

COURSE NO.: SS 459N: SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

MA-III Semester; Compulsory Course; Monsoon Semester: July–December; Credit: 4
Mode of Evaluation: Mid-term Assignment–2credits, End-sem. exam—2credits & Participation in class room discussion.

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“Put aside your knowledge! And then look with empty eyes... and life is a constant surprise. And I am not talking about some divine life—the ordinary life is so extraordinary. In small incidents you will find the presence of God—a child giggling, a dog barking, a peacock dancing. But you can’t see if your eyes are covered with knowledge. The poorest man in the world is the man who lives behind a curtain of knowledge.”– A. Zen Master

Our Quest

We know the way knowledges are classified and processed. The moment the word ‘sociological theory’ is uttered, as a university student you begin to visualize an intellectual trajectory—the West with its Enlightenment, industrial revolution, liberal democracy, scientific progress and secularization universalizing its categories and concepts—Comtean positivism (imagine France after revolution) transcending ‘theological’ and ‘metaphysical’ orientations, and arriving at the ‘science of society’, and eventually uniting positive science and positive religion for a new social order; classical sociologists (to use Robert Nisbet’s words, they were drawing the landscape of industrial Europe in late 19th and early 20th century) theorizing a modern/industrial society through the categories like division of labor and organic solidarity, or this worldly asceticism implicit in Protestantism stimulating the growth of capitalism, and emergence of a new form of rational/legal authority, or historical materialism with its dialectical logic of class conflict leading to a linear movement of history; and functionalism, structuralism, phenomenology, critical theory, symbolic interactionism, postmodernism with their icons like Talcott Parsons, Levi-Strauss, George Herbert Mead, Habermas and Foucault trying to theorize the journey of the Euro-American world in modern times (militant nationalism, cold war, post-socialist era, the assertive neo-liberalism, advanced capitalism, conspicuous consumption, information revolution, hybridity, multiculturalism) with its history of science and order, technology and violence, war and totalitarianism, hypermodernity and all sorts of risks, media revolution and globalization. Possibly modern Indian universities have not yet acquired the courage to rewrite the history of sociological theories. In this transaction of ideas the West continues to dominate, despite the occasional cry of postcolonial theorists; even the critique of the West comes from the West itself. No wonder, we continue to make a division—India-related courses and theory courses. So Gandhi and Ambedkar are not supposed to enter theory classes, whereas Foucault and Lyotard must come!

What does it mean to us—situated in this part of the world with our own cultural practices, philosophic thoughts and historical trajectories—to study these sociological theories? You must ask this question: Why should we universalize their theories? Why should we continue to repeat their mantras when we know that our experiences did not always converge with theirs? We experienced colonialism and partition; they experienced fascism and holocaust. While they

experienced a breakthrough in Protestantism and Calvinism; here the journey had a long history—Buddha, Nanak, Kabir, Ramakrishna. Whereas Bacon, Descartes and Newton were the idols of Western modernity, here even ‘renaissance’ was in continuity with ancient wisdom—Rammohon Roy engaging with the Upanishads, Ambedkar negotiating with Buddhism, and Iqbal in communion with Islam. Although we experimented with modernity, nationalism and secularism, our experiences were not necessarily like theirs; Nehru’s text on modernity, or Gandhi’s interpretation of politics and religion had a different flavor; here liberal democracy did not mean the withering away of the identities like caste and religion; secularism didn’t mean standardization, uniformity and absolute rationalization.

