HSPS Tripos – Part IIA, Soc2
Social Theory
(2017-18)

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: Mead; symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology; hermeneutics and theories of interpretation; the development of Marxist thought in the twentieth century; the Frankfurt School and critical theory; Habermas; Foucault; Bourdieu; Bauman; Giddens; Beck; functionalism; structuralism, post-structuralism; theories of modernity and postmodernity; theories of subjectivity, identity and ‘race’; theories of power and resistance; feminist theory; theorising sexuality.
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 write six or eight 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 should attempt three questions.

Supervision

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

How does this paper relate to others?

This paper builds further on Part I, Paper 2: it elaborates on the contemporary relevance of the sociological classics, in particular Marx, Weber and Durkheim. For example, this paper discusses Marx’s and Weber’s influence on Sartre and the Frankfurt School, or Durkheim’s impact on structuralist thought. The paper is an ideal stepping stone towards some of the debates in Soc 2 (for example, the work of Giddens, Beck and Bauman is directly relevant to current debates on globalization), Soc 4 (for example, Bourdieu’s theory of fields, Adorno and Horkheimer’s notion of the culture industry and Habermas’s theory of the public sphere), Soc 10 (for example, Foucault’s writings have informed recent work on the body), Int 5 (the lectures on feminist theory are directly relevant to this paper) and Int 6 (again, Foucault’s work has had a profound impact on the study of crime, deviance and social control). This paper also goes well with Pol 2 (for example, the legacy of Marx) and Pol 6 (for example, The Frankfurt School). This paper is a prerequisite for students wishing to take Soc 6, the Advanced Social Theory paper, in their final year.
Outline of Lectures

Michaelmas 2017

Development of Social Theory (I)
Dr Filipe Carreira da Silva

The aim of this course is to explain key developments in modern social theory and explore the link with sociology, psychology and political science. The lectures can be divided into four sections. The first section (lectures 2-4) explores the tradition of American micro-sociology, in particular, G.H. Mead, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach and Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology. The second section (lectures 5-8) introduces the French tradition of social theory and philosophy, focusing on existentialism, structuralism, Bourdieu’s genetic structuralism and Latour’s actor-network theory. The third section (lectures 9-10) deals with critical rationalism and ‘analytical’ social theory, focusing on rational choice theory. The final section (lectures 11-12) discusses the relationship between politics and social theory by exploring the Frankfurt School and the origins of the German tradition of critical theory.

Lectures

1. Introduction: varieties of theorising, and relevance to sociology, politics and psychology.

2-4. American contributions to the study of social interaction

2. The self and interaction (I): American pragmatism, G.H. Mead and symbolic interactionism.

5-12: French social theory

5-6. Existentialism: Sartre, de Beauvoir.
7-8. Structuralism: applications in history, linguistics, anthropology and semiotics.
11-12. Redefining the social: Bruno Latour and actor-network theory (lecture by Josh Booth)

13-14. Falsificationism and rational choice theory

13. Falsificationism and sophisticated falsificationism.
14. Falsificationism and the rediscovery of homo economicus

15-16. Politics and social theory

15. Frankfurt School and the notion of critical theory.

Readings

1. 


Essay question: What’s distinctive about G.H. Mead’s account of the self?


Essay question: In what sense should we take the trivialities of everyday life seriously?

5-6.

Essay question: Is Marxism compatible with existentialism?

7.

8.
Essay question: Critically assess the structuralist revolution in EITHER history, OR linguistics, OR anthropology, OR semiotics.

9-10.


Essay question: Critically assess Bourdieu’s explanation for the role of culture in the reproduction of inequality.

11-12.


Essay question: In what sense does Latour want to redefine the nature of the social? Do you agree?

13.


Essay question: Do theories need to be falsifiable?

14.


Essay question: What type of rational choice theory is most effective for the social sciences?

15-16.


Essay question: see 12.

12.


Essay question: According to the Frankfurt School, what is problematic about the Enlightenment project?

