24.635: Topics in Critical Social Theory
Sp2023

Reading: Ortner, Sherry. 1984. "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties" (page citations below to this article)

1. What is social theory?

Very broadly, social theory is the interdisciplinary study of society. It includes questions concerning how societies, and elements of them, form, change, and disappear, and also more specific questions that arise in understanding how society works. Social theory includes "normative concerns bearing on debates about desirable ends or values of social life—about how social life ideally "ought to be"—in ways that overlap closely with concerns in the fields of moral, political, and legal philosophy."[1]

2. Basics

In thinking about societies, there are multiple basic questions:

1) In what sense do societies (or even organizations, states, etc.) exist over and above the individuals who make them up?

> *Classic methodological individualism* (**MI**): "in sociological work these collectivities [states, organizations, groups] must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action" (Weber 1922, 13).

For some time, methodological individualism has been divided into two claims:

> *Ontological individualism:* social facts are *exhaustively determined* by facts about individuals and their interactions, e.g., a mob consists in a group of individuals. (Epstein 2015, 11)

> *Explanatory individualism:* social facts are best *explained* in terms of individuals and their interactions, e.g., psychological explanations of joint action. (Epstein 2015, 11)

>> *Agent centered explanation:* the agent's point of view is essential to adequate explanation of human behavior. Agents respond to reasons, and adequate explanation of their behavior is *interpretive* (*verstehen* explanation).

2) What explains the unity and stability of a society? How do societies evolve over time?

> Although individualists may want to explain unity and stability by reference to individuals, e.g., their interests or preferences, this is typically where it is helpful to bring in the idea of societies as dynamically homeostatic systems with structures. It is an ongoing question how to understand the ontology of systems and structures, and whether they are reducible (in some sense) to individuals and their interactions.

> This raises the question: what is the relationship between agents and social structures? On one hand, it would seem (especially given MI) that agents make up social structures, so how can social structures be something "over and above" agents? But the stability of social phenomena seems to

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[1] https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0054.xml

depend on structures managing individuals. Does this make individuals just cogs in a machine? How do we capture human agency?

3) How are societies affected by and responsive to external conditions, e.g., the material environment, other societies?

Societies (and their subsystems) are not closed, but are open systems that take input from outside. How do we individuate systems? How do systems interact? (This is relevant to intersectionality.)

4) What makes for a good society? How ought we to live together?

Societies all involve social norms for interaction. How should we understand these norms? And how and how are they related to moral/political norms?

To answer these questions, it has seemed that we should consider:

Agents (individual persons)

Culture (norms, values, symbols)

Structures (economic, legal, and political frames for agency) and systems (simple, complex…)

Material conditions (human bodily needs, geography, climate)

Bases for critique (the value of autonomy, well-being, relational equality)

3. Recent history of social theory (Ortner's narrative)
Classics:

Marx – materialist with emphasis on economic exploitation and social critique
Weber – methodological individualist with emphasis on subject's perspective on action (*verstehen* explanation)
Durkheim – functionalist with emphasis on causal/functional/structural explanation

Early 1960s: 3 new paradigms

Symbolic Anthropology (Geertz (influenced by Weber), Turner (influenced by Durkheim))

> To undertake the study of cultural activity – activity in which symbolism forms the positive content – is thus not to abandon social analysis for a Platonic cave of shadows, to enter into a mentalistic world of introspective psychology or, worse, speculative philosophy, and wander there forever in a haze of "Cognitions," "Affections," "Conations," and other elusive entities. Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture. (Geertz "Religion as a Cultural System," 91).

Geertz:

Geertz's most radical theoretical move (1973b) was to argue that culture is not something locked inside of people's heads, but rather is embodied in public symbols, symbols through which the members of a society communicate their worldview, value-orientations, ethos, and all the rest to one another, to future generations – and to anthropologists. (Ortner 129)

- Culture is not a "worldview" but an ethos with affective and stylistic dimensions. The point is not to "lay bare a set of cognitive ordering principles but (especially) to understand how the

> Balinese way of chopping up time stamps their sense of self, of social relations, and of conduct with a particular culturally distinctive flavor, and ethos. (Ortner 129).

- Geertz also adopted an agent-centered form of explanation.
    > What it means…is that culture is a product of acting social beings trying to make sense of the world in which they find themselves, and if *we* are to make sense of a culture, we must situate ourselves in the position from which it was constructed. (Ortner 130).

Schneider was in the same school, but was more interested in the "*internal logic* of systems of symbols" (Ortner 130).

Turner "stressed that the normal state of society is not one of harmonious integration of parts, but rather one of conflict and contradiction." (Ortner 130) The question shifts from how solidarity is sustained, to how it is achieved in the first place.

Challenges (Ortner 130-31):
i) Didn't develop a political theory or an account of the interdependence of culture and politics.
ii) Didn't develop an account of the production and maintenance of symbolic systems.
iii) Focused on agent-centered explanation at the expense of other forms of explanation.

Cultural Ecology (White, Sahlins, Service)

Cultural ecologists emphasized, in contrast to the symbolic anthropologists, that societies are situated in particular environmental conditions and are adaptive, and they were suspicious of a lack of scientific rigor. On their view, societies are not closed systems:

> [cultural ecology] shifts attention to the relation between inside and outside; it envisions as the mainspring of the evolutionary movement the interchange between culture and environment…Adaption is real, naturalistic, anchored to those historic events of cultures that inner dynamism ignores. [Ortner 133, Sahlins 1964: 135-6)

This approach, following Durkheim, tended to focus on the ways in which parts of culture/society have "adaptive or system-maintaining functions." Society exists within an environment and has to manage it and its relationship to it.

