University of Cambridge
Faculty of Human, Social, and Political Science
HSPS Tripos Part IIA, Soc 2, for the academic year 2023-2024

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; 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 2023

Lectures

Lecture 1. Introduction. American pragmatism, G.H. Mead and symbolic interactionism (PB)
Lecture 2. Erving Goffman and the sociology of everyday life (PB)
Lecture 3. Existentialism and existentialist feminism: Sartre, de Beauvoir (PB)
Lecture 4. Existentialism and anti-colonial movements: Fanon (JD)
Lecture 5. Francophone postcolonialism: Achille Mbembe; Françoise Vergès (JD)
Lecture 6. Practice theory: Pierre Bourdieu (PB)
Lecture 7: Homo economicus and rational choice theory (PB)
Lecture 8. Michel Foucault: Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics (PB)
Lecture 9. Hannah Arendt and the humanist critique of modernity (PB)
Lecture 10. The Frankfurt School, the critique of Enlightenment, and critical theory (PB)
Lecture 11-12. Gender and sexuality (SP)

Readings

1. Introduction. 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?

2. 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?

3. Existentialism and existentialist feminism: Sartre, de Beauvoir


Essay questions:

What is the relationship between existentialism and collective political action?
How convincing is Sartre’s account of racism and antiracism?
“De Beauvoir’s feminism is more important than her existentialism”. Critically discuss with reference to The Second Sex.

4. Existentialism and anti-colonial movements: Fanon

Wynter, S. 2001. Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What it is Like to Be “Black”. In National Identities and Sociopolitical

Essay questions:
“Racism makes recognition impossible”. Discuss with reference to Fanon’s work.
Critically analyse Fanon’s conception of Blackness.

5. Francophone postcolonialism: Achille Mbembe; Françoise Vergès

Morgensen, S. L. 2011. The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now. Settler Colonial Studies, 1, 52-76.

Essay questions:
How far is coloniality dependent on the regulation of life and death?
Is necropolitics a useful concept for understanding contemporary inequalities?

6. Practice theory: Pierre Bourdieu


Essay questions:

How does Bourdieu explain the role of culture in the reproduction of inequality? Do you agree?

Is Bourdieu’s social theory elitist?

7. **Homo economicus and 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?

8. Michel Foucault: Surveillance, sexuality, freedom

*Primary texts*


Essay questions:

What can the genealogy of sexuality or the prison tell us about modern power relations?

Does Foucault’s ethics of the self successfully reconcile power and freedom?

9. Hannah Arendt and the humanist critique of modernity


Essay questions:

What is valuable about Hannah Arendt’s approach to totalitarianism?
How useful if the idea of the ‘banality of evil’?

10. The Frankfurt School, critique of Enlightenment and the notion of critical theory


**Essay questions:**

Is the Frankfurt School’s account of enlightenment too pessimistic?

“The purpose of critical theory is emancipation”. Assess this claim with reference to the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

**11-12. Gender and sexuality**

*Butler, J, 1990, Gender Trouble, Routledge (Section 1: Subjects of Sex, Gender and Desire)*


*Davis, Angela, Chapter 13 of Women, Race and Class (1981), available here: https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/davis-angela/housework.htm*


**Essay questions:**

Critically assess the relationship between gender and sexuality.
To what extent are contemporary conceptions of sexuality and gender rooted in European modernity?
To what extent are gender and sexuality technologies of control?
Lent 2024

Development of Social Theory (II)

Lectures

Modernity and its critics: The German tradition of critical theory
Lecture 1-2. Habermas and critical theory (FCS)
Lecture 3. Critical theory today: Honneth and Fraser (FCS)

Modernity, postmodernity and the posthuman
Lecture 4. The postmodern turn: Modernity and postmodernity (FCS)
Lecture 5-6. The cultural turn: Rediscovering Marx and Durkheim (FCS)
Lecture 7-8. The ontological turn: New materialisms (FCS)

Provincializing modernity: A view from the margins
Lecture 9-10. Pragmatism, ‘Black social theory’ and the sociology of knowledge (NY)
Lecture 11-12. Postcolonial and decolonial theory: Sociology, Eurocentricism, and the imperial episteme, Southern theory (NY)

Readings

1-2. Habermas and critical theory


(especially Chapters 6, 10, 12)

Essay questions:
What are the main shortcomings of Habermas’ notion of the public sphere?
Is deliberative democracy effective in countering political disaffection?

3. 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?

4. The postmodern turn: Modernity and postmodernity


(Especially Chapters 7-8)


Essay questions:

Is Lyotard’s incredulity toward metanarratives justified?
Critically evaluate Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity.

5-6. 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?

7-8. The ontological turn: New materialisms


Zerilli, L. 2005. Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (Especially Introduction, Chapters 1, 4)


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.
9-10: Pragmatism, ‘Black social theory’ and the sociology of knowledge


Glen Sean Couthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. The University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Introduction; Ch 1; 131-133; 139-149; Conclusion.


University of Chicago Press, 2002. Foreword by Lewis R. Gordon; Ch 5 (Black Souls in White Skins?)


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’.

11-12: Social theory and the imperial episteme

[https://doi.org/10.1086/231125.](https://doi.org/10.1086/231125)


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4RmaYRt6pM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4RmaYRt6pM)

Glen Sean Couthard, Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition. The University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Introduction; Ch 1; 131-133; 139-149; Conclusion. Purchase or Gauchospace.


Essay questions:

To what extent is the 20th century social theory canon Eurocentric?  
To what extent is canonical social theory guilty of ‘analytical bifurcation’ (Go), or ‘abyssal thinking’ (de Sousa Santos)?
**Easter 2024 - Revisions**

Week 1. Revisions for the lectures of Michaelmas
P Baert et al.

Week 2. Revisions for the lectures on Lent
FC Silva et al.

**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.