

MECHANISM AND MEDIEVALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY: SYSTEMS SUGGESTIONS FOR TRANSFORMATION

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This paper examines the possibilities for the transformation of social theory via basic systems epistemology. I argue that social theory has lagged behind theoretical development in other realms of scholarship and thinking in world cultures in part because of its implicit reliance on dialectic or oppositional epistemology that is an outgrowth of mechanism. Social theoretical activity of the past 50 years has oft criticized conceptions of modernity, science, objectivity, and reason as artifacts of Europe between the 1500s and 1700s. However, these critiques have failed to address how these ideas emerged in the context of dominant monotheistic religion in the Medieval or Middle Ages in formative Europe. Consequently social theory bears the cast of Medieval scholarly practices to the current day. This argument appears by looking at the context of the 400s-1400s in the territories of what later became Europe and suggests the relevance of relational units for social theory.

Contemporary social theory carries the implicit cast of mechanistic thinking that came to the fore during Medieval times in what later became Europe. This has kept it from integrating advances in thinking in world cultures and the full range of scholarship worldwide. Consequently its ability to deal with pressing social issues is limited. This limitation can be overcome by a systems transformation to relational, non-summative, unit of analysis.

Much attention in contemporary social theoretical activity has gone into criticism of the ideas that came to be grouped under the label of “Science” during the European Enlightenment (1500s through 1700s). Often ideas like nomotheism, objectivity, logic/reason, and positivism have become the target of critique for their contribution to the creation of a mind set that aided in the scourges of colonialism, racism, sexism, and more generally modernity.

However, there has been scant attention to historical evidence that this collection of ideas emerged in Medieval times, the Middle Ages in forming Europe (400s-1400s). Because of this the idea that these ideas emerged as a reaction to the character and interests of the Christian Church has been missed. In this vein two arguments arise: 1. nomotheism, objectivity, logic/reason, and positivism need to be understood as a reaction to theological legitimation, 2. Mechanism underpinned emerging notions of scholarship in the Middle Ages and has been transferred implicitly into current modes of scholarship largely without notice. I shall consider each of these arguments in turn below before turning to consider where the systems alternative of holism or non-summativity might lend a hand in transforming current gridlock in social theoretical activity.

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

The Medieval or Middle Ages in Europe rest between the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Renaissance. These were times when there was a vacuum caused by the erosion of Roman forms of governance and the influx of new peoples into the areas that later became Europe. The Roman Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity was a springboard to fusing the Christian church with the organizational structures and practices of the Roman Empire. It took less than 100 years for Christianity to go from a persecuted cult to Rome's official religion required for all Roman officials (Cook & Herzman, 1983: p: 74). In so doing the Christian Church became a force for stabilization of what was largely an agrarian culture experiencing rapid transformation through widespread immigration and the emergence of a secular economy.

To maintain and increase its areas of control the church needed to find ways to reconcile an emerging human capacity for self sustenance and awareness of in its own abilities with notions of deity. Classic scholarship, particularly the work of Aristotle, was enlisted to this end. Plato, Aristotle's teacher, advanced a philosophy that only ideas were real. Aristotle countered that ideas were indeed real but could be discovered and improved by using human sensory information. This became a hugely important idea that the Church used to solidify its control.

It allowed the reconciliation of human activity and the divine through a new concept of a human. As the era began truth was something that was discovered only in the past and therefore not something a given human could discover (Cook et al., 1983: p. xxi). Truth and meaning rested in the wisdom of deity and was therefore beyond the reach of humans. Aristotle's ideas transformed this by allowing for a body of truth separate from the divine (Thompson & Johnson, 1937: p.694). There was reality in things that people could discover . This was very appealing in a culture where humans were beginning to develop trades, arts, professions, cities, and markets. It may have also held appeal in everyday lives that were fraught with armed conflict and life threatening diseases like the plague.

Aristotle's belief that there was an eternal force at the edge of the universe was easily translated by medieval theologians into the intellectual justification for the existence of a single Christian god (Price, 1992: p. 129). He also allowed for human discovery of principles that governed the universe. This allowed a role for human knowledge as complementary to divine omniscience.

Notions of human efficacy were beginning to undermine Church domination in the middle ages as people started to get the idea that they could individually or collectively take care of themselves through thought and effort. You could irrigate your crops rather than pray to God to get a better yield. This was very threatening to the Church.

