

SOCIAL THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

If you are interested in political or economic questions, or culture, or gender or ethnic relations, social theory explains the relations between them. You might like to think of this as ‘having it all’.

Take globalisation, which has transformed our world and been a big topic of academic and public discussion since the 1990s. Early accounts stressed the economic aspects and political implications for nation-states, but sociologists quickly pointed out that the globalisation of culture was equally important and, crucially, interrelated with the other dimensions. It’s possible to write a perfectly decent book about the globalisation of production, trade or financial markets, but if you’re going to focus on the world as a whole, as theories of globalisation aimed to, it makes no sense to chop it up into separate economic, political and cultural domains and treat them in isolation. For one thing, what two social theorists in the middle of the twentieth century called the ‘culture industry’ is just that: an increasingly global industry employing millions of people. If cultural consumption is about taste, it’s also about money and politics (‘soft power’ or influence). Among the causes of the collapse of communism in Europe at the end of the 1980s was the influence of Western and local rock music, and related movements like punk.

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Social theory is the best framework we have for thinking about these relations. Take another term which has been heavily used in the last thirty years, 'modernity'. An economic historian will focus on the rise of markets and wage labour in Europe; a political scientist will focus on the growth of state bureaucracies and political representation in parliaments; a sociologist will talk about the emergence of an 'industrial society' or, in more Marxist language, about 'advanced' or 'late' capitalism. But a broader conception of modernity covering all these dimensions is what we need. Modernity in this sense is future-oriented, focused on the development of new ways of producing goods and organising human social and political relations. This is what social theory has provided over the past few hundred years and particularly since the 1980s.

Social theorists, then, ask the big questions and return to them again and again, in different forms in successive generations. The history of social theory is more like the history of philosophy than a history of science that presents it as a succession of 'discoveries'. But there are parallels with what the twentieth-century historian of science Thomas Kuhn called 'scientific paradigms': exemplary achievements, whether technical or conceptual, such as Lavoisier's discovery of oxygen in 1777, which transformed our understanding of combustion and respiration, and in doing so changed the face of science and human knowledge. Kuhn also used the word 'paradigm' to refer to frameworks of explanation and shared assumptions – what he sometimes called a 'disciplinary matrix'. Paradigms of the first kind tend to lead to those of the second.

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We can use the term ‘paradigm’, as I do in this book, for some classic explanatory attempts in social theory which fed into distinctive styles of social thought and continue to be relevant today. I say attempts, because none of them is accepted without question and most, as we shall see, have been superseded in later decades. But that’s not the point; we’re interested in them because they introduce *ways* of explaining things. They set theoretical and political agendas. We are still, for example, thinking about inequality in terms shaped over 250 years ago. We now pay more attention to gender inequalities and to global (rather than just national) differences in wealth and income, but older ideas of equality of opportunity and the relation between natural and social inequalities (and increasingly, for obvious reasons, the political critique of obscenely excessive wealth) remain at the centre of thinking about these questions. In short, this book explains why social theory is an essential part of understanding the world.

Many of the thinkers discussed in this book defined themselves or were later defined as sociologists (the word ‘sociology’ was popularised in the 1830s by Auguste Comte – who also inaugurated the term ‘positivism’ to refer to the scientific study of nature and society – and came into general use in the early twentieth century), but social theory is a broader family, encompassing, for example, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, perhaps Freud and certainly Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and other writers who shaped post-colonial theory. (The term ‘social theory’ was popularised in the UK in 1971 by Anthony Giddens, who reserved ‘sociology’ for more specific work emerging

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that focused on industrial society.)

‘YOU READ IT FIRST HERE’: INNOVATIONS AND CONTINUITIES IN SOCIAL THEORY

‘The privileged really come to consider themselves as a different species’ – Abbé Sieyès

‘The worst is when you have the poor to defend and the rich to contain’ – Jean-Jacques Rousseau

These quotations do not come from a twenty-first-century social critic. The first is from 1788, the year before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and the second from a little earlier, in 1755. Our thinking about inequality, one of the topics of Chapter 1, is now focused once again on the ultra-rich, the ‘1%’. I will sketch the circumstances of then and now, showing how ideas that inspired revolution centuries ago remain powerfully relevant. Continuities of this kind run through social theory. The key innovation was the idea, which seems to have emerged in Europe and North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that human societies can be understood as human products, shaped by underlying processes but also able to be reshaped by human intervention. The idea of ‘knowing the causes of things’ is much older (in Europe, the phrase goes back to the Roman poet Virgil, just before the Christian era), but the idea of the social as a distinct realm of reality is new.

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Another novelty around this time was the idea of what we now call economic systems, operating according to their own laws but existing in and reshaping a social context. In the eighteenth century Adam Smith combined what we now think of as two very different areas of inquiry: economics and moral philosophy. (Not many people these days do both, though Amartya Sen is one of them.) For Karl Marx, a century after Smith, the emphasis had shifted to the analysis of capitalism as a system following its own laws and resistant to moral criticism. Marx also made the crucial link between classes and forms of production, in which positions in a system of production determine classes and the conflicts between them. Controversies around capitalism have been a central theme of social theory and are the topic of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 examines the evolutionary sociology of Marx's contemporary (and his neighbour in Highgate Cemetery, north London) Herbert Spencer. Evolutionary theory was developed further in France by Emile Durkheim. Durkheim was one of the cluster of social theorists writing across the turn of the twentieth century who form the core of 'classical' social theory. His strong (some would say too strong) conception of society is a central reference point of modern social theory.

