



Theory and Praxis Class at Project South
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THEORY AND PRAXIS: GENERAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PHILOSOPHY

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Welcome (Ruben Solis)

This will be a course on theory, leading to our knowing and understanding the basic aspects of philosophy. Today we'll consider the general history of philosophy. The second class will concern the main periods/eras of social development.

The tradition of thinking of theory as the mental work and praxis as the body work involves a false, western separation between the body and the mind.

Economic classes under capitalism have reflected divisions of labor rooted in a basic division of the mind from the body that depicted people who "are good with their hands" (as in, How many hands do we have for this task?) as workers with no need to use their minds. This division has led people to develop concepts and feelings of being superior or inferior.

Learning about the history of philosophy, as well as the theoretical dialectics of change and praxis will give us some basic knowledge of vocabulary and concepts. The next course can involve knocking down some of the sacred cows we will cover in this one.

Individual answers to **What do we know about theory?**

Theory is not neutral, not natural (not the result of nature). It is created and has an origin and an end. Think of it as developing within a particular ecology. We always need to ask whose theory it is and for what purposes, to be aware of the origins of thoughts and whom they benefit.

Theory of public education is an example of someone practicing their ideas.

Theory is how people have analyzed the story behind something, such as racism and education. Marxist theory, with its class analysis, has been popular for some. Many older people like theory, even when it has led to their dividing into camps fighting over what is the correct theory. This process seems strange to the younger people watching them.

Misuse of theory can lead to dogmatic interpretations that cause arguments over what is more rational or more scientific. Sectarianism involves making a firm choice between particular interpretations when there's actually no clear reason to do so.

Theory comes from struggle. It involves a way to explain things, to see worlds or not see them. It is a form of vision.

Philosophy seems to be a western world view that we need to fight against.

Theory is a tool that sometimes helps make sense of specific developments to allow better planning for how to change things.

Theory is an attempt to figure out phenomena, to develop an overall view/reason for how and why things happened as they did, to explain what naturally occurs.

What is the reason of nature or the nature of reason? This question is the heart of philosophy. Rationality, emphasizing reason, is only one particular philosophy out of a thousand or more. Theory involves explaining phenomena, bringing things together.

The gathering and hierarchy of thoughts is how we organize thinking in our brains, how we bring our thoughts together. When we're going through changes, we're re-organizing parts of our brains.

Ruben's Overview of the History of Philosophy

Before we begin to cut down the philosophers listed on the handout, we need to understand what they represented.

Some people seek data that they believe will support whatever they are determined to believe. They then use that data to try to convince others they are right.

Rationalists have claimed to have a scientific rationale for everything. For them, only their version of science, which they believe is objective rather than subjective, makes something true. They look for subjects and objects in nature. They believe that science is a tool that allows humans to prevail over/dominate nature. They do not consider land to be valuable until the trees are cut and a fence is put around it so they can privatize, clear, and "develop" it. Nature is, for them, an obstacle to development. Science is supposed to help them set nature aside whenever it seems to be in their way. The current climate and environmental crises have resulted from the false assumption that we can and should prevail over nature.

The analysis of indigenous people, on the other hand, has called for us to live in harmony with nature, cutting down trees only for a reason and only after asking permission.

Colonization/occupation has involved a clash between these two philosophies, between the indigenous and the rationalist way of seeing nature and how we should interact with it.

A key question for us should be, how do we define nature? All philosophers try to define nature. Different interpretations of nature have led to different philosophies. Eugenio Maria de Hostos wrote about nature. Hume decided that people are driven by our needs. Kant saw cosmic reality as unique.

Theory is a way of organizing information for analysis and is a reflection of practice. Analysis of theory develops new theory, which then leads to still more theory. Practice is the mother of invention.

The masses are the makers of history that philosophers then try to rationalize. Official religion tries to impose a particular interpretation of god(s).

Philosophers exist because some people had slaves to work for them so they could sit around and

think instead of working. Without slaves and other hard workers, there would have been no Renaissance or written works of philosophy.

Thoughts after Small Group Discussions about the vocabulary, people, and ideas in the history of western philosophy:

What has philosophy involved, as people explained things in different ways? How seriously should we take what these philosophers have said?

We need to hear another side, particularly about the role of government and human needs. Some have interpreted Gramsci's ideas about "cultural hegemony" to refer to ideological assumptions accepted by the majority of people as "the way things have to be." They have not realized that the existence of capitalism, for example, has a history and is not the result of a universal "human nature." We need to uncover what false assumptions we allow to continue because we have never thought about questioning them. This can also involve shining a light on knowledge hidden within theories.

Epistemology (theories about knowledge) needs to include the existence of epistemological genocide.

Ideas are machines; concepts carry out work. They shape what we "know" to be real and what we do. Different philosophies are inside us, affecting us in varying ways.

It is important to know the historical context of each philosophy. Some philosophies considered revolutionary in their day accepted the idea that kings had the right to take rights and property from people.

Which of the philosophers assumed that blacks were not human (including those who said some people should vote)? Which of their influential ideas actually harmed groups of people? Kant, for example, wrote, "The Black is not a human." Philosophers and others have made up stories about the stars and trees in order to naturalize things in ways that are limiting.

The concept of the Social Contract makes me angry.

