Department of Sociology

SOCIOLOGY II

THEORY AND SOCIETY

Term 1: 2019

Emma Hay
(e.hay@ru.ac.za)
RE-CONTEXTUALISING CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY

Each group must be able to attain its style of existence without encroaching on or being thwarted by another. Out of this mutual respect for each other and complete freedom of self-determination there will obviously arise a genuine fusion of the lifestyles of the various groups. This is true integration (Steve Bantu Biko)

Social theory is important. As Elliot (2010:8) correctly notes, social theory is essential to our “practical and political engagement with the self, with others, with the wider world in these troubled and troubling times”. Social theories are, broadly speaking, “analytical frameworks or paradigms used to examine social phenomena” (Murphy, 2013:17). In other words, social theory is an (intellectual) interplay between cultural and social context, augmented by worldview and historical place and time. Many modern social theories have a background in Sociology. However, social theory (particularly classical theory) generally finds itself positioned across and between the humanities and social sciences – from philosophy to anthropology, spanning communication studies, politics, psychology and cultural studies alike.

In the conventional study of social theory, certain themes are commonplace and they have their inception in social, cultural, political and historical happenings. Although an obvious statement, it is not always clear how theories have come to be, though this is very important when we consider dominant ideas about the social world. Examples of common themes include those of power, of the nature of social life, the structure of social institutions and the role and possibility of social change. Ultimately, social theory is a cumulative product of many theorists within a given society, in a given geographical place, at a given point in time and the geopolitical times in which they live(d) – meaning theory is always and unavoidably contextually bound.

This introductory course is concerned with re-contextualising classical theory in a way that makes it accessible and less abstract by way of analysing the dominating themes and debates found at the heart of social theory in relation to this place-and-time context and goings-on of the time of writing. Since theory reflects intellectual collections of postulations about how the world works, and because how the world works is in continuous flux (events and perceptions of them), looking to the past informs an understanding of the present. This is what is meant by contextualising. As Patel (2010:10) states, “universal voices that structure sociological thinking and elaborate on the unique characteristics of the national and/ or regional sociologies ... need to be taken into account in discussing international sociology in the globalizing world”. In this course, we shall therefore abide by the premise that “people’s social locations—their race, class, gender, ethnicity,
nationality, linguistic background—profoundly shape their work and outlooks on the world. This is as true for social theorists as for the rest of us” (Harriford & Thompson, 2008:12).

Moreover, it has been suggested that “courses in sociology and the other social sciences generally do not attempt to correct the Orientalist bias by introducing non-Western thinkers. If we take the 19th century as an example, the impression is given that during the period Europeans such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others were thinking about the nature of society and its development, there were no thinkers in Asia and Africa doing the same” (Alatas, 2012:1). To explain, convention traces the rise of classical theory to a predominantly European core, consisting of the work of the likes of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, among others. These theorists are usually posited as the ‘Founding Fathers’ (of sociology) and their (social) theories have gained such proliferation as to be known collectively as ‘the canon’. The word ‘canon’ is derived from ancient Greek κανόν, meaning a measuring rod or standard. The current situation (of what is regarded as a persistent Eurocentric hegemonic canon) is itself in motion, as we are now situated within this cultural context that we must critically analyse.

We shall explore the rise of such a canon in order to first understand it, and then to analyse it for the contributions, or otherwise made to the pool of social knowledge. Hence, by understanding better the historical, social and cultural framework that has created dominant (Eurocentric) classical social theory and its core themes, it is hoped we can then begin to move towards a more inclusive body of social knowledge.

In order to move beyond the argued provinciality and hegemony of ‘Northern’ social theory, but also avoid the trap of a ‘plethora of particularisms’ or binary essentialism (North versus South, for example), we will seek out the intellectual offerings from diverse social groups, attempting to trace the relationship between the individual and society more inclusively. In order to expand sociological knowledge in an inclusive and cooperative manner, the situation faced must be explored. Stepping back and gaining a more inclusive knowledge means using a macro historical lens and considering how the situation that currently exists came to be. From this vantage point, we can then arguably learn from the theorising of others and we can even apply some of it to deepen our understanding of the complexity of multiple modernities. This is only the beginning of the journey. From this basis, we can assess more objectively what is missing from the table of social knowledge. Questioning what insights and voices are missing, have been lost or even silenced, suppressed and marginalized, is a central theme. We shall delve into and discuss these themes in depth during this course.

This leads us to other, often marginalised sources of knowledge and an exploration of these ‘perspectival realisms’. This approach is not one intended to steep minds in deep social theorising of a few scholars, but rather to provide a more holistic and thematised foundation – a foundation that exposes hegemony in social theory but, at the same time, also harvests what it can from canonical and indeed all contributions to social knowledge – however limited they may be. Arjomand (2008, cited in Go, 2016:13) summarizes this effort aptly by explaining that “our concern should not be with the ethnic identity or geographical location of social
scientists and public intellectuals, but with comparisons of the concepts used to understand the phenomena and developmental patterns of the metropolitan and peripheral regions of the world”.

In summary, this is intended to be a broad-scoping introductory course in which we explore a number of contextualising themes that are relevant to our sociological understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. By critically re-contextualising the themes that have been born out of the emergence of the canon and situating them in world events and positioning them against the influence of worldviews, this is something of a historical journey.

