

Social & Political Theory

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The content of the course.

- * The history of the systematic reflection on 'the social': its emergence and deconstruction.
- * Periods of crisis and the process of narrowing down the focus of social reflection:
 - *Ancient Greece and the collapse of the homogeneous universe: socio-political reality emerges.
 - *17th Century: 'the social' separated from 'the political.'
 - *18th Century: the emergence of 'society'; theory of progress.
 - *19th Century: three continuations of the 'Enlightenment project':
 - *Herbert Spencer: social organization and its evolution;
 - *August Comte: what keeps people together: in search of stability;
 - *Karl Marx: society as an ideological fiction: revolutionary transformation.
- *19th/20th Century: academic sociology in search of the analytic units of social theory.
 - *Émile Durkheim: social facts.
 - *Max Weber: social action.
 - *Interactionism: how to build a society out of human interactions?
 - *Structural functionalism: how to integrate social action and social system?

What is 'theory' in sociology?

- *Theory as 'perspective.' The way of seeing, that defines what we can see from a certain point of view and orders what we actually see. (R.H. Brown, The Poetics for Sociology)
[William Skidmore in his (1975) Theoretical Thinking in Sociology, presents 'perspectives' as a certain type of theory, consisting of relatively loosely connected elements: statements, insights, categories.]

Theory as perspective.

- *Richard Harvey Brown: theory as a certain way of looking at things which orders them so that we can understand the relations between them.
- *The problem of 'looking at things': do 'things' exist independently

of the way we look at them? 'Thing-in-itself'; 'thing-for-us.' Or: 'thing-for-us'; 'thing-for-others'?

From looking to talking.

*'Things' in social life largely exist as things named, that is formulated in a language provided by a theory-perspective. In most cases, armed with a language of one theory we approach 'things' named in languages of other 'theories', including the popular discourses of people involved in their everyday life and perceiving their worlds through the categories of common sense.

*Consequence: reflexivity of social theory

Theory as an art of translation.

*The task of theory as 'translating statements, made within one...tradition, so that they can be understood within the system of knowledge based on another tradition.' (Zygmunt Bauman)

*'Interpreters and legislators': the problem of a normative theory.

'I return to sociology...with a hope of finding a home where social analysis is valued because it is inspired by a will to make a better world.'
(Steven Seidman)

The problem of 'order.'

*Without order – unknowable chaos; knowledge presupposes (a bit of) order.

*Postmodern criticism of modern "narrative" (theory) as a "representation that arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and standpoint of interpretation that is taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents" (Richard Ashley)

*"Order is intellectually dishonest"???

* 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' theories. The problem of change. Theory as an 'arrest of change' vs. theory as a 'voice of change.'

*Existential meaning of theory: to transcend the contingent and transient nature of social life. Theorizing as a quest for immortality. Order and continuity as weapon in an existential struggle.

Modernity as discontinuity.

*"When contemporary society calls itself 'modern,' it identifies itself with the help of a differentiation from the past. "

*Modern society's relation to the past is constituted "not through identification but rather through disidentification, through difference. Whether we like it or not, we are no longer what we were, and we will not be what we are now....[T]he characteristics of today's modernity are not those of yesterday and not those of tomorrow, and in this lies modernity." (3)

*Luhmann, N. 1998. *Observations on Modernity*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Social theory as theorizing the rupture.

*,,...social theory, and sociology in particular, was born of a strong sense of a rupture of present and past and a desire to overcome the dichotomies

that this gave rise to: community and society, the sacred and the profane, status and contract, individual and society, self and other, origin and goal, differentiation and integration. Thus social theory was greatly preoccupied with the search for a principle of integration which would be capable of reconciling the contradictions of modernity and imposing unity on a disordered and fragmented world” (Delanty 2000, 29).

What is ‘the thing’ social theory looks at?

- *Social theory is the ‘interpretation of “the social,” which came to be seen as a domain mediating the private world and the state.’ (Gerard Delanty)
- *Social theory is a response to and reflection on modernity. Before modernity society ‘did not exist in the sense of a recognizable social domain distinct from kinship, economic and military functions, the state, or religious ties.’ (Delanty)

“Society” as a modern invention.

- *‘The idea that human beings can be understood from the social arrangements they form is a modern one...In the simplest sense, a society was a system of groups of people and institutions linked to each other in a variety of ways. This linkage...did not stem from a “plan”, was not stipulated in laws or rules and was neither purely “political” nor purely “economic” – and it was precisely this differentiation that made societies such complicated units that were so difficult to manage.’ (Johan Heilbron)

What makes ‘the social’?