Aristotle's work allowed reconciliation of this threat. Human efforts and knowledge could coexist with ultimate deistic control. Thus, his work fed into the needs of the Christian Church in formative Europe. Whether consciously or not, for a time the church managed to turn what was a potential threat into a pillar that held up its platforms.

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

Consequently Aristotle's philosophy was folded seamlessly into Christian theology around the 1100s as a way of maintaining Church domination. With this came what Price referred to as an "overwhelming" application of the practice of dialectic (Price, 1992: p.120). This is the birth of mechanism, reducibility of whole to parts and opposition as an intellectual practice in emerging European philosophy. At the end of the Middle Ages the ideas of Aristotle were inextricably connected to the theology of Christianity both in form and content.

Mechanism was thus protected as an intellectual practice beginning in the 1100s. The ultimate separation of Church and state, and the emergence of "Science" during the European Renaissance did not interrupt the influence of mechanism since the formalization of schools and universities in formative Europe was largely under the influence of the Christian Church. Thus while direct control of practices of scholarship may have decreased since the Middle Ages, the indirect or implicit influence of mechanism as a derivative of religion remains as alive today as it was in the late 1400s.

Mechanism has survived largely unnoticed by even the most scathing critics of science, positivism, objectivity, and modernity of the last 50 years. Indeed its practice underpins much of this critique in that it often relies on oppositions. As such critiques often resemble the realm of religion in that the modes of dialectic reasoning or oppositions are used even as critics oppose targeted premises of science and modernity, like objectivity, nomotheism, and positivism.

Because of this current ideologically driven critiques are somewhat reminiscent of the forms of legitimation of scholarship and knowledge that dominated in the middle ages. They all draw back to the proponents for lines of authority. This leads to a situation where a practice is self justifying and lives in the realm of thought and ideas rather than human observation.

CURRENT MANIFESTATIONS OF MECHANISM

The conflux of applications of the basics of Aristotle's philosophy in various social historical contexts has led to a situation where there are many disharmonies between scholarly practices. I emphasize practices because I want to draw attention to habits of scholars that come from socialization in particular contexts and training that may be implicit or unconscious. This informal or taken for granted set of ways of doing things runs underneath the surface of what people formally put out as their ideas or theories. How scholars do their work influences what they produce. Therefore, these "hows" are as worthy of analysis as what is produced.

If we trace the heritage of Aristotle's ideas to the Medieval times that brought them into wide attention and practice, it is possible to see that various contradictions were inevitable as humans attempted to apply them in some contexts and criticize them in others. Indeed such contradictions are in Aristotle's theories themselves.

He advocated using individual instances or units to discover general properties of classes

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

of objects as a whole. Humans could use their senses to look at parts of the universe to figure out principles that govern the universe. This is the essence of mechanism and justifies taking things apart or studying pieces to try to understand a whole. At the same time Aristotle's famous observation that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is a starting point for non-summativity or holism, the founding principle of systems analysis. Other classical philosophers like Diogenes and Pythagores (Hanson, 1995) focused on these relational properties rather than mechanism. So both mechanism and holism as epistemology have been around in what came to be seen as European philosophy as least as far back as the classics,

I argue that it was the appeal to monotheistic religion of mechanistic modes of thinking in Aristotle that led to the sanctification of his theories rather than other available alternatives of the time. Separability of parts and dialectic oppositions were amenable to monotheistic theology as it tried to market its ideas to the masses. Good versus evil, sinner versus saint, heaven versus hell, God versus devil became key constructs that the Christian Church used to appeal to people living in the uncertain, conflict rife, and scary world of Medieval emerging Europe.

Dialectic

Dialectic and mechanism suited the times of the Medieval Christian Church and have been passed on as practice to the current day through the influence of religious practices and institutions in education. This is evident in the current use of oppositions in theorizing about social behaviour. Indeed dialectic was a cornerstone of socialist theory with people like Hegel and Marx putting out models of conflict between opposing forces or interests. These modes of analysis have been highly influential in the formal structure of Marxist, socialist, and critical theory. They are also evident in forms of structural and/or functionalist theories like the works of Parsons with (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Intregation, Latent) , Merton (Manifest and Latent function),

Dialectic and opposition show up in the interface between social theory and social activism in the politics of marginalization. Since the 1960s social theory has become infused with social activism. The civil rights and feminist movements led to the development of theories of social inequalities based on have or have not, or have less and have more. Socialist theory was central to the development of both theory and activism. Along with socialist theory came notions of dialectic, therefore mechanism implicitly.

