What is (Classical) Social Theory?

Theory

“A scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena” (OED, def. 4a)

θεωρία (looking at, contemplation, speculation etc.)

“Scientific Revolution” (Theory of x)

systematic, abstract

also unsupported (cf. “practice” or “law”)
Social

Socius (friend, companion etc.)

“Pertaining, relating, or due to, connected with, etc. society as a natural or ordinary condition of human life” (OED, def. 7a)

“Concerned with, interested in, the constitution of society and the problems presented by this” (OED, def. 9)
Puzzle

• Why the belated origins of social theory?
  – “Sociology” conventionally attributed to Comte in the 1830s
  – Quetelet’s “physique sociale”
    • at the earliest to Montesquieu, *De l’esprit des lois* (1748)
Discursive Precursors

- Classical Greek Philosophy: Aristotle
- Chinese philosophy: 韓非子
- Islamic Tradition: Ibn Khaldun
- Modern European political philosophy: Machiavelli, Hobbes
- State-based Knowledge
  - Political Arithmetic (William Petty, c. 1676)
  - Kameralwissenschaft (Peuchberg, Sonnelfels et al. late 18th c.)

NOT social theory
  morality > analysis etc. but the fundamental lacuna is the absence of “society” or “social”
The Constitution of Society

• The object of inquiry must be constituted / imagined

• In early modern Europe, language of “society” referred to “elite” - Monde, Sozietät

• Only in the 18th century did the new language of “society” begin to disseminate – Société, Gesellschaft

– 社會 (1870s in Japan)
Social Forces

• Cultural (horizontal) integration
  – Linguistic, religious, cultural integration / homogenization
  – Creation of a “national” identity

• Status (vertical) integration
  – The classic binary: status to contract, Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft
  – The vision of a “people” (egalitarianism)
The Birth of “Society”

• Propelled by the triple revolutions: industrial, democratic, and disciplinary
• Merges with the discursive imaginary in the early 19th century – Comte, Spencer
• Disseminates throughout the West and the Rest – Imaginary recasting of the world; Institutional ordering through colonialism, the modern state bureaucracy etc.
The Birth of Social Theory

• Related to but distinct from both “discursive precursors” (social/political philosophy) and the modern social sciences

• Two key distinctions
  – Transdisciplinary
  – Value-laden
Vico, *Scienza Nuova* (1725)

Verum-Factum Thesis
- Cf. Descartes: truth in observation
- Vico: truth in creation

Philosophers have focused on the natural world, which “because God has made it, he alone has knowledge,” but they have ignored the civil world, which “because human beings have made it, they can achieve knowledge of it”
Logical Reconstruction

The fundamental syllogism of social theory

A. Human beings have made the world in which they live.

B. Because they made it, they can come to understand it.

C. Because they can come to understand it, they can change it.
(Classical) Social Theory

• At once a “scientific” (*wissenschaft*) effort to understand and explain the social world and a “political” project

“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it” (Marx, “On Feuerbach,” Thesis 11, 1845)
Two Articles of Faith

• The possibility and the necessity of transdisciplinary knowledge
  – Power, wealth, “social”
  – Avoid ethnocentrism of place / time

• The possibility of human freedom and democratic reconstruction
Fatal Flaws

• Ethnocentrism
  – Place / culture
  – Time / history
  – Human nature (differences)

• Essentialisms
  – Creating typical, atomic, unchanging, and homogeneous object(s) of inquiry
  – Occluding differences, connections, changes, and heterogeneity

• Disciplinary straitjacket
  – Loss of the original ambition
  – Loss of “reality”
Fatal Flaws (continued)

• Causality
  – Simplistic, Newtonian understanding
    • The will to generalize (natural laws)
  – Complexity ignored

• Objectivity
  – The impossibility of value neutrality (Weber)
  – The place of values in human inquiry
The Modern Social Sciences

• Social science disciplines originate in the 19th century
  – Money / market: economics
  – Power / government: political science
  – Social / society: sociology
  – Non-modern: anthropology
  – Space: geography
  – Time: history

• Social theory relatively independent
  – Interdisciplinary / transdisciplinary
    • The poverty of vocabulary for the entirety of the human world
  – Different epistemic / political ambition
Sociology as National Science

• Sociology about Society: Society = Nation

• The Primacy of the State
  – Not only in creating “society”
  – Also in state policy, infrastructural development
    • Patrons / paymasters
    • Unit of analysis (social statistics as national statistics)

• Theory (abstract particular masquerading as abstract universal)
  – In fact, almost all the classics take the example of UK or US (Das Kapital or The Great Transformation)
Society outside Society?

• International as a Society of Societies
• What to do with differences?
  – Social Evolutionism
    • Obvious differences arrayed on a linear scale of development: e.g. Spencer, Modernization Theory
  – No different for Marx and Marxists
  – The only major exception: Max Weber
    • Intellectually tamed (Parsonized)
Consequences

• Ethnocentrism / Parochialism
  – US-centric; Eurocentric
  – Confusion in Unit of Analysis
    • N=1?

• Transnational phenomena occluded
  – Society as a billiard ball
  – Essentialism: Vertical or Horizontal (Status or Cultural)
Stratification, for example

• Achievement: acknowledging inequality (avoiding status essentialism)

• Failure: ignoring the transnational (cultural essentialism)
  – Ignoring “non-nationals” within
  – Ignoring global/transnational capital relations
    • Consider Marxist or Weberian definitions: relational inequality would encompass transnational relations
Disciplinary Chauvinism

The focus on the social inevitably bypasses the non-social, such as the economic, political etc.

