HSPS Tripos – Part 1, Soc1
Introduction to Sociology: Modern Societies I
(2020-21)

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Aims and Objectives
The course has three interconnected aims and objectives:
● to introduce students to the systematic study of society and social life
● to introduce students to the central debates concerning the nature of the modern era and its social consequences by exploring a selection of key sociological texts by Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and W.E.B. Du Bois
● to provide students with a fundamental understanding of the major institutions that comprise, and issues that confront, modern societies

Course Content
The course introduces students to the discipline of sociology in two parts. In the Michaelmas term students are thoroughly acquainted with core sociological concepts and concerns (e.g. class, bureaucracy, social solidarity, social change). We do this through a critical engagement with the ideas of four central figures in the history of modern sociological thought: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and W.E.B. Du Bois. Towards the end of Michaelmas and throughout Lent, we build on the foundations laid by the classical theorists and develop a systematic analysis of key institutions and aspects of modern societies including the following: the modern state and the rise of nationalism; citizenship and the welfare state; the media and public life; class and inequality; gender and sexual divisions; race and ethnicity. We conclude with a broader reflection on the changing nature of modern societies in our contemporary global age.

Mode of Teaching
The paper is taught through 18 two-hour lectures over three terms. A list of supervision topics is included in this paper guide and will also be available from the Faculty Office. Students will be expected to supplement the material acquired in lectures through their own reading of the literature recommended here and by supervisors. Required reading is starred.
Mode of Assessment
There is one three-hour written examination at the end of the year. Candidates must answer three questions from an undivided paper.

Supervision
Supervision is essential for this paper and will be arranged by Directors of Studies in the Colleges. It is recommended to have six to eight supervisions in total for this paper (including revision supervisions), covering six of the topics in this paper guide. A list of qualified supervisors is provided by the paper coordinator.

Part I: THEORIES OF MODERNITY (Michaelmas 2020)
Patrick Baert

Introductory session

(Michaelmas week 1)

This introductory lecture elaborates on the structure of the course. In relation to Part I of the course (theories of modernity), it discusses the relevance of sociological classics for understanding society today and the impact of recent debates (e.g. surrounding decolonizing) on the study and selection of classical authors. Part I focuses on writings by Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and W.E.B. Du Bois. For all four, we discuss what they see as new or distinctive about modern society, what they think are its main problems and how can they be solved.

In relation to Part II of the course (the study of modern societies), this lecture introduces the notion of intersectionality to frame the empirical themes that will be dealt with.

Topic 1 – Karl Marx

(Michaelmas week 1)

Karl Marx is an unusual figure in that his writings not only contributed to the study of capitalism but also inspired various political experiments around the world. This is very much how he conceived of his own work: whilst his writings engaged with philosophy and were highly theoretical, his ultimate aim was to change the world.

a. Historical context
The first part addresses the particular intellectual and socio-political context within which Marx wrote. More specifically, we will consider how Marx was influenced by and reacted against German idealist philosophy and utopian socialist thought.

b. Historical Materialism and the Communist Revolution
The second part explores four important texts by Marx. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts includes an intriguing discussion of alienation, whilst German Ideology presents a basic outline
of a materialist conception of history. Both demonstrate the influence of Feuerbach on the young Marx and the extent to which he distances himself from Hegel. Co-written with Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto* is a polemical piece, defending historical materialism and predicting the collapse of capitalism. *Grundrisse* is generally viewed as a transition piece, linking his earlier philosophical concerns with what could be described as a more ‘scientific’ approach found in *Capital*.

c. Marx and Marxism: the legacy and its critics
The final part of this lecture deals with Marx’s enduring influence, the varieties of Marxism, and its critics. We also assess the widely held view that recent social and political events refute the validity of Marx’s views.

**Reading**

**Essays**
1. Do you agree that Marx is a critic of capitalism but not of industrialisation?
2. How relevant is Marx’s theory of exploitation for understanding inequalities in the modern world?

**Topic 2 – Max Weber**
(Michaelmas week 2)
These lectures introduce Weber’s views about the transition to rational capitalism. As with the lectures on Marx, we consider two fundamental aspects of Weber's intellectual project: first, his observations regarding what is distinctive and problematic about modern society; and second, his interest in the role of unanticipated effects in history.

a. Historical context
The first part of this lecture explores the particular intellectual and socio-political context in which Weber wrote. It includes, amongst other things, a discussion of Weber’s relationship to historical materialism, his position vis-a-vis the ‘Methodenstreit’, the notion of *Verstehen* and the use of ideal types.

b. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism
The second part introduces Weber’s classic study of the relationship between Protestantism and rational capitalism. The lecture also explores Weber’s text on ‘bureaucracy’.

c. Weberian sociology and its critics
The final part gives some indication of Weber’s influence and assesses various critiques of Weberian sociology.

