**SR968 SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY**

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This book is about social thought and its development. The book does not attempt to develop a Christian social theory. Sociology will on occasion unearth the same social principles found in Scripture. There are hidden threads that weave sociology and Christianity together. The main focus of the book is the contribution that Christianity and social thought make to each other. This book evokes serendipity, the experience of finding valuable things that were not sought.

At the heart of Christianity is the belief that the Creator of the universe and humanity is revealed through two main channels: the universe He created and the written Word or Bible He inspired. Science focuses on the universe and people of faith focus on the Bible and issues related to spirituality.

**Chapter 1 Hidden Threads**

One way of thinking about social thought is to blame the social structures for problems and advocate human freedom. Problems can only be changed through radical social change.

The other way of thinking is to locate evil in the person, not in the organization. Problems are solved when laws are enforced and social stability is maintained.

**Chapter 2 The Nature of Theory**

A theory is a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. Reality is frequently distorted by the media, advertising, and technology. Theory considers social phenomenon in two ways: (a) objectively, as it is in reality, and (b) subjectively, as it presents itself to someone’s mind.

There is a difference between attitude and action. Attitude is subjective and may lead to action which is objective. Because of sin, the best intentions (subjective reality) will not necessarily result in expected outcomes (objective reality). The prediction of human behavior is limited by subjective attitudes. It is important to distinguish between subjective reality, what is intended and objective reality, what is done. Early theorists frequently failed to distinguish between subjective and objective reality.

Early theorists believing that the social world was the same as the natural world omitted the subjective side of reality. Social theory was revolutionized about a century ago when it became apparent that human consciousness was an important factor in the study of social reality. A person’s action was based upon a large number of personal qualities such as education and occupation. Surveys of large numbers of people were not always accurate because important factors influencing behavior were frequently overlooked.

The later approach led to soft science modeled partially on the assumptions of philosophy. Something could be real even if it was not experienced; reality could exist outside of human experience. Much important data cannot be measured because the data exists on the level of human attitudes. Modern social science has trouble accepting a soft or qualitative approach to social reality.

God’s work is seen (a) in creation and can be studied empirically; and (b) in social principles given for man’s benefit in social relationships, which are less empirical and can be studied most effectively with a soft science approach. Man’s work is the result of human limitations and falls short of God’s work. The principle to be followed by a Christian in social theory is this: measure man’s work in the social world by a proper understanding of God’s work in creation.

An accurate operational definition is a critical element in good theory. In the early years of social theorizing there was a lack of an adequate methodology to give an empirical basis to theory.

What scientists believe and how they come to agree on beliefs form a crucial part of theory formation and a perception of what the world is really like. (a) Much social science today is based on contemporary values. (b) Modern social paradigms are often more accurate than earlier ones that lacked empirical evidence. (c) There must be sensitivity to scientific claims that have sustained the test of time because they agree with biblical principles.

A student may experience considerable satisfaction when the merger of faith and science. When such merger leads to a belief system it may become an ideology which justifies and sact5ifies a vested interest of some group.

An ideology is the manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture. Ideology and theory are cut from the same cloth; each tries to present its perception of reality.

Christians should avoid ideological thinking because of its disregard for the truth and inherent divisive and hostile quality. Christians should have enough confidence in God’s plan that security need not be sought in a social program or theory. The Christian who places faith in something or someone other than God may slip into an ideological trap. Scientists may slip into the ideology of scientism: a belief that science provides the best means to know the world as it really is.

Karl Marx was a good example of one who was captivated by ideology. In advocating the necessity of revolution, he ignored the complex nature of the world; he attributed economically motivated behavior to people who were not so motivated; he was Utopian in his desire to provide a revolutionary program; and his definitions were of the non-operating type and could not be tested.

**Chapter 3 The European Heritage**

The 18th century was a period in history well suited for a revolution in social science.

**Enlightment**

The Enlightment was a philosophic movement of the 18th century marked by a rejection of traditional social, religious, and political ideas and an emphasis on rationalism. Many philosophers sought a revolution in the structure of society and in fundamental belief systems. What they were often reacting to was an authoritative religion propped up by its relation to the state. Science replaced the authority of the church and gave credence to human omniscience.

Leaders of the Enlightenment were generalists, men of letters who held to relativist positions (no absolutes in ethics) on all issues except freedom, tolerance, reason, and humanity. A relativist position embraces a theory that knowledge is relative to the limited nature of the mind and the conditions of knowing. Man’s problems were social not religious; society had to change before man could become good inwardly. Science was to return morality to man and stability to society. Charles Montesquieu was the best example of a sociologist at this time; he recognized the complexity of society as few had.

***Auguste Comte* (1798-1857)**

Comte, of French descent, was known as the Father of Sociology; he emphasized observation, experimentation, and comparison, the basic requirements for science. A positive society was one that gave up the search for absolute values and relied on a belief in science. Religion was combined with science, utopianism with conservatism into a restless and unstable intellectual system. Comte believed that a religious system would emerge that directed the political; a religious system that rejected traditional doctrines and practices of the church; a religion of humanity, one of moral worth capable of producing unity and love in society. Comte’s social program sought to use religion as a means to gain the unity of the state and then of the human race. Comte emphasized a realism which could be understood as a world of cause and effect in which social facts yielded to the proper application of science.