Lent 2018

**Development of Social Theory (II)**

Prof John Thompson
The aim of this course is to provide an introduction to various perspectives and debates in contemporary social theory. I’ll be focusing on modern European thought and I’ll discuss the work of a variety of authors and traditions. I’ll seek to provide both a systematic introduction to the work of key theorists and a balanced assessment of their contributions. Throughout the course, the critical discussion of major texts will be used as a basis upon which to raise some of the key issues and problems of social theory today.

The following list cites some of the literature to which I’ll refer. No-one will be expected to read all or even most of this literature, but a detailed list may be helpful to students who wish to pursue particular topics in depth. I’ve starred the writings which are highly recommended. You may also find the following paperbacks helpful throughout the course:

R. Bernstein, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory
P. Baert and F. Carreira da Silva, Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond
A. Elliott, Contemporary Social Theory

I’ve provided one or more essay questions for each topic, but exam papers from previous years are also a very good source of essay questions.

The course will consist of eight sessions of two hours each. I’ll aim to deal with one of the following topics during each session, allowing time for questions and discussion at the middle and the end of each session.

1. Hermeneutics and Social Theory (I)

Introduction to the course: the Enlightenment and its legacy. Hermeneutics and the problem of understanding; Dilthey’s theory of historical understanding; Heidegger’s analysis of the structure of understanding; Gadamer’s account of the effective-historical consciousness.

W. Outhwaite, Understanding Social Life
W. Dilthey, Selected Writings, esp. Part IV
M. Heidegger, Being and Time, esp. Part I
*H.-G. Gadamer, Truth and Method, esp. Part II, section 2
H.-G. Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, esp. ch. 2
R. Palmer, Hermeneutics
*R. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, Part III
*G. Warnke, Gadamer
*J. Habermas, On the Logic of Social Sciences, esp. pp.143-75

Essay question: Is Gadamer’s analysis of tradition inherently conservative?

2. Hermeneutics and Social Theory (II)

Interpretation and method in social inquiry; the idea of depth hermeneutics; Ricoeur’s account of action as a text; Geertz’s analysis of culture as a text; problems of interpretation in the analysis of popular culture.
P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, esp. Part I
*P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, esp. ch. 8
*C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures*, esp. chs. 1 and 15
J. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture*, esp. chs. 3 and 6
*J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds.), Writing Culture, esp. V. Crampanzano, ‘Hermes Dilemma’
J. Radway, *Reading the Romance*

Essay question: Is interpreting cultures a matter of reading texts?

3. **Habermas and Critical Theory (I)**

   The philosophical orientation of Habermas’s critical theory; knowledge and human interests; the theory of practical discourse; problems of critique and justification in social analysis.

*J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*
J. Habermas, ‘A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (1973)
*J. Habermas, ‘What is Universal Pragmatics?’, in Communication and the Evolution of Society*
J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, esp. vol.1, ch. 3
*J. Habermas, ‘Discourse Ethics’, in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*
J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*
T. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas*
*T. McCarthy, ‘Practical Discourse’, in his Ideals and Illusions*
S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, esp. ch. 1
J. Thompson & D. Held (eds), *Habermas: Critical Debates*, esp. chs. 3-7
R. Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity*
R. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*

Essay question: Does Habermas’s theory of practical discourse provide a sound basis for dealing with the normative problems of critical theory?

4. **Habermas and Critical Theory (II)**

   The background to Habermas’s substantive social theory; the crisis tendencies of contemporary capitalism; the theory of rationalization and the colonization of the life-world; modernity as an unfinished project; the postnational constellation.

*J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*
J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, esp. vol.2, ch. 8
J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, esp. ch. 7
*J. Habermas, ‘Modernity: An Unfinished Project’, in S. Benhabib & M. Passerin D’Entreves (eds), Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*
J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*
*J. Habermas, ‘The Postnational Constellation and the Future of Democracy’, in The Postnational Constellation*
J. Habermas, ‘Does the Constitutionalization of International Law Still have a Chance?’, in The Divided West
A. Honneth & H. Joas (eds), *Communicative Action*
Essay question: Is Habermas right to think of modernity as an unfinished project?

5. **Foucault and Social Theory (I)**

The idea of an archaeology of knowledge; the history of madness and the birth of the asylum; the archaeology of the human sciences; methodological problems of historical epistemology.