Hence we ought to study and interpret ‘sociological theories’ in a different way. Never should we forget our own location, our own knowledge traditions, the debates that shaped the journey of our civilization; never should we refuse to reject, innovate, amend these theories if they do not help us to understand our reality. We are not passive receivers; we are active creators. No, it is not our contention to say that there is nothing we can learn from these theories. Exclusion blocks creativity; dialogue makes it possible. Yes, in a rapidly changing world cultures are overlapping, and we are experiencing a shared world—the neo liberal market, the rising middle class, the culture of consumption, violence, terrorism, surveillance machineries and the fear of all sorts of risks, and hence there are moments when even Giddens, Baudrillard, Marcuse, Bauman and Foucault would make sense to us. We would engage in a meaningful conversation with them. Likewise, there are shared human aspirations and experiences, there are shared human agonies relating to hunger and stratification, social conservatism and stigmatization, and if we evolve an appropriate pedagogy (with lectures, conversations, group projects, creative articulations) we can give our own fragrance to these theories. We can have our unique engagement with Marx and Durkheim, Weber and Parsons. Although the present course is not a departure from the usual university curriculum with its emphasis on the theories that emanated primarily from the West, it is not difficult to evolve the realms of creative possibilities, provided we remain rooted in the everydayness of our lives. Let it be our quest.

Foundation Lectures

(These lectures are not intended to ‘cover’ the syllabus, or dictate who said what. The idea is not a mechanical review of literature in a chronological fashion, but a flow of ideas that invite us to the domain of theory making.)

Lecture-1: Can Theory Phobia Be Overcome?

Why do we grow up with a false duality—theory vs. practice, philosophy vs. everyday living, abstraction vs. experience? This duality tends to cause theory phobia—theory is something distant, remote, abstract; one can’t smell the fragrance of theories; theories are a strange combination of difficult words to be uttered like a mantra (Bourdieu’s habitus, Foucault’s micro physics of power, Gramsci’s hegemony), but one cannot dance with theories; one cannot experience theories as poetry. As colleges and universities keep constructing this theory phobia, we seek to take a different turn. In this lecture we would see the roots of this theory phobia, understand the meaning of a theory, and try to see how theory emanates from life itself (theoreticians are not people from a different planet), and learning theory is like establishing this linkage between ‘near’ and ‘far’, concrete and abstract, description and explanation, experience and conceptualization. Making theory is also an art of storytelling.

Lecture-2: Nature, Location and Contextualization of Theory

True, sociology is fond of its theories—its grand texts: classical as well as contemporary. Durkheim and Weber, Marx and Parsons, Habermas and Althusser, Foucault and Giddens, Bauman and Butler—our theory classes are often a celebration of their texts. While we learn and unlearn them, it is equally important to know the scope and range of a sociological theory. It is important to interrogate both—abstracted empiricism as well as abstracted grand theorization. Furthermore, it is important to ask whether theory classes often establish the supremacy of the West (the West gives us theories, and we provide empirical data). Is it possible to question this politics of transaction of theories, renew ourselves as active creators of theories rather than passive receivers of borrowed ideas? The lecture aims at raising these critical questions, and sensitizing us.

Lecture-3: Theorizing the Social

How is it possible for sociological theories not to conceptualize the ‘social’? How often we feel that we live in the realm of the ‘social’—its overarching influence on the way we think, behave, act; its ‘externality’, its ‘fact’ like existence, its stories of constraints and socializing practices. What are its functions? Does it heal and integrate? Does the loss of connectedness mean anomie, normlessness and strain? The lecture revisits the skill of theorization of the ‘social’ as developed by the likes of Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton, and seeks to engage with the functionalist theory in a way that is embedded in everyday life.

Lecture-4: Action and System: Theorizing the Nuanced Relationship

Is society an integrated system? Is it possible for the ‘system’ to exist despite the flowering of human agency engaged in the production of innumerable actions? What is the relationship between ‘action’ and ‘system’? This a pertinent question bothering sociologists engaged with ‘order’, ‘stability’ and ‘cohesiveness’. Can the ‘system’ retain the integration of ‘personality’, ‘culture’ and ‘society’? Or are there dysfunctions and continual possibility of deviant behavior? Talcott Parsons and his student Robert Merton would occupy our attention in this lecture.