French philosophers believed reality was collective and the group was a determining influence on behavior. Society was closed and left little room for historical or other external influences. In German tradition reality was in social change; traditional scientific methods were considered inappropriate. Society was viewed as an open system responsive to historical and other external influences that effected society.

***Karl Marx* (1818-1883)**

Karl Marx visited Paris in 1843 looking for answers for the failure of the French Revolution. He did not find the answer but the time in Paris set the stage for the rest of his work. He believed that progress resulted from the expansion of human capacities and that there should be a natural unfolding of human potential for the fullest development of the social order. Social conflict was justifiable as a means of bringing in the ideal state.

The Hegelian tradition in which Marx was immersed was idealistic and dialectical. Dialectical was the art or practice of logical discussion as employed in investigating the truth of a theory or opinion; logical argumentation. Marx believed that the sweep of history was largely beyond the influence of individuals whose primary responsibility was to understand their place in the process of change.

Ideology always dominated the work of Marx. He usually asked the right questions but arrived at the wrong answers. Marx has enormous importance for contemporary sociology; his contributions include:

1. Alienation, the idea that man is separated from reality. Man was separated from his work and his products in a capitalist society, a basis for enslaving the worker. Man was perfectible if allowed to reap the benefits of his labor. Marx saw revolution as the only means by which man would finally escape his alienation.
2. Consciousness, the idea that people differed from animals in their ability to chose among forms of action. There is willfulness in people directing their future action and for which they are responsible. As persons in social classes view life with the same awareness and concern, they developed class consciousness. Social class is deterministic of behavior and forms the distorted perception of society.
3. Conflict, the idea of inevitable revolution against the state, resulting in a communist society. Conflict assumes resistance against things as they are, always with the expectation that social change will shape things as they should be.
4. Sociology of knowledge, a tradition in sociology claiming that consciousness is a social product. If social classes should have an incorrect perception of their condition, then they would have a distorted view of reality shaped by their social consciousness.

It is a mistake for Christians to ignore Marxist thought and the questions raised. His way of seeing problems as inherent contradictions in society should provide considerable help in understanding the world as it is. The sociology of knowledge provides a useful and accurate model in the social construction of reality against which to critique modern society.

***Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)***

The publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859 was a watershed of evolutionary thinking which dominated thought into the 20th century. Herbert Spencer was the major figure in the revolution to apply evolutionary principles to the social world. He believed that social institutions, like plants and animals, adapted to their environments. Social laws were deterministic as natural laws. Progress was considered an uncontrollable scientific law readily accepted in early Victorian England. He developed a theory that recognized the possibility of stagnation and retrogression in social change. Without the possibility of predicting whether a structure would progress or regress, the theory lost its scientific basis. He believed people were perfectible if allowed to adjust to the circumstances found in a progressing society. It was through society and society only that human potential could be realized. Spencer coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” which was popularized by Darwin and others. Spencer opposed all social reform and wanted social life to evolve free of any external control. In the end modern society posed challenges that evolution could neither explain nor predict.

**Classical Sociology**

The residue of evolutionary thinking became apparent in the institutional malaise in Europe at the end of the 19th century. It was time for a radical departure from past ideas; social thinkers developed a subjective attitude toward the world. Consciousness and non-rational thought became the means by which they hoped to interpret social life in a modern world.

Classical sociological thought revised simplistic notions of the past:

1. It established the realization that sociology was a separate discipline with its own methodology.
2. A new view of human natu4re emerged, one which neither encouraged man’s radical efforts to remake society nor accepted his submission to historical forces. Man was an actor in a meaningful world.
3. Classical sociology developed a realistic view of progress. Modern life was viewed as neither simple nor responsive to easy change.

Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel were the giants of classical sociology.

***Emile Durkheim* (1858-1917)**

Durkheim, from a long line of French rabbis, shaped the field into a legitimate academic discipline; he established the meaning of social facts, that group of phenomena which may be differentiated from those studied by other natural sciences. Social facts came from society or some segment of it and constituted the proper domain of sociological research. He believed that social facts have a coercive power which influences a person, independent of his individual will. The explanation of a social phenomenon depended on the cause producing it and the function it fulfills.

Durkheim was influenced by Spencer’s suggestion that social life evolved from one level of development to another. He realized that much of the unity found in simple societies came from religion and the norms and values it provided. He concluded that society is the source of all religion and believed that worship of the divine is simply worship of the power of society. Durkheim made a distinction between the sacred and the profane; the sacred is the essence of religion and includes all aspects of social reality set aside as divine. The profane included all the mundane, everyday aspects of life. He singled out secularization as a characteristic problem of modern society. In Durkheim’s model harmony results from the social importance of the individual differences which lead to unity as each depends on the other. He omitted the place of the individual in social groups. He never clarified the importance of individual consciousness and the place it might have in social dissent. Durkheim immersed himself in public service during World War I and died in 1917, shattered by the senselessness of the times.

