

# **Advanced Introduction to Critical Social Theory**

Critical Social Theory  
Comprehensive Examination  
July 7, 2006

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## **Advanced Introduction to Critical Social Theory Course Outline and Readings**

### **Description**

This course is intended as an advanced introduction to critical social theory. As an introduction, the course attempts to bridge the demands of breadth, depth and coherence; as an advanced introduction, the course presupposes some familiarity with social and sociological theory. Consequently, this course is not, strictly speaking, a course in either classical or contemporary social theory.

Critical social theory opposes itself to mainstream sociology in its empiricist and positivist forms. While critical social theory does not reject empirical research *in toto*, it claims that as practiced, much mainstream sociology is dangerous in its applications and founded on an incoherent epistemology. Critical social theory questions and challenges all forms of domination and exploitation and understands itself as contributing to the project of creating self-instituting, autonomous societies. While critical social theory is critical of mainstream sociology, it must also be critical of itself. Thus, much critical social theory is directed at itself; evaluating and assessing its own foundations and claims at all times.

Topics discussed will include epistemology and ontology; the relation between the social and other spheres of life; the relation between critical social theory and its normative project; the formation of subjectivities and identities; and the relation between the production of knowledge and power.

### **Objectives**

In addition to introducing the student to the material, it is expected that students will both learn to read difficult theoretical texts and to translate their learning and understanding into their own written texts. As such, this course requires the student to practice exegetical exercises, which will simultaneously contribute to developing the ability to read, understand and write complex theoretical texts. While it is the view of this course that critical social theory is an end in-itself, it is hoped that students will draw upon the texts, lectures and discussions in order to evaluate their own position in the world and how they contribute to the reproduction or transformation of current structures of domination. In order to accomplish these goals, it is expected that students will ask questions when necessary and complete all assigned work.

### **Structure**

The course is divided into four sections. The first section (“Preliminaries”) is intended as an orientation in critical theory, focusing upon its historical origins, its relation to modernity and its epistemological assumptions. The second section (“Classics”) re-examines the classic texts of social theory in light of critical social theory identifying the contributions made by each to critical social theory. This second section also serves as a crash-course for those who do not have a foundation in classical social theory. The third section (“Transitions”) acts as a hinge between classical and contemporary thought looking at figures that are neither classical nor contemporary. The final section (“Contemporaries”) surveys recent trends and approaches within critical social theory.

The course comprises a two hour lecture and a one hour tutorial each week. Students are required to attend both. Prior to attending the lectures, it is *required* that the student complete all the readings and arrive at class prepared to ask questions and contribute to the discussion. The lectures will introduce the topic, outline the major concepts, and assist students through difficult

passages. The tutorials are designed to encourage discussion, especially concepts and ideas from the texts and lectures that were difficult. The tutorials are also organized to practice close reading of passages from the assigned texts. To repeat, *students cannot succeed in this course if they do not stay on top of the readings and arrived to class prepared.*

### **Evaluation**

In addition to studying critical social theory, this course introduces the student to the task of reading difficult theoretical texts. The best way to bring these two objectives together is through the practice of exegesis. An exegesis of no more than fifteen hundred words on a single reading is required in each of the second (“Classics”), third (“Transitions”) and fourth (“Contemporaries”) sections, which is to be handed in before the beginning of class no later than one week after the week in which that reading was done. The student may *not* choose readings from the final week of either semester. Because it is expected that the student will improve throughout the course, each assignment is weighted progressively more.

Beyond learning to read theoretical texts, the student is also expected to be able to compare, contrast and evaluate concepts, ideas, approaches and theories relative to one another. As such, each half of the course is capped-off with a take-home exam consisting of three questions, two of which the student is required to answer. The length of the completed exam should not exceed twenty pages. The exam is to be handed in no later than noon on the last day of the exam period.

The grade break down is as follows:

Exegesis I	15% (Lectures 6-11)	Take-Home I	20% (Lectures 1-11)
Exegesis II	20% (Lectures 12-15)	Take-Home II	20% (Lectures 12-24)
Exegesis III	25% (Lectures 16-24)		

All written work is to be submitted in twelve-point Times New Roman on regular letter-sized paper with margins of one inch on all four sides.

### **Required Texts**

All readings will be available on reserve in the library. A coursepack containing all of the readings is available in the bookstore. Where they exist, other editions are permissible. However, it is the student’s responsibility to ensure they are reading the correct pages.

### **Academic Offenses**

Students are expected to be familiar with the relevant policies concerning academic conduct. Violations of these rules (for instance, plagiarism) shall be treated seriously. The source of much plagiarism is ignorance of proper citation practices. It is recommended that students familiarize themselves with a recognized style guide: for instance, the MLA (Modern Languages Association), Chicago, or the APA (American Psychological Association). *Students found plagiarizing will **fail** the course.*

## Preliminaries

### 1. Sociological and Social Theory [39pp]

Talcott Parsons ([1945]1964) “The Present Position and Prospects of Systemic Theory in Sociology” in *Essays in Sociological Theory*. New York: The Free Press, 212-37. [25pp]

Steven Seidman (1991) “The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope” *Sociological Theory* 9(2): 131-45. [14pp]

### 2. Critical Theory [55pp]

Max Horkheimer ([1937]1999) “Traditional and Critical Theory” in *Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum, 188-243. [55pp]

### 3. Enlightenment, Modernity and Autonomy [32pp]

Michel Foucault (1984) “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 32-50. [18pp]

J.P. Arnason (1989) “The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity” in *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 86, 323-337. [14pp]

### 4. Epistemology I – Critical Realism [32pp]

Roy Bhaskar (1989) “Critical Realism, Social Relations and Arguing for Socialism” in *Reclaiming Reality*. London: Verso, 1-11. [10pp]

Roy Bhaskar (1989) “On the Possibility of Social Scientific Research and the Limits of Naturalism” in *Reclaiming Reality*. London: Verso, 66-88. [22pp]

### 5. Epistemology II –Perspectivism [40pp]

Michel Foucault ([1976]2003) *Society Must Be Defended*. New York: Picador, 1-21. [20pp]

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 251-71. [20pp]

## ‘Classics’

### 6. Karl Marx I – The ‘Younger’ Marx [59pp]

Karl Marx ([1844]1964) “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” in *Early Writings*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 69-76, 120-34, 152-67, 168-74. [44pp]

Karl Marx ([1845]1998) *The German Ideology*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 36-44, 47-54. [15pp]

### 7. Karl Marx II – The ‘Older’ Marx [59pp]

Karl Marx ([1867]1990) *Capital*, Vol. 1. New York: Penguin, 711-24, 781-94, 794-802, 873-6, 927-30. [40pp]

Karl Marx ([1863-1866?]1990) “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” in *Capital*, vol. 1. New York: Penguin, 1019-1038. [19pp]

**8. Ferdinand Tönnies – Romanticism and Culture [45pp]**

Ferdinand Tönnies ([1887]1955) *Community and Association*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 37-48, 59-60, 74-77, 87-90. [17pp]