Because of this theories of marginalization were forged as oppositions. This made the emergence of intersections inevitable. Having drawn lines whereby individuals fall on one side or the other it was just a question of time until problems with such boundaries emerged. This has cropped up in various ways. The casting of common interest based on being in a defined margin group created problems when acting out the politics of marginalization. A person who was a member of a particular group was assumed to represent the interests of the group as a whole. However, this was often not the case as resistance to change came in the form of putting people who represented the category but

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

did not support the goal of equality for the group were put in positions in order to dissipate protest.

Also, raising profile of a group led to questioning the definition of group membership or challenges from other groups claiming like or greater entitlement. For example you saw women in general and women of colour rejecting classification as women in second wave feminism (hooks, 1984, Hill Collins, 1991) .

Problems with the mechanistic units that underpin conception of opposition or margin came up vividly in the example of the American 2008 Democratic presidential primaries. Voters were presented with choosing between a white woman, Hilary Clinton, and a man of colour, Barack Obama. Both campaigns tried to stay out of the issue of gender versus “race” but the pervasiveness of gender and racialization meant that it was there in people’s minds. Like the elephant in the room, everybody knew it was there but nobody wanted to talk about it.

Indeed both candidates tried to steer away from the issue. I recall Clinton’s statement in response to being asked if she was being criticized so strongly while she was the front runner because she was a woman . She responded that she was not being criticized because she was a woman, but rather because she was ahead. In discussions about the primaries it was very tricky ground to take a stand even in informal conversations, particularly among people who consider themselves to be progressive or liberal. If you wanted Clinton chosen you could be seen as racist. If you wanted Obama chosen you could be seen as a sexist. There was no safe ground even if your feelings were strongly anti-racist and feminist. There was no way to be both when forced to choose.

Indeed this has been the dilemma of intersectionality and second wave feminism—how to work though the politics of multiple identities/subjectivities. How do you deal with competing and or multi-present positions? As it stands one is confronted with no-win, either or, situations. Which identity is more important? Who gets the nomination, grant, tax break, graduate program, etc?

The metaphor of intersection is an apt image for the application of mechanism. Because a process is divided, you have converging different paths all trying to get through a central point. As the effort or traffic for each path increases it is inevitable that it becomes more difficult to get into the centre. Any one flow entering the centre blocks another. At the extreme you get gridlock—the point where none of the flows can move. This leads to a competitive and confrontational atmosphere.

Social theory may have contributed to such confrontations in a way that is counterproductive or at least not as helpful as it might be. A systems view, specifically relational epistemology, may be useful in looking at implicit assumptions and practices that underpin current oppositional social categories. My hope is to shed some light on how we got to the point of category gridlock, the point where identities are all trying to get through the same point and blocking each other. So no one moves ahead or the gain of any one identity is seen as a loss for another identity.

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

This happens even though there may be fundamental agreement among the driving forces on the need for social equality and strengthening of community support for the needs and desires of the widest possible group of persons. While the gridlock continues, political territory around it becomes fertile for the fostering of attitudes that oppose this fundamental point of harmony–social equality.

Untheory, Anti-Theory and Theoretical Nihilism

Better social theory could be a guiding force toward more effective social activism. Activist agendas have accelerated in social science since the 1960s. However, this has not led to a corresponding acceleration in the development of social theory. This is not to deny the contributions of politics of marginalization, critiques, or thinking around theory. Instead I argue that such scholarship is theoretical activity rather than theory. The turf of theory has been claimed by political agendas without significant reflection the nature of theory itself. Indeed some forms of theoretical activity simultaneously critique theory and claim status as theory (Sica, 2005) . Or, work like Dorothy Smith's feminist thought is put out as theory when the author herself says she is doing method rather than theory (Smith, 1987; Wallace & Wolf, 1995).

This has led us to a point where questions of theory are highly contested and often about rejection of theory. Because of this these pursuits are forms of untheory /non theory, anti-theory or theoretical nihilism. By this I am referring to scholarship that is attributed with the status of theory and at the same time rejects or questions theory. For example politics of marginalization seeking to self define as theory while at the same time criticizing the role of intellectual activity in perpetuating inequalities. This is evident in the work of authors like Foucault (1980), Butler (1990) and various forms of critical theory (Sica, 2005).