There is something sneaky about the idea of natural rights, involving a leap from observing and witnessing reality to prescribing and locking down reality. Some philosophies didn't consider very many people to be human; the ancient Greeks defined democracy as allowing only those who were born "free citizens" to participate in government.

What about theories from outside of Europe?

How much weight have these philosophers had over our lives? To what extent are we basing our current assumptions practices on problematic philosophies?

Philosophers have restricted what had been more open thinking by putting groups of people inside of specific boxes. Invisible "truths" such as the mind-body split have not allowed a free range for us to think for ourselves.

Some of these philosophies are rigid, but as a midwifery teacher stressed, we need to understand other people's ideas and lives, even if we disagree with them.

If we take a good idea and then make it too rigid, it becomes an ideology.

By paying attention to the context in which people were writing, we can learn how epistemology for black feminists has differed from what white male philosophers have said.

The philosophies defined on the handout seem like school lessons that are hard to take in, so I cannot identify with any of them. (This is an approach Nietzsche agreed with.)

Much of this leads to feelings of annoyance and then excitement over the annoyance, similar to arguing with Sunday School teachers. The philosophy of epistemology seemed good because it involved asking questions, but then there were new “right” arguments and a struggle between striving for understanding and striving to restrict understanding.

Is a philosophy or a political stand that someone believes a box that limits possibilities? Is it possible to think that someone can be at either end at the same time?

Learning about Appalachian history revealed that the derogatory term “hillbillies” hid a real culture. They are facing the issue of coal companies removing the tops of mountains, but many of them also support waving the Confederate flag as a form of “protecting what’s mine.”

Is philosophy conscious power or is it essentially supporting or opposing oppression?

There is a conflict between being loyal to a community and being aware that we are asked to fight for the nation or for schools that are not really our schools. This sets my hood against the imposed image of a nation.

Philosophy can hold positions on behavior, as when school justice has to fight the philosophy calling for schools to make students sit in rows and stand in lines to prepare them to work in a factory or the military. We see our philosophies in the way we do things.

There’s no position outside of some kind of philosophy. These centralized systems name what our fights should and could be. How do we name the real fights? Is it about a bill or a house or a school or what?

Ruben’s (and maybe others’) thoughts inspired by what individuals said about the philosophers:
I heard anger, confusion, people feeling pissed off, but also a desire to understand.

One version of philosophy involves oppression and hegemony; another is our tendency to consider our own philosophy to be good, wholesome, helpful.

We need to identify our philosophy and ideology as we destroy the fallacies of the old western philosophies.

Everyone has a philosophy. Even Nihilism, the rejection of all philosophies because nothing can be known, is itself a philosophy. We have to consider where certain parts of our philosophy came from and how we can reconstitute ourselves by understanding ourselves better.

John Locke’s emphasis on reason had a major influence on American politics. The anti-emancipatory imperialist version of liberalism rationalized oppression by asserting that society has to be organized to avoid chaos. Some people have had to give up rights as citizens to be recognized at all and today some can claim no citizenship.

Locke and his followers claimed that their ideas could not be disputed as some were questioning religion because their ideas were based on a rationalism grounded in science. These rationalists

constructed the liberal capitalist world, justifying and never questioning private property, capitalism, imperialist wars, and the creation of borders to protect some people from other people. Cultural hegemony allows the system to reproduce itself without putting in jail the people who become and stay wealthy by oppressing and exploiting others.

The electoral college and other voting limitations that we take for granted are the result of bad thinking rooted in the ideas of Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers.

It became important to move beyond assuming that truth was what a king or some other authority figure said or the idea that there are different kinds of races, a falsehood justified by the use of pseudo-science.

Through the 3/5 Compromise and other clauses, the “founding fathers” incorporated into the Constitution the idea that slavery was the destiny of black people, whom they considered to be, in effect, animals of burden.

There is a contradiction involved with working class people wanting to be rich.

Jail is about entrapping people's power. The Black Panthers' philosophy calling for self-defense led to their being put in jail even before they could organize an army.

The roles of black people in movies and TV have a large cultural impact.

We can't reform the system without changing the ideology. A black President doesn't do away with racism.

There are differences between support for pacifism and support for wars against terrorism because of fear of terrorists; also, between believing in and being willing to fight for my people, as opposed to people not being willing to fight a the government that has been oppressing them.

We should deconstruct how some people built a system which calls “progress” the sale of thirty-year mortgages, modernism, cutting off the tops of mountains, destroying the environments of communities, pushing people out, and discarding those who oppose these practices.

Questions for us to consider: How can we bring self-determination together holistically? What is my/our philosophy of life? What vision will help me/us move forward? What is so good for them at one moment so they don't repress you and then so bad at another moment that they do? What philosophers should we look at; how do we uplift our philosophers? How can we have a pulse on that process? What philosophies led to the cultural practices in the South concerning black men and youth? How can we recreate/regenerate our philosophy?

In the next few classes, we'll break down issues such as who decided we should all have flushing commodes, making us dependent on water. If we lose the water, there will be shit everywhere.

Reflection Paper: How do you want to use theory or philosophy to bring about change? To decolonize? To destroy what is against us and build what is for us?

Next class: Periods of social and human development (Modernism, post-modernism, etc.)