1. AIMS OF THE COURSE

The primary aim of the course is to familiarise students with the conventional and less conventional classical underpinnings of social theory through the lens of debates surrounding hegemony, provinciality and generalizability of social theory. We shall explore the themes found within classical social theory hand-in-hand with the context from which they arose. As we consider alternative theories to that of the canon, we naturally explore the debates surrounding epistemology and ontology (especially universality, generalizability and particularism).

2. COURSE STRUCTURE

- The importance and relevance of worldview, social and historical context to the formulation of social theory.
- Key concepts and processes underpinning classical social theory.
- Important classical theorists from the global North and South.
- Applicability and relevance of key concepts from classical theorists (North and South) to contemporary society.

3. COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To introduce the debates surrounding what constitutes social knowledge.
- To explore the importance of the historical backdrop, the social/cultural context and the impact of worldviews on classical knowledge systems of the classical theory context (themes to include; modernity; the ‘enlightenment’; colonialism; capitalism; rationalisation; evolutionism).
- To critically overview some of the major theoretical concepts of the ‘founding fathers’.
  - Key (canon) themes told though the works of Karl Marx (historical materialism, capitalism); Emile Durkheim (societal transition, social order); and Max Weber (culture, bureaucracy, and rationality).
• Missing voices - classical non-canonical theory: themes to include modernity; the slave trade; racism; colonialism; imperialism; Apartheid and how these themes and contexts are linked to one-another and connected to the themes behind the canon.

• To critically overview the major theoretical concepts of some of the missing voices/alternative theorists:
  o Key (non-canonised) Southern theory/subaltern/indigenous sociology: told through the works of William E Du Bois (race and double consciousness), Tiyo Soga (religion, tradition and modernity), and S.E.K Mqhayi (colonialism, experiential social crisis and religion).

• To introduce the missing founding (M)others: Harriet Martineau: race relations, religious life, marriage, children, and home (The Woman Question) and Anna Julia Cooper – conditions of slavery and racial inequality (A view from the South).

4. LECTURE OVERVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Lecture</th>
<th>Topic Overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction: what is social theory? What do we need to understand (in social theory in general)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|      | 2       | Introduction: An overview of classical social theory – ‘founding fathers’ and ‘the canon’.
|      | 3       | The importance of worldview and impact upon ideas (formulating social knowledge). |
|      | 4       | Worldview, epistemology, and social theory (explanation of terminology) – link back to positivism and Interpretivism from 1st year. |
|      | 5 & 6   | Historical backdrop, social/cultural context and the impact of worldviews on classical knowledge systems.
|      | 7 & 8   | Introducing canonical classical theory born out of this context: Karl Marx (historical materialism, capitalism) with link to context. |
|      | 9 & 10  | Introducing the classical theory born out of this context: Emile Durkheim (societal transition, social order) |
| Week 3 | 11 & 12 | Introducing the classical theory born out of this context: Max Weber (culture, bureaucracy, and rationality).

| Week 4 | 13 | Critically assess key aspects of the applicability of these theories to global civil society, then and now – how many concepts are relevant and what is missing? Recap of three ‘founding fathers’ |
| Week 4 | 14 | Missing voices - classical *non-canonical* theory: modernity, the slave trade, racism, colonialism, imperialism, Apartheid. |
| Week 4 | 15 & 16 | William E Du Bois (race and double consciousness)

Key text (reader only): Harriford, D. & Thompson, B. (2008). *When the centre is on fire: Passionate social theory for our times*. Austin: University of Texas Press. [pp. 38-50] |
| Week 5 | 17 & 18 | Tiyo Soga (religion, tradition and modernity).

| Week 5 | 19 & 20 | S.E.K Mqhayi (colonialism, experiential social crisis and religion) linked to the historical, social and cultural context.

| Week 6 | 21 | Missing founding (M)others: Harriet Martineau (race relations, religious life, marriage, children, and home (the ‘woman question’))

| Week 6 | 22 & 23 | Anna Julia Cooper (conditions of slavery and racial inequality) A view from the South


*Thursday, 21 March – Human rights day (no lecture)*
5. METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

5.1 Tests

This course is comprised of two formal assessments. The class mark will count 40% of your final mark and includes two class tests comprising essays written under test conditions. Further details regarding the dates and venues will be made available at the start of the course.

5.2 Examination

You will write a two-hour exam in June. The exam mark will count 60% of your final mark. The questions in the exam paper will be based on the lectures, the readings, and the formal assessments, supplemented by additional reading from the prescribed and recommended readings in the course outline. (Handout 1 contains a marking schedule for examinations and tests).

6. READINGS

A reader is provided that includes one key text from each week of the course. Please find the additional key and recommended readings/sources on RUConnected. The key texts are:


**Week 1**

Key readings:


**Recommended readings:**


**Week 2**

**Key readings:**


**Recommended readings:**


**Week 3**

**Key readings:**


**Recommended reading:**

**Week 4**

**Key reading:**


**Recommended reading:**


**Week 5**

**Key readings:**


**Recommended readings:**


**Week 6**

**Key readings:**


**Week 7**

**Key reading:**