*M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*
M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*
M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*
*M. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge*
A. Sheridan, *Michel Foucault*
*H. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, Michel Foucault*
M. Cousins & A. Hussain, *Michel Foucault*
L. McNay, *Foucault*
G. Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*

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

6. **Foucault and Social Theory (II)**

The genealogy of power; the birth of the prison; punishment, discipline and surveillance in modern societies; the history of sexuality and practices of the self; problems of knowledge, power and critique.

*M. Foucault, Discipline and Punish*
*M. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 1*
M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*
M. Foucault, *Care of the Self*
*M. Foucault, Knowledge/Power (ed. C. Gordon)*
*M. Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture (ed. L. Kritzman)*
M. Foucault et al., *Technologies of the Self*
*H. Hoy (ed), Foucault: A Critical Reader*
P. Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, esp. chs. 5-7
N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, esp. chs. 1-3
A. Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, esp. chs. 4-6
L. McNay, *Foucault and Feminism*

Essay question 1: Do we live in a ‘society of surveillance’?

Essay question 2: What can the history of sexuality tell us about the formation of the modern subject?

7. **Modernity and Postmodernity (I)**
The ideas of modernity and postmodernity; Lyotard on the postmodern condition; Bauman on modernity, ambivalence and the Holocaust; the idea of liquid modernity; the significance of postmodernism.

D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*
*J.-F. Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition*
*Z. Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence*
*Z. Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust*
*Z. Bauman, Liquid Modernity*
Z. Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*
Z. Bauman, *Liquid Life*
Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times*
Z. Bauman and K. Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*
D. Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman*
S. Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*
S. Best and D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*
A. Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*

Essay question 1: Is our condition ‘postmodern’, as Lyotard claims?

Essay question 2: ‘Without modern civilization, without the whole assortment of achievements of which we are otherwise so proud, the Holocaust would have been unthinkable.’ (BAUMAN) Discuss.

8. **Modernity and Postmodernity (II)**

Beck on risk society and the second modernity; Giddens on modernity and its consequences; self and society in the late modern age; rethinking modernity and the tasks of social theory.

*U. Beck, *Risk Society*
*U. Beck, *World at Risk*
*U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, Individualization*
U. Beck, *Power in the Global Age*
U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*
*U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, Reflexive Modernization*
U. Beck and J. Willms, *Conversations with Ulrich Beck*
B. Adam, U. Beck and J. van Loon (eds.), *The Risk Society and Beyond*
*A. Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity*
*A. Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity*
A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*

Essay question 1: What do Beck and Giddens mean by ‘reflexive modernization’? Are they right to argue that this is fundamentally different from earlier forms of modernization?

Essay question 2: Assess Beck’s thesis that in the conditions of the second modernity, ‘how one lives becomes the biographical solution of systemic contradictions’.
These four one-hour lectures explore feminist social theories addressing knowledge, modernity, intimacy, the body, gender, sexuality and inequality.

**Lecture 1: Feminist Science Studies**
Readings:

Essay Question: Assess the view that all knowledge claims are socially located.

**Lecture 2: Feminist Technology Studies**
Readings:

Essay Question: Are ‘Feminist Technologies’ ‘Technologies of the Self’?

**Lecture 3: Modern sexual experiences, identities, and power**
Readings:
* Goffman, I. 1988. *Gender Advertisements*
* Tiefer, Leonore 2004 *Sex is Not a Natural Act*. Westview.

Essay question: Do you agree that sexuality and gender power are inextricably intertwined?

**Lecture 4: Intimacy and Inequality**

Readings:
* Faircloth and Twamley eds. 2015 special issue on ‘Gender, Equality and Intimacy: (un)comfortable bedfellows?’ *Sociological Research Online* 20(4)7.

Essay question: Why are intimate relationships a particular site of feminist claims?

**Easter 2018**

**Revision Sessions**
**Dr Filipe Carreira da Silva and Prof John Thompson**

Lecture 1:
Revision – Dr F Carreira da Silva’s lectures.

Lecture 2:
Revision – Prof J Thompson’s and Prof L Layne’s lectures.
Student Feedback:
Your chance to put forward your opinions on the papers you take!

For Sociology Papers, student feedback is collected via hard-copy 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.