***Max Weber* (1864-1920)**

Weber enjoys the reputation of being the most complete sociologist who ever lived. He organized social thought and laid the foundation for much of modern sociology. Weber’s work was directed toward understanding the part played by ideas in the development of Western history. He leap-frogged over Durkheim and Spencer by suggesting that social phenomena were primarily subjective and not purely natural or social. The way to study phenomena was to understand them rather than to attempt to predict them.

Science cannot make any final statements or predict with any assurance. The best it can hope to do is to understand the meaning and value attributed to any particular social action and then to develop casual relations. Weber tried to show that Western civilization had a unique development with religious basis. He reversed the Marxist thesis by arguing that spiritual causes could have material consequences. He felt that Puritans pursued wealth as a religious duty. Sociology’s main purpose was first to interpret social action in terms of its subjective meaning and patterns and then to move to causal explanation of it occurrences. Weber never moved beyond the social and psychosocial meaning of religion; he did recognize the revolutionary effect of Christianity on history. Weber died in 1920 after great efforts in the reorganization of Germany.

***Georg Simmel* (1858-1918)**

Georg Simmel was born in Berlin and received his doctorate in 1881. He was of Jewish ancestry and was marginalized within the German academic system. Only in 1914 did Simmel obtain a regular academic appointment, and this appointment was in Strasbourg, far from Berlin. He wrote extensively on the nature of association, culture, social structure, the city, and the economy. His writings were read by Durkheim and Weber, and Simmel contributed greatly to sociology and European intellectual life in the early part of this century. One of his most famous writings is "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) and his best known book is *The Philosophy of Money* (1907).

Simmel combines ideas from all of the three major classical writers and was influenced by Hegel and Kant. When Simmel discusses social structures, the city, money, and modern society, his analysis has some similarities to the analyses of Durkheim (problem of individual and society), Weber (effects of rationalization), and Marx (alienation).

Simmel considered society to be an association of free individuals, and said that it could **not** be studied in the same way as the physical world. "For Simmel, society is made up of the interactions between and among individuals, and the sociologist should study the patterns and forms of these associations, rather than quest after social laws." (Farganis, p. 133). This emphasis on social interaction at the individual and small group level, and viewing the study of these interactions as the primary task of sociology makes Simmel's approach different from that of the classical writers, especially Marx and Durkheim.

**Chapter 4 The American Tradition**

American sociology was born in the post-Civil War period. Social thought at that time responded to the urbanization and industrialization of the nation and the resulting problems. Six men are looked upon as founders of American sociology,

**American Sociology Founders**

***William Graham Sumner* (1840-1910)**

Sumner attended Yale College and studied ancient languages and history at Göttingen (1864) and theology and philosophy at Oxford (1866). The following year he was appointed tutor at Yale and then was ordained in the Protestant Episcopal Church. In 1869 he left Yale to be rector of churches in New York City and [Morristown](http://www.answers.com/topic/morristown-new-jersey" \t "_top), N. J. In 1872 he became the first professor of political and social science at Yale, a position he long held.

Sumner was a [Social Darwinist](http://homepage.newschool.edu/het/schools/apologist.htm); he was the American counterpart of the British evolutionary theorist, Herbert [Spencer](http://homepage.newschool.edu/het/profiles/spencer.htm).   Sumner defended radical *laissez-faire* as being justified by laws of evolution and was instrumental in reforming the American university system away from its old "divinity-classics" roots and towards modernism.  His famous analysis of social norms was contained in his 1907 book *Folkways*. *Folkways* was notable in several respects. It contributed terms that have become widely used, such as [folkways](http://www.answers.com/topic/folkways), mores, the wegroup, and [ethnocentrism](http://www.answers.com/topic/ethnocentrism). In addition, Sumner established the notion of different degrees of social pressure for conformity in his analyses of folkways, mores, and institutions. A crucial and fundamental idea in this book was the observation that social life is mainly concerned with creating, sustaining, and changing values. But Sumner insisted that the values in folkways and mores are inherently non-rational and yet powerful in influencing thought and behavior. Consequently, he regarded conflict and struggle as [inseparable](http://www.answers.com/topic/inseparable) components of human society in any age.

***Albion Woodbury Small* (1854-1926)**

Albion Small was born in Buckfield, Maine, on May 11, 1854. Though trained as a minister at the Newton Theological Institution (1876-1879), he pursued wider interests at the universities of Leipzig and Berlin (1879-1881), particularly in political economy. Thereafter, till 1889 he taught at Colby College in Maine and embarked on advanced studies in economics and history at Johns Hopkins University. After selection as president of Colby College, he was chosen in 1892 to found a department of sociology at the new University of Chicago. During his tenure at Chicago, Small built the leading department of sociology in the United States, helped in founding the American Sociological Society (of which he was president in 1912 and 1913), and was the first editor of the *American Journal of Sociology.*

The best summary of Small's overall thinking is contained in *The Meaning of Social Science* (1910), where the thrust of his *General Sociology* is clarified in surprisingly modern terms. Essentially, social science including sociology studies continuing processes through which men form, implement, and change valuations of their experiences. Human behavior derives meaning from these valuations, and both values and behavior are simultaneously patterned in the individual as personality and in society through groups and organizations.