Ferdinand Tönnies ([1931]1955) “Introductory Article” in *Community and Association*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1-29. [28pp]

**9. Emile Durkheim I – The Social and Morality [65pp]**

Emile Durkheim ([1893]1984) *The Division of Labour in Society*. New York: The Free Press, 11-31. [20pp]

Emile Durkheim ([1895]1964) *The Rules of the Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press, 1-46. [45pp]

**10. Emile Durkheim II – Sociology of the Sacred [62pp]**

Emile Durkheim ([1912]1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press, 1-18, 208-16, 231-41, 303-13, 412-5, 419-33. [62pp]

**11. Max Weber – Interpretive Sociology [54pp]**

Max Weber (1946) “Science as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds). Oxford: Oxford UP, 129-56. [27pp]

Max Weber (1978) *Economy and Society*, vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 4-31. [27pp]

**‘Transitions’****12. Georg Simmel I – Sociology of Culture [41pp]**

Georg Simmel ([1908]1971) “How is Society Possible?” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 6-22. [16pp]

Georg Simmel ([1908]1971) “The Problem of Sociology” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 23-35. [12pp]

Georg Simmel ([1910]1971) “Sociability” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 127-40. [13pp]

**13. Georg Simmel II – Conflict and Modern Culture [39pp]**

Georg Simmel ([1908]1950) “The Stranger” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 143-49. [6pp]

Georg Simmel ([1903]1950) “The Metropolis and Mental Life” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 324-39. [15pp]

Georg Simmel ([1918]1950) “The Conflict in Modern Culture” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 375-93. [18pp]

**14. Feminism I – Subjugation, Sex and Gender [38pp]**

Simone de Beauvoir ([1949]1952) *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam Books, xiii-xxix. [21pp]

Betty Friedan ([1963]2001) *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 15-32. [17pp]

**15. Feminism II – Bourgeois and Radical [54pp]**

Kate Millet (1969) *Sexual Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 23-58. [35pp]

- Shulamith Firestone ([1970]2003) *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 3-14. [11pp]
- bell hooks (1989) "Feminism: A Transformational Politic" in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist/Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 19-27. [8pp]

### ‘Contemporaries’

**16. Hannah Arendt – The Social and the Political [56pp]**

Hannah Arendt ([1958]1998) *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 7-11, 22-8, 38-73, 199-212. [56pp]

**17. Jürgen Habermas I – Critical Theory [73pp]**

Jürgen Habermas ([1981]1987) *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System*. Boston: Beacon Press, 153-97, 374-403. [73pp]

**18. Jürgen Habermas – Democracy [46pp]**

Jürgen Habermas ([1992]1996) *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 341-87. [46pp]

**19. Michel Foucault I – Power and Discipline [52pp]**

Michel Foucault ([1975]1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 3-31, 170-94. [52pp]

**20. Michel Foucault II – Biopower and Sovereignty [40pp]**

Michel Foucault ([1976]1990) *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon, 135-59. [24pp]

Michel Foucault ([1976]1980) "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, C. Gordon (ed). New York: Pantheon, 166-82. [16pp]

**21. Pierre Bourdieu I – Habitus, Capital and Field [50pp]**

Pierre Bourdieu ([1980]1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 30-41, 53-65, 66-79, 112-21, 135-40. [50pp]

**22. Pierre Bourdieu II – The Sociology of Sociology [49pp]**

Pierre Bourdieu (2004) *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 45-94. [49pp]

**23. Post-Marxism [52pp]**

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe ([1985]2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Verso, 1-5 [4pp]

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1987) "Post-Marxism Without Apologies" in *New Left Review* 166, 79-106 [27pp]

Chantal Mouffe ([1988]1993) "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?" in *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso, 9-22. [13pp]

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) "Preface to the Second Edition" in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Verso, vii-xix. [7pp]

**24. Feminism III – For and Against Postmodernism [54pp]**

Seyla Benhabib (1995) "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance" in Seyla Benhabib *et al* (1994) *Feminist Contentions*. London: Routledge, 17-34. [17pp]

Judith Butler (1995) "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'" in Seyla Benhabib *et al* (1994) *Feminist Contentions*. London: Routledge, 35-57. [22pp]

Nancy Fraser (1995) "False Antitheses: A Response to Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler" in Seyla Benhabib *et al* (1994) *Feminist Contentions*. London: Routledge, 59-74. [15pp]

**25. Post-Critique [23pp]**

David Couzens Hoy (2004) "Introduction" and "Postscript: On Deconstructive Genealogy" in *Critical Resistance*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1-12, 227-39. [23pp]

## Complete Text of the Final Lecture

### 1. Introduction

This course has been an introduction to critical social theory. The point of the course was not to produce experts in critical social theory, but rather to introduce you to an understanding of critical social theory as an alternative to ‘mainstream’ sociological theory. The course began with a discussion of Talcott Parsons’ 1945 paper, “The Present Position and Prospects of Systemic Theory in Sociology,” and Steven Seidman’s 1991 paper, “The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope.” Both papers attempted to push sociology in a particular intellectual direction: ultimately, they were political defenses of intellectual goals. That is, both must be understood as advancing a programme: a vision and direction for sociology. From the perspective of critical social theory, both were ultimately unsatisfactory.

Next we attempted to reconstruct the idea of social theory presented by Seidman by connecting it with and critical theory hoping to avoid the pitfalls of both sociological (Parsons) and social (Seidman) theory. To do this, we looked at Max Horkheimer’s 1937 paper, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” which anticipated the contradiction between social theory and sociological theory through advancing a critique of positivism in the social sciences (traditional theory) that he called critical theory. In order for critical theory to be ‘critical’ it must be ‘for’ something and ‘against’ something else. We associated critical theory with a normative position: the project to create an autonomous democratic society. For us, then, critical theory cannot be neutral: it must have a normative project and it must remain committed to that project. Finally, we spent some time considering the sort of epistemology required by critical social theory. To this end, we discussed critical realism (Roy Bhaskar) and perspectivism (Michel Foucault and Patricia Hill Collins).

Having elaborated an idea of critical social theory, we began re-reading the ‘classical’ founding texts of social theory – those of Marx, Tonnies, Durkheim and Weber. We then considered ‘transitional’ texts that intervened into the space created by the ‘classical’ texts from the margins of social theory – specifically, Georg Simmel and feminism. Finally, we moved on to texts that intervene into and interrogate our own present: Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser. That short list brings us to today’s lecture, which is a review of critical social theory. As a review, this lecture will examine the ‘meta-theoretical’ aspects of critical social theory rather than review or overview any particular theorist we studied. Hence, this lecture seeks to answer the question, “What is critical social theory?”

## **2. Past and Present**

What we have called critical social theory does not neatly fall into the standard division between ‘classical’ and ‘contemporary.’ Such a distinction is, perhaps, more appropriate to designing a curriculum than it is to introducing and discussing a topic. While we have attempted to escape the largely artificial divisions between ‘classical’ texts (those that once spoke to us and lead to the formation of our discipline, but are no longer relevant) and ‘contemporary’ texts (those that easily fall within the present boundaries of the discipline and address our current concerns), our approach has resulted in a superficial coverage of topics and depth of investigation. It would not be an exaggeration that each topic we considered could have formed its own course. While the superficiality might be a bit misleading, I think it was necessary if we want to understand the relation between past and present, classical and contemporary, and the historical dimension of oppression, domination and critique.