Lecture-5: Self and Society

‘Who am I?’ How often we ask this question. It engages existentialists, spiritualists, psychologists and even sociologists. And for sociologists the question acquires yet another meaning. We are embedded in time and space; and hence we are historically/socially located actors; our ‘selves’ are socially constituted. But then, if our ‘selves’ are socially constituted, do we have any freedom—the freedom to differ, the freedom to transcend, the freedom to be creative? At this juncture, symbolic interactionism as a mode of enquiry begins to fascinate us—how our ‘selves’ are constituted through the continual process of the emission of symbols and gestures and norms of shared practices that we internalize, and become what society wants us to be. But is it so flat? Or does symbolic interactionism also talk about the possibility of creative ‘I’ not necessarily always in conformity with the well-adjusted ‘Me’? The lecture would invoke George Herbert Mead, and throw light on this question which is not merely academic, but also biographical and existential.

Lecture- 6: The Front Stage of society: Theorizing the Play of Roles

Is the world a stage? And is it that we are all playing diverse roles—the role of an air hostess in the flight, the role of a waiter in the restaurant, the role of a doctor in the operation theatre, the role of a receptionist in the corporate office, or even the role of a teacher in the lecture hall? Is our everyday world only about ‘performance’ and ‘impression management’? There is something horrifying about the dramaturgical approach; life tends to lose its authenticity and spontaneity. This requires investigation. No wonder, the lecture would engage with Erving Goffman—his argumentations regarding the presentation of ‘self’ in everyday life, and raise critical questions relating to the dynamics of social interaction and quest for human authenticity.

Lecture-7: Beyond the Duality of Structure and Agency

Determinism and freedom, structure and agency, rules and creative practices—the debate does not seem to have an end. Yes, there are structuralists (recall Althusser and Levi-Strauss) who may devalue the possibility of creative agency; but then, there are phenomenologists who would like to begin with the subjectivity of human consciousness. And then there are sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu who could see the possibility of a dynamic interaction between structure and agency. The lecture seeks to invite you to this debate through reflections on structuration and habitus.

Lecture-8: Seeing Through Ideology: Making Sense of Conflict in Society

How often we see the breakdown of the ‘normative order’—the emergence of conflict: latent or manifest! How do we theorize conflict—conflict over power, conflict over material resources, conflict over ideas and practices? Can conflict or violence be seen only through the rationale of the ruling establishment? Or do we need to go deeper? The lecture revisits Karl Marx, refers to Althusser, understands the formation and role of ideology, and generates a conceptual understanding of conflict in society.

Lecture-9: Functional Order or Hegemony?

Yes, Karl Marx was a classicist. However, the Marxian theory did not remain static; it innovated itself. In a modern society filled with the ethos of liberal democracy, mass media, civil society groups, compulsory schooling, how do the ruling classes rule? Is it merely through coercion? Or through the inculcation of ideology that conquers the minds of even the subaltern classes? It is in this context that the ideas of domination and hegemony, state and civil society become important. The lecture introduces Antonio Gramsci—a refreshing breakthrough in the Marxist theory in the twentieth century.

Lecture-10: Beyond Reductionism: Another Twist in the Marxist Theory

In continuity with LECTURE-9 we need to ask yet another question: Is it possible to evolve counter hegemony for a revolutionary practice? What role do organic intellectuals play in this ideological/cultural struggle? Is culture then a mere epiphenomenon (as reductionist Marxists would like us to believe)? Or does it have great importance in the process of social transformation? The lecture brings back Gramsci again, introduces the concepts of war of movement and war of position, and the formation and societal function of intellectuals.

Lecture-11: Critical Theory: A New Form of Social Control

Critical Theory or Frankfurt School Marxism is yet another turning point, another insight into modernity, its instrumental rationality, its technocratic consciousness, and the way with its ethos

of consumption and mythology of 'good living' it breeds the ground for totalitarianism, some sort of one dimensional existence. The lecture plans to introduce critical theory, its origin at a time when the Enlightenment project was in crisis because of devastating war, fascism and emergence of authoritarian personality; moreover, it refers to Herbert Marcuse—the arrival of one dimensional man.