Small wrote an article in 1907 laying out four assumptions characteristic of early American sociology. The assumptions were (a) the importance of natural laws as an influence in social life, (b) the idea of progress in the development of society, (c) the use of sociology for melioristic intervention in society, and (d) the importance of individual behavior as influential in society.

***Lester Frank Ward* (1841-1913)**

Lester Frank Ward (June 18, 1841 – April 18, 1913), was an [American](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/United_States) [botanist](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Botany), [paleontologist](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Paleontology), and [sociologist](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sociology), and first president of the American Sociological Association. He is credited as one of those instrumental in establishing sociology as an academic field in the United States. His vision of a just society, with equality for women, all [social classes](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Social_class) and races, and the elimination of [poverty](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Poverty) was revolutionary for his time. He believed that human beings have the capability to accomplish such a society, and that social scientists, sociologists in particular, had the responsibility to guide humankind in that direction.

In 1905, Ward became a professor at [Brown University](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Brown_University), and in 1906, the first president of the American Sociological Association. He also served as editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* from 1905. Ward theorized that [poverty](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Poverty) could be minimized or eliminated by systematic state intervention. He believed that humankind is not helpless before the impersonal force of nature and [evolution](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Evolution). Instead, through the power of mind, man could take control of the situation and direct the evolution of human society. This theory is known as "telesis." Ward placed himself in direct opposition to social Darwinism, especially to the work of [Herbert Spencer](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Herbert_Spencer). Although Ward admired Spencer, he believed that Spencer had lost his way when he tried to apply his ideas to the world of government and politics.

***Franklin Giddings* (1855-1931)**

Franklin Giddings was born on March 23, 1855, in Sherman, Conn. After graduation from Union College, he turned to newspaper work in Connecticut, and during the next 10 years he developed great skill in analyzing public issues. He began to publish articles in scholarly journals, mainly on economic questions, and received favorable notice from the academic world. In 1888 he was made lecturer on politics at [Bryn Mawr College](http://www.answers.com/topic/bryn-mawr-college) and soon became a full professor. In 1894 he was invited to a new chair in sociology and the history of civilization at Columbia University, where he developed one of the nation's leading departments until his retirement in 1928.

The major themes in Giddings's work were fully presented in his *Principles of Sociology* (1896), where he clearly described sociology as a special basic social science, rather than the sum of other social sciences. Specifically, he conceived of sociology as the study of developing forms of human society, based on the changing intensity of "consciousness of kind," or collective feelings of similarity and belonging. Societies develop through normal conflicts and readjustments between these two forms. Giddings was a pioneer in encouraging the use of careful quantitative and experimental methods in studying social phenomena.

***Charles Horton Cooley* (1864-1929)**

Charles Horton Cooley believed the [human beings](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Human_being) are essentially social in nature, and that a significant source of information about the world comes through human interaction with others, including the concept of one’s self. He is most famous for the concept of the "looking glass self," the idea of how people appear to others, which he regarded as an essential component of the development of self-image. Cooley also believed that human society functions "organically," and is healthy and successful when each individual member lives for the sake of others, not limited by selfish individualism. He is known for his criticism of apparently successful nations, such as [England](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/England) and the [United States](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/United_States), noting that selfish individualism prevented them from achieving an ideal society.

Charles was the fourth of his family's six children. He developed a withdrawn personality as a result of a speech impediment and being partially invalid. Cooley was intimidated by the great success of his father, which probably also contributed to his personality. He apparently had few playmates as a child. Cooley received a BA in [engineering](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Engineering) from the University of Michigan in 1887 after seven years of study, which were interrupted by illness and work. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1894 in economics. His dissertation was a work in social [ecology](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ecology) entitled, "The Theory of Transportation.” He taught at the University of Michigan starting in 1892 and remained there until the end of his life.

Cooley stressed the systematic relationships between social processes in society. He argued each aspect of society was dependent on others for its growth and survival. This organic ideal put him at odds with the classic selfish individualism of economics and of the [sociology](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sociology) of [Herbert Spencer](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Herbert_Spencer). Cooley's sociology is holistic, in describing society as an organism, he makes no analogy with [biology](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Biology) in the manner of Spencer, but is looking at the systemic interrelations between all social processes: "Our life," Cooley stated, "is all one human whole, and if we are to have any real knowledge of it we must see it as such. If we cut it up it dies in the process."