It is peculiar to begin the final lecture with a discussion of the division between the ‘classical’ and the ‘contemporary.’ However, it is this neat compartmentalization of the ‘past’ as irrelevant and the ‘present’ as relevant that I want to challenge. It seems strange to suggest that Marx or Durkheim is ‘irrelevant’ to us in the present. Is not capitalism still a major force of domination in our present? Are we not rightly concerned with the forms of association and solidarity between ourselves, as members of the same society, and in our relations to others? Further, doesn’t much ‘contemporary’ critical social theory proceed through a return to so-called ‘classical’ texts? A return to Marx or a return to Durkheim? A feminist interpretation of Weber or Simmel? David Couzens Hoy, in the chapters we read today from his book, *Critical Resistance*, suggests that much contemporary critical social theory arises from a re-reading of and engagement with the nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche.

### **3. Sociological versus Social Theory**

Talcott Parsons’ essay, “The Present Position and Prospects of Systematic Theory in Sociology” was used as an example of the tendency in sociology to which critical social theory is opposed. While my comments on Parsons, including the reasons why critical social theory does not present a ‘general theory’ in Parsons’ sense and why it is not structural-functional, are correct, we should be careful not to associate Parsons too closely with the dominant ways of doing sociology at present – a lot has changed since 1945. Similarly, we only discussed one small aspect of Parsons’ work – his idea of a general theory – and we did not have the opportunity (and possibly not the inclination either) to consider his substantial and substantive contributions to theoretical and empirical sociology. It should also be remembered that (even in his own time) there was opposition to his theoretical system on both intellectual and political grounds. While Parsons was not necessarily the dominant figure in sociology in 1945, when he

wrote the paper, it is the case that his stature within sociology quickly grew to the point where his structural-functionalism became the dominant way of doing sociology by about the sixties. He notes that “it is the primary thesis of this paper that the structural-functional type of system is the one which is most likely and suitable to play a dominant role in sociological theory.” Briefly, at least, his ‘thesis’ was true. Since then it has been increasingly challenged to the point that is no longer the dominant way of doing sociology; yet, it still casts a large shadow over the entire discipline. It is likely the case, for instance, that your introductory sociology textbook was vaguely structural-functionalist in orientation, even if it didn’t openly declare itself as such.

For Parsons, an adequate theory “is a body of logically interdependent generalized concepts of empirical reference. Such a system tends, ideally, to become ‘logically closed,’ to reach such a state of logical integration that every logical implication of any combination of propositions in the system is explicitly stated in some other proposition in the same system.” The purpose of general theory, according to Parsons, is to facilitate description and analysis. Description, he suggests, is met by ‘securing determinate and verifiable answers’ to “all of the scientifically *important* questions.” Parsons does not explain what he means by analysis, but one assumes that it involves ensuring that the logical structure of each concept is made explicit in the form of propositions; that is, larger concepts are built up from smaller ones and the smallest concepts are axiomatic. If Parsons means that propositions are made up of self-evident axioms and that concepts are made from propositions, then Parsons must also mean that general is as self-evident and certain as its axioms. This seems to be the meaning of ‘logical closed’ – the only conclusions that can be drawn (propositions and concepts) must be wholly contained in the self-evident axioms. The entire system of the general theory stands or falls with the possibility – or impossibility – of forming such a foundation. Meanwhile, the descriptive aspect would have to

connect the logical system to the messiness of empirical reality; this is what Parsons calls the “what” of the theory.

The form of general theory proposed by Parsons is structural-functional theory. This involves two different components: the structures and the functions. “Phenomena which are significantly interrelated [and] which constitute a system” are related at the structural level. Structures are organized as a system – they relate to one another as a series of systems and their component sub-systems. The system that incorporates all of the other systems is the general theory of society. Organizing thought via a structural system enables two separate procedures: on the one hand, it proposes a mechanical determination such that past events can be explicitly accounted for by reference to previous states of the system and future events can be predicted on the basis of the present state of the system and, on the other hand, the system applies to empirical reality in the form of laws, which are infinitely and indefinitely applicable. The essential feature, Parsons notes, “is the treatment of a body of *interdependent* phenomena simultaneously, in the mathematical sense.” This implies that empirical reality can be coded as variables, which can be inputted into a formal system so as to produce new knowledge about empirical reality.

Meanwhile, “functions” are the mode in which the general theory is connected to what Parsons calls “the dynamically variable elements in the system,” or, more plainly, a particular chunk of empirical reality. Because the empirical is far messier than the theory, empirical reality is a “going concern” for the system. The system represents the ‘static’ moment while the functions represent the ‘dynamic’ moment. Or, perhaps more accurately, the functions connect the static to the dynamic without being part of either. Functions in this sense are “inherently teleological” in that their purpose is to do what they do: connect the general to the particular in such a way that the integrity of the general is preserved. Functions are either “functional” or

“dysfunctional” – that is, they either preserve the stability of the system as a whole or they disrupt the stability of the system; they either work properly or they do not work at all. It is worth noting that Parsons slips out of a ‘scientific’ discourse into a ‘moral’ discourse because he suggests that the functions are there to preserve the system; the system, originally descriptive, at this point becomes prescriptive. In the truest sense of the word, Parsons’ general theory is conservative because it interprets the social world in such a way that the system must maintain status quo – change is introduced by the breakdown of the system, understood as a dysfunction. Hence, contrary to ‘radical’ sociological theories, Parsons writes, “On this level no competent modern sociologist can be a Comtean, a Spencerian, or even a Marxist.” It is, no doubt, the Marxists – he is writing, after all, in 1945 at the conclusion of World War II where the USSR has just emerged as a world power and the only rival to the global hegemony of the United States – that he has in mind.

Just as Parsons’ structural-functionalism can be interpreted as an intervention against Marxism – not that Comte or Spencer were actual possibilities for sociology in 1945 – Steven Seidman’s 1991 essay, “The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope,” attempts to recover ‘social theory’ for sociology from what he describes as the hegemony of ‘sociological theory.’ His comments have the appearance of being directed at a residual Parsonianism in sociology. Seidman’s essay brings three concerns to our attention: the rejection of ‘sociological theory,’ a defense of ‘social theory,’ and the degree to which his solution is satisfactory. Sociology is in danger because the foundational discourse provided to it by sociological theory has failed. That is, “the quest for foundations and for a totalizing theory of society” have not been realized. Seidman’s solution to the problem is found within the problem itself: to save itself, sociology must reject sociological theory, its quest for a foundation and its consequent

‘scientism’ in order to make way for social theory and its embrace of anti-foundational post-modern narratives.

