

Hilary Term, 2024

CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY AND ITS IMPACT

Dr Michael Biggs

2–4pm Friday, Meeting room on 1st floor

(version 1.1, 26 January 2023)

very frequently the world-views that have been created by ideas have, like signalmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest
—Max Weber, 1915

Social theories such as critical race theory and queer theory have escaped the confines of academia. They have become institutionalized in Anglophone societies and embedded in the worldview of the professional-managerial class. Arguably these theories have had comparable impact to the economic theories that forged neoliberalism in the previous generation. This paper seeks to understand these theories and their intellectual origins, and to explore their social impact.

Questions include: What is queer theory? What is critical race theory? What do these theories borrow from Marxism and how do they differ? How have they influenced law and institutions? How have they affected culture? Is it coincidental that their social impact has coincided with increasing economic inequality? What lessons can be drawn from studies of the influence of economics?

Requirements for students auditing the paper as well as those enrolled:

- For two of the eight weeks, you will write an essay (about 2000 words) answering one of the questions. You are welcome to propose another question, just discuss it with me first. As well as the assigned readings, you must also read two other articles or another book. Sharing your essays will help with revisions for the examination. Email me the essay before 5pm on Thursday. Late essays will not receive comments.
 - In one of those two weeks, you will give a 10-minute presentation based on your essay.
- The paper is assessed by an unseen three-hour examination in Trinity Term.

READING LIST

I. Precursors

Marx and Engels and then Foucault provide some of the foundational texts of critical social theory. Many their ideas are recognizable in contemporary sociology, illustrated by a recent presidential address to the American Sociological Association. This address, however, constructs a quite different genealogy, citing American rather than European precursors.

- How is Romero similar to Marx and Engels in her conception of modern society? How is she different?
- Compare Foucault's conception of power with that of Marx and Engels.

Mary Romero, 'Sociology Engaged in Social Justice', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 85, 2020, pp. 1–30; <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312241989367>

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848; read preface, parts i-ii, iv; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', 1976, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, 1980, pp. 78–108

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, Vintage Books, 1976

2. Sex

Many second-wave feminists theorized sex as analogous to Marxist class, with reproduction or sexuality replacing production. MacKinnon is particularly important because her ideas directly impacted the law, especially around sexual harassment (as we will see in week 6). Standpoint theory is another significant contribution, which is obviously applicable to other axes of inequality.

- What is the relationship between sexuality and the subordination of women?
- Why would a subjugated group possess greater sociological insight?

Nancy C. M. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, Reidel, 1983, pp. 283–310

Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard University Press, 1989; read chs 1, 6–8, 11–12

3. Race

The intellectual genealogy of thinking on race is harder to follow because the ideas of critical race theory have been taken up by various scholars. We focus on the most important concepts: systemic racism, microaggression, and white privilege. Although we lack time to examine postcolonial theory, Spivak provides a taste.

- According to these theorists, why are African Americans still disadvantaged in the 21st century?
- What is 'epistemic violence'? Is it useful for sociology?
- What is 'intersectionality'? Is it useful for sociology?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education, 1988, pp. 271–313

Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, 1991, pp. 1241–99; <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Derrick A. Bell, 'Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory?', *University of Illinois Law Review*, vol. 1995, 1995, pp. 893–910

Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, 'Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students', *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 69, 2000, pp. 60–73

Patricia Hill Collins, 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 41, 2015, pp. 1–20; <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 'Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 62, 1997, pp. 465–80; <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657316>

Peggy McIntosh, 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack', *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, July/August 1989, pp. 10–12; https://nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/Knapsack_plus_Notes-Peggy_McIntosh.pdf

4. Gender

Queer theory started with Butler, and so the central task is to understand her conception of gender. We also consider an earlier influential theorization of sexuality, and two founding texts in transgender studies. We conclude by comparing postmodern and materialist approaches to sex/gender.

- According to Butler, what is the relationship between 'gender' and 'sex'?
- Contrast Rubin's and MacKinnon's conceptions of sexuality.
- What does the experience of transgender people contribute to the theorization of gender?

Gayle S. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', Carole S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 143–78

Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault', *Praxis International*, vol. 5, 1986, pp. 505–16

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990; read original preface and ch. 1

Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"', Steven Seidman (ed.), *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 153–70

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, 2004; read introduction and ch. 4

Sandy Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 10, 1992, pp. 150–76; https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-10-2_29-150

Susan Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage', *GLQ*, vol. 11, 1994, pp. 237–54; <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>

Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Points against Postmodernism', *Chicago-Kent Law Review* vol. 75, 2000, pp. 687–712

5. The impact of economics

In this interlude, we examine one of the most plausible cases for the impact of academic ideas: neoclassical economics.

- What does it mean to say that economics is ‘performative’?
- How strong is the empirical evidence for the impact of academic economists on the world outside the university?

Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*, MIT Press, 2006

Elliott Ash, Daniel L. Chen, and Suresh Naidu, *Ideas Have Consequences: The Impact of Law and Economics on American Justice*, NBER Working Paper, 2022

Marion Fourcade and Rakesh Khurana, ‘The Social Trajectory of a Finance Professor and the Common Sense of Capital’, *History of Political Economy*, vol. 49, 2017, pp. 347–81; <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-3876505>

John Ifcher and Homa Zarghamee, ‘The Rapid Evolution of Homo Economicus: Brief Exposure to Neoclassical Assumptions Increases Self-Interested Behavior’, *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*, vol. 75, 2018, pp. 55–65; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2018.04.012>

6. Impact on institutions

This session and the next evaluate the impact of critical social theory on the world. Has critical social theory changed institutions? We consider recent case studies from Britain and the United States. We also consider the reverse argument: social theory merely reflected legal changes dating from the 1960s.