***Edward Alsworth Ross* (1866-1951)**

Edward Alsworth Ross was born in Virden, Illinois, son of farmer and schoolteacher. Orphaned at the age of ten, Ross was taken in by three different Iowa families. Ross’s lawyer and guardian, protected his inheritance, which afforded him plenty of funds for his schooling. Ross earned his A.B. from Coe College in 1886, after which time he studied for a year at the University of Berlin and traveled in France and England (1888-1889). He started graduate study in 1890 at Johns Hopkins University where he majored in economics. Ross received his Ph.D. in political economy in 1891 with minors in philosophy and ethics. In 1892 he married Rosamond Simons, the niece of the first president of the American Sociological Society, Lester Frank Ward.

During these first few years, Ross held a plethora of attractive positions, including professor at Indiana (1891-1892), secretary of the American Economic Association (1892), professor at Cornell University (1892-1893), and professor at Stanford University (1893-1900). In 1901 Ross accepted a position at the University of Nebraska; Howard also took a position there in 1904. Together, with a young law professor named Roscoe Pound, they transformed the University into a bustling center of sociology. While at Nebraska, Ross published one of his most famous works, *Social Control* (1901), in which he analyzed societal stability in terms of sympathy, sociability and social justice. He explored the dimensions of racism and coined the phrase “race suicide” in his article, “The Causes of Racial Superiority” (1901). In his *Foundations of Sociology* (1905), Ross created a comprehensive theory of society.

In 1906, Ross followed an offer from the University of Wisconsin economics department. Ross wrote his popular essay, [“Sin and Society”](http://spartan.ac.brocku.ca/~lward/Ross/Ross_1907/Ross_1907_toc.html) in 1907, which gained endorsement from Theodore Roosevelt. In 1908, Ross published [*Social Psychology*](http://spartan.ac.brocku.ca/~lward/Ross/Ross_1919/Ross_1919_toc.html). Two of his most progressive and influential books, *Changing America* (1909) and *The Social Trend* (1922), paved the way for future sociological analysis and reform. Ross served as the fifth President of the American Sociological Society for the years 1914 and 1915. Ross formed a separate Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Wisconsin, which he chaired until 1937. He retired in 1937 and was honored with election to the status of professor emeritus.

**Social Gospel**

Washington Gladden (1836-1918) was a Congregational minister who criticized the excessive competition that often accompanied the growth of capitalistic ventures. He was especially outspoken when denouncing many of [John D. Rockefeller](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h957.html)'s practices. Gladden served congregations in [New York](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1918.html), [Massachusetts](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1909.html), and, for many years, [Columbus, Ohio](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2086.html). He is regarded as the founder of the Social Gospel movement and authored more than 30 books that contained biblical solutions for the problems of the industrial age.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) ministered among the German immigrant community in the Hell’s Kitchen section of [New York City](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2122.html). He witnessed first-hand the misery created by poverty during the depression of the 1890s. He was convinced that all social ills were somehow connected to poverty and that unrestrained capitalism was the root cause. Rauschenbusch urged his church and others to join actively in the struggle for social justice.

The Social Gospel emerged as a new and unorthodox expression of Christianity with a vision of saving modern civilization and harmonizing its warring interests, classes, nations, and races. It was a progressive force, protesting against the evils of industrialism and individualism produced by evolutionary thinking. Individual salvation was replaced with social salvation. Orthodox notions of individual depravity were no longer needed. The objective was the establishment of an earthly kingdom of God, a Utopian notion well suited to evolutionary dogma.

The movement failed in its effort to develop scientific respectability. This sort of Christian sociology was unrealistic and as out of step with the scientific thinking of that day as it was with religious orthodoxy. The movement ignored the reality of sin. World War I destroyed much of the optimism of the day and left the Social Gospel in wreckage.

**American Renaissance**

A 25 year period from the founding of sociology as an academic discipline at Chicago to the end of World War I was a time of transition. Hope was placed in education and the possibility of creating a brand of social thinkers conceived of mankind as responsive to social as well as environmental factors. The view was a rejection of the influence of Spencer and Comte. Members of the Chicago faculty studied in Germany and brought fresh ideas to the study of society. Chicago sociologists studied all forms of environments from hobo havens to elite neighborhoods and from juvenile gangs to ethic communities. These sociologists saw society in a different light; society was recognized as a loosely integrated and complex set of relationships among motivated persons who acted consciously, intentionally, and voluntarily to attain some objective. There was concern for human relationships as the basic building blocks of society. Certain basic assumptions about people and how they behaved began to shape theory in new ways.

1. A fundamental assumption of the Chicago school was the importance of personality.
2. Man’s end-seeking behavior was another basic assumption. People are goal-oriented, often in creative and unpredictable ways.
3. People rationally sought the means to attain their ends was a third basic assumption.
4. Mental reflection is a necessary basis for any choices a person makes. Rational thought is needed to be justified before the action can be taken.

Because the Chicago sociologists failed to understand spiritual needs, their contributions were limited and faulty. Instead of seeing reality as emanating from nature and imposed on people, they conceived of reality as shaped by humans.