Seidman understands social theory as a particular current within sociology that has occasionally flourished and has occasionally been suppressed. For instance, he suggests that there are elements of both ‘social theory’ and ‘sociological theory’ in each of the so-called ‘Founding Fathers’ of sociology – Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Seidman wants to separate what he understands as the ‘social theory’ in each – *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Division of Labour in Society*, and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* – from what he understands as the ‘sociological theory’ in each – *The German Ideology*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Hence, according to Seidman, “social theory and sociological theory, at least since the eighteenth century, have lived side by side and frequently have been intertwined.” However, since the end of the Second World War – incidentally, in the same year as Parsons’ essay – those wishing to do ‘theory’ in sociology have been increasingly encouraged to do ‘sociological theory,’ understood as ‘scientific,’ rather than ‘social theory,’ which is viewed as ‘ideological.’ Sociology has organized itself such that “prestige and privilege” is awarded on the “ability to produce new analytic approaches to supposedly universal problems.” Consequently, in Seidman’s estimation, sociological theory has become an irrelevant discourse that exclusively addresses itself.

Relative to what he calls ‘sociological theory,’ I think that Seidman is more or less correct. Seidman identifies sociological theory as “humanity’s” continuing “discourse on ‘the social,’” whose aim it is “to discover the one true vocabulary that mirrors the social universe.” Here we recognize Parsons’ description of the structures as abstracted from empirical reality. Further, says Seidman, “sociological theory aims to denude itself of its contextual

embeddedness” through abstraction from the “current social conflicts to reflect on the conditions of society everywhere, to articulate the language of social change, conflict, and change in general.” It attempts to do this by elevating “itself to the universal, to the level of theoretical logics or central problems or to the study of social laws or the structure of social action.” *The Structure of Social Action*, it will be recalled, was the title of Parsons’ first major work, which attempted to systematize all previous sociological theory (with the exception of Marx, who is given a single tiny chapter) under a single logic – the first step towards constructing his general theory of society and structural-functionalism.

It is the attempt to use sociological theory to construct a foundational discourse for sociology that Seidman identifies as sociology and sociological theory’s biggest error. In order to produce laws, according to both Seidman and Parsons, sociology requires a coherent and consistent epistemological foundation upon which to build a logically closed system. An endeavour, it should be noted, that Parsons views as essential and that Seidman views as impossible, even if they agree on the necessity of a foundational discourse in order to produce social laws. Sociological theory, as the discourse that constructs the system in thought, claims to be the foundational discourse of sociology; the task of sociological theory is to render sociology coherent by providing models ready to be tested against empirical reality. The ‘central problems’ of sociological theory become the attempts to express a sociological logic, which, as Parsons points out, must be ‘closed’ and ‘self-contained.’ Excessive amounts of work is devoted to “the task of defining and defending the basic premises, concepts, and explanatory models of sociology.” Consequently, sociological theory becomes “the virtual police of the sociological mind” who resolve “disciplinary disputes and conceptual conflicts” through providing “a universal epistemic rationale that provides objective, value-neutral standards.” The problem here,

relative to sociological theory, is that rather than settling disputes, sociological theory multiplies and intensifies disputes. Rather than providing a foundation, sociological theory has utterly failed to do so in a context of competing foundational claims: “In this discursive clamor there is virtually no standardization of language, no agreement on what are central problems or standards of evaluation.”

Seidman’s critique of sociological theory is more or less as follows: sociological theory is an enterprise devoted to solving the epistemological and metatheoretical problems of sociology so as to provide a general theory that can be applied in empirical research programmes. The empirical research programmes, in turn, provide the data with which the general theory of society is constantly revised so as to make it an ever more perfect reflection of society. Sociological theory, then, becomes the discourse that attempts to mirror ‘the social’ in thought. Central to this problematic is a belief that, in order to create a scientific sociology, a general theory of society resting upon sound epistemological foundations is required. Hence, it is this dream of obtaining ‘scientific’ status – that is, true and universal knowledge of society – that drives sociological theory.

Seidman wishes to replace an ostensibly scientific sociological theory with postmodern anti-foundational social theory. If Seidman’s argument is going to succeed, it seems to require that he, first, coherently differentiate social and sociological theory and, second, that his anti-foundational, postmodern social theory can be presented and defended as a viable alternative. Taking the failure of sociological theory to establish a viable foundational discourse despite its repeated attempts to establish such a foundation as his point of departure, Seidman suggests that the solution to the problem is to reject the ‘scientism’ that requires a foundational discourse and, consequently, also reject the project of establishing a foundational discourse. Social theory

should present itself as interested in the particular instead of the universal, the specific instead of the general, and develop its knowledge claims in conjunction with empirical life: “Rival ontological and epistemological claims seem meaningful only insofar as they are tied to practical interests or specific forms of life.” If ‘ontology and epistemology’ are, in fact, tied to ‘practical interests and specific forms of life,’ what sense does it make to pursue a project of developing an ontology and an epistemology that transcends the practical and the specific? Such a project seems to be excluded from the outset. [As an aside: it isn’t clear why ontology suddenly appears in his discussion – it was absent in his discussion of sociological theory.]

In place of a foundational discourse, Seidman suggests an epistemology tied to the local context and a “relentless epistemological suspicion,” by which he means that a discourse must call itself into question at all times; “no social discourse can escape the doubt that its claims to truth are tied to and yet mask an ongoing social interest to shape the course of history.” This means, for Seidman, that any discourse that would speak for or represent others (a social discourse or a discourse of the social) is involved in power relation between those who construct the discourse and those who are represented in it. Those speaking or constructing the discourse and those represented within are tied to particular contexts that most likely do not coincide and, therefore, are also tied to particular interests, which means, according to Seidman, that there is no universal position of enunciation and no total representation in discourse. If a position of universality or completeness is impossible, then so too is any discourse that aims at universality. Science is no exception to this rule: if science requires solid and universal foundations, then it is impossible. Science, then, becomes a power play in the service of a particular regime of power or a political project. Postmodernism claims that foundational discourses seek to hide a ‘will to power’ beneath a ‘will to truth;’ that truth is actually in the service of power and is really just a

mask for naked interests. What separates social theory from sociological theory, then, is that social theory at least admits that universality is impossible, while sociological theory makes no such admission and proceeds as though universality is possible.

Rather than a foundational discourse of truth, Seidman argues for a shift to understanding knowledge in terms of its moral, social and political consequences. That sociological theory does not hold the same position as Seidman only reflects their bad faith vis a vis their own interests: “A discourse that justifies itself solely by epistemic appeals will not be compelled to defend its conceptual decisions on moral and political grounds. [...] On the other hand, if theorists – as postmodernists – believe that all appeals to universal standards or justificatory strategies are not ultimately compelling, they will be forced to offer ‘local’ moral, social, and political reasons for their conceptual decisions.” Hence, Seidman suggests that we adopt a strategy of narratives and “evaluate conflicting perspectives by asking what are their intellectual, social, moral and political consequences.”

