



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

What is meant by critical engagement and the use of theory?

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Topics today

- Critical engagement with literature
 - Do I need to use theory?
- How to structure the dissertation

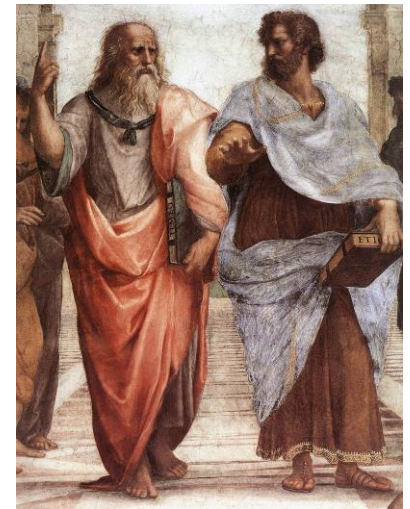
Critical engagement with literature

- What is a theory?
- A theory is a tool for understanding, explaining and analysing.



Theories: what and from whence

- Where do theories come from:
 - Philosophy – ex. Structuralism, and post-structuralism
 - Science – ex. Macro-economic theory
 - Society & politics – ex. Feminism
 - Anthropology – ex. Post-colonialism, and reflexivity



Should we use theory?

- Empirical approach (i.e. looking directly at the evidence) fairly common in Humanities
- Proponents of theory may view 'under-theorised' investigations are inadequate because 'they depend on a set of implicit and problematic assumptions masquerading as "common sense".' (Morley 2004: 1).
- Counter view – modern concepts and theories, misleading and anachronistic.
- Trying to force a past reality to fit abstract models?
 - Overly technical terminology (jargon, esoteric words).
- More simply theory can be described as 'a set of ideas and assumptions' that guide and inform historians practices and the way in which we interpret the world (Morley 2004: 3).

Potential value of theory

- To encourage the students to think of particular questions or issues to address.
 - What we focus on and how we compartmentalise history, culture or society matters.
 - E.g. influence of the development of the nation-state on nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship.
 - The cultural context in which we lives influences the types of questions we are interested in.
- To get scholars to think about the manner in which they approach the evidence – what techniques or tools to use in assessing the evidence.

Structuralism

- “A method of cultural analysis derived from structural linguistics and based on the observation that the same underlying units of culture could be found in all societies, despite their more noticeable diversity. It is held that these units, which may be beliefs, myths, ritual practices, and so on, can be identified and compared through systematic analysis to reveal underlying cultural structures. ” Elliot,
Mark, Ian Fairweather, Wendy Olsen, and Maria Pampaka. "structuralism." A Dictionary of Social Research Methods. : Oxford University Press.
- Read more: Piaget, Jean. *Structuralism*. London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971. Print.

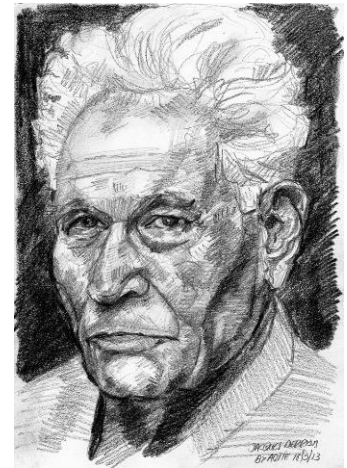


Claude Levi-
Strauss

Post-structuralism

- “The approach challenges the structuralist notion that there are fixed relationships between signs and meanings, between the signifier and the signified, arguing instead that meaning is contextualized within the individual and highly nuanced. A general trend of post-structuralist method, often termed deconstruction, is to unsettle any allegedly firm, detached, or neutral conclusions on the basis that claims of truth are internal to any particular discourse.”

Darvill, Timothy. "post-structuralism." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology*. : Oxford University Press, 2008.



Jacques
Derrida

- Read more: Attridge, Bennington, Young, Attridge, Derek, Bennington, Geoffrey, and Young, Robert. *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. Print.

Modernism

- “Roland Barthes, a French semiologist, saw Modernism as a pluralization of world-views that resulted from the evolution of new classes, technology, and communications that were gathering momentum in the mid-19th century, while the English novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf regarded it as a historic opportunity for change in human relationships and the human character. Although there is little unanimity as to when it began or exactly what its characteristics were, stylistically Modernism is usually depicted as a movement that explored the limits of the classical aesthetic forms of realist representation and narrative.” “Modernism.” *A Dictionary of Sociology*. Ed. Scott, John. : Oxford University Press, 2014. *Oxford Reference*. 2015.
- Read more: Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. Print. The New Critical Idiom.

Post-modernism

- “In its broad usage, this is a ‘family resemblance’ term deployed in a variety of contexts (architecture, painting, music, poetry, fiction, etc.) for things which seem to be related—if at all—by a laid-back pluralism of styles and a vague desire to have done with the pretensions of high-modernist culture. In philosophical terms post-modernism shares something with the critique of Enlightenment values and truth-claims mounted by thinkers of a liberal-communitarian persuasion; also with neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty who welcome the end of philosophy's presumptive role as a privileged, truth-telling discourse.”
Norris, Christopher. "post-modernism." *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. : Oxford University Press, 2005. [Oxford Reference](#). 2005.
- Read more: Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print. Very Short Introductions.