**Reading**


Collins, H. *Weberian Sociological Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (esp. chapters 1, 2)


**Essays**
1. According to Weber, what makes bureaucracies efficient? Do you agree?
2. Critically discuss Weber’s theory on the role of the Predestination doctrine in the development of early capitalism.
**Topic 3 – Emile Durkheim**  
(Michaelmas week 3)

These lectures introduce Durkheim’s views about the transition to a modern differentiated society. We focus on *Division of Labour* and *Suicide*, discussing it in two ways. Firstly, we consider Durkheim’s thoughts on what is distinctive and problematic about modern society, and secondly his views concerning how society is held together.

**a. Historical context**  
The first part of this lecture explores the particular intellectual and socio-political context in which Durkheim wrote. It includes a discussion of Durkheim’s efforts to create a new academic discipline, the influence of Comtean positivist philosophy and the socio-political situation in the Third Republic in France.

**b. Division of Labour, Suicide and other works**  
The second part introduces Durkheim’s *Division of Labour*. We first discuss Durkheim’s use of evolutionary theory to account for societal change. Second, we discuss his diagnosis of the problems of modern society, in particular the notion of anomie. We subsequently explore how some of the themes in *Division of Labour* are taken up in later works, in particular his groundbreaking book *Suicide*.

**c. Durkheimian sociology and its critics**  
The second part of this lecture explores Durkheim’s legacy as manifest in the work of more recent social thinkers. It also discusses major criticisms of Durkheimian sociology.

**Reading**  
Essays
1. What does Durkheim mean by anomie, and why does he regard it as a problematic feature of modern societies?
2. What are the major strengths and flaws of Durkheim’s book *Suicide*?

**Topic 4 – W.E.B. Du Bois**
(Michaelmas week 4)

These lectures introduce W.E.B. Du Bois’ sociological reflections on race and ethnicity. We focus on his text *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays that reflect on the condition of African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century in the US.

a. Historical context
We explore the specific social and political context in which Du Bois grew up with a focus on racial segregation. We analyse how his studies at Harvard and Berlin affected him and how his sociological work was intertwined with his political activism.

b. Souls
We explore *The Souls of Black Folk* and discuss key concepts such as ‘double consciousness’, ‘the veil’ and ‘the colour line’. We also pay attention to other writings by Du Bois, including *The Philadelphia Negro*.

c. Legacy
We discuss the relevance of Du Bois’ work on contemporary sociological analysis of race and ethnicity. We discuss the similarities between Du Bois’ concerns and those by Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko.

Reading


**Essays**

1. What is meant by ‘double consciousness’? What are the possible political implications of this notion?

2. Would you agree that, for Du Bois, Fanon and Biko, racial inequality is not only a structural issue, but also manifests itself at a psychological level?
Part II: SOCIAL INEQUALITIES (Michaelmas 2020 & Lent 2021)
Manali Desai & Ali Meghji

**Topic 5 – Class and Inequality**
Ali Meghji (Michaelmas week 5)

This lecture will look at class in the 21st century. We will consider the material, symbolic, cultural, and moral dimensions of class. After providing a theoretical grounding for understanding class, we will then consider case studies ranging from education through to the economy, stigmatisation, the media, and Grenfell.


1. To what extent is class shaped by cultural and moral boundaries?
2. To what extent is class ‘cultural’?
3. What makes a social class?

**Topic 6 – Race, Ethnicity and Racism**

Ali Meghji (Michaelmas week 6)

**Race, Ethnicity and Racism**

This topic will look at what it means to say that racism is ‘structural’. After providing a grounding in critical race theory, we will consider a range of case studies – from Trump and Brexit through to everyday interactions, the economy, austerity, the legal system, and the media.


1. Is there a difference between racism and racial prejudice?
2. Discuss two processes through which racism is reproduced.
3. Can we have a ‘racism without racists’?

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**Topic 7 – Nations and Nationalisms**

Manali Desai (Michaelmas week 7)

a. This part of the lecture addresses the rise of the nation and nationalism in Europe and beyond.

b. In this part of the lecture we will ask whether nationalism is on the decline in the face of globalization.

**Reading**

a.


b.


Essays

a. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Anthony Smith’s theory of the ethnic origins of nations.
b. Discuss, using examples, how ‘globalization’ both erodes and strengthens nationalism.

**Topic 8 – Gender, Sexuality, and Intersectionality**

Manali Desai (Michaelmas week 8)

a. In this part of the lecture we will discuss the category of ‘gender’; how is it constructed, and why is it so powerful? How are gender and sexuality related?
b. What is ‘intersectionality’ in sociology and why is it important?

**Reading**

a.


b.