- *Following the Enlightenment, the social was constructed around the play of four... dimensions. These are materiality, morality and habit, culture and rationality. By materiality, I mean the view...that society is constituted primarily by forms of production, distribution and consumption. By morality and habit, I mean the view...that society is primarily a moral and organic entity integrated through shared values. By culture, I mean symbolic and linguistic practices transmitted through socialization but knowable through techniques of understanding and decoding. By reason, I mean the view that the social is constituted through calculated and goal-directed action...’ (Larry Ray)

Ancient Greece

- *Homogeneous universe: a stable synthesis of the natural, the human and the sacred.
 - *No clear boundaries;
 - *‘Interchangeable languages’;
 - *‘Taken for granted’;

*Single, fundamental order.

Existential legitimacy.

*Legitimacy as a moral and as a factual problem.

*The "domination of truism" (M. Finley).

*Tradition.

*Religion.

Max Weber: traditional legitimacy - based on "an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them."

Single, fundamental order.

*The universe as an unified totality, characterized by a single, fundamental order, which structures both nature and society in a way that distinction between them cannot be expressed.

*Legitimized by truism, tradition and religion (M. Finley).

"It is over this order that Zeus, the father of gods and human beings, presides; and it is over particular communities within this order that kings preside, dispensing, if they are just, the justice that Zeus has entrusted to them." (A. MacIntyre)

Polis as a manifestation of order.

*Social/political organization of life in a city-state. A manifestation of the universal order.

*Later on, polis as human world. Aristotle: human being as *zoon politikon*, "social and political creature" who lives in *polis* and only there can develop his/her human features. "Whoever does not live in *polis* is either a god or an animal."

Greek concept of justice.

*Two notions of justice:

*justice as *themis*: justice dispensed by the ruler;

*justice as *dike*: the quality of being just, enabling to conduct one's actions and affairs in accordance with the place occupied in the universal, sacred order.

**Dike* as a manifestation of the sacred order. Function: maintaining the order as taken for granted, unchangeable; making it unnecessary to provide rational justifications for what people do and for what does exist.

The crisis of "justice."

*Degeneration of *themis*.

- *Social conflicts; re-definition of *dike* by the subjects (W. Jäeger).
- *New concept of *dike* as a legal principle, independent of the ruler's mercy, to which each member of a community can appeal. *Dike* connected with equality: rulers and subjects meet each other as equal in face of the law. (Similarly to Weber's idea of legal-rational legitimacy.)

Social context.

- *Acceleration of change; social/political transformations within *polis*.
- *The encounter with the Other.
 - *Crisis of ethnocentrism.
 - **Logographers* – the first Greek sociologists.
 - *The acceleration of change.
 - “An open-minded sailor became skeptical about the traditional order because he saw too many different and diverse things in other countries; and an Athenian citizen, on the other hand, living within the confines of his city and without knowledge of the ‘foreign’, had to greet with skepticism the value and meaning of what he treated as his own, because it changed too often during his lifetime and even with his personal participation.”* (V. Solovyev.)

The role of writing.

- *J.-P. Vernant: writing as an aspect of *logos*; medium through which justice and equality manifest in social life of *polis* as a rational and democratic form of social organization.
- *Specificity of orally transmitted cultures: “paralyze of mind,” “formular mentality,” and hierarchical transmission of knowledge in a form of a monologue. Fixed in order not to forget. (E. Havelock)
- *An alternative approach. J. Derrida: writing as *Pharmakon*: a dangerous drug which apparently helps memory but actually replaces its natural movement with the “dictatorship of signs;” writing is against life.

Writing against tradition.

- *“The advent of literacy, especially mass literacy, is a major influence modifying tradition. When literacy is confined to a small elite, it is not necessarily directly corrosive of tradition, since its monopoly by the few can be used to sanction doctrines held to be inherent in ‘classical scriptures’.” (A. Giddens)

The role of philosophers.

- *The death of Socrates or how in the situation of Crisis, Critical thinking can be perceived as a Crime and how the real crime is easy to be committed. Plato's life tragedy (Solovyev): Starting with the rejection of the world in which Socrates had happened to be sentenced to death, Plato ended up with a project of the world in which Socrates would be sentenced for sure (if allowed to speak in the first place).

Plato on *polis* and change.

The One remains,
the Many changes and passes.

.....

Life like a dome from many-coloured glass
stains the white radiance of eternity
until death tramples it into fragments.

Shelley, *Adonais*

Plato's politics.

"Politics [according to Plato] is the art of unifying and organizing human actions and directing them to a common end...It is the expression of Plato's fundamental tendency: the tendency to unify the manifold, to bring the chaos of our minds, of our desires and passions, of our political and social life into a cosmos, into order and harmony."