Chapter 4 returns to the theme of capitalism but focusing this time on its cultural preconditions and consequences. At the beginning of the twentieth century Max Weber traced what he thought was the crucial impact of a version of Protestant Christianity on the emergence of modern capitalism, and broadened this into a theory of 'rationalisation'

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expressed not just in *economic* calculation but also in legal and administrative systems, particularly bureaucracy, and religion itself (for example, in theology). Though they were contemporaries, Weber and Durkheim paid little attention to each other's work, but they form the two magnetic poles of classical social theory, with Weber's focus on the motivation of human action contrasted with Durkheim's stress on the determining quality of social influences.

The third of the leading classical theorists, Georg Simmel, who introduces Chapter 5, was closer to the Weberian pole. His most substantial work was also on the money economy, but his wide-ranging interests in cultural phenomena and everyday life inspired much ongoing work in sociology and cultural studies, including the 'postmodern' theory popular in the later twentieth century.

Chapter 6 departs from the classical *social* theorists and turns to Sigmund Freud, whose analysis of the psyche has fundamentally changed our understanding of humanity and hence culture and society. Are our social and political attitudes and actions shaped by underlying psychological influences? This chapter outlines Freud's work and traces its implications up to the present, through figures such as Herbert Marcuse, one of the thinkers who inspired the student and youth movements of the late 1960s.

Chapter 7 explores the ways in which some leading social theorists have tried to explain modern politics. Why are socialist parties so weak in the US? Why do the leaders of political parties, even socialist parties, become so detached from the mass of their members? Why did fascism achieve power in some European countries and not in others? I

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discuss the relation between the social and the political with these examples in mind.

The final chapter addresses some topics which have been rather neglected in social theory until fairly recently: gender, international relations and war, race and colonialism, and environmental crisis.

1

ORIGINS

This chapter focuses on the key questions posed by two early social theorists, Rousseau and Montesquieu, in the eighteenth century.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote an essay in 1755 for a competition (which he didn't win) on the origins of inequalities in human societies. The term 'origins' should not be taken too literally, although he did refer to 'the first person who had the idea of enclosing a piece of land and saying "this is mine"'. We should, according to Rousseau, have rejected this claim, saying instead 'that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody'. This sounds like communism, but Rousseau's position was not quite so radical. He was concerned that social inequalities should not diverge too far from natural inequalities (strength, skill, etc.) and he was exceptionally hostile to luxury and excess. The essay concludes that 'it is plainly contrary to the law of nature, however defined, that children should command old men, fools wise men, and that the privileged few should gorge themselves with superfluities, while the starving multitude are in want of the bare necessities of life'.

Here are some of the central themes of social theory. One is the difference between the natural and the social, with the idea that, as Marx put it a century later, people make their own history but under given natural and historical

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conditions. The other is the distinction between moral and social criticism: Rousseau was a moralist but he also wanted to go beyond mere condemnation to offer explanations and diagnoses which could, as we would now say, inform policy. Some social theorists, notably Max Weber and Georg Simmel, see their role as merely to understand and explain (though Weber also produced highly polemical speeches and newspaper articles). Others, such as Marxists and feminists, offer an explicitly critical social theory.

Rousseau's critique of luxury and excess, and his idea that social inequalities should not be too great, and should not diverge too far from natural ones, is a theme which pervades later discussions, running from the sociologist and liberal politician Ralf Dahrendorf in the 1960s to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, Danny Dorling and Thomas Piketty today. Wilkinson and Pickett, in their influential book *The Spirit Level* (2009), showed that the more equal societies in the contemporary world are healthier and happier. Just what explains these differences remains unclear. One explanation is that levels of insecurity are higher in very unequal societies with poor welfare systems: in the US, for example, a short illness can mean financial disaster. Another, slightly more diffuse, explanation, which points forward to the discussion of Durkheim in Chapter 3, suggests that relatively equal societies have more of a common feeling of what Durkheim called solidarity and that this, rather than anything more tangible, may explain why they are healthier.

In France, Pierre Rosanvallon and Piketty have echoed and developed the Occupy movement's critique of the '1%', documenting the rise of inequality¹ and the way in which

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the super-rich, as the Abbé Sieyès put it in 1788, see themselves as a different species. ‘It is long past the time,’ writes Piketty, ‘when we should have put the question of inequality back at the center of economic analysis.’ The explosion of very high corporate salaries and related benefits is not just a curiosity, like the similar rise in the incomes of professional footballers. In the corporate and financial world, it contributed to the risky and corrupt practices which nearly broke the world economy in 2008. As the British sociologist Andrew Sayer neatly put it, ‘We can’t afford the rich.’

Perhaps, though, we need to look beyond these symptoms at the structure of capitalism; this has been one of the main criticisms directed at Piketty’s book. Chapter 2 opens up these issues via a discussion of Karl Marx, for whom inequality was merely a symptom of the underlying problem: wage labour under capitalism. A ‘fairer’ wage merely meant that ‘the length and weight of the golden chain the wage-labourer has already forged for himself allow it to be loosened somewhat’. As we have seen, Rousseau’s preference for the moderation of inequalities can be compared with the more radical idea, popularised in Marxism, that people should get what they need and contribute what they can to society. Most recently, the very idea of ‘natural’ inequalities – for example, of intelligence – long criticised on methodological grounds, has been questioned by advances in genetics and performance-enhancing drugs. We now confront the possibility that the rich may become smarter intellectually as well as in their clothing.

What, if anything, is wrong with inequality? So far we have been looking at the question from two angles: the