**Essays**

a. Are gender and sexuality fundamentally intertwined, or should they be considered as entirely separate analytical frameworks?

b. Discuss two ways in which the theory and method of intersectionality challenges white, western feminism (or feminist theory).

**Topic 9 – Global and transnational inequalities**

Ali Meghji (Lent week 1)

This topic will look at the need to adopt global, historically-connected sociological analysis. We will consider the ‘decolonial’ turn in sociology and the social science, zooming in on the concept of modernity/coloniality. We will then consider cases where such transnational, historical analysis is needed in the present day, including the climate, populism, and police brutality.


1. To what extent do colonial relations continue to shape present inequalities?
2. Does history matter for understanding present inequalities?
3. Critically assess Du Bois’ comment that we are living in a ‘new phase of colonial imperialism’
PART III: POWER & SOCIETY (Lent 2021)

Hazem Kandil

How do shifting power relations produce social change? This section of the paper examines the concept of power from a sociological perspective. It then surveys three forms of power: political, military, and ideological, before turning to how intellectuals react to power. Required readings starred.

Lecture (1)–Understanding Power

This lecture introduces two classical concepts of power by Marx and Weber, then contrasts them with two contemporary ones: Bourdieu’s realist view that highlights ongoing power struggles between multiple actors, and Foucault’s post-structural depiction of power as diffuse and illusive.


Questions
1) Why do sociologists offer different portrayals of power?
2) Which approach to power do you consider most accurate, and why?

Lecture (2)–Political Power: Revolution

This lecture applies the classical and contemporary concepts of power to politics. It focuses on revolution as a key aspect of political power struggles. Different views on power lead sociologists to disagree over what causes revolution. This was evident in competing interpretations of the Iranian Revolution, discussed here in some detail.

Questions
1) Why are revolutions becoming less likely?
2) What caused the Iranian revolution?

Lecture (3)—Military Power: War
This lecture explores the paradoxical nature of military power, distinctive views on the social nature of war, and whether technology transforms war. It then turns to American militarism as a case-study.

Questions
1) Why do some consider contemporary warfare entirely new?
2) Why is war fundamentally social?

Lecture (4)—Ideological Power: Neoliberalism
This lecture reflects on the meaning and influence of ideology in the contemporary world, and how it differs from discourse. It then investigates the origins and spread of the dominant ideology of the age: neoliberalism.

Questions
1) Why do some consider contemporary warfare entirely new?
2) Why is war fundamentally social?
Questions
1) How can ideas become a source of power?
2) Why did neoliberalism spread globally?

Lecture (5)–Speaking Truth to Power? Intellectuals
In this final lecture, we turn from competing concepts and forms of power to how one deals with power: using, resisting, subverting, or possibly ignoring it. Few have obsessed over this question than intellectuals seeking to identify their role vis-à-vis power – and sociologists eager to identify it for them.


Questions
1) Why is deciding the ‘role of the intellectual’ so problematic?
2) Why do sociologists differ over the right attitude to power?
Part IV. Revision Sessions (Lent and Easter Term 2021)
Prof Patrick Baert, Dr Manali Desai, Dr Ali Meghji, Dr Hazem Kandil

Revision 1: Marx, Du Bois: critics and legacy
Patrick Baert (Lent week 7)
We explore the criticisms of Marx and Du Bois, as well as their political and intellectual legacy. For further reading, see also lectures 1 and 4.

Revision 2: Weber, Durkheim: critics and legacy
Patrick Baert (Lent week 8)
We discuss the criticisms of Weber and Durkheim, as well as their sociological legacy, especially in the light of the topics covered this year. For further reading, see also lectures 2 and 3.

Revision 3: Class, inequalities, race/ethnicity and racism
Ali Meghji (Easter week 1)
Revision in relation to Dr Meghji’s lectures.

Revision 4: Nations, gender/sexuality and intersectionality
Manali Desai (Easter week 2)
Revision in relation to Dr Desai’s lectures.

Revision 5: Power and society
Hazem Kandil (Easter week 3)
Revision in relation to Dr Kandil’s lectures.

Further information:

a) How this course relates to others
This paper provides students with grounding in some of the classic texts of social thought, with an introduction to some of the key concepts in sociology today and with an understanding of some of the core institutions of modern societies. The paper provides the foundations for more advanced coursework in sociology at the IIA and IIB levels.

b) Supplementary Reading List
c) Student Feedback
Your chance to put forward your opinions on the papers you take!

For Sociology Papers, student feedback is collected via anonymous online surveys distributed at various points in the academic year. It is crucial that you complete these and give feedback on your papers. Getting good feedback from students makes the course better and shows the outside world how Cambridge degrees consider their students’ views.

Course organisers take students' concerns and suggestions into consideration each year when preparing their paper outlines and selecting supervisors for the year. So please remember to fill out a form.