HSPS Part II B Soc 6
Advanced Social Theory
2022-23
Course Organizer: Professor Jennifer Gabrys

Aims and objectives
This course offers students the opportunity to pursue their interests in contemporary social theory at an advanced level. The course encourages students to use social theory in order to think creatively, constructively and critically about the ways in which the social and political world is changing today. The course takes for granted an intermediate level of knowledge of classical and contemporary social theory; students are expected to develop and extend their knowledge of key thinkers by reading their work in greater depth. However, the course itself is organized around problems and issues, not around thinkers and texts. The emphasis is on encouraging students to practice social theory by thinking theoretically about particular problems and issues. The course seeks to bring social theory alive by getting students to draw on the resources of social theory in order to understand the world of the 21st century and how it is changing.

Course aims:
• To enable students to pursue their interests in social theory at an advanced level.
• To enable students to read a selection of theoretical texts in detail.
• To encourage students to use social theory to analyse particular aspects or characteristics of contemporary societies.
• To encourage students to think creatively, constructively and critically about how the social and political world is changing today.

Course organization
The course is organized in terms of discrete modules – i.e., clusters of lectures or seminars. Each module consists of around four hours of lectures or seminar-based teaching, often scheduled as two two-hour sessions. The modules are focused on particular problems or themes and are taught by leading practitioners of social theory today. The content of the modules will vary from year to year, depending on the availability of members of staff. In 2021-22 the modules listed below will be offered:

Michaelmas 2022
Prof Jennifer Gabrys, 'Introduction to Advanced Social Theory: Pluralizing Social Theory' (12 and 19 October)
Mr Robert Dorschel, 'Subjectivation' (26 October and 2 November)
Dr Michelle Westerlaken, ‘Thinking With More-than-Human Entities’ (9 and 16 November)

Lent 2023
Dr Ali Meghji, ‘Critical Race Theory, Decoloniality, and Contemporary Nationalisms: Towards a Theoretical Synergy’ (25 January and 1 February)
Dr Filipe Carreira da Silva, ‘Rethinking Populism’ (8 and 15 February)
Dr Scarlet Harris, 'Abolition: Racism, Resistance and Worldmaking' (22 February and 1 March)

Easter 2023
Prof Jennifer Gabrys, Revision Session (3 May)
Course format
We will hold lectures and seminars in-person. However, as there may be an ongoing need to respond to Covid-19 during the 2022-23 academic year, we may hold some lectures online, with accompanying seminars that may be scheduled for in-person or online meetings depending upon conditions. The usual lecture format will include a presentation of approximately 1 hour in length that you will be able to view in advance of course discussion, and 1 hour of course discussion and related activities. All session formats will be recorded and made available on the course moodle on the VLE, along with slides and/or related material for each lecture.

When consulting these materials and recordings, please be sure to read the University of Cambridge’s policy on the ‘use of recordings for remote teaching and learning,’ which notes that the copyright for course materials including videos belong to its lecturer. Course videos are only to be used by the cohort of students enrolled in this course and only for the current academic year (2021-22). These materials may not be shared more widely. Please refer to the Department and University guidance on Covid-19 adaptations on a regular basis for updates.

Supervision
Supervision will be provided either by the individuals teaching the modules or by other supervisors who have agreed to supervise for this paper. One or two contacts are given for each module and they will either do the supervision or help arrange it. There is a central SOC 6 sign-up sheet for supervisions that you will be able to access from the course moodle. You can sign up for 6 total lectures, with 3 in Michaelmas and 3 in Lent terms. If students or Directors of Studies encounter difficulties with supervision arrangements they should contact the Course Organizer.

Revision
A one-hour revision class is scheduled at the beginning of Easter Term. You will have the option of signing up for 2 revision lectures in Easter term in preparation for your examination.

Assessment
The course will be assessed by means of a three-hour examination paper. All exam scripts will be submitted through Turnitin to ensure texts do not contain plagiarised material.
Brief description of modules and reading lists

MICHAELMAS TERM 2022

1. Introduction to Advanced Social Theory – Prof Jennifer Gabrys

Session 1: Introduction to Social Theory and Social Problems
How does the study of social theory change when engaging with social problems, even more than distinct writers or theories? We will discuss how social problems are constituted, the ways in which social theory variously engages with the formation of social problems, and different ways in which theory can address social problems. Through an overview of the course contents, we will look the multiple social problems and topics to be address in this course, and consider how this approach might reorient customary approaches to social theory.

