Objectives of the Course

What is social theory? This is a question that all students in the social sciences are faced with at every level of the university, be it from first year undergraduate students to doctoral candidates, and eventually to practicing academics. This course is targeted at students in the first year of the doctoral programme who are expected to have some familiarity with sociological and anthropological theories and relevant engagements by philosophers. Rather than focus on a particular set of theorists or schools of theory, the course will try to provoke students to think about theory in a dialogical manner. Hence the course will encourage students to see how different theories or representatives of different theoretical schools/factions speak across to each other in the context of particular themes. The course will also encourage students to not merely read theory to but to engage with theory critically in relation to themes of interest that are reflected in contemporary sociological and anthropological research.

Unit 1: What is theory?

We begin this course with the basic question: ‘what is theory’? The starting point of this unit will be a major controversy that emerged around an intervention made by the Physicist Alan Sokal. Sokal had contributed an article to a prominent publication associated with the Post-Modern turn. Sokal’s article later emerged as a fake which he had written was written to uncover the problems and limitations that he felt existed in post-modernism and theory. While the Sokal affair is caught in concerns of truthfulness, authority and the ethical practices in scholarship, it also raised important questions with regards to the nature of theory. Is all theory susceptible to really being gibberish? Or did Sokal reveal fissures in the larger corpus of theory in social sciences?

Unit 2: Categories

Students of Sociology and Social Anthropology constantly engage with categories such as society, culture, the political, the social and community among many others. Nevertheless recent scholarship has shown how problematic these categories can be even though they are essential for conceiving sociological work. How do we approach categories like the social, cultural, community, publics and the political?


Samaddar, Ranabir. 2010. *The Emergence of the Political Subject*. New Delhi: Sage

Unit 3: Power, State and Ideologies

Contemporary social scientists are often faced with the question of dealing with ‘power’, ‘state’ and ‘ideology’. These topics have been covered by a range of scholars from Weber and Marx to Foucault and Bourdieu. New research in the social sciences in South Asia invariably implies an encounter with power, state and ideologies-as both concepts and as things in existence. Can they be further interrogated? Is it possible to see how scholarship, from very different standpoints in time and space can be brought into a dialogue? What are the varied responses that have been made to ‘power’, ‘state’ and ‘ideologies’?
Unit 4: Political Economy

Political economy serves as both object of and context for sociologists and anthropologists from the days of Marx to the present of Harvey. This unit will initiate a discussion on an anthropology/sociology of Political Economy.

There are many sources of Marx. Just in case here is a web link

Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*


Unit 5: Self, Being and Subjectivities

One of the challenges of Sociological theory has been with regards to notions of the self. How do we approach questions of selfhood in relation to social formations? This topic has further led to larger questions of being and ontology. Other scholars have also tried to look at the emergence of the ‘self’ in a genealogical mode situated in a particular historical trajectory. Students will be introduced to readings from Sociologists, Anthropologists and Philosophers studying the notions of self and being. Following this we shall look at the emergence of anthropological work on ‘subjectivities’ and the ‘body’ as a sociological phenomenon

Mauss, Marcel. 1979. *A category of the human mind: The notion of person, the notion of self from
Unit 6: Gender and Sexuality

The themes of Gender and Sexuality constitute a critical arena in anthropological and sociological debates. Both of these themes have been covered extensively by various scholars and in a range of courses. For this course, we shall engage with scholars whose work shows how Gender and Sexuality complicate the very categories that we think with as social scientists and in everyday life. Engagements with Gender and Sexuality may enable us to question the very suppositions social scientists often take for granted in their work. We shall start with a debate started by scholars such as Sherri Ortner and then proceed to Michel Foucault.


Unit 7: Language and Meaning

Language is a topic that has been of great interest for Sociologists and Anthropologists. Language has been treated not only in terms of communication but also as an important medium for approaching social concepts, practices and ways of thinking. Language also offers a way into a larger realm of symbols, meaning and processes of interpretation. In this unit we shall approach language through different authors with an emphasis on conceptual processes, interpretative action, and translation. Translation will be seen as not only related to language but also as a way to understand (mis)communication as a social process.
Unit 8: Location: Time and Place

All scholars in Sociology and Social Anthropology have to deal with questions of time and place. The concern with time and space/place is relevant at both the analytical and empirical levels. The concepts of Time and Place, by themselves and as perspectives that inform questions of location in scholarship, have been studied and discussed by Sociologists, Anthropologists and theorists from related disciplines. What can questions of Time and Place tell us about similarities and differences across societies? How can they inform analysis and critiques of sociological phenomenon and theory? The unit will then bring discussions of time and place together in a discussion of ‘eventful’ and the ‘everyday’.


Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press


Unit 9: Networks and other Connections

The study of networks and the ways individuals and societies forge, maintain and break connections have been integral to modern sociological and anthropological research. Networks also play an important role as objects of study for students of sociology. Networks are implicitly and explicitly implicated in all sociological phenomena. This unit will introduce students to research on networks and connectivity, drawing on readings that have achieved the status of classics in the field of study. Students will engage with the work of Bruno Latour work to take a material-semiotic approach of different ways of forging connections.


Unit 10: Advanced Social Theory: South Asian possibilities

Theory in sociology and anthropology has often been criticised as being euro-centric. Is there a non-western and specifically South Asian perspective for theory? The aim of this unit is to encourage students to see the sociology of south Asia beyond the lens of areas studies. Rather the unit will initiate a discussion with regards to the kind of contribution made by (a) South Asian Sociology. Yet the unit will also caution students to consider the development of theory in the sub-continent with regards to the politics of national boundaries and institutional practices.

