arranged in consultation with a Director of Studies. Supervisions will be directly concerned with the general concepts, texts and theories that have been covered in the lectures. It is essential for students to have 6 supervisions (plus revision sessions) and to write a minimum of four essays over the course of the year.

There are classes and lectures in the Easter term, both for revision, and to make connections between the different components of the paper. The exam paper is undivided and covers the lecture programme. Students will be required to pick three questions in the exam.

**Supervision**
Supervisions will be organised by the course organiser in the first lecture.

**How this Paper/Course Relates to Others?**
This paper builds further on the first-year sociology paper (Soc1) as it elaborates on the contemporary relevance of the sociological classics, in particular Marx, Du Bois, Weber and Durkheim. For example, this paper discusses Marx’s and Weber’s influence on Sartre and the Frankfurt School, Du Bois’s influence on contemporary ‘Black social theory’, or Durkheim’s impact on structuralist thought. It also discusses recent reappropriations of Marx and Durkheim in the humanities and social sciences. The paper is particularly useful for understanding some of the theoretical debates in the other sociology papers. It provides an ideal basis for the advanced social theory paper (Soc6). This paper also goes well with history of political theory papers.
Outline of Lectures

Michaelmas 2020

Lectures

Lecture 1. Introduction (PB)

The American tradition of micro-sociology
Lectures 1-2. American pragmatism, G.H. Mead and symbolic interactionism (PB)
Lecture 3. Erving Goffman and the sociology of everyday life (PB)

The French connection
Lecture 4. Existentialism and existentialist feminism: Sartre, de Beauvoir (PB)
Lecture 5. Existentialism and anti-colonial movements: Fanon, Biko (PB)
Lecture 6. Structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss (PB)
Lecture 7-8. Practice theory: Pierre Bourdieu (PB)
Lecture 10. Falsificationism and the rediscovery of homo economicus (PB)
Lecture 11-12. Michel Foucault: Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics (FCS)

Race, ethnicity and gender
Lectures 13-4. Pragmatism, ‘Black social theory’ and the sociology of knowledge (AM)
Lecture 15-16. Gender and sexuality (AM)

Readings

1. Introduction: What social theory is, and its relevance to sociology, politics and psychology


1-2. American pragmatism, G.H. Mead and symbolic interactionism


Essay questions:

What’s distinctive about G.H. Mead’s account of the self?
For G.H. Mead, in what sense is the self a social self?

3. Erving Goffman and the sociology of everyday life


Essay questions:

Critically assess Goffman’s views on the role of stigma in modern society.
How can Goffman’s analysis be used to understand power dynamics in society?

4. Existentialism and existentialist feminism: Sartre, de Beauvoir


Essay questions:

Is feminism compatible with existentialism?
Critically evaluate Sartre’s assessment of antisemitism.
5. Existentialism and anti-colonial movements: Fanon, Biko

Quinn, R. 2017. *An Analysis of Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth.* London: Routledge.

Essay questions:

According to Fanon, how precisely does colonialism affect the colonized? Do you agree?
Explain Fanon’s choice of book title in *Black Skin, White Masks.*

6. Structuralism: Claude Lévi-Strauss


Essay questions:

Critically assess Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist analysis of myths.
Does Lévi-Strauss’s account of social phenomena deny agency?

7-8. Practice theory: Pierre Bourdieu

(originally, 1972)


Essay questions:

- How does Bourdieu explain the role of culture in the reproduction of inequality? Do you agree?
- How convincing is Bourdieu’s attempt to transcend the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism?


Essay questions:

- In what sense does Latour want to redefine the nature of the social? Do you agree?
- What do actor network theorists mean by ‘network’ and why is the concept significant?

10. Falsificationism and the rediscovery of homo economicus

a. Falsificationism


Essay questions:
Do theories need to be falsifiable?
Does Kuhn’s history of science undermine falsificationism as a philosophy of science?

b. Rational choice theory


Essay questions:
What type of rational choice theory is most effective for the social sciences?
What are the strengths and limitations of game theory for analyzing social and political phenomena?

11-12. Michel Foucault: Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics


Essay questions:

Is Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge an intellectually coherent enterprise?

Do we live in a ‘society of surveillance’?

What can the history of sexuality tell us about the formation of the modern subject?