The move from foundational discourses to an analysis of the intellectual, moral, social and political consequences of knowledge is tied to a transition from sociological theory’s foundationalism to social theory’s endorsement of ‘social narrative.’ Seidman specifies that he is interested in an ‘events-based narrative.’ He writes, “The postmodern social narrative I advocate is event-based and therefore careful about its temporal and spatial boundaries. By event-based, I mean that the primary reference points of postmodern narratives are major social conflicts or developments. As event-based narratives, postmodern social analyses also would be densely contextual. Social events always occur in a particular time and place, related to both contemporary and past developments in a specific social space.” The ‘event-based narrative’ is held against the modernist ‘grand narrative,’ which, while concerned with events, disregarded

the temporal and spatial dimensions of events thus presenting them as universal, trans-historical stories of the development of humanity, modernity or the west. That is, a theory of capitalist development in a particular country in the west – England, for instance – was held to have global significance because it outlined the actual progression of capitalism everywhere and at all times. Event-based narratives, tied to their local contexts, become essentially connected to social conflicts. The social theorist becomes the advocate of the conflicts whose narrative they relate: “the advocacy of theorists would take the form of elaborate social and moral argumentation about consequences and social values [...] we would be advocates for a way of life [...] we would be compelled to produce elaborated social and moral discourses. As theorists we would be in a role of encouraging moral public discussion; we would be catalysts for public and moral debate.”

While critical social theory is largely in support of this anti-foundational shift, it is nonetheless hesitant about the move to the opposite of foundationalism; that is, complete relativism. What is worse, while Seidman appears to endorse a relativist position, he seems, nonetheless, to have necessary recourse to a new foundational justification: in the place of truth, Seidman puts ‘intellectual, social, moral and political’ factors and their consequences. The problem here is that if we are to have a discussion that transcends the local situation of particular narratives, which is a necessity if we are to determine their relative consequences, that implies that we must already – prior to entering into the discussion – have an agreement on at least three things: (1) the respective meanings of the intellectual, moral, social and political, (2) that consequences of positions can be determined beforehand and that the relevant consequences follow from the intellectual, moral, social and political and (3) that the proper mechanism of dispute resolution is through reference to consequences. Thus, the problem is, on the one hand,

the imposition of a new foundation and a new dispute resolution mechanism and, on the other hand, that this new foundational and mechanism can avoid or at least control the ‘will to power’ that distorts the proper adjudication of the consequences. Put another way, the emphasis upon narratives means that the person or group able to come up with the best narrative will win and that there is no requirement that the narrative be true or false because the very categories of truth and falsity are themselves false. The result is that ‘social theory’ moves from foundationalism to complete nihilism and relativism: anything goes!

#### **4. From Social Theory to Critical Social Theory**

Seidman’s argument leaves us with two problems: (1) while he implies a normative ground for social theory, he fails to specify it; (2) his defense of narratives leaves open the possibility of complete relativism. [An aside: ironically, the second problem correctly reveals social theory as ideological. The critics of social theory, mocked by Seidman, are, in fact, correct.] Put another way, there is no way to determine the difference between domination and emancipation and why one should be preferred to the other (the first problem) and truth is irrelevant to his argument (the second problem). His attempt to subvert absolute, universal and foundational claims results in a position that appears to accept everything so long as it is able to account for itself in the form of a narrative. The second problem is epistemological and we will return to it shortly. For now, we will concern ourselves with the political problem.

The political problem is solved through answering the question, “What is critique in the service of?” or “Why do we bother to critique at all?” This problem is essential because without an answer there is no reason to critique in the first place – without a reason critique becomes complaining and entirely subjective. Put another way, can we work on Seidman’s narratives in

such a way that we maintain the rejection of positivism and foundationalism as well as the concern for the local while transforming his social theory into critical social theory?

The first answer we want to give is that critical social theory is in the service of democracy and autonomy. By democracy we mean, at the very least, that everyone effected by or implied in a decision should be allowed to participate in the making of that decision in a meaningful way. We also want to say that everyone who wants to participate in decision-making should not only have the right to do so, but also the have the means of doing so. This means that decisions must be made collectively and that individuals must be free and able to partake in the activity of collective decision making. That is, individuals must have the ‘free time’ to participate in politics without worrying about, for instance, financial or family obligations, and individuals must have the cultural and intellectual resources to participate in the making of complex decisions. We can then see the importance of autonomy: individuals and collectives must have the resources to participate in democracy. Autonomy, literally, refers to the making of one’s own laws, but it also refers to the ability to perform actions without relying upon others. Hence, autonomy must necessarily be opposed to heteronomy: the making of laws by others and the imposition of a situation in which autonomy is rendered impossible. Thus, critique must be in the service of autonomy by revealing and exposing forms and instances of heteronomy such that they can be combated in the name of democracy and autonomy. As pointed out by J.P. Arnason, in his paper, “The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity,” the “problematic of autonomy is above all a starting-point for the theory of modern democracy.” Arnason points to capitalism as a major source of heteronomy, but we would also want to point to, among other things, sex, gender, race, culture and religion.

Heteronomy is an institution: it is an institution that determines other institutions. In the context of capitalism, it makes sense to speak of capitalist society; in the context of sexism, it makes sense to speak of sexist society; and so on. What doesn't make sense is to speak of autonomous and democratic society except insofar as they constitute a political project against all forms of heteronomy. Thus, for Arnason, "the political project of autonomy is the cultural horizon of democratic institutions, inasmuch as they involve an explicit self-institution of society ... it also manifests itself in an enhanced capacity to question and transform cultural patterns."

Foucault suggests this relentless attack on heteronomy could be considered the 'ethos of Enlightenment.' Foucault advocates the "permanent critique of our historical era." This critique is "one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject." The horizon of this type of critique is the "otherwise," that things – forms of subjectivity, ways of relating, institutions – can be otherwise. That is to say they have not always been this way, that they have come to be this way, and, consequently, that they could be another way; that is, that they could be "otherwise," an otherwise aimed at maximizing freedom. Foucault describes this as a "limit attitude," a reflection on limits (i.e., heteronomy) and how they can be transformed (i.e., autonomy). Critical social theory takes this "limit attitude" and belief in an "otherwise" as its foundation in the attack upon heteronomy and its defense of autonomy and democracy.

## **5. Epistemology**

Finally we can turn to the last elements in our sketch of critical social theory: the epistemology or epistemologies proper to a critical theory of society. We considered two sorts of epistemology: first, we discussed Roy Bhaskar's critical realism and then we discussed perspectivism, using the examples of Patricia Hill Collins and Michel Foucault.

Epistemology is the subject of the second problem confronting Seidman's argument. Recall Seidman's argument in favour of post-modern social theory that suggested in the place of general theory supported by foundational claims, it was necessary to move in the direction of anti-foundational narratives. Social theory, therefore, would become the practice of intervening into events and conflicts through relating the narratives of the participants in those conflicts. As with critical social theory, Seidman's own post-modern social theory is at once interested in a political project (hence his extensive discussions of social conflicts and events) and the relation of those political projects to knowledge (the role of the social theorist). The problem, however, is that Seidman rejects any and all foundations as either ideological or as power-grabs. Thus, a claim to truth according to Seidman is actually an imposition of power. Consequently, there can be no such thing as truth, there is only power. Truth is a ruse of power. In other words, the purpose of the narrative is to be a weapon in the conflict. Insofar as the narrative is a weapon, it does not matter if the narrative is true or false, but, rather, that it is effective. The result of this is that anything goes. From the impossibility of universal and absolute foundations, Seidman concludes that there is no such thing as truth, that there is no such thing as knowledge, and that there are only narratives.