Comte / Parsons: Sociology as the “Queen”
The promise of an integrated social science

In practice: smuggling other social-science disciplines:
hence, economic sociology, political sociology, social psychology etc.

The fractal structure of all disciplines
Disciplinary Knowledge

• Ever receding frontier
• Triumph of the natural sciences in technology
• No such successes in the social sciences

• What does it mean to read ASR and AJS?
  – Policymakers (who reads AJS?)
  – People?
  – Scholars in Search of Social Knowledge?
Knowledge of the Present

• If disciplinary knowledge for disciplinary professionals, then who will educate the public?
• How relevant is the study of the US (or European society) relevant for others?
• Who will educate the professionals (especially about non-disciplinary knowledge, which is perforce necessary)?
Disciplines vs. Reality

- The nomothetic impulse
  - The will to generalize
    - Disciplinary division and indivisible reality
  - The disorder of reality
    - Incessant change, for example
  - Idiographic reality
    - The recalcitrance of differences
Area Studies

• One solution to the gap: a new discipline
• Precursors in Orientalism
  – Travelogues, Reports
  – Philology
• Colonial Science
  – German and French, Russian and Japanese studies of their colonies
  – Branch of administrative science (state-based)
  – Commercial, missionary, and other interests
• As we know it, Post-World War II U.S. Science
Intellectual Rationale

• Makes sense of the differences
  – Orientalist / philological legacies
  – Policy obstacles
  – Lay perceptions
  – Made urgent by the Cold War

• Interdisciplinary
  – Comparative and historical impulse

• Modernization Theory
The Rapid Growth of Area Studies

• Geometric growth since the 1950s
  – Cold War Science: National Security
  – Part and parcel of the Golden Age of the research university

• The Crisis in the 1990s
  – In fact misrecognizes the triumph of area studies
    • Handful to over 2,000 members
Ironies of Area Studies

- Hegemonic project produced counter-hegemonic scholarship
- Modernization theory generated best examples of comparative-historical studies
  - E.g. Barrington Moore, Jr., Clifford Geertz, Albert O. Hirschman
- Intellectual garrisons in mainstream social-science and humanities departments
- The principal sources of anti-ethnocentrism, anti-Eurocentrism
Limits of Area Studies

• The persistent charge of parochialism
  – Ethnocentrism masqueraded as universalism for the study of the US (West); appallingly obvious as ethnocentric for the study of other places

• Neglect of inequality / differentiation

• No overarching theoretical construct
  – Largely negative / critical
    • E.g. Edward Said, *Orientalism*

• Reproducing other problems of sociology
  – Space/Time, Technology etc.
Disciplinary Chauvinism *Redux*

The incorporation of area studies into distinct departments reproduces the flaws of disciplinary chauvinism.

Ever-reduced ambit of the matrix of disciplinary area studies

e.g. Asian studies: divided into mutually incommunicable disciplinary subfields (as well as “national” areas)

Yet no solution to create independent departments of area studies
What Is Missing

“Knowledge of the Present” (What is going on?)
State-based knowledge for state bureaucrats
Disciplinary knowledge for discipline-bound scholars

What is missing is provided by popular writers
Democratic knowledge necessary in democracy
Social Theory as Global Studies

• A synthetic effort to integrate social-science disciplines and area studies
• Avoid ethnocentrism of place / time
  – Comparative-historical studies
• Avoid blinders produced by disciplinary divisions
• Public Science
Intellectual Foundations

In many ways harking back to the promise of classical social theory (Marx and Weber) and their modern reincarnations

– Comparative/historical impulse
– Transdisciplinary (technology in Marx; religion in Weber)
– Global outlook
– Potentially popular in dissemination
Pragmatist Point

Pragmatism: the insight that most people do (or know enough to do) well but may have wrong ideas about what they are doing

Metaphysical backdrop needs to be changed
Disciplines: endless frontier
Social theory: knowledge of the present
knowledge for democratic reconstruction
Towards Disciplinary Deconstruction

• Fixed matrix into fluid networks
  – Rather than seeing departments as permanent structures, create fixed-term structures based on networks
  – Fordism vs. Silicon Valley (flexible production)

• Reorganizing intellectual work
  – Example of big science
  – Project teams
The Specter of Dilettantism

• The promise of disciplines
  – Achieved only in the natural sciences
  – Yet the same sciences have moved headlong into thoroughgoing interdisciplinary

• “Specialists without spirit” especially problematic in the social sciences, with the necessity of “knowledge of the present”
  – Hence the near monopoly by “true” amateurs and dilettantes (and demagogues)
  – The rise of NGO’s, social movements etc.
Peril of “Non-Democratic” Knowledge

• The best thing about science/discipline
  – Corrigibility
  – Democratic accountability

• Precisely what is missing in “amateurs” and “social movement” intellectuals
  – Not all bad: the benefits of dogmatism
    • Protreptic nature of theory (self-fulfilling prophesy)
    • The case of “non-racial” science
The Role of the “Global”

• Just as classical social theory and sociology arose with the rise of “society,” social theory as global studies arises with the rise of “global society”
• Non-nationals within “society” (migration)
• Transnational links (the weakening of national borders)
The Promise of the Global Imagination

• Capture the complex and fluid reality
  – Elusive to the extant division of intellectual knowledge production
  – Knowledge of the present
• Knowledge appropriate for “Global Society”
  – Not a panacea
  – Perhaps too little, too late?
• The inescapably normative nature of social knowledge