This is a loose categorization on my part, a convenience that reflects the nature of these pursuits in terms of the rejection of traditional modes of theorizing such as grand theory or narratives and a desire to reject classification on the terms of tradition . Germane to this paper is thinking about why scholarship has gotten to this point. It is a form of meta-theoretical analysis, theory of theory.

In this vein it is possible to look below the surface of theoretical activity to its basic world view and the social historical context in which it is practiced. The key question is: What is theoretical activity about? Why is it happening now? How did it end up looking like this?

Considering these questions in current social theoretical activity had led me to search for underlying patterns that might help explain what is going on. My search led me back to the middle ages of formative Europe and an argument that some the tension and rejection in current theoretical activity may be attributable to the mechanistic modes of thinking that underlay scholarship.

Much of what I think of as un-theory, anti-theory or theoretical nihilism has arisen in conjunction with rejection of categorization in political or administrative terms. Areas of

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

like women's studies, race and ethnicity studies, gerontology, and disability studies have arisen in attempts to address important political issues within academia and cut across traditional disciplinary lines. So politically these areas have already resisted mechanism in the form of divisions of wholes into parts and looked for dynamic synthesis among scholars looking at the same issue from different learning paths. However, this principle has not been carried through into development of theory.

Likewise theoretical nihilism has run up against mechanistic oppositions which may underpin moves to talking around rather than about issues. About implies a line to an entity. Around suggests movement and pattern. When I look closely at Foucault's writing about power I get an impression of someone who has a gut feeling about the need to portray social relations in terms of an interconnected dynamic whole but lacking an approach that works on this level (1980: pp 92-95).

In terms of dialectic, opposition, and movements within theoretical activity since the 1960s I see evidence of intellectual pursuits all limited by reliance on mechanism but unaware of this or unwilling to go in a new direction. Because of this social theory has fallen behind other spheres of scholarship like health, natural and physical sciences, and environmentalism in terms of its epistemological awareness. Just at the importance of holism as a basic epistemological stance for dealing with pressing issues like health, conflict, and ecology is being recognized, social science seems to be retrenching into more traditional world views harking back to middle age formative Europe.

This is paradoxical since the social sciences have taken pride in examining epistemology and world views in terms of the implications for scholarly activity, political awareness, and theory building. I sense part of the resistance to holistic epistemology is the past association between systems epistemology and the conservative status quo justifying versions put forth by social theorists like Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhman, and Herbert Spencer. I constantly run up against this.

It is to the point that colleagues and students hear that I do systems theory and automatically decide that I am a right wing reactionary without ever reading my work, talking to me, or considering my longstanding involvement in equality politics specifically fighting for gender, racial, age, and disability equality. Since my interests range into health, and philosophy of science, I am often involved in the activities of health care researchers/practitioners and practices of the physical and natural sciences, in addition to social sciences.

Ironically I have detected a greater willingness to embrace new epistemological thinking in the health, physical, and natural sciences than in the social sciences. Indeed you see widespread willingness to embrace the insights of constructivism into various forms of care and research particularly in the adoption of "qualitative" methods and recognition of the influence on researchers in what is observed. This leads me to the conclusion that social science and particularly social theory is stuck in a time warp in terms of the available epistemology of today in scholarship worldwide. Systems epistemology could lend a hand in helping social theory catch up and transform.

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION: PUTTING THE SOCIAL IN SOCIAL THEORY

Catching up could involve looking at the basic systems principle of relation as unit . This involves unearthing the fundamental traditional tracings of mechanism in scholarship and thinking it through in a different way. As with all things systems this begins with non-summativity, Aristotle's observation that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This subtle idea has important derivative principles.

Because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, you can't usefully understand a whole by studying its parts in isolation. You need to study wholes as wholes. This leads to the first pivotal idea in a system transformation of social theory relationship as unit.

Unit Relation

It would seem an obvious and necessary epistemological principle that any conception of anything social requires relation, two or more interconnected parts. There is no social without this. Thus, relation is the irreducible point for any social analysis. While epistemological purity may at times give way to practicality like sending questionnaires to individuals, relation must always be present at some level of the analysis.

For example if one were studying satisfaction with intimate relations you could send out separate questionnaires to both members of a number of relationships and ask them to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 how happy they are with their relationship. The systems leap comes by recognizing that you can't sum up and divide the individual scores. If you have one couple where one member said 5 and the other also said 5 and another couple where one member said 10 and the other said 0 a summative model would rate both relationships a 5 on satisfaction. However, the two patterns are very different in terms of what the relationship is like therefore more usefully viewed in their totality.