The problem is that anything goes. Any claim is possible and permissible so long as that claim doesn't involve either the presupposition of foundations or the supposition of its own truth. Consequently, the social theorist is reduced to the role of a propagandist: to the role of someone who recounts narratives on behalf of the participants in a struggle. [An aside: Seidman does not appear to consider the power relation implicit in the relation between the advocate of a struggle and the participants in the struggle.] If social theory is merely the recounting of narratives, it isn't clear why Seidman needs to or wants to retain 'social theory' as a category of analysis. Why is a

social theorist more able than a participant in the struggle to recount the narrative of that struggle? If truth isn't a concern because it is impossible, it doesn't really matter who tells the narrative. The social theorist qua social theorist has no role in the struggle.

While critical social theory wants to minimize the differences between lay and expert knowledge, it nonetheless also wants to assert that critical social theory is a specialized practice; the practice that critical social theorists perform. This sounds tautological, but it shouldn't. Critical social theorists work on events in order to study action and structures so as to provide tools for the participants in struggles to combat heteronomy and to defend autonomy and democracy. The role of the critical social theorist is, therefore, essential. Through the tools of critical social theory, the critical social theorist can intervene into an event and present an account of that event. While the account may not be 'true' in the strict sense of the term, it is nonetheless 'correct' in that it is the best possible account of the event that can be made so as to aid in the struggle. While not requiring absolute and universal foundations, critical social theory nonetheless requires some sort of epistemological orientation that enables the critical social theorist to isolate the relevant aspects of the event.

## **6. Critical Realism**

Roy Bhaskar's critical realism unites a political project with his academic work. For him, philosophy is in the service of political projects: "We need to take philosophy seriously because it is the discipline that has traditionally underwritten both what constitutes science or knowledge and which political practices are deemed legitimate." Bhaskar aligns his philosophy with what he calls socialism: "I take it that whatever our politics, in the narrow party or factional sense, socialists can agree that what we must be about today is the building of a movement for socialism – in which socialism wins a cultural-intellectual hegemony, so that it becomes the

enlightened common-sense of our age.” To put this obliquely, Bhaskar is interested in both meta-politics and meta-theory; he is interested in aligning left politics in such a way that it can transcend particular factions and he is interested in aligning critical theory under a meta-theory of scientific practice. That is, critical realism, according to Bhaskar, is in the service of human emancipation.

Such an alignment of politics and knowledge depends upon developing a concept of the social that is amenable to critical, scientific study. Socialism is a political project of radical transformation and, as a project of transformation, it requires concrete knowledge that can be used in its project: the “critical realism which I have expounded conceives the world as being structured, differentiated and changing [...] we will only be able to understand – and so change – the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events or discourses. Such structures are irreducible to the patterns of events and discourses alike. These structures are not spontaneously apparent in the observable patterns of events; they can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences.” Critical realism, therefore, has the task of constructing a theory of society that is amenable to use in the political project of socialism.

Transformation is a central concept in critical realism: the relationship between social structures and human agency is based upon a transformational concept of social action that is irreducible to voluntarism and reification. Similarly, the emphasis upon the social as consisting in relations rejects both ‘atomistic individualism’ and ‘undifferentiated collectivism.’ Finally, Bhaskar rejects both deterministic and eclectic explanations.

For social action of any kind to be possible, social structures must already exist because they provide “the means, media, rules and resources for everything we do.” For this to be true,

society cannot be something we spontaneously create through our actions (voluntarism) but, equally, it is not something that exists independently of us (reification) because our everyday activity requires the prior existence of social structures and also our everyday activity both reproduces and transforms the social structures. At the same time, however, the social structures themselves depend upon social relations for their own existence because it is out of social relations that social structures emerge. According to Bhaskar, the connection of social relations and social structures designates society as something real; that is, something amenable to transformation and change and which has real effects. [An aside: we might want to consider the ways in which Seidman's consequences and Bhaskar's effects relate or do not relate to one another.]

### **Bhaskar's Enemies**

<i>Type of Explanation</i>	<b>Determinism</b> One type of relation determines all the others.	<b>Eclecticism</b> Anything goes – there are no relations which tend to determine the others.
<i>Type of Association</i>	<b>Voluntarism</b> We 'create' society.	<b>Reification</b> Society exists independently of us.
<i>Unit of Analysis</i>	<b>Atomic Individualism</b> Describing facts about individuals exhaustively explains society.	<b>Undifferentiated Collectivism</b> Describing facts about groups exhaustively explains society.
<i>Political Level</i>	<b>Liberalism</b> Conjunction of voluntarism and atomic individualism.	<b>Labourism (Stalinism)</b> Conjunction of reification and undifferentiated collectivism.

The problem, however, is that while society is something real, something with effects, and something that is reproduced and transformed through action, the agents of its transformation and reproduction may not be conscious of or even aware of their role in the

maintenance and transformation of society. Thus, society can appear as something opaque to the agents who sustain its existence.

The role of critical social theory, therefore, is to render society knowable in such a way that this knowledge can contribute to the socialist transformation of society. Hence, “while social structures are dependent upon the consciousness which the agents who reproduce or transform them have, they are not reducible to this consciousness ... They always have a material dimension.” Critical social theory takes the consciousness of social structures and the material dimension of the social structures as its object such that the transformation of these – the material and consciousness – is always possible.

Such an understanding of social structures and social relations implies that the world cannot be changed and transformed in accordance with the goal of socialism without an adequate interpretation or understanding of society. Critical realism, so to speak, provides a method for this understanding. Bhaskar points to two problems confronting critical realism in this regard:

- (1) “Because social systems are intrinsically open and cannot be artificially closed, our criteria for the empirical testing of social theories cannot be predictive and so must be exclusively explanatory;”
- (2) “Social theory and social reality are causally interdependent. This is not to say that the social theorist ‘constructs’ social reality. But it is to say that social theory is practically conditioned by, and potentially has, practical consequences in society.”

The first problem, it should be noted, points back to the Parsons/Seidman. Bhaskar’s point here recognizes Seidman’s argument that the logically closed system of general theory proposed by Parsons is impossible. Bhaskar even superficially agrees with Seidman that social theory cannot be predictive (again, contra Parsons) but only descriptive and explanatory. Where Bhaskar

disagrees with Seidman is with the form of explanation: Seidman's post-modern narratives are not sufficient and do not constitute social science in Bhaskar's sense because Seidman's narratives are not – or at least they do have to be – realist.