**13-14. Pragmatism, ‘Black social theory’ and the sociology of knowledge**


Essay questions:

Critically assess the Black sociological tradition’s contributions to social theory.
‘Social theory can be used to support hierarchical power relations [and] social theory can also challenge unjust ideas and practices’ (Collins). Discuss.
Critically assess Collins’ argument that we need to separate questions of ‘what counts as knowledge from questions of who decides what knowledge is’.

15-16. Gender and sexuality


Essay questions:
To what extent are contemporary conceptions of sexuality and gender rooted in European modernity?
Critically assess the relationship between gender and sexuality.
To what extent are gender and sexuality technologies of control?
Lent 2021

Development of Social Theory (II)

Lectures

Modernity and its critics: The German tradition of critical theory
Lecture 1-2. Hannah Arendt and the humanist critique of modernity (PB)
Lecture 3-4. The Frankfurt School, the critique of Enlightenment and the notion of critical theory (PB)
Lecture 5-6. Habermas and critical theory (I) (FCS)
Lecture 7. Habermas and critical theory (II) (FCS)
Lecture 8. Critical theory today: Honneth and Fraser (FCS)

Modernity, postmodernity and the posthuman
Lecture 9-10. The postmodern turn: Modernity and postmodernity (FCS)
Lecture 11-12. The cultural turn: Rediscovering Marx and Durkheim (FCS)
Lecture 13-14. The ontological turn: New materialisms (FCS)

Provincializing modernity: A view from the margins

Readings

1-2. Hannah Arendt and the humanist critique of modernity


Essay questions:

What, according to Hannah Arendt, is distinctive about totalitarianism?
What does Hannah Arendt mean by ‘banality of evil’?
3-4. The Frankfurt School, critique of Enlightenment and the notion of critical theory


Essay questions:

According to the Frankfurt School, what is problematic about the Enlightenment project? How does critical theory differ from other theories?

5-6. Habermas and critical theory (I)


Essay questions:

What are the main shortcomings of Habermas’ notion of the public sphere?
Does Habermas’s theory of practical discourse provide a sound basis for dealing with the normative problems of critical theory?

7. Habermas and Critical Theory (II)


Essay questions:

Is Habermas right to think of modernity as an unfinished project?
Is cosmopolitan democracy desirable and feasible?

8. Critical theory today: Honneth and Fraser


Essay questions:

What, if any, are the tasks of a critical theory of society today?
Can redistributive politics be reconciled with the politics of recognition?

9-10. The postmodern turn: Modernity and postmodernity


Essay questions:

Is Lyotard’s incredulity toward metanarratives justified?
‘Without modern civilization, without the whole assortment of achievements of which we are otherwise so proud, the Holocaust would have been unthinkable.’ (BAUMAN) Discuss.

11-12. The Cultural Turn: Rediscovering Marx and Durkheim


Essay questions:

Why, according to Spivak, are western efforts to speak for the other bound to fail? Do you agree? In which respects, if any, is cultural sociology superior to the sociology of culture?

13-14. The ontological turn: New materialisms


Essay questions:

Do things have agency?

‘By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.’ (HARAWAY) Discuss.

15-16: Social theory and the imperial episteme


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4RmaYRt6pM


1. To what extent is the 20th century social theory canon Eurocentric?
2. To what extent is canonical social theory guilty of ‘analytical bifurcation’ (Go), or ‘abyssal thinking’ (de Sousa Santos)?
3. What can social theory learn from postcolonial theory? What can postcolonial theory learn from social theory?

**Easter 2021**

Lectures Michaelmas 1-10; Lent 1-4: Revision – Prof. P Baert.

Lectures Michaelmas 11-12; Lent 5-14: Revision – Dr Silva

Lectures Michaelmas 13-16; Lent 15-16: Revision – Dr Meghji

**Student Feedback:**

Your chance to put forward your opinions on the papers you take!

For Sociology Papers, student feedback is collected anonymous questionnaires distributed at various points in the academic year. It is crucial that you fill these out and give feedback on your papers. Getting good feedback from students makes the course better and shows the outside world how Cambridge degrees consider their students’ views.
Course organisers take students’ concerns and suggestions into consideration each year when preparing their paper outlines and selecting supervisors for the year. So please remember to fill out a form.