CSS 271 - SOPHOMORE COLLOQUIUM

College of Social Studies

Fall 2013
Modern Social Theory

Note: The full syllabus for this course will be available after August 1st.

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M-W, 1:10-2:30 p.m.
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I. Introduction

During the first year of the CSS your tutorials and the fall colloquium all focus on the emergence and functioning of industrial society. The tutorials approach this theme from their own disciplinary perspectives. In History, for example, you will examine the modern history of Western Europe, particularly the industrial revolution and the emergence of modern, democratic politics. As you can see from the general syllabus of the colloquium, the principal academic content of this course will be (some of) the major social and political theories written between 1650 and 1950. As you will learn in your tutorials, the processes of modernization and industrialization involved enormous changes in every aspect of life. While the changes were in many ways liberating, and welcome to some social groups, they were deeply threatening to others, and disruptive to all. Most important for our purposes, although they resulted from the conscious and intentional actions of men and women, the changes themselves were generally unplanned, often quite unexpected, and no one at the time had a clear understanding of the kind of society or way of life that was emerging. In many ways one can see these theories as attempts by philosophers and social thinkers to grasp the dramatic transformations that were occurring in their societies. By coming to understand their own societies better, they were able to analyze the different forms of society that were possible and to prescribe a particular form which, in light of their theories, could be seen to be superior to other attainable forms. These theories, then, were *critical* reflections on society, intended both to explain what was going on, and to criticize social reality, in part by articulating an ideal of social order and by specifying what must be done to achieve it.

Because of the critical dimension of these theories, they are important not only for what they teach us about how society works and the causes of modernization and industrialization, but also because they themselves become part of the very process of social change itself. For men and women take up these theories, or ideas inspired by them, draw up political programs, create institutions, and conduct their lives according to them. As these theories become part of society in this way, they often have consequences that are unintended by the theorists who drew them up. Thus, to look back on our history

and to understand our own form of life requires that we understand the theories that have in part shaped it. As Keynes once wrote in his *General Theory*,

> the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.[1]

Thus, when you study the consolidation of the modern state, the development of the institutions of political and legal sovereignty, and the growth of new forms of the state and law, you will be studying social and political processes whose ideas were first articulated by Hobbes; when you investigate the growth of the constitutional state of the 19th century, you will find the ghost of Locke; and when you learn about the socialist movement and the creation and operation of non-market industrial economies, you will not have to look hard to see the influence of Marx.

If we must study these theories because they have become integral parts of our world, and the history of the creation of that world, we must also study them because they continue to provide the essential ideas we still use to understand and explain that world. One of the principal aims of the social sciences is to develop theories which explain the widest possible range of social phenomena in terms of a few basic principles. Ultimately, the idea is to create a unified theory that could account for many aspects of social life, including such things as war, the structure of families, the level of prices and employment, political revolutions, and the forms of religious practice. Social theories ultimately rest upon certain very basic assumptions regarding human motivation, rationality, sociality and needs. In other words, they presuppose a conception of human nature and society, some image of what it is to be a person and the relationships of people to one another. In order to understand these theories, it is essential that we grasp the basic assumptions upon which they rest.

The theories that we will be studying in this course all put forward a conception of the person and society on the basis of which social scientists have continued to develop theories even to this day. The first theory we will study is Hobbes's *Leviathan*. In this work Hobbes sets out a conception of the person and of society that will be familiar to many of you, for in many ways it resembles the conception that underlies much of modern economics, political science, and sociology – not to mention our ordinary, unreflective ways of talking about society. Another theory we will study is Marx's, and the connections between his theories of society and contemporary Marxist ideas are obvious. There will be such connections for all of the theories we will study this semester.

These theories also provide the basic frameworks within which normative issues have been and continue to be posed. If we want to understand such concepts as liberty, equality, solidarity, democracy, the public interest, justice, or alienation, then the best place to begin is with the thinkers who first

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[1]J.M Keynes, The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, n.d.),pp. 383-4.

enunciated them, or who first thought about them in a systematic, rigorous, way.

This course, then, has a number of intellectual objectives. First, it will provide a background for the other work you will be doing in the College by presenting some of the theories that are important components of the social and historical processes you will be studying in tutorials. Second, by studying these theories and analyzing their structures and basic assumptions, you should come to see some of the assumptions that underlie the theories modern social scientists use to explain society. This should help you become more self-conscious about your own assumptions about what is involved in understanding social life. Third, you should come to see, at least in an impressionistic way, the connection between thinking about society in a certain way and holding certain values or principles regarding how society ought to be organized. And last, you should come to see that there are a number of fundamentally different and competing ways of thinking about modern society, and what some of these differences involve.

One final note about the role of this colloquium in the CSS. This is the first occasion when your whole class will meet and work together on a common academic project. Thus, it is an opportunity to learn not only about the subject, but also about your colleagues. Ideally the colloquium will contribute to the development of a shared sense of membership and common purpose within your class, which can be one of the most valuable and rewarding aspects of the College experience, and something that is hard to find outside of the College setting.

The notes in this syllabus have been developed and refined over the years during which this course has been offered. They were originally developed by Brian Fay and me, but over the years they have been elaborated by many others.