The possibility of a social *science* is what separates Bhaskar and Seidman on this point. Against Seidman, Bhaskar argues that society is a real object and, as a real object, it is possible to study it in a social scientific manner, although, most certainly, the 'scientific' manner cannot be positivistic nor can it be on the exact same model as the natural sciences. Social science is therefore a real possibility (one discounted or rejected by Seidman) and the task of critical realism is to make this possibility actual. The type of science proper to social science depends upon the way in which society is real. The reality of a real object can be determined in two ways, and the way in which an object is real points to the way in which we can study them. Reality is either perceptual or causal. Society is, quite clearly, not the sort of object that can be perceived. But, while we will never perceive the object that is society, we can know it through its effects; that is, via its causal impact on us – society can bring about change or, at least, can effect the sort of actions we can perform.

The question, then, is how do we know the effects caused by society? That is, what, exactly, do we study when we are studying society? Bhaskar has already excluded two possible answers: atomistic individualism (describing facts about individuals explains society) and undifferentiated collectivism (describing facts about the group explains society). Rather than individuals or groups, Bhaskar points to social structures and social relations: "sociology is not concerned, as such, with large scale, mass or group behaviour, conceived as the behaviour of large numbers, masses or groups of individuals, but (paradigmatically) with persistent *relations* between individuals (and groups), and with the relations between these relations." Critical social

theory studies the relations between people and each other, their products and activities, the natural world and themselves. This “nexus” (as Bhaskar calls it) is the object of social scientific explanation. That is, social science can only *explain* these relations (the ‘nexus’) and the effects they *tend* to have. Thus, contra Parsons, social science cannot make predictions on the basis of social laws; it can only explain. And, contra Seidman, a narrative is not explanatory.

Further, and this is essential, because social theory and social reality are causally interdependent, critical social theory cannot be content with merely explaining social reality, it must also explain itself. Critical social theory must also be an object of investigation and explanation because critical social theory cannot possibly be neutral given its interdependence with social reality. Social theory, in Bhaskar’s sense, is always “a practical intervention in social life” and, thus, often entails values and actions. In the case of critical realism, this entails socialism and the radical transformation of social relations and social structures.

## **7. Perspectivism**

While I originally conceived the course as presenting two general epistemological options for critical social theory, as I’ve given you these lectures, I’ve wondered if the realist and perspectivist positions are as much at odds with one another as I had previously thought. So, I want to point to two areas of continuity I’ve overlooked before moving on to the discussion of perspectivism as such. First, perspectivism takes a plurality of perspectives on *the same object* for granted in which none of the perspectives is final, complete or total. Thus any perspective is of necessity partial and incomplete and, while each perspective might be incommensurable with the others and while the perspectives cannot be joined together to reach the complete picture, this does not preclude the fact that all of the perspectives are perspectives on the same object. What this suggests is that the object of a perspective is real. The object is real in Bhaskar’s sense – it

has effects. Where perspectivism comes in is with the effects: the effects are known and experienced differently depending upon the standpoint of the perspective. For instance, sexism is just as real to the men who benefit from it as it is to the women who suffer from it; however, it cannot be said that their understanding and experience of sexism is equivalent and, thus, they have different perspectives on the same object. Second, Bhaskar points out that critical realism cannot be conceived as value neutral because the work of critical realism often entails action geared toward social transformation. The need for transformation depends upon a perspective that can see the necessity for this transformation. Bhaskar's socialism is incomprehensible from the perspective of capital. Thus, while realists might question an epistemological commitment to perspectivism and perspectivists might question an epistemological commitment to realism, I don't think these positions are necessarily incompatible.

But enough of these possible continuities, on with perspectivism. Our discussion of perspectivism looked at Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy and Patricia Hill Collins' concept of Black feminist epistemology, or standpoint theory. It should be pointed out again that Collins did not conceive of her standpoint epistemology as in dialogue with Foucault's. I think she's wrong on this point and we will discuss them as though they are putting forward similar positions, even if they do not understand themselves in such a way.

Collins takes the matrix of "intersecting oppressions" and the historical and continued oppression Black women suffer as her starting point. The point about intersecting oppressions is that oppression is not simply a matter of either being free or being oppressed. This can be demonstrated intuitively and schematically: relative to men, women are in a position of oppression; relative to Whites, Blacks are in a position of oppression; relative to White men and women and Black men, Black women are in a position of oppression; but, relative to White

women, Black men and Black women are in a position of oppression. One could easily add a number of other categories to the schema and roughly complete the matrix – sexual orientation, (dis)ability, class, etc. The important point here, however, isn't with oppression as such, but rather with the relation one has between one's standpoint in the matrix in relation to knowledge. Thus, we could assume that the majority of social scientific knowledge has an especially close relationship with the standpoint from which much of it was produced; that is, the standpoint of White men. Conversely, despite their exclusion from the production of knowledge, black women have a privileged point of access to knowledge because of their subjugated position. Collins calls this the 'subjugated knowledge' that is produced by Black feminist thought. Their very position in the matrix of intersecting oppressions grants Black women access to a privileged perspective on knowledge and oppression. Thus, "as critical social theory, U.S. Black feminist thought reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators." The contribution of Black feminist epistemology to critical social theory is essential because "the level of epistemology ... determines which questions merit investigation, which interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and to what use any ensuing knowledge will be put ... epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead, these concerns tap the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail." Collins discussion points to the connection between knowledge and power.

She notes that knowledge is ultimately determined by political criteria: (1) knowledge claims are evaluated by a group of experts who bring with them their own history and standpoint; (2) each group of experts must be able to maintain its credibility in relation to other groups of experts and to the population at large and, so, radical or non-commonsensual ideas are at an immediate disadvantage relative to commonly accepted views. Thus, on both accounts, Black

feminist thought is in a weak position in comparison to other forms of thought. Further, the dominant groups are able to define their standpoint as neutral and thus exclude non-neutral standpoints – that is, standpoints other than their own – on the basis that they are not scientific.

In contradistinction to the official, dominant forms of thought, Collins points to the importance of knowledge that emerges from the everyday lived experience of oppression. She suggests that it is not individuals as such who are oppressed, but rather communities as a whole and its through the communal experience of oppression – through dialogue, connectedness and emotional bonds – that the knowledge of Black women emerges. Despite the communal form of the knowledge, it nonetheless does not claim to be universal or absolute. Rather, “because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is incomplete.” Thus, Black feminist thought must communicate beyond its own local situation to bring itself in dialogue with other groups and contribute to “building group solidarities across differences.”

Because Collins so ably presents the perspectivist position, I won’t say too much about Foucault because, as I indicated, I don’t think their respective arguments are all that distant from one another. But I do want to briefly discuss what Foucault has to say about science, subjugated knowledges and genealogy because it points to a method of making sense of the variety of subjugated knowledges.

Foucault points to what he calls the efficacy of “local critiques’ and the “return of knowledges.” The local critiques refer to a variety of social movements – feminism, anti-psychiatry, prison reform and decarceration – that offered critiques aimed at local sites and situations in order to bring about particular, specific changes. At issue here is the distinction between “local critiques” and what he describes as “totalizing theories” such as Marxism and psychoanalysis. While Foucault recognizes that these theories have provided tools that have

proven effective at the local level, their efficacy at the local level has been on the condition that their systematic character be interrupted. Foucault points to the importance of affinities between struggles, but he also insists that these affinities should not be systematized under a global theory because there is something about the local that produces its own theoretical practice without reference to any global or universal perspective. Here we can see a similarity to Collins' suggestion that groups "build solidarities across differences." Hence, insofar as these local struggles are concerned, an openness to the knowledge provided by the local standpoint has been essential.