So called "quantitative" researchers are more often criticized for methods that objectify social relations and negate subjectivity. However, problems with mechanistic units permeate various forms of social research including constructivist approaches. This is particularly evident in the academic politics of marginality when trying to deal with various subjectivities.

Models of marginality are derived from concepts of a constituency that is on the periphery of social participation, representation, influence, and benefits. It is a stirring and familiar image of a page like this one where the focus is on what is inside the margins and what lies outside the margins is peripheral. In the centre are those who have social identity that goes along with greater benefit and ability to shape things in their favour. Issues of marginality of women, and various ethno-cultural groups came into academic attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Somewhat concurrent and taking greater force later were issues of sexualities, aging, and disabilities. Since the 1960s all of these areas have grown in academia in terms of presence in scholarship, academic programs, and governance.

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

This growth has brought along with it the question of how all these subjectivities play out in everyday life and formal politics. As different issues have developed more resources and means of getting greater benefits there has been inevitable overlap, even competition. Certain questions arise. When there are many different constituencies of the margin which constituency's entitlement is greater? Where do persons with multiple marginal identities fit? I have belaboured these issues above in terms of the politics of oppositional categories.

Relevant to the theoretical question of unit is a third question. When you have a proliferation of margin statuses, who is left in the centre? Models of margin versus centre are limited by this question. Formed in opposition to begin with, the observation that the so-called margins in actual life may have become more populous than the centre tends to undermine the utility of the units of margin and centre. Further, having drawn unit boundaries in this way makes it difficult to analyze points where marginalized groups have permeated centre for example electing representatives to high positions in government and acquiring significant personal wealth.

The systems suggestion would be to work toward models that rest on dynamics, relations, rather than divided oppositions, bipolar categories, or dichotomies. As long as models build on non-summative units are used there will be a proliferation and ultimate deterioration of categories.

Take the example of a concept of "other" that is often used to capture the sense of separation and social deprivation of one group versus another group. This may be implicit in terms of people who are not part of the other category taking their lives for granted and not understanding their privileged positions. The lesson of the past 50 years has been that the declaration of marginal status and oppression by a group is a process with new groups emerging to claim similar status. One of the prime examples here is the growth of the categories that have come under the rubric of sexualities as various constituencies have fought to be included and have their identity legitimized.

This is important to observe for the meta-theoretical question of units because drawing of summative unit boundaries makes it inevitable that such division lines will become problematic. Because an in/out line has been drawn there will always be another "other" seeking inclusion. Systems epistemology might lend a hand by focusing on relation as the basic irreducible unit. The focus then becomes the relation between parts rather than the parts themselves.

This makes it possible to worry less about who is inside the margins and who outside than why an in/out process perpetuates. This is the example of the pattern of armed conflict since World War II. An enormous industry emerged that has a vested interest in international conflict. This perpetuated the Cold War until the former Soviet Union's economy could no longer afford to participate. But the lack of an actual threat did not stop the war industry. Multiple threats have been created or emerged on their own and been supported. Since parts drop out and the dynamic continues the parts focus could be aptly placed on the dynamic itself. A systems approach allows seeing this.

Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

It could be likewise important for social theory of equality. Moving beyond categorical turf wars could open up new possibilities. So much of what has gone on in the past forty years has been based on oppositional categories. Perhaps its time to build theory that is not divisive by the nature of its fundamental unit.

This was the lesson of Einstein. He transformed traditional Newtonian models of physics based on mechanism, summativity, by putting out a model of relativity instead. Parts like planets or atoms were relevant in terms of their relation to one another, not just in terms of their individual properties. It is also a core view to schools of thought and practice like ecology, yoga, pilates, naturopathy, and midwifery.

DISCUSSION

In total I see social theory in a place where it has fallen behind advances in thinking from around the globe, world cultures, and other types of theory. While social theory has been at the forefront of theories of equality in political terms it has not followed through the principle of elimination of ethnocentrism into scrutiny and reform of its own practices. Social theory has raged against the domination imposed by Western cultures and Western thinking while its basic epistemology is dominated by Western, specifically Medieval, modes of scholarly practice.

Because of this I argue it is time for social theory to get its own house in order, follow through its criticism of world views to its own world view. One place to start is to look at how medieval practices of mechanism as tied to religion have carried through to the present. Once this is done it may be possible to transform critiques of science and modernism.

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Mechanism and Medievalism in Contemporary Social Theory

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