Session 2: Pluralizing Social Theory
Building on the introductory session to this course, we will engage in more depth with questions of how to pluralize social theory when studying and engaging with social problems. We will analyse how diverse and multiple formations of epistemology and ontology generate and inform different ways of engaging with social life. We will look at how social theory as developed within indigenous, Black, postcolonial, decolonial, feminist and queer scholarship provides alternative approaches to ways of knowing and being that also make the political implications of different ways of doing social theory more apparent. This second lecture will continue themes addressed in the introductory lecture while providing a map for the overall course, where lecture and discussion topics will engage with questions of truth and authority, community and political agency, inequality and social justice. How do more pluralistic approaches to social theory and social life enable researchers to create other ways of practicing theory and producing knowledge?

Required Reading

Recommended Reading
Global Social Theory, https://globalsocialtheory.org/
Chapter 5: "Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies: Are There Multiple Sciences?"


**Essay questions**

1. How do different approaches to social life create different social practices?
2. Explain how ‘situated knowledges’ could change approaches to objectivity
3. Does global sociology contribute to more pluralistic social theory?

**Supervision**

Contact Prof Jennifer Gabrys at jg899@cam.ac.uk

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**2. Subjectivities and Societies -- Robert Dorschel**

The relationship between individual actors and structural configurations is a classic and controversial theme within social theory. In the context of two sessions, we will explore contemporary ways of conceptualising this complex relationship. In the first session, we will engage with theories that problematise essentialist and power blind accounts of how actors acquire schemas of perception, recognition and action. Focusing on the culturalist, post-structuralist and post-colonial turn in social theory, we will engage with conceptualisations of subjectivity as a historic-specific and conflictive social phenomena. Moving beyond an understanding of subjectivity and society as stable or singular entities, we will grasp the two dimensions as dynamic, disputed, and plural social forms.

In the second session, we will continue to explore the different trajectories that social theory has taken since the culturalist, post-structuralist and postcolonial turn. The focus will lie on research that has emerged in the last two decades in the context of an ever more globalising and digital social order. Given the acceleration of international mobility, trade, and communication, we will ask how different forms of subjectivities are constructed and temporarily stabilised within these developments. This interest will be pursued through discussion of the ways that subjects are interpellated by institutional forces as well as how they deploy technologies of the self.

**Session 1:**

*Required Reading:*


[Especially chapter 3: “Structures, habitus, practices”]
Recommended Reading:

Session 2:
Mandatory Reading:

Recommended Reading:


**Essay questions**

1. How are contemporary theories of subjectivities positioned vis-à-vis the debate on structure vs. agency?
2. Can we account for the plurality of forms of subjectivities within one theoretical framework?
3. How do processes of digitalisation relate to processes of subjectivation?

**Supervision**
Contact Mr Robert Dorschel at rcd49@cam.ac.uk.

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**3. Thinking With More-than-Human Entities – Dr Michelle Westerlaken**

This module aims to bring our understanding of social theory into the realms of thinking with more-than-human entities. Anna Tsing writes on the importance of cultivating “the arts of noticing” (Tsing 2015), and Haraway’s slogan advocates for a “Staying with the Trouble” (Haraway 2016). But what could this mean in a more-than-human world? How can the inclusion of more-than-human entities in social theory rework social collectives? In the first session we will introduce and challenge the notion of the more-than-human by unpacking this term, discussing alternatives from Indigenous scholarship, and questioning if we are even human individuals ourselves. By attending to more-than-human entanglements, and bringing in different examples, we will investigate a social theory that is more inclusive of the relations that other entities propose.

To further question the notion of more-than-human entanglements, the second session focuses on how more-than-human social theory may have different implications across marginalized groups and Indigenous worldviews. Here we will look at scholarship from fields like Critical Animal Studies, disability studies, and black feminist thought that focus on the inclusion of more-than-human entities in social theory.

**Session 1: Posthumanism and More-Than-Human Entanglements**

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**

Gilbert, Scott. F. (2017). Holobiont by birth: Multilineage individuals as the concretion


**Session 2: More-than-human? Less than Human?**

*Required Reading*


*Recommended Reading*


*Essay questions*

1. What could it mean to *think-with* more-than-human entities in sociology?
2. How can more-than-human approaches to sociology offer different understandings of the Anthropocene?

3. How does the focus on more-than-human entanglements risk reproducing social inequalities for both human- and multispecies communities?

