

# **TEACHING SOCIAL THEORY IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: Issues, challenges, opportunities**

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“The end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a technocratic world and of the social order proper to this world” (p.435)

“What task is reserved for thinking at the end of philosophy?” (p.427)

Martin Heidegger from “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” (1964) in *Basic Writings* (1993).

**\*In other words, if philosophy is exhausted as Heidegger alleges, where do we do our thinking about the worthiness of the technical knowledge we teach in Universities and how do we inspire tomorrow’s citizens to do this sort of thinking? One answer is in the teaching of...**

# THEORY?

Theory (Gk. Theoria = vision, seeing, contemplation) is a disciplined way of looking at the world. In Plato's *Republic* (Books 5&7), the philosophical Theorist is introduced as one "in love with the spectacle of truth." He also saw the *true* and the *good* as closely linked.

All sciences and academic disciplines claim to operate on the basis of coherent theories or 'ways of looking'. The social sciences (dealing with the patterns, conflicts and meanings of human association or society) are no exception.

# WHAT IS SOCIAL THEORY?

Social theory can be broadly understood as a diverse, international and multidisciplinary body of conceptual frameworks that enable social scientists to *make sense* of the social world and its most pressing problems, e.g. gender and cultural difference, violence, poverty, inequality, power, social change, sustainability etc.

Historically, “social theory” has been most strongly identified with the disciplines of anthropology, criminology and sociology. However, over the past four decades *the concepts and perspectives of social theory have spread far beyond any single discipline* enabling researchers from diverse backgrounds to discuss, investigate and debate social problems across disciplinary boundaries. While not synonymous there is considerable interplay between *social theory* and *political, cultural and communications theory (sharing terms, perspectives and theorists)*.

Today, social theory is an integral part of social scientific practice in such diverse fields as social geography, history, human services, social work, planning, social policy, media studies, information systems, law, political economy, race relations, cultural studies, health sciences, public administration, corporate governance, human rights, development studies, ecological sustainability and education.

# WHAT DOES SOCIAL THEORY DO?

Sociologist, Kirsten Harley (2005: 344-345) argues that the “uses” of social theory are “polymorphous” and identifies 26 functions including classification, antiquarian interest, problem-formulation, deriving testable hypotheses, explanation, interpretation, deconstruction, academic status enhancement, status group closure and critique.

The latter *critical dimension* is extremely influential and arguably has been as important as the analytical function of social science since the European Enlightenment. It involves not only a description or explanation of how social institutions and discourses operate but also poses evaluative and situated questions concerning how things might be otherwise? (e.g. can we get out of this mess we are in and change for the better?)

In practical terms, social theory invites critical reflection upon fundamental social values (e.g. liberty, justice, equity, diversity, peace, participation); the distribution of power in a democratic society, the sort of society we want to live in and the ecological sustainability of human communities.

# THE PROBLEM...

Professor Simon Marginson (2002) of the Sydney University Centre for the Study of Higher Education, found that more than half of Australia's 28,632 doctoral students and 9,408 research masters students were enrolled in the Social Sciences.

Most national, professional associations or national conferences of the main social science disciplines have theory subsections or committees within their organisation.

A preliminary survey of course offerings in Australia, conducted by the researcher in late 2007, confirms that social theory is taught in a variety of disciplines and courses in every university in Australia.

However, despite the enormous significance of the social sciences in Higher Education, there has been *no study of the teaching of social theory to undergraduate social science students in Australia.*

# OF TEACHING SOCIAL THEORY

Social theory scholars, in general textbooks, journals or specialist works, make sweeping *Gnostic* statements about which theories are dominant or influential at a given time or place. Such pronouncements are usually based on their own reading and journal citations analyses.

However, nobody has ever conducted a survey of what texts, perspectives, concepts or thinkers are referred too (or not) in undergraduate teaching practice in the various social science disciplines. In its absence, theoretically informed understanding about successful teaching approaches and innovations in undergraduate courses in social theory remains fragmented, serendipitous and largely dependent upon the professional networks of individual academic teachers.

Given the importance of the issues social theory addresses, it is important that the pedagogy of social theory enable student's to become *critically reflective, learners and citizens in the ongoing processes of social change* in which they (we) will live. So, it would be *useful to research both what is taught and how?*

# AIMS OF CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT

To conduct a pilot study into the teaching of social theory in a purposive sample of sociology and criminology courses throughout Australia.

The critical research issue here pertains to the pedagogy of social theory and what is in fact taught (and why?) rather than what the textbooks claim is taught.

The findings will in turn be published in disciplinary journals aimed at the imaginative and effective teaching of social theory at USC and other Australian universities.

The project is envisaged to form the first part of a two-stage study of the teaching of social theory in all of the social science disciplines in Australia for which an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) grant will be sought in 2010.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS: THE *WHAT* AND THE *HOW*?

**Firstly**, the research asks *what* is being taught under the rubric of social theory and to what purpose? (What reasons are given for teaching it?)

- Which theories and theorist's ideas are most influential in the teaching of social theory in Australia and why?
- What sort of mix of theories is being taught? (e.g. "classical" and contemporary theories? Modern and Postmodern theories?)
- Which text-books are the most frequently used in the teaching of social theory and why have they been chosen?

**Secondly**, the research asks what methods seem to be most effective in equipping an increasingly diverse (and international) student body with a critical awareness about society and change.

- What are the current modes and methods of teaching favoured by lecturers in social theory?
- To what extent is the teaching of social theory informed by educational theory (e.g. are critical theories matched by critical pedagogies?)
- What consideration is given to teaching a predominantly "western" (Euro-American) body of social thought to students from culturally diverse and international backgrounds?

# METHODOLOGY

The main methodology used for this pilot study will be survey methodology utilising a questionnaire with closed and opened ended questions to allow for the generation of both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire would be distributed to a random sample of 20 Australian universities where undergraduate social theory courses are taught and followed up by phone interviews to facilitate optimal response rates. The questionnaires will be addressed to the relevant course-coordinators or lecturers involved in the teaching of social theory subjects.

The construct validity of the questionnaire will be pre-tested on a small number of colleagues.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

We expect there to be some surprises!

We will not know until the survey is conducted but we have hunches.

e.g. We expect the traditional Western 'canon' to be further de-centred by a more globally diverse discourse. We expect that social constructionist and postmodern critiques will predominate in sociology over any new attempt at general synthesis or systems theories. We suspect Marx will be back in class with the global economic meltdown. We expect Beck's theory of the Risk Society will continue to prosper in criminology and security courses. Habermas's Communicative Action Theory and Castells theory of the Network Society will increasingly influence communication studies. We expect that realism will be losing some ground to social constructionism in politics and international relations.

**THANK YOU**