

Critical Analysis of Garner's "Social Theory, A Reader"

Posted on October 10, 2022

Contemporary society has moved through major intellectual, social, cultural, and technological changes. Classical social theory focused heavily on industrialization, capitalism, bureaucracy, class conflict, and the rise of modern institutions. Contemporary social theory, however, examines a wider range of issues, including globalization, identity, media, technology, gender, race, surveillance, neoliberalism, and the changing nature of knowledge. This reflection critically analyzes three readings: Garner and Hancock's *Social Theory, Volume II: From Modern to Contemporary Theory*, Espeland and Sauder's "Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds," and Hassan's "The Knowledge Deficit: Liquid Words as Neo-Liberal Technologies." Together, these readings show how contemporary social theory helps explain the complex relationship between social structures, measurement, technology, knowledge, and human behavior. (Espeland, 2007; Hassan, 2012)

Garner and Hancock's View of Contemporary Social Theory

Garner and Hancock's *Social Theory, Volume II* provides an important introduction to the transition from modern to contemporary social theory. The text is valuable because it presents theory not as a fixed body of knowledge but as an ongoing conversation shaped by historical change. This approach is useful because society itself is never static. Social institutions, cultural practices, political systems, economic structures, and human relationships continue to change over time. Therefore, theory must also change in order to explain new social realities.

One of the important ideas in Garner and Hancock's work is that time and space are central to sociological understanding. Human behavior does not happen in isolation. It is shaped by historical moments, geographical locations, institutional settings, and cultural contexts. For example, the experience of identity in a traditional rural society may be very different from the experience of identity in a globalized digital society. Similarly, social power operates differently across time periods and spaces. What is considered normal, acceptable, or valuable in one society may be challenged in another.

The strength of Garner and Hancock's approach is that it connects classical theory with contemporary concerns. Instead of treating modern and contemporary theory as completely separate, the reader shows how contemporary theory builds on earlier sociological debates while also moving in new directions. Issues such as race, gender, media, culture, and globalization cannot be fully understood

through classical frameworks alone. However, classical theory still provides important foundations for understanding power, inequality, social order, and social change. (Garner & Hancock, 2014)

A possible limitation of this approach is that contemporary theory can sometimes become too broad and fragmented. Since contemporary society includes many different forms of identity, power, and social experience, it can be difficult to identify one central theoretical framework. Nevertheless, this diversity is also one of the strengths of contemporary theory because it allows sociology to address the complexity of modern life more accurately.

Espeland and Sauder's Theory of Rankings and Reactivity

Espeland and Sauder's article "Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds" offers a significant contribution to contemporary sociology by examining how public measurements influence behavior. The authors argue that rankings, ratings, and public measures do not simply describe reality; they can also change the reality they measure. This is a powerful idea because contemporary society increasingly depends on rankings, evaluations, performance indicators, and accountability systems.

The authors focus on reactivity, which refers to the way people change their behavior when they know they are being observed, evaluated, or ranked. For example, universities may change their policies to improve their ranking position. Law schools may adjust admissions, employment reporting, or institutional priorities in response to ranking systems. In this way, rankings become active forces that shape institutional behavior.

Espeland and Sauder identify important mechanisms of reactivity, including self-fulfilling prophecy and commensuration. Self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a ranking influences expectations in such a way that the ranking helps produce the outcome it claims to measure. For example, if a school is ranked highly, it may attract better students, stronger faculty, and more funding, which then strengthens its position. Commensuration refers to the process of converting complex qualities into numbers or comparable categories. This makes institutions easier to compare, but it can also oversimplify reality.

The strength of Espeland and Sauder's article is that it helps explain how measurement becomes a form of power. Rankings appear objective, but they often shape what institutions value. When organizations are ranked publicly, they may begin to prioritize measurable outcomes over deeper educational, ethical, or social goals. This is important because it shows that numbers are not neutral. They influence behavior, create pressure, and redefine success.

A critical concern is that rankings may reduce complex institutions to simplified scores. For example, the quality of education, student well-being, intellectual growth, and social responsibility cannot

always be captured through numerical indicators. Therefore, while public measures may increase transparency, they may also distort institutional priorities. Espeland and Sauder's work is valuable because it teaches readers to question the social effects of measurement rather than accepting rankings as purely factual.

Hassan's Concept of Liquid Words

Hassan's "The Knowledge Deficit: Liquid Words as Neo-Liberal Technologies" provides a different but equally important perspective on contemporary society. Hassan examines the changing relationship between knowledge, language, technology, and neoliberal globalization. His concept of "liquid words" is especially significant. The phrase suggests that written language has become more fluid, unstable, and technologically mediated in the digital age.

Traditionally, written words were associated with print culture, books, newspapers, and relatively stable texts. In digital society, however, words appear on screens, circulate rapidly, and are constantly edited, copied, shared, and consumed. This transformation affects not only how people read and write but also how they think, learn, and understand knowledge. Hassan argues that digital technologies and neoliberal structures have changed the nature of knowledge by making it faster, more flexible, and more market-oriented.

The strength of Hassan's argument lies in his ability to connect media technology with social and economic power. Digital communication is not merely a neutral tool. It is connected to broader systems of capitalism, speed, productivity, and information control. In neoliberal society, knowledge is often treated as a commodity that must be produced, packaged, measured, and consumed efficiently. This creates a knowledge deficit because people may receive more information but develop less deep understanding.

However, Hassan's article may be difficult for some readers because of its complex language and abstract style. Although the metaphor of "liquid words" is powerful, the article could communicate its ideas more clearly. This is a useful criticism because social theory should not only be intellectually rich but also accessible enough to invite meaningful engagement. If theoretical writing becomes too difficult, it may limit its own social impact.

Despite this limitation, Hassan's argument is highly relevant today. Digital reading, online learning, social media, artificial intelligence, and rapid information exchange have changed how people interact with knowledge. People now encounter words through screens more often than through printed pages. This creates new possibilities for communication but also new risks, including distraction, superficial reading, misinformation, and reduced attention to complex ideas.

Comparative Reflection on the Three Readings

Although the three readings focus on different topics, they are connected by a common concern: the transformation of social life in contemporary society. Garner and Hancock provide the broader theoretical framework for understanding the movement from modern to contemporary theory. Espeland and Sauder show how measurement and rankings reshape institutions and behavior. Hassan explains how digital technologies and neoliberal systems transform language, knowledge, and time.

Together, these readings show that contemporary society is shaped by systems that are often invisible but powerful. Time and space shape social behavior. Rankings shape institutional priorities. Digital technologies shape knowledge and communication. These forces influence how people think, act, and understand themselves. Contemporary theory is important because it makes these forces visible.

The readings also show that social theory is not only abstract. It can be used to analyze real-world issues such as education, media, globalization, technology, and institutional accountability. For example, a university ranking is not just a list; it changes how universities behave. A digital text is not just a new form of writing; it changes how knowledge is produced and consumed. A contemporary theory reader is not just a collection of essays; it represents the changing concerns of sociology itself.

Conclusion

Garner and Hancock, Espeland and Sauder, and Hassan each contribute important insights into contemporary social theory. Garner and Hancock help readers understand how social theory develops through historical change and shifting social conditions. Espeland and Sauder show that public measurements such as rankings can reshape institutions and social behavior. Hassan explains how digital technologies and neoliberal globalization transform written language and knowledge. A critical reading of these texts shows that contemporary society is shaped by time, space, measurement, technology, and power. These readings broaden the understanding of sociology by showing that social theory remains essential for analyzing the changing conditions of modern life.

References

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