

SO344-15 Sociology of Knowledge, Science and Intellectuals

20/21

Department

Sociology

Level

Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader

Steve Fuller

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

Reduced version of a module (from 2 to 1 term) regularly given since 2005.

[Module web page](#)

Module aims

This module aims to have students understand the role of authoritative knowledge in society: How do people decide what to believe and, more crucially, what is worth having beliefs about? How do these decisions interact with other concerns about how people allocate time and resources? These questions, while always important, have taken on an added significance as more specialised forms of knowledge, or 'expertise', have come to influence public policymaking in areas of health, security, welfare and education. In the classical sociological tradition, these issues have been associated mainly with religion and political ideology. More recent work has focused on organized inquiry, or 'science', and the ideally knowledgeable citizen, or 'intellectual'. Existing between these two forms of knowledge is the 'expert', who often occupies a quasi-political or quasi-judicial role. All of these forms of knowledge are offshoots of the history of philosophy, which in the past few

years

has been itself subject to a major systematic sociological treatment. We shall examine all of these matters from a comparative (i.e. historically informed, cross-cultural) perspective.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1— Is it rational to have an unconditional faith in science: How can science be a public good if very few people practice it or know much about it?

Week 2 -- Are the natural and social sciences fundamentally different?

Week 3 -- How does an understanding of the history of science contribute to an understanding of contemporary science?

Week 4 -- To what extent can a philosophy be judged by the sociological conditions responsible for its emergence and maintenance?

Week 5 -- What can we learn about the nature of science from the study of non-Western cultures?

Week 6-- Does the transition from academic to intellectual inevitably involve 'dumbing down' or is something added in the process?

Week 7 -- There is a popular image of the intellectual as always championing unpopular causes — sometimes even being 'an enemy of the people'. Is the image justified?

Week 8 -- How do the issues raised by Kuhn's and Popper's theories of science illustrate the differences and similarities between being a scientist and being an intellectual?

Week 9 -- Is rule by experts inevitable in liberal societies?

Week 10 — Are science and technology taking us to 'Humanity 2.0'? Should we embrace or combat this prospect?

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- -- Students will demonstrate in essay form an understanding of the role of knowledge as a source of authority in society
- -- Students will demonstrate in essay form an understanding of the similarities and differences of science and religion as sources of authoritative knowledge.
- -- Students will demonstrate -- either essay or exam — an understanding of the role and prospects of the public intellectual as a producer and disseminator of social knowledge.
- -- Students will demonstrate — either essay or exam — the extent to which science and technology have transformed our understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Indicative reading list

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Sivin, Nathan. (1982). 'Why the Scientific Revolution Did Not Take Place in China -- or Didn't It?' *Chinese Science* 5: 45-66.

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Weber, Max (1965). *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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Wouters, Paul (1994). 'The Citation Culture: How the Citation Came Out of the Bag and Why It Is Hard to Return It'. Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science, New Orleans.

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Interdisciplinary

Students read texts in history, philosophy and sociology of science -- as well as journalistic accounts and policy reports related to contemporary developments in science and technology.

Subject specific skills

knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed
ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied

knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study

an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis

a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline

Transferable skills

the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects

critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem

an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline
conceptual understanding that enables the student:

- ○ to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline
- ○ to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline
an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	9 sessions of 1 hour (6%)
Seminars	9 sessions of 1 hour (6%)
Private study	132 hours (88%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

Student will read materials and consult with the instructor by e-mail or in person about matters of content and assignments that arise.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

Assessment group A1

	Weighting	Study time
Assessed Essay	100%	
Discuss the senses in which science and technology have made humanity more distinctive as a species. Do you believe that science and technology will redeem humanity in the future – or will they be the source of our collective downfall? Explain your answer, which may involve adopting a ‘middle’ position to the question.		

Feedback on assessment

There will be a formative essay due in mid-term on which written feedback will be provided within 20 working days.

Availability

Courses

This module is Core optional for:

- Year 3 of ULAA-ML33 Undergraduate Law and Sociology

This module is Optional for:

- USOA-L301 BA in Sociology
 - Year 3 of L301 Sociology
 - Year 3 of L301 Sociology
 - Year 3 of L301 Sociology
 - Year 3 of L303 Sociology with Specialism in Gender Studies
- Year 4 of USOA-L306 BA in Sociology (with Intercalated Year)
- Year 3 of USOA-L314 Undergraduate Sociology and Criminology

This module is Unusual option for:

- UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
 - Year 3 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)
 - Year 3 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)
 - Year 3 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)

This module is Option list A for:

- ULAA-ML34 BA in Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree)
 - Year 3 of ML34 Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree)
 - Year 4 of ML34 Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree)
- Year 5 of ULAA-ML35 BA in Law and Sociology (Qualifying Degree) (with Intercalated year)
- ULAA-ML33 Undergraduate Law and Sociology
 - Year 2 of ML33 Law and Sociology
 - Year 4 of ML33 Law and Sociology

This module is Option list B for:

- USOA-L301 BA in Sociology
 - Year 3 of L305 Sociology with Specialism in Cultural Studies
 - Year 3 of L304 Sociology with Specialism in Research Methods
- Year 3 of UPOA-ML13 Undergraduate Politics and Sociology
- Year 4 of UPOA-ML14 Undergraduate Politics and Sociology (with Intercalated year)

This module is Option list C for:

- Year 3 of UHIA-VL13 Undergraduate History and Sociology
- Year 4 of UHIA-VL14 Undergraduate History and Sociology (with Year Abroad)

This module is Option list G for:

- UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
 - Year 2 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)
 - Year 2 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)
 - Year 2 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)