These local critiques have been made possible by the "return of knowledges;" the return of local knowledges that have not been systematized and that have resisted being incorporated into a system. These knowledges are described by Foucault as "subjugated" and coming "from below." That is, they are "a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity." Foucault indicates a number of these knowledges that depend upon the position of the knowing subject: the psychiatrized, the patient, the delinquent, the common sense of common people, etc. That is, Foucault points to the "historical knowledge of struggles" that these subject positions embody. Reactivating the historical knowledge of struggles is the task of the genealogist: "we can give the name 'genealogy' to this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics." Genealogy, as the combination of the local and the scholarly, presents "antisciences" whose purpose it is "to fight the power-effects characteristic of any discourse that is regarded as scientific." The important point for Foucault is

that the distinction between science and non-science, between the systematic and the local, is the attempt to shut-off particular knowledges and perspectives.

What perspectivism contributes to critical social theory is an epistemology that takes into account the importance of one's position in "the matrix of intersecting oppressions" in the production and reception of knowledge. The production of knowledge, according to perspectivism, is tied to one's standpoint and relates to power: the power to dominate or impose one's standpoint on others and have it recognized as true. Unlike Seidman's post-modern narratives which entirely do away with truth and only pay attention to power, and unlike Bhaskar's critical realism which does not take account of power at all, perspectivism points to the relationship between power and knowledge without reducing knowledge to power.

## **8. Critical Social Theory**

We have now reached a point where we can attempt to provide an answer to the question, "What is critical social theory?" Recall, the lecture began with two unsatisfactory alternatives in social theory: on the one hand, Talcott Parsons' general theory of society (structural-functionalism) and, on the other hand, Steven Seidman's post-modern narratives. Where the former proposed a foundational epistemology, a closed system, and demanded the production of social laws, the latter claimed that each of these was impossible and, consequently, that the theoretical enterprise should concentrate on relating the narratives of participants in social conflicts. We tentatively agreed with Seidman: given those options, his post-modern social theory was preferable to structural-functionalism. The problem, however, was that there was nothing particularly *critical* in Seidman's position. His position, rather than making criticism possible, made it impossible because, by his account, narratives qua narratives are equivalent; the only difference between narratives is the power of the people whose story they tell. Knowledge,

for Seidman is just another form of domination, it is just an expression of power. In other words, for Seidman, it appears that ‘anything goes.’ As critical social theorists, we find such a move unhelpful: critique becomes complaint and it only reflects personal subjective preferences. Our solution to the problem presented by the move away from a foundational epistemology was to tie the enterprise of social theory to a normative project. What makes critical social theory ‘critical’ is that its critique is in the service of the normative project of autonomy and democracy. Thus, critical social theory seeks out heteronomy – institutions, structures and relations – that prevent the creation of an ‘autonomous society,’ one that is autonomous at both the individual and collective levels. The problem, however, is that without an epistemology, critical social theory is unable to describe any particular instance of heteronomy with any hope of accuracy and correctness. The first step in constructing an epistemology was to determine whether or not social objects could be described as real and, if they were real, what sort of engagement we should have with them. Drawing upon the critical realism developed by Roy Bhaskar, we discussed that objects could be called real if they produced effects. While studying effects could generate knowledge, it was not the sort of knowledge amenable to the positivistic enterprise of producing social laws. Bhaskar argued that effects could not be predicted, but could only be explained. Thus, for us, the importance of effects for critical social theory was that the task of critical social theory would be to explain these effects – where they come from, what they do, and how they can be changed. While the shift to effects is quite important, we don’t want our interventions into oppression and domination to be re-captured by our opponents such that what we uncover becomes the useful to them in their own projects. As such, rather than ‘scientifying’ our method, we want to keep our analysis as close to the sites of oppression as possible. Hence, we want to draw attention to how knowledge emerges in a local context of intersecting

oppressions. Remaining attentive to our own position in the academy and to the local context of oppression, we look to genealogy to provide an ‘anti-science’ that resists systematization and co-optation.

The question, then, having *described* critical social theory, can it be more or less *defined*? Perhaps not with the purpose of fixing the field of critical social theory, but rather with the intention of providing an answer when someone asks you, “Just what are you doing when you are doing critical social theory?” Let’s try the following as a tentative definition, one subject to revision when needed:

*Critical social theory is a form of theoretical practice in the social sciences which attempts to further the project of ‘the autonomous society’ by providing a relentless critique of all forms of domination, oppression and heteronomy. Critical social theory presents an anti-foundational epistemology that is sensitive to the local context of struggles against oppression recognizing that struggle and conflict does not take place in a vacuum, but, rather, in the historical context of a ‘matrix of intersecting oppressions.’ Oppression and domination are real and, thus, are able to be recounted in a correct and truthful manner, even if the truth is partial as it arises from one’s location in the intersecting matrix of oppressions. Recounting the stories of struggle in the local context, armed with the tools of social science, critical social theory aims its genealogies at the present in the form of a constant intervention against heteronomy.*

## 9. Post-Critique

Finally, we should end with a word of warning: being critical towards heteronomy does not alleviate the responsibility to be critical towards oneself and the critique that one produces. Self-critique is as important as other-critique. The flip-side of the “matrix of intersecting oppressions” is a “matrix of intersecting dominations.” That is to say, in order for there to be people who are oppressed, there must be people who dominate. As academics and scholars in a university setting, we have the privilege and relative freedom to engage in critique – a freedom and privilege that is often absent or even impossible in the local setting: a cop in the middle of beating a ‘suspect’ is most likely not interested in hearing a critique of police powers, the law, and their complicity in domination and oppression and, similarly, while being beaten by a cop,

one isn't in the position to offer a critique. The cost of our relative safety and security is that we must ensure that we do not abuse the power afforded to us by our privileged location. Critical social theorists are not magically located outside of domination and oppression – we, like so many others, both contribute to and benefit from oppression and domination. In other words, we must not fall into self-righteous complacency.

Self-critique, as a type of critique of critique, has the appearance of being a ridiculous academic exercise; an exercise in narcissism about our own self-importance. Such an observation misses the point. Critique that is not willing to open itself up to critique cannot be properly considered critique. As David Couzens Hoy notes, “resistance that was unwilling to be both critical and self-critical would not even be worth attempting in the first place.”

## **10. End and Administration**

This brings us to the end of our course. I want to say – and I'm not *just* saying this – that you have been, by far, one of the best – if not *the* best – groups of students I've had the pleasure of teaching in recent years. I have thoroughly enjoyed teaching this class, discussing the issues and topics with you, and reading your papers. On that note, do remember that some of you still need to complete your final exegetical assignment; indeed, it should be handed in today. Also, don't forget to pick up a copy of the exam questions; your answers are due on the final day of the exam period. Good luck on the exam and enjoy your summer!