**The Thomas Dictum**

W.I. Thomas said, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Since social disorganization is found in all societies at all time, there is nothing inherently evil in it. Society is always changing and social disorganization is a symptom of social strains inhibiting the accomplishment of human desires and needs. A good society does not necessarily make good people and vice versa. This conception of reality goes a long way toward explaining the effects of sin on people and society. When people make choices that ignore God’s plan, those choices cause real problems.

Robert Park developed the idea of the *marginal man*, man is characterized by social maladjustment preventing him from satisfactory adjustment to any social group. Consequently, he finds himself on the margin of each. A Christian may be a marginal man simply because of “being in the world” and yet “not of it”.

**Two Traditions**

In the development of American sociology, social thought stemmed from or was a response to Comte and Spencer. Each thinker represented one of two traditions that can be traced back to the founding of sociology and beyond.

1. One tradition claims that society has a reality separate from the person; the person is more object than subject and is shaped by society. Society produces data which accurately describe how people are influenced.
2. The other tradition conceives of society as composed of interacting persons who, as social beings, make society what it is. Society has no existence apart from people whose reality is expressed in their actions. This is the tradition of Marx, Weber, and the German idealists who influenced the tradition of Chicago sociology.

Neither tradition is completely acceptable to the Christian. Since people are made in the image of God and endowed with personality, they are different from the rest of creation. A person is subject as well as objected and in sinfulness makes a world for himself or herself.

The first tradition reduces all aspects of society to measurement in the hope of defining and predicting social reality. The other tradition relies on interpretation, not measurement, and requires the scientist to become involved in his data. A sociologist may best understand reality when both traditions are combined in careful support of each other and must be supplemented by uniquely Christian assumptions of man and society.

Two Christian assumptions: (a) the ultimate nature of the world must be accepted as a limiting condition of social scientific knowledge, and (b) since people are always constructing a world to their won liking, their sinfulness is a rejection of God’s plan for the world and limits understanding of human knowledge.

**CHAPTER 12**

**POSTMODERN THEORIES**

Postmodern theorists are concerned with such things as the explosion of symbols and images, the implosion of meaning, hyperreality, spectacle, and the disappearance of the subject. Postmodern theorists are concerned with the new ways that people are controlled, deceived, and managed. Through a variety of techniques. Postmodern theory can help to understand how we have been duped by the images, technology, and the various and not-so-subtle allures of the consumer society. Contemporary life provides an especially difficult climate for discerning what it means to live in the world but not be entirely of it.

To understand what *postmodern* means, we must have a grasp of the term *modern*. The word modern implies something hopeful, something that holds promise, a sort of coming out of darkness and into light. But what of modernity’s promise? Is this rationality, logic, and search for truth actually getting us somewhere? The rational tenor of the modern age has been called into question, and the boundaries of rational thought have been breached.

Modernity’s successor, postmodernity, is characterized by a certain plasticity. Modernism represented social unity and human progress; postmodernism, by contrast seems to be the logical outcome of progress in a world of means without clearly defined ends. To idolize the modern age, to place our faith in progress, science, and the power of the human will, is to deify our collective conscience and erroneously elevate human ends to the level of the divine.

In pursing the promises of modernism, we often replace prayer with work, and equate progress in the kingdom of God with progress in the kingdom of man. For the modernist, truth exists, but it is often distorted to support ideological self-interest. On the postmodern worldview, truth claims are viewed with suspicion. Postmodernism elevates emotion, experience, and intuition as forms of truth; truth becomes a mere by-product of the human will, nothing more than a social construction.

***Structuralism and Poststructuralism***

In moving from modern to postmodern thought, we must shift focus from sociological theories to social theories, which are more multidisciplinary in character. Postmodern theory is rooted in competing intellectual systems, Sartre’s existentialism, French structuralism, and Derrida’s poststructuralism. Postmodernism is best understood as a social movement rather than an intellectual one.

***Sartre***

Sartre saw the individual as responsible for what he or she does and downplayed the role of larger structures played in influencing behavior. Sartre’s later work is more Marxist in tone; he pays greater attention to the oppressive social and economic structures which constrain human freedom but he still emphasized the human prerogative for transcendence, the surpassing of the given.

***Structuralism***

The structuralists perspective focuses on structures which influence human behavior. They are concerned with the discovery and exploration of universal structures which underlie human existence, shape it, constrain it, and give it meaning. One form of structuralism focuses on the discovery and examination of linguistic structures. The structuralists take a decidedly less autonomous view of human beings, but the matter of individualism and freedom reemerges in poststructuralist thought; it appears in postmodern thought, where the almost limitless choices confronting individuals have serious adverse implications for the so-called freedom they enjoy.

Saussur (1857-1913) developed formal description of the structure of the sign. He saw signs as the product of two elements: (a) a signifier, a symbol like a word, and (b) a signified, some concept that the signifier references. Signifiers are created by a community of language users; once created they moved beyond human control and resist any efforts to change them. Signifiers and the objects they signify become inseparable as we use them.