- Choose one institution and assess the extent to which its policy or practices have been influenced by critical social theory.
- To what extent does equality legislation (like the Civil Rights Act in the U.S. or the Equality Act in the U.K.) instantiate the values of critical social theory?
- Where did ‘Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion’ come from?

EITHER (1) Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket, *Holding up a Mirror to Cricket*, 2023; <https://theicec.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/HOLDING-UP-A-MIRROR-TO-CRICKET-REPORT-ICEC.pdf>

OR (2) NHS Confederation’s LGBTQ+ Leaders Network with LGBT Foundation, *Leading for All: Supporting Trans and Non-Binary Healthcare Staff*, 2023; <https://www.nhsconfed.org/publications/leading-all-supporting-trans-and-non-binary-healthcare-staff>

Jacob Gersen and Jeannie Suk, ‘The Sex Bureaucracy’, *California Law Review*, vol. 104, 2016, pp. 881–948; <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38HV80>

Michael Biggs, ‘Queer Theory and the Transition from Sex to Gender in English Prisons’. *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, vol. 2, 2022; <https://doi.org/10.35995/jci02010002>

Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, ‘The Origins and Effects of Corporate Diversity Programs’, *The Oxford Handbook of Diversity and Work*, ed. Q. M. Roberson, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 253–81

Richard Hanania, *The Origins of Woke: Civil Rights Law, Corporate America, and the Triumph of Identity Politics*, HarperCollins, 2023; read chs 1–4

7. Impact on culture

Has critical theory changed culture? We examine quantitative data on linguistic changes in the media and some first-hand accounts by participants. The transmission of culture through schooling is of particular interest.

- What does the quantitative analysis of digital texts tell us about the impact of critical social theory?
- Is there any association between academic theory and the ‘culture of victimhood’?
- How do abstruse academic theories become transmitted more broadly within contemporary culture?

David Rozado, ‘Themes in Academic Literature: Prejudice and Social Justice’, *Academic Questions*, vol. 35, 2022, pp. 16–29; <https://doi.org/10.51845/35.2.5>

EITHER (1) David Rozado, Musa Al-Gharbi, and Jamin Halberstadt, ‘Prevalence of Prejudice-Denoting Words in News Media Discourse: A Chronological Analysis’, *Social Science Computer Review* vol. 41, 2023, pp. 99–122; <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211031452>

OR (2) David Rozado and Matthew Goodwin, *The Increasing Prominence of Prejudice and Social Justice Rhetoric in UK News Media*, 2022; <https://zenodo.org/record/6942391/files/Report%20-%20The%20Increasing%20Prominence%20of%20Prejudice%20and%20Social%20Justice%20Rhetoric%20in%20UK%20News%20Media.pdf?download=1>

Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, ‘Microaggression and Moral Cultures’, *Comparative Sociology*, vol. 13, 2014, pp. 692–726; <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341332>

Molly Brigid McGrath, ‘The Authority of the Sacred Victim’, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 37, 2020, pp. 132–52; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505252100008X>

Yarrow Eady, “‘Everything Is Problematic’”, *McGill Daily*, 24 November 2014; <https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2014/11/everything-problematic/>

Carly Thomsen and Laurie Essig, ‘Lesbian, Feminist, TERF: A Queer Attack on Feminist Studies’, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 26, 2022, pp. 27–44; <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2021.1950270>

Erin Cooley, Jazmin L. Brown-Iannuzzi, Ryan F. Lei, and William Cipolli, ‘Complex Intersections of Race and Class: Among Social Liberals, Learning about White Privilege Reduces Sympathy, Increases Blame, and Decreases External Attributions for White People Struggling with Poverty’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, vol. 148, 2019, pp. 2218–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000605>

Harper Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, ‘Drag Pedagogy: The Playful Practice of Queer Imagination in Early Childhood’, *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 50, 2020, pp. 440–61; <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2020.1864621>

Eric Kaufmann, *The Political Culture of Young Britain*, London: Policy Exchange, 2022; <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-political-culture-of-young-britain/>

‘Science Must Respect the Dignity and Rights of All Humans’, *Nature Human Behaviour* vol. 6, 2022, pp. 1029–31; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01443-2>

8. Materialist explanations

We conclude by considering explanations that emphasize material causes over intellectual ones. Increasing attention to race, gender, and sexuality has coincided in the longer term with increasing prosperity, at least for the professional-managerial class. In the shorter term, it has

coincided with increasing class inequality and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. One strand of Marxism views critical social theory as serving the interests of the ruling class.

- Would a more prosperous society pay greater attention to group disparities?
- Is it plausible that critical social theory is functional for capitalism?

Ronald F. Inglehart, Eduard Ponarin, and Ronald C. Inglehart, 'Cultural Change, Slow and Fast: The Distinctive Trajectory of Norms Governing Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation', *Social Forces*, vol. 95, 2017, 1314–40

Benjamin Enke, Mattias Polborn, and Alex Wu, *Morals as Luxury Goods and Political Polarization*, NBER Working Paper, 2022; <https://doi.org/10.3386/w30001>

Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, 'The New Left: A Case Study in Professional-Managerial Class Radicalism', *Radical America*, no. 3, 1977, pp. 7–22

Adolph Reed, Jr. 'Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 42, 2018, pp. 105–15; <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-017-9476-3>

EITHER (1) Nancy Leong, *Identity Capitalists: The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality*, Stanford University Press, 2021

OR (2) Carl Rhodes, *Woke Capitalism: How Corporate Morality Is Sabotaging Democracy*, Bristol University Press, 2022