Ernst Cassirer, Plato's *Republic*, in: E. Cassirer, The Myth of the State.

Change is evil, rest is divine...

*"Good" – "everything that preserves."

*"Evil" – "everything that destroys or corrupts."

*How to "arrest change"? The idea of a "closed society."

"Closed society"

*Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. (1945)

*Fixed and segregated slave state based on equality among guardians and inequality between them and the rest; "no-mingling" principle.

*Control.

*Elimination of property (to eliminate conflict).

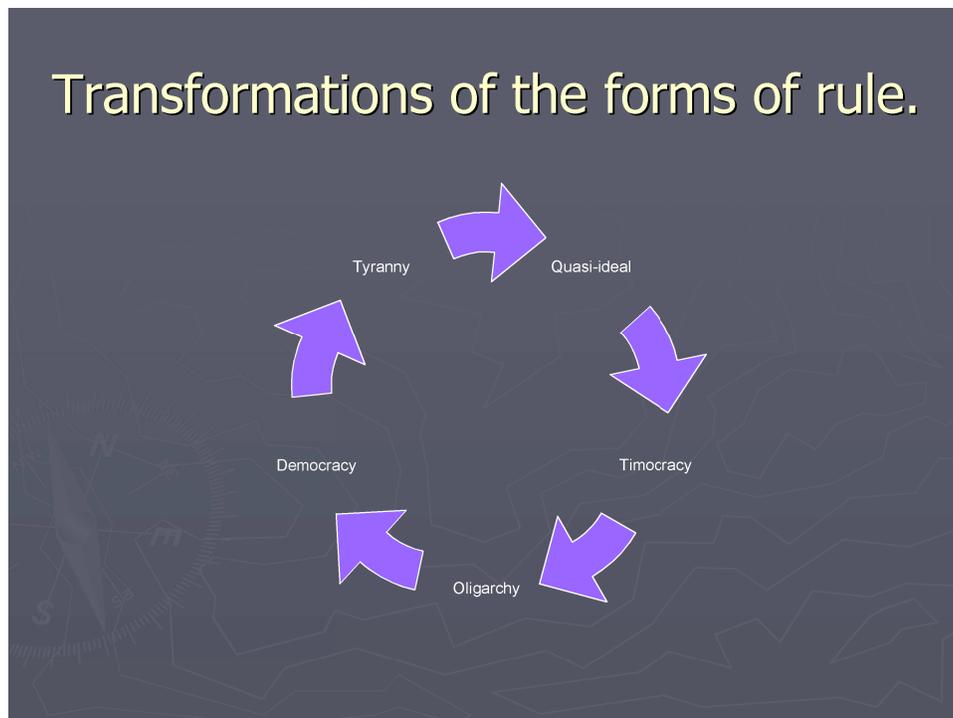
*No individual responsibility.

*"Great project."

Popper on the “open society.”

- *A society of individuals who use their rationality to make decisions for which they are responsible and who may want to gradually change the arrangements of their social life (“piecemeal engineering”) to eliminate what they decide to be wrong.
- *Open society is made out of individual decisions that lead people into the unknown, the uncertain, the insecure...

Transformations of the forms of rule.



Mechanisms of change

- *Psychological (quasi-ideal timocracy).
- *Between patterns of structuration (prestige vs. money: timocracy oligarchy).
- *Economic (rich vs. poor: oligarchy democracy).
- *Multiple (within democracy).
- *Access to means of coercion (democracy tyranny).
- *Education, planned action (tyranny quasi-ideal monarchy). Hypothetical.

An alternative approach: *The Statesman*

EVIL	Who rules?	GOOD
Tyranny	One	Monarchy
Oligarchy	A few	Aristocracy
Lawless democracy	The many	Conservative (lawful) democracy

Additional literature.

*Cassirer, Ernst. The Myth of the State.

*Derrida, Jacques. The Pharmakon, in: A Derrida Reader. Between the Blinds.

*Finley, Moses. The Ancient Greeks.

*Giddens, Anthony. Central Problems in Social Theory.

*Havelock, Eric. A Preface to Plato.

*Jäger, Werner. Paidea.

*Kohanski, Alexander. The Greek Mode of Thought in Western Philosophy.

*MacIntyre, Alasdair. Whose Justice, Which Rationality?

*Popper, Karl R. The Open Society and Its Enemies. Vol. 1.

*Solovyev, Vladimir. Plato's Life Tragedy.

*Vernant, Jean-Pierre. The Origins of Greek Thought.

*Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. The Black Hunter. Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World.

*Voegelin, Eric. Order and History. Vol. 2: The World of Polis.