Meaning of many words derive from their relation to their binary opposites, cold/hot, wellness/sick. People and other aspects of the social world are being shaped by the structure of language. The structuralist’s traditions advance a search for universal structures which offer a kind of transcendence, and ground human meaning in something outside itself.

***Poststructuralism***

Poststructuralists argue that the internal structure of the sign has collapsed, with signifiers disconnected from any stable signified, making meaning multiplicative, open-ended, and fragmented. Poststructuralist Derrida sees language as inherently unstable and unorderly, and thus incapable of exerting controlling power over people. For him the search for the universal laws governing language is futile.

The theories are post structural in the sense that they advocate a relativist view of the world where the patterns, routines, and conventions of social life are inherently unstable and thus only temporarily structured. This intellectual shift has implications for the Christian who believes that the Word of God is transcendent truth, and that this truth is trans-cultural, timeless, not of human origin, and provides regulating norms for human social behavior. Where the structuralists see stability and universal meaning rooted in systems of signs, the poststructuralists see instability and fragmentation.

Derrida sees institutions as nothing more than writing and therefore momentary, fragmented, without underlying meaning and ideally unable to constrain people. According to Derrida we live in a theater of cruelty where we are enslaved, bound to the speech hailing from various artificial, supposedly universal, structures. The present cultural fixation with so-called excellence provides a good example of how we passively conform to the speech of our institutions. Excellence is somehow thought to be a universal ideal or good. Many do little more than pursue scripted success through credentials gained in excellence factories, never stopping to think about what excellence might look like or how it might act out in countercultural ways. Excellence is just a word, one that can mean anything we wish.

In the postmodern age, language has become unmoored from any universal standard of meaning; signifiers are no longer connected to only one signified. (See the example of nigger on page 193) Multiple and competing conceptions of truth and reality can coexist and no single one can be privileged. Social thought and theory moved from a traditional view of reality with an emphasis on structures and stable meanings to a relativist view of social reality based on no unifying logos.

**Baudrillard**

***Hyperreality***

Jean Baudrillard’s work best exemplifies postmodern social theory and the social implications of the postmodern age. Baudrillard developed the ways in which images themselves have replaced a language of words and how images have become unmorred from words and the signified altogether. Ours is a language of free-floating images which move us further from reality until reality itself is erased.

Baudrillard is best known for his concept of hyperreality, what states that our cultures have been thoroughly saturated by the media and entertainment industries such that the differences between the real and the images, signs, and simulations, have dissolved. The consumer culture has erupted in a cataclysm of garish delights, mostly concerned with image, not substance. In postmodernity signifiers have become disconnected from the things they signify.

Symbols and images have come to have a realness about them. Anytime information is conveyed through a medium, it changes the information in some way; consequently some of the meaning which it originally conveyed is lost or altered. Media prepackages information such that the very form in which it is presented becomes the meaning itself—the medium is the message. From Baudrillard’s perspective, our technological devices of mass communication dissipate reality. (see pages 196-197 for example of Diana) This society conceptualizes prestige and social esteem through the logic of consumption rather than production.

Bauidrillard refers to the proliferation of images, which represent realities that never existed and never will exist, as simulacrum. (see example of McDonald’s on pages 199-200) We live in the reality of unreality, and our simulacra are everywhere.

***Spectacle***

The spectacle is an opiate that is used to overcome the fact that the commodities we purchase are ultimately dissatisfying and disenchanting. Spectacles are tightly controlled and their purpose is to seduce people into buying commodities. George Ritzer developed the ways in which preoccupation with simulation and spectacle creates a vacuum of meaning and ultimately leaves people disenchanted. A great deal of interaction with other human beings is in fact simulated.

In a world where sign value dominates, and where signs are so proliferated we actually learn to prefer the unreal over the real. Modernity produced an explosion of signs and was characterized by clarity of difference, clear logic, and a sense of forward direction. Postmodernity produced a reversion of those signs, an implosion of the modernist creation. Sexuality, race, political boundaries, and entertainment field are no so clear any more. The erasure of classification or the blurring of boundaries between phenomena culminated in a crisis of meaning. The crisis of meaning occurs because in a world where everything points to something, nothing points to anything. Signs have been destabilized, unmoor3ed from anything real. Life becomes a game in which we are armchair participants arranging and rearranging signs which have no real meaning. Christians flip easily between the secular and the sacred with little recognition of any boundaries between the two realms.

***Identity***

Identity and self-concept are often based on exclusionary practices, rooted in out-group contrasts—male, not female; married, not unmarried; middle class, not lower class. Culture and identity are interdependent; as culture begins to fragment, so does identity. Moving deeper into postmodernity, the categories which define identity begin to break down. Baudrillard suggested that all social categories, classes, genders, political orientations, and cultures collapse into each other; everything is absorbed into everything, and the meanings of any and all categories diminish.

