

# Social Theory and Critique: Contested Knowledge

**Modular value:** 20 credits

**Duration:** Term 1

**Teaching:** 2 hour seminar

**Lecturers:** [Justin Cruickshank \(/schools/government-society/departments/political-science-international-studies/staff/profiles/cruickshank-justin.aspx\)](https://schools/government-society/departments/political-science-international-studies/staff/profiles/cruickshank-justin.aspx)

## Module Outline

This module engages with various forms of classical and contemporary post-positivism, seeking to explore how post-positivist positions are located in terms of both changing intellectual traditions and explicit or implicit normative commitments. No prior philosophical knowledge is presumed.

Positions discussed include:

- Dewey's pragmatism and its relation to Lippmann's elitism and the Frankfurt School critique which regards pragmatism as an expression of instrumental rationality
- Rorty's development of pragmatism, including his arguments against epistemology and the post-Nietzschean hermeneutics of suspicion, and his arguments for a post-foundational reformist liberalism
- Bhaskar's critical realism which seeks to turn from epistemology - and the 'epistemic fallacy' of reducing questions about reality to questions about how we know reality - to ontology, and which seeks to develop a realist (as opposed to positivist) argument for the unity of the sciences
- 'Strong' and 'weaker' versions of social constructionism
- The Sociology of knowledge as advocated by Barnes and Bloor which follows on from Durkheim by seeking to develop a causal - and relativist - account of knowledge
- Popper and Kuhn's philosophies of science, which are explored in terms of whether criticism should replace justification in the production of knowledge
- Critics of the neo-liberal university as a site of knowledge production

## Key Questions explored in the module:

- Can knowledge have foundations?
- Can there be epistemic authorities to underwrite knowledge ?
- Is the knowledge produced by the natural sciences qualitatively different from other branches of knowledge and, if so, should the social sciences be based on the method used in the natural sciences?
- To what extent is knowledge socially mediated?
- Can there be a sociology of knowledge as well as a sociology of error?
- Is knowledge caused?
- To what extent should we look at the processes and institutions involved in the production of knowledge?
- How do debates about knowledge link to debates about democracy?
- Is there any escape from instrumental rationality?
- Does the hermeneutics of suspicion undermine all knowledge and socio-political agency?

## Illustrative Texts:

Adorno, T.W. 1976. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heineman.

Bhaskar, R. 1998. *The Possibility of Naturalism*. 3rd edition. London: Routledge.

Bloor, D. 1991. *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. 2nd edition. London: University of Chicago Press.

Collini, S. 2012. *What are Universities for?* London: Penguin.

Dewey, J. 1954. *The Public and its Problems*. Athens: Swallow Press.

Hacking, I. 1999. *The Social Construction of What?* London: Harvard University Press.

Hacohen, M. 2000. *Karl Popper: The Formative Years. Politics and Philosophy in Interwar Vienna*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Horkheimer, M. 1974. *The Eclipse of Reason*. London: Continuum.

Rorty, R. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London. Penguin.

## Assessment

- 1 essay (100%)

## You may be interested in these modules:

- 20 credits - [Social Theory: From Marxism To Post Marxism \(/postgraduate/courses/taught/govsoc/modules/social-theory-marxism-post-marxism.aspx\)](https://postgraduate/courses/taught/govsoc/modules/social-theory-marxism-post-marxism.aspx)

## You may be interested in these degrees:

- [Social and Political Theory \(/postgraduate/courses/taught/govsoc/social-political-theory.aspx\)](https://postgraduate/courses/taught/govsoc/social-political-theory.aspx)