Lecture-12: The Trap of Culture Industry

How does one make sense of culture industry—mass produced cultural objects, simulations, symbols: the phenomenal rise in soap operas, entertainment industry, best seller literature, gossip columns, sports carnivals? Is culture losing its aura, its space for human creativity, uniqueness, spiritual quest? Is it a fall of modernity—some sort of dialectic of Enlightenment? Here is yet another lecture on critical theory that engages with Theodor Adorno—his theorization of culture industry.

Lecture-13: From Despair to Hope: Public Sphere and Communicative Action

Among all the three classical sociologists it was Max Weber who was possibly most sensitive to the crisis of modernity—the gap between formal rationality and substantive rationality, the increasing rationalization of the world leading to disenchantment, the emergence of iron cage in a bureaucratic social order. With Adorno and Marcuse the discontents of modernity became rather sharper in the sociological discourse. But is it possible to rescue modernity, its promise of a dialogic public sphere and communicative action? Even though Jurgen Habermas was aware of the 'structural transformation of the public sphere' in contemporary times leading to 'colonization of the lifeworld', he was still hopeful about the project of modernity. The lecture reflects on this delicate debate.

Lecture-14: Reflexive Modernization and Risk Society

Are we living in a society filled with the all-pervading fear and all sorts of risks (emission from nuclear reactor, air pollution, depletion of ozone layer, pesticides in food stuff) emanating from the very 'success' of modernity itself? Is it a risk society? Does modernity require reflexivity—an ethos of examining its own premises to free itself from its pathologies? How do we conceptualize reflexive modernization in a risk society? The lecture recalls Anthony Giddens (his reflections on modernity and its consequences), introduces Ulrich Beck, and theorizes the emergence of a 'risk society'.

Lecture-15: From Modern to Postmodern

With postmodernity the critique of modernity acquires yet another dimension. The solid foundations of modernity—science as grand truth, the supremacy of reason causing coherence and certainty, and unilinear progress as universal aspiration of history—crumble; postmodernists celebrate heterogeneity, fragments, differences. From Bauman's liquid modernity to Baudrillard's hyperreal – the lecture derives its insights, and examines the postmodern condition.

Lecture-16: From Panopticom to CCTV Camera: Theorizing the Discourse of Power

With the acknowledgement of the discontents of modernity we begin to evolve a new way of seeing—how knowledge is never outside power, how with the birth of the modern clinic and prison, a new/subtle form of disciplinary devices evolved, how through modern psychiatry reason established its control over 'madness', how through discipline and surveillance the

modern machine through its normalizing judges (doctors, wardens, psychiatrists, teachers) sought to produce docile bodies—productive as well as subjugated. Here is a lecture that invokes Michel Foucault, and throws light on this discourse of power and knowledge to make sense of our times.

Reading...Learning...Unlearning

(A reader, because of its very nature, remains incomplete; it reveals; it conceals. A reader is just a humble beginning.)

There is a reader. Feel the reality of this ‘hard copy’. Read it in your own way; there is no race. Relate the text to the world you see, touch, experience and feel. Feel the journey—from lectures to texts, from texts to lectures. You will engage with thought provoking texts like Robert Merton, Social theory and Social Structure; Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action; Antonio Gramsci, Selections From the Prison Notebooks; Theodor Adorno ,The Culture Industry; Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man; Anthony Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method; Zygmunt Bauman, Intimations of Postmodernity; Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, and many others. Learn and unlearn. Don’t lose your originality, your language, your eyes. And don’t carry the burden of knowledge. Despite heavy theories, feel the lightness of being. Our egos (if we are not careful, theories can cause tremendous intellectual arrogance; and in this regard universities are not very sane places) destroy the music of existence.

Once it happened, a friend of Mullah Nasruddin was talking to him. They had met after many years. They were bitter rivals; both were poets. Both started to boast about the progress they had made in their careers.

“You have no idea, Nasruddin, how many people read my poetry now,” bragged the friend. “My readers have doubled.”

“My God, my God!” cried Nasruddin. “I had no idea you got married!”