Postmodern age leaves us with questions of identity. The postmodern age erodes the categories by which we structure identity. It seems that the more we try to anchor identify, the more it slips away and remains just beyond our grasp. The New Testament takes a counterintuitive approach to this problem of identity. “If you want to say your life, you must lose it. If you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to lead, you must serve. These images, pouring out, losing one’s life, serving, and being born again stand in stark contrast to the signs, simulated realities and control offered by technology by which we try to find ourselves. Being in Christ provides a new super-ordinate category for identity that outshines all previous one.

**Hearing and Seeing**

Postmodernism is about images. What does it mean that we live in a world comprised of, and defined by, them? Scripture has far more to say about the Word than about images. God is inseparable from his Word, and his Word is the basis for all that is (John 1:1-3) Matthew 4:16 suggests that the Word brings sight. John 9 draws attention to two manifestations of sight, physical and spiritual sight. The emphasis on Word and on hearing is much at odds with the conditions of life in the post modern world. Although scripture places the emphasis on hearing the Word, seeing has become for us the dominant mode of knowing. How do we submit to the Word in a world which honors and privileges the image above all else?

Jacques Ellul explains that while hearing and see are inseparable and complementary, they are different and their difference is of fundamental importance. Sight places the seer at the center of the universe. Sight guarantees my possession of the world and makes it into a “universe-for-me.” Seeing gives me the possibility of action. Sight is the basis of my mastery.

Hearing orients us to the world in a very different way. We open our eyes and something complete and coherent confronts us. Sound mostly raises questions. Sight turns us inward, while hearing has the opposite effect. There is a fundamental difference between images and words, sight and sound. Ellul say that our civilization tends to confuse reality with truth. The Word, hearing, is related to Truth, but the image, seeing, only to reality. Praxis becomes the measure of all truth.

Ellul shows how Truth and the Word belong to an order wholly different from the one verifiable through our scientific and other explorations of reality. Truth resists concrete definition; no image is able to convey any truth at all. An image always expresses an incomplete reality and in so doing distorts reality. The Truth comes only through the Word and it is such that images can never capture or lead us to possess it. The Word described in the scriptures is inseparable from the person of Jesus. Jesus never actually wrote anything. In John 8 Jesus wrote on the ground which was quickly washed out, erasing his markings. The image fades but the Word remains. Jesus did not leave behind anything written because to do so would be to convert the Word into an image.

**Spectacle**

Postmodern age is driven by spectacle. We are inundated with the images of the magical, mystical, and larger-than-life. Involvement may be one way people try to anchor themselves in a fragmented world. Spectacle is noisy, garish, visually compelling and inescapable. It cannot regenerate our lives, because it is false: it is simulacra. Scripture is filled with spectacle, and with the promise of future spectacle, but of a different nature than that found in our amusement parks, casinos, and cinemas. Biblical spectacle points to and testifies to the Truth found in Jesus.

In scripture spectacle is mostly deemphasized as it relates to this worldly orientation. Much of our spectacle functions as an escape from reality. In Mark, Jesus alternately commanded secrecy and disclosure. There was a progressive unfolding narrative surrounding the identity and true nature of the messiah. Spectacle can function to either illuminate or distort the reality of who Jesus is and what he is about. The central question concerns the function of spectacle as symbol. Do people want the rush of spectacle or will the spectacle reorient them to the movements and emerging unveiling of the Son of God.

**Logocentrism**

The idea of logos lies at the heart of Western rationalism and at the center of scripture. The concept and the tension surrounding it defines the postmodern struggle with the idea of truth. Believers may disagree about many matters but they share common ground in their commitment to the centrality of the scripture. If there is no logos, there is little basis for faith. Derrida suggests that we delude ourselves in the search for a logos that does not exist, a search that has been enslaving and destructive.

To better understand Derrida’s concern, it is helpful to look at scripture interpretation. We often decide what a passage means by appealing to the best understanding of the author’s intention. Greater fidelity to the author’s intention is seen as truer than other interpretations. The author’s intention is held as truth. Derrida would not privilege the author’s intention as the truth, reality, or only possibility of the text. Writing according to Derrida continues to signify, even in the absence of the writer. Writing continues to signify long after its authors are gone. There may be no single true meaning, guaranteed by the word of the author. Derrida encourages a hermeneutic humility. He may also inadvertently push us away from human-based certainty and back into the realm of faith.

Vanhoozer outlines two very different hermeneutical approaches. (a) Hermeneutical realism is the position that believes meaning to be prior to and independent of the process of interpretation. (b) Non-realist see reality as a human construction. For the hermeneutical non-realist meaning in a text depends on what aims, categories and perspectives one bring to it.

We are caught in the tension between a world consisting of both seen and unseen. For the Christian it can only be navigated by faith in a Creator who evidences Himself in the Logos, who animates and sustains the reality he created and who alone gives meaning to life. Many of the narratives in scripture leave us not with an answer but with a set of questions. (Good Samaritan parable) Living the question and not forcing the answer gives us traction on reality in a murky social world t\where truth is an especially rare commodity. Living the question is an act of faith and faith is the only path to the real.

The emerging paradigm of the postmodern era has the potential to reanimate our collective imagination, to se our sight on a new vision of the kingdom of God and our place in it.