**Supervision**

Contact Dr. Michelle Westerlaken at mw833@cam.ac.uk

**LENT TERM 2023**

4. **Critical Race Theory and decolonial thought: epistemic allies or divergent pathways?**
   – Dr Ali Meghji

In this two-part module we will consider the central differences and overlaps between critical race theory (CRT) and decolonial thought. Rather than attempting to synthesise these two approaches, we will consider the possibility for a social theory built around synergy. In order to demonstrate how this synergy may work, we will then focus on a variety of case studies such as contemporary nationalisms, Brexit, Trumpamerica, Bolsonaro’s regime in Brazil, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Students will have to decide where they position themselves on the possibility and consequences of the overlaps and divergences between decolonial thought and critical race theory.

**Sessions 1 and 2:**

**Required Reading**


**Recommended Reading**


Essay questions
1. Are critical race theory and decolonial thought inconsistent approaches?
2. Is there any potential to use critical race theory and decolonial thought together in sociological analysis?
3. Do critical race theory and decolonial thought both offer critical insights into ongoing processes of settler colonialism?

Supervision
Contact Dr Ali Meghji at am2059@cam.ac.uk

5. Rethinking Populism – Dr Filipe Carreira da Silva
Especially after the 2008 financial crisis, the term ‘populism’ has become one of the buzzwords of our time. Journalists, politicians, pundits and scholars alike have come to apply the term to a vast array of phenomena across the political spectrum: from anti-establishment political movements on both left and right (Greece’s Syriza, Spain’s Podemos, Italy’s Five Stars, the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements in the United States), through political leaders (e.g., Erdogan in Turkey, and Orban in Hungary) and candidates (e.g., Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the US), to parties and currents within parties challenging the traditional political mainstream from the inside (e.g., the National Front in France). Yet, amongst socio-political concepts, populism has pride of place as one of the most contentious, being variously characterized as ideology, logic, discursive frame, strategy/organization, a mode of political practice, or, for those privileging its performative aspects, political style.

In this module, I take one step back, and call this labelling into question. What unites and disunites the above-mentioned phenomena? Does the ‘populist’ theoretical/conceptual framework help us make sense and explain these phenomena, or, on the contrary, does such a framework inhibit our understanding of what these phenomena are and what they are about? Do the different understandings of populism itself, both conceptually and methodologically allow for significantly different levels of understanding and scientific analysis of the phenomena in question? In the first session, I discuss the rise of ‘populist politics’ in Europe and in the United States and examine different conceptualizations of ‘populism’ and their operationalization for the purpose of analysis. In the second session, I consider how populism has characteristics of utopian thinking: populist leaders use highly moralized images of the past to castigate the present and promise the eminent advent of a new future.

Session 1:
Required Reading

Recommended Reading


Session 2:
Required Reading

Recommended Reading

Essay questions
1. What factors led to the rise of populism in recent years?
2. Is populism an ideology?
3. “The utopia of the Populists was in the past, not the future.” (Hofstadter) Discuss.

Supervision
Contact Dr FC Silva at fcs23@cam.ac.uk

6. Abolition: Racism, Resistance and Worldmaking - Dr Scarlet Harris
The global Black Lives Matter uprisings of summer 2020 reignited a popular abolitionist imaginary. In this module we will explore the historical and contemporary uses of abolition as a concept and praxis, asking what abolitionist accounts offer for thinking through questions of oppression and liberation in different global contexts. While these sessions focus on the anti-racist worldmaking potential of abolition, we will address the multiple intersections of abolitionist thinking, including feminist and queer abolitions, and border abolition.

In the first session, we will focus on the development of the North American prison abolition movement, including its roots in W.E.B Du Bois’ ‘abolition democracy’, its theorising of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) and its radical vision for a world without prisons, police and borders. Reflecting on the writing and work of contemporary prison abolitionists, we will examine how an abolitionist framework emphasises not only the dismantling of carceral systems, but the remaking of new institutions and ways of relating to ourselves and each other.
In the second session, we trace the historical development of Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity to consider not only the role of Palestine in contemporary abolitionist imaginings, but the ways in which abolitionist ideas, practices and demands have emerged out of the specific struggle for Palestinian liberation. We will also consider what a more global perspective on abolition adds to debates concerning anti-racist, transnational solidarities.

Session 1: Theorising abolition: ‘abolition democracy’ across time and space

Required Reading


Recommended reading


Session 2: Globalising abolition: Palestine and Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity

Required reading


Recommended reading


Essay questions

1. To what extent can abolition be understood as concerning ‘presence’ as much as ‘absence’?
2. What would an intersectional approach to abolition look like?
3. What can an abolitionist perspective tell us about the relational nature of ‘race’, racisms and anti-racist resistance?

Supervision

Contact Dr Scarlet Harris at sh2232@cam.ac.uk.