Post-colonialism



- “Epistemologically, the post-colonial viewpoint proposes a standpoint theory of knowledge, according to which knowledge and ideas are shaped by the perspective of a social group, and this perspective, in turn, is shaped by the social location of the group in historical distributions of material and cultural resources. For some this has implied a relativism and a denial of objectivity, according to which knowledge derived from a post-colonial standpoint must remain separate and distinct from that produced from the standpoint of the colonizer, rather than being integrated into any larger sociological or historical account.”
"post-colonialism." *A Dictionary of Sociology*. Ed. Scott, John. : Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Read more: Kohn, Margaret, Kohn, M., McBride, Keally, and McBride, K. *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations*. Oxford UP, 2011. Web.

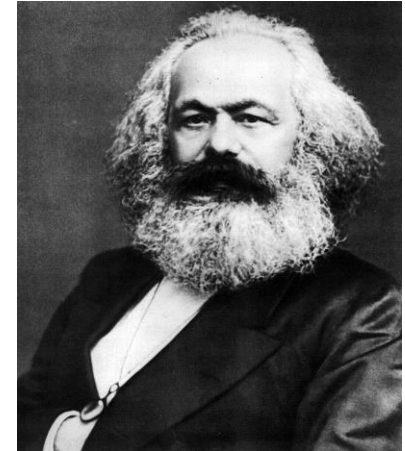
Marxism

- “Theoretically, Marxism is an adherence to at least some of the central ideas of Marx. These will typically include perceiving the social world in terms of categories of class as defined by relationships to economic and productive processes, belief in the development of society beyond the capitalist phase towards a revolution of the proletariat, in economics the labour theory of value, and above all rejection of the exploitation inherent in private control of productive processes. Practically, Marxism is a commitment to the exploited and oppressed classes, and to the revolution that should better their position.”

Blackburn, Simon. "Marxism." [The Oxford Dictionary of](#)

Philosophy : Oxford University Press, 2016.

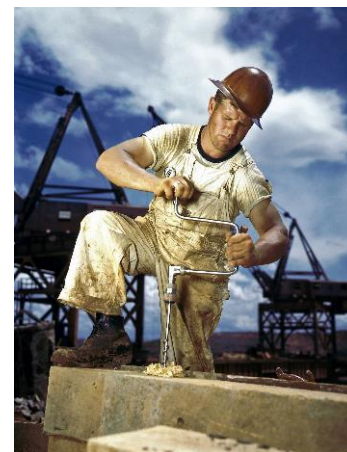
- Read more: Wesson, Robert G. *Why Marxism? : The Continuing Success of a Failed Theory*. London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1976. Print.



Karl Marx

Constructionism

- “Social constructionists challenge the positivist notion that social reality is given or unproblematically objective. They argue that observed social realities cannot be understood by disengaging them from the observers or from cultural and historical circumstances. Taken to the extreme, such a position is open to the criticism that it denies the possibility of transcultural and historical understanding. Social constructionism does generally reject the possibility of a strongly objectivist, externally scientific concept of truth in the study of society, but few social constructionists argue that social realities are so divergent as to provide no points of commonality, avenues of insight, or understanding among different perspectives.”
“constructionism.” *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. : Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Read more: Burr, Vivien. *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1995. Print.



Essentialism

- “The doctrine that it is correct to distinguish between those properties of a thing, or kind of thing, that are essential to it, and those that are merely accidental. Essential properties are ones that it cannot lose without ceasing to exist. Thus a person wearing a hat may take off the hat, or might not have been wearing the hat, but the same person cannot cease to occupy space, and we cannot postulate a possible situation in which the person is not occupying space. If we agree with this (it is not beyond debate, which illustrates the difficulty with essentialism), occupying space is an essential property of persons, but wearing a hat an accidental one. The main problem is to locate the grounds for this intuitive distinction. One suggestion is that it arises simply from the ways of describing things, and is therefore linguistic or even conventional in origin. Contrasted with this (the nominal essence) is the Lockean idea that things themselves have underlying natures (real essences) that underlie and explain their other properties.”

Blackburn, Simon. "essentialism." [The Oxford Dictionary of](#)

[Philosophy](#). : Oxford University Press, 2016.

Feminism/Feminist Theory



- “Feminism is a political position arguing for the equal treatment of women and men, and improved gender relations. Feminist theorists go further by offering a critique of male bias in the production of knowledge about the world. By shaping what can be known, this bias is seen to be at the root of exploitation in gender relations, calling for a radical questioning of the objectivity of knowledge. Key concepts include masculinity, stereotypes, marginalized voices, standpoints, gender blindness, and gender neutrality.”

theory.” *A Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. : Oxford University Press. *Oxford Reference*. 2016.

Elliot, Mark, Ian Fairweather, Wendy Olsen, and Maria Pampaka. “feminist

- Read more: Richardson, Robinson, Richardson, Diane, and Robinson, Victoria. *Introducing Women's Studies : Feminist Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993. Print.

Materiality

- “Although materiality generally refers to the qualities of physical objects, recent definitions in anthropology have defined it instead as the mutually constitutive interactions that take place between material objects, people, bodies, and cognition. ”
- Vivanco, L. materiality. In A Dictionary of Cultural Anthropology. : Oxford University Press. Retrieved 16 Aug. 2019,



The 'material turn'

- A focus on what objects *are* and what they *do*, as well as how people interact with them.
- Shift of focus away from instrumentalism (things as tools) and representation (things as signifiers) in dealing with things.
 - A challenge to unrefined representational approaches to material culture.

