**Introduction to Theories & Concepts**

***Understanding and Using Theories & Concepts***

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| **AIMS:*** To establish basic definitions and deepen understanding of what concepts & theories are.
* Increase awareness of how their use/misuse of theory and concepts matter to their own arguments.
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**Lecture**: Outline the lecture; Concepts (definition, ambiguity of concepts and identifying concepts) & Theories and state the aim of the lecture (as stated above).

**Concepts**

**What is a concept?**

“An abstraction or general notion that may serve as a unit of a theory.” (Oxford Companion to the Mind) A concept is one word, or phrase, that denotes a more or less complex idea at a higher level of abstraction. A concept becomes a short hand for an otherwise lengthy description of something.

For Example:

* Power: the ability of A to make B do something he otherwise would not do.
* “Something often made of wood that usually has four legs and a big board on top” = Table - the concept of “table” neatly packages what would otherwise be a lengthy description into one word. ‘Table’ is a quite concrete example, and nobody really speaks about the concept of a table.

Remember that in politics (and the social sciences in general), there are multiple definitions for the same term - these are concepts. A concept is an idea that is explained by looking at all of its characteristics and features. Scholars debate about the exact definition of many of the concepts you will encounter such as the definition of power, the state, globalization and nationalism. Depending on who you ask, these all have different definitions.

Concepts, (especially in the social sciences) generally refer to more abstract notions, for instance “power”, “legitimacy”, “freedom”, “poverty”, “class”.

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| **Class Activity:** Consider a concept, e.g. “freedom”. Ask students to write down how they conceptualise “Freedom”, make them discuss the similarities and differences of their own definitions with their neighbours. Can the class reach a consensus on the concept or does it mean slightly different things (or have different elements/features) for different people? Show that all concepts are, to some extent, **contested.** |

**Ambiguity**

Concepts can be ambiguous – a major task in philosophy is to clarify them. For example, “freedom” can mean many different things to different people. It is therefore good practice to clarify/define concepts that could be ambiguously received.

Emphasise to students that they should incorporate the definitions into their writing in order to clarify which version or which author’s definition they will be applying and the following is to show how they can do so.

For Example:

* “freedom here is defined as…”
* “According to Locke, legitimacy refers to….”

Referencing gives validity to the definition you have given, (students cannot just make up their own definition when writing an academic paper, but they can find a reference that has a similar view/definition of the concept with their own).

**Identifying Concepts**

Identifying key concepts in a reading helps you to better understand the authors argument and makes you more familiar with the key words used in political studies to discuss and understand phenomena.

To identify concepts when reading, keep in mind:

* What is the topic for this week in the course outline?
* What are the recurring topics in the text?
* What key words does the author use repetitively?
* What is the authors argument?

Identifying the argument is part of identifying the concept. Simply identifying the focus of a particular text is not enough if you do not complete the task by identifying what the author hopes to convince the reader of in the text.

Is there a main point (or points) that the author hopes you walk away with? What role do the concepts you have identified play in achieving this?

Ensure you have understood all the major concepts and have an idea of how to define them to better guide your understanding of the text and application of the concepts.

**Theory**

**What is a Theory?**

“A theory is an account of the world which goes beyond what we can see and measure. It embraces a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organizes our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world in a systematic way.” (A Dictionary of Sociology)

Concepts are building blocks of theories. (i.e. class is an important building block for Marxism).

**The objectives of a theory**

Theories fulfil four major roles in the social sciences **(where possible, give examples from course content)**:

1. They make generalisations about and classifications of the world, i.e. they serve to simplify and group things. For instance, people have come up with theories of what states are. These theories define abstract ideal-types and generalize.

2. They build hypotheses which are then tested through empirical research.

3. They aim to explain phenomena and identify/propose potential causal mechanisms and other interactions between phenomena.

4. They enable us to draw connections at an abstract level which might not be at first sight observable in the real world and thus guide research in new directions.

We use theory because it helps to make the complex simple; it gives us the analytical tools to understand certain phenomena in the world, such as revolutions.

In short, grand theories aim to provide general explanations of how the world works, e.g. Realism, Marxism, Rational Choice Theory.

**Using Theories**

Theories are analytical tools that simplify the “reality” of a case in order to make it analysable. Thus, different theoretical lenses simplify cases in different ways, and thus can shed light on different aspects of a conflict, as they ask questions differently.

We do not refer to theories as being wrong or right: just more or less useful in understanding a particular subject/phenomenon.

**Theories Change**

As theories are used to simplify and explain reality, they must change as our reality changes. Over the years, one can observe certain trends of which theories were particularly fashionable and certain points in history. This has to do with the problems scholars were dealing with, but also with the general mindset of the time. Prevalent theories that shape the academic agenda are also referred to as paradigms. Paradigms shift over time as new perspectives are gained and historical circumstances change.

All theories are based on core assumptions. Theoretical debate often revolves around the validity of these core assumptions.

E.g. a realist theory of international relations is based on the assumption that states behave as unitary, rational actors in the international system. Social constructivism criticizes this view by problematizing the premise, that states can simply be seen as unitary actors and that domestic political climate matters in a state’s international behaviour.

Theories evolve over time and with critique.



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