Challenges:
i) Tended to ignore agent-centered explanation in favor of functional/adaptive explanation
ii) Tended to be less interested in cultural dynamics.

Structuralism (Levi-Strauss)

Levi-Strauss:

> Cultures are primarily systems of classification, as well as the sets of institutional and intellectual productions build upon those systems of classification and performing further operations upon them. One of the most important secondary operations of culture in relation to its own taxonomies is precisely to mediate or reconcile the oppositions which are the bases of these taxonomies in the first place. (Ortner 135)

Challenges:
i) Does this ground the parallels between cultures in the mind? Is it a kind of Chomskyan nativism? Ortner says no.
ii) Levi-Strauss was quite formalistic – less interested in the particular contents of the classifications.

iii) In contrast to the symbolic anthropologists, he was focused on cognition rather than the richer psychological ethos of culture.
iv) It wasn't focused on agent-centered explanation; agents seem to be driven by forces beyond themselves.

Advantage: it allows us to distinguish simple transformations within a system and revolutionary transformations that change the structure. (Ortner 136) How?

<u>1970s Social Theory</u>

Structural Marxism
> The specific advance of structural Marxism over its antecedent forms of materialist anthropology lay in its locating the determinative forces not in the natural environment and/or in technology, but specifically within certain structures of social relations. (Ortner 139)

It didn't dismiss culture (like the cultural ecologists) or dismiss the structuring forces of the material conditions (like the symbolic anthropologists), but "allocated to cultural phenomena (beliefs, values, classifications) at least one central function…culture was converted to "ideology," and considered from the point of view of its role in social reproduction; legitimating the existing order, mediating contradictions in the base, and mystifying the sources of exploitation and inequality in the system." (Ortner 140) So the "material" and "cultural" were interdependent.

Challenges:
i) All culture became "ideology" with the function of mystification and maintenance of the status quo. This is too strong. (Ortner 140-41)
ii) It maintained an analytical distinction between base and superstructure, and tended to see them as fixed rather than historically/contextually variable.

Political Economy
Political economists shifted emphasis from particular societies to "large-scale regional political/economic systems." (Ortner 141) The project takes seriously the fact that societies are part of wider systems of exchange, both economic and cultural.

Challenges:
i) Tends to be too economistic and capitalist focused. Societies are not merely structured by capitalism.
ii) "History is often treated as something that arrives, like a ship, from outside the society in question." (Ortner 143)
iii) Again, agent-centered perspective is ignored. Social agents are "passive reactors to and enactors of some "system," [rather than] active agents and subjects in their own history." (Ortner 143)

<u>1980s Practice Theory</u>

General features:

- Find a way to allow that there is a system that has a deep effect on human agency without minimizing agency.
- Seek to "understand where "the system" comes from – how it is produced and reproduced, and how it may have changed in the past or be changed in the future. (Ortner 146)

- Attend to the fact that
  > the most important forms of action or interaction for analytic purposes are those which take place in asymmetrical or dominated relations, that it is these forms of action or interaction that best explain the shape of any given system at any given time. Whether it is a matter of focusing directly on interaction (even 'struggle') between asymmetrically related actors, or whether it is more broadly a matter of defining actors (whatever they are doing) in terms of roles and statuses derived from asymmetrical relations in which they participate, the approach tends to highlight social asymmetry as the most important dimension of both action and structure." (Ortner 147)

- Resist the division of society into base and superstructure, or society and culture.
  > An institution – say a marriage system – is at once a system of social relations, economic arrangements, political processes, cultural categories, norms, values, ideals, emotional patterns, and so on and so on. No attempt is made to sort these components into levels and assign primacy to one or another level. (Ortner 148)

- Emphasize not just agential "moves" but the background against which these moves are situated and their long-term patterns.

- Resist a voluntarism where agents are assumed to be "free" to do what they choose. Attend to the domains in which "action proceeds with little reflection" and perpetuates the system. (Ortner 150; also 154)

- Resist an account of human agency according to which we are all pursuing our individual interests all the time, or navigating contradictions. "Intrinsic to the [practice] perspective is a sense of motive and action as shaped not only by problems being solved, and gains being sought, but by images and ideals of what constitutes goodness – in people, in relationships, and in conditions of life." (Ortner 142)

- Rather than focusing on the mystifying power of culture, include culture in the constitution of social reality. "In the [practice approach], there is only one reality, and it is culturally constituted from top to bottom. The problem is not that of the system telling us lies about some extrasystemic "reality," but of why the system as a whole has a certain configuration, and of why and how it excludes alternative possible configurations." (Ortner 153)

- Rather than assuming that change requires the development of a counterculture where people ""escape" the prevailing hegemony" and engage in class struggle (though this is possible and sometimes necessary), allow for the fact that change can happen when existing practices cannot accommodate "novel phenomena." (Ortner 155). "[the] change of context, this refractoriness of the real world to traditional expectations, calls into question both the strategies of practice and the nature of the relationships they presuppose." (Ortner 155-6) "Change…is failed reproduction," (Ortner 156) However, such change cannot happen overnight but involves several generations.

Challenges:
i) We need not only to focus on asymmetrical and oppressive social relations, but also "patterns of cooperation, reciprocity, and solidarity." (Ortner 157) In short, the care infrastructure.
ii) Practice theory doesn't adequately accommodate the intentional efforts to maintain or disrupt social systems. There are powerful agents who prevent social change.
iii) It still remains unclear how social theory is related to political theory and moral theory.