

THEORY.ORG.UK TRADING CARD



Anthony Giddens

British social theorist, born 1938. Prolific output. Theory of 'structuration' solved problem of whether individual acts, or major social forces, shape society, by asserting that it is human agency which continuously reproduces social structure. This relationship means individuals can bring change. In the 1990s, Giddens fashioned theory on how selves find meaning, and create narratives of identity, in modern society.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/giddens

[Card 1 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Social analysis mixing classic and modern

RISKS: Misguided postmodernists may attack

SPECIAL SKILLS: Appreciation of impact of feminism

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Judith Butler

American theorist, born 1956. Key figure in queer theory due to book *Gender Trouble* (1990), which argued that idea of two 'biological' sexes is just as socially constructed as gender is. Feminist discussion of men and women as separate groups – and all women as one coherent group – has only served to maintain this problem. Butler calls for proliferation of radical gender performances to subvert assumptions.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/butler

[Card 2 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Groundbreaking, constructive critical skills

WEAKNESSES: Increasingly impenetrable writing style

SPECIAL SKILLS: Offers radical lifestyle manifesto

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Michel Foucault

French thinker, 1926-1984. Earlier work noted how social order is maintained as people learn to keep checks on themselves. Later work saw self-identity as an active project, influencing queer theory. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault suggests power is not a fixed property held by certain groups, but is fluid and present in all interactions. Where power is exercised, resistance develops: this is a productive relationship.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/foucault

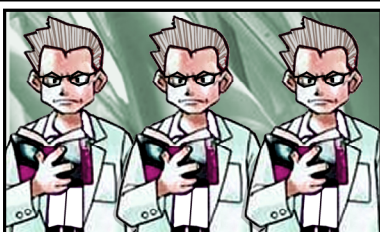
[Card 3 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Model of power innovative and realistic

WEAKNESSES: Idiosyncratic reading of history... arguably

SPECIAL SKILLS: Happily rejects old models, creates new ones

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Psychologists

Whilst fine when dealing with the clinical analysis and treatment of the brain within a biological-medical paradigm, psychologists often mistake their observations of social life as psychological insight, ignoring the social variables which lead to the construction of particular interactions. See, for example, the useless analyses of 'male' and 'female' behaviour, or 'media effects', peddled on cheap TV shows every week.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/psycho

[Card 4 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Resistance to postmodern self-doubt

WEAKNESSES: Discipline attracts thick people

SPECIAL SKILLS: Arrogant ignorance of social factors

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Postmodernity

Ambiguous, controversial concept. Postmodernity is characterised by a collapse of faith in metanarratives (grand explanations) – see Lyotard. In postmodernity, nothing is fixed, and old certainties – from faith in science, or Marxism, to belief in a stable self – are gone. Consumerism provides satisfaction. Globalisation both universalises and alienates. Giddens agrees these symptoms but says it's just 'late modernity'.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/postmodern

[Card 5 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Recognisable contemporary social analysis

WEAKNESSES: May not really describe a wholly new era

SPECIAL SKILLS: Virtually critique-proof

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Erving Goffman

American sociologist, 1922-1983, whose readable classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) saw social interaction as 'performances' by individuals, which vary according to context, usually intended to please the current 'audience'. Not merely micro-level social psychology, this book suggests how identities and ideologies are reproduced on a grand scale (see Giddens and structuration, card #1).

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/goffman

[Card 6 of 12]

STRENGTHS: New model of social action, fully explored

WEAKNESSES: May be too cynical. Is any behaviour 'real'?

SPECIAL SKILLS: Accidentally invented postmodernism?

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Theodor Adorno

German thinker, 1903-69. Member of the Frankfurt School. Argued that popular media is the product of a 'culture industry' which keeps the population passive, preserving dominance of capitalism at the expense of true happiness. Mass media is standardised, and the pleasures it offers are illusory – the result of 'false needs' which the culture industry creates. Argument is elitist, but that doesn't mean it's wrong necessarily.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/adorno

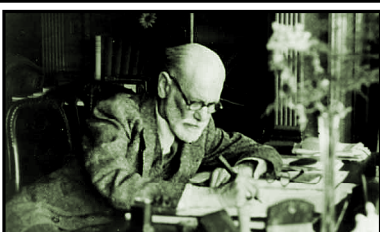
[Card 7 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Saw culture to be as important as economics

WEAKNESSES: Shows no understanding of popular tastes

SPECIAL SKILLS: Extreme anti-capitalist argument

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Psychoanalysis

Multipurpose perspective, invented by Freud 1896-ish. Puts sex-based drives at the heart of everything. Horribly abused by unimaginative film theorists and others who apply a stupid version of it to pop culture. Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* argued that the semi-conservative theory could be usefully appropriated by radicals, although Mitchell herself clearly loved Freud too much to use him very freely.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk

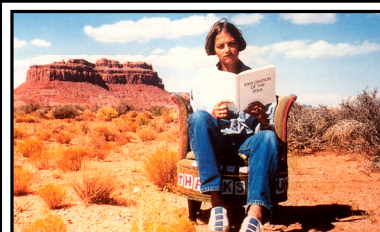
[Card 8 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Uninhibited focus on power of sexuality

WEAKNESSES: Not everything can be explained by sex

SPECIAL SKILLS: Huge impact on 20th century thought

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Tracey Emin

British artist, born 1963. Uses all aspects of her life in her work, turning intimate autobiography into broader statements about everyday life, troubles and sex. Powerfully independent and yet desperately attached to friends and family, and her own past, Emin's work reflects dilemmas of individual autonomy versus forces of society, history and memory. Also raises questions about selling one's self for success.

For more, see www.theory.org.uk/art

[Card 9 of 12]

STRENGTHS: Accessible, emotional art about life

WEAKNESSES: Cynically exploiting public's dodgy curiosity?

SPECIAL SKILLS: Marketing high-impact stories of self