

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture 50
George Herbert Mead

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George Herbert Mead

Life and Intellectual Influences



Welcome back to the class and today we are going to discuss yet another important sociologist George Herbert Mead otherwise known as G H Mead, a person who is extremely important figure in sociology not only because of his, the usual contributions about sociological theory and then arguments, but, he is one among the very few sociologist or one among the very few important sociologists who provided a completely different orientation to other sociological enterprise both in terms of its theoretical engagement as well as the kind of a methodological orientation.

So, Mead is significantly different in his sociological analysis, in his understanding about what constitutes social in his ambition, in his scope about the discipline, he is very-very different. So, G H Mead is one of the very important sociologists who laid foundation for the development of sociology in a peculiar way, in a particular direction. And that stand of theorization is widely known as the interactionism.

There are different sections which we will discuss maybe towards the end of the course, this will give you some broad overview, but that particular way of sociological analysis which focuses on interaction is something quite different from the other theoretical perspectives that are known as functionalism or conflict theory because, these two broad theoretical orientations look at the macro picture, the larger structural aspects of society whereas interactionism looks at the micro processes and with the very term indicates interactionism it looks at the dynamics involved in human interaction.

So, it has a very strong belief that human beings are unlike other animals, and they are able to create a sense of society through their interaction and human beings are able to create society, human beings are able to change the society according to their, according to the meanings that they attribute to that, and this is very different from the, a kind of a positivistic understanding of society as we have seen in the case of Auguste Comte and even up to Emile Durkheim.

I think, I hope you remember and you followed the discussion, when we had a brief discussion about positivism. Positivism understands that there is an outside reality out there and the task of the sociologist is to go, collect those information and analyze them and maybe to do kind of experimentation and other analysis and then come up with a kind of a conclusion. Whereas, interactionists they take a completely different path, they would argue that there is no social reality out there, a perception of reality is created through human interaction.

So, in that one the it is very closely connected with psychology, it is very closely connected with social psychology. So, these arguments about the roads about mind, roads about the senses, roads about self, these are some of the very-very important concerns in interactions theory. And we will see that, for example, George Herbert Mead his theory about mind self and society or CH Cooley's, his arguments about looking glass self-theory.

Or Blumer's argument about symbolic interactionism or Garfinkel or Goffman, all these thinkers from which we will just touch upon towards the end of the course, will give you a very clear picture about this particular distinct focus or distinct approach of sociology, an approach which looks at, which can be described as this micro sociological perspective, they are not talking about

the larger historical transformation, they are not talking about the larger structure of society, rather, they are looking at them very specific, very micro level interaction.

Interaction between two people, interaction in a small group, how people construct meanings and how other people understand the same meaning that we want them to understand through gestures and symbols and other things. How do we engage in different role games and how a particular role is understood by the other person?

For example, in a classroom setting, how there are very clear expectations about how a student is supposed to behave? How a teacher is supposed to behave? So the moment we enter into a classroom, we all, both the teacher as well as the students are, they are performing their roles. They are performing the roles by adhering to certain established protocols. And these protocols are in terms of your gestures, in terms of your appearance, in terms of the way you sit, the way you look up to the teacher, the way in which the so called decorum is supposed to be, maintained in the class here, host of other things.

So these scholars would argue that a classroom space is created through these carefully choreographed actions. And this is something quite different from the perspective from, in functional theory, or in conflict perspective. So George Herbert Mead is one of the most important, maybe we can say one of the important founding fathers of interactionist perspective. So we will discuss Mead in detail, maybe 3 or 4 classes on Mead, because he is an extremely important figure as somebody who is responsible for the establishment of this interactionist school.

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- George Herbert Mead was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1863
- In 1883, Mead graduated from Oberlin with a major in philosophy
- In autumn 1887, Mead enrolled at Harvard University, where his main interests were philosophy and psychology.
- In 1888, Mead left Harvard after receiving only a B.A. and moved to Leipzig, Germany to study with psychologist Wilhelm Wundt
- Joined University of Chicago and taught there until his death on 1931



So there is another interesting thing about Mead is that he is an American. He was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1863. And he was he is not somebody from Europe. And so far, that we were discussing about scholars only from the European continent. Whereas, maybe, except Ibn Khaldun whom we discussed in the very first class, or others scholars who we have discussed so far, or from the, from Europe, from Italy, from Germany, and, then France, and then England, nobody else I think.

So now, we are coming across a scholar from the US, an American scholar, George Herbert Mead. But interestingly, he also spent a lot of time in Germany in Leipzig which we will see. So in 1883, Mead graduated from Oberlin with a major in philosophy. And in autumn 1887, Mead enrolled at Harvard University, where his main interest was philosophy and psychology. So you know that he was, he is not so far, he is not kind of trained in sociology, he got a degree, a BA degree in philosophy and psychology at Harvard University.

And 1888, he left Harvard after receiving only BA, and moved to Leipzig, Germany, to study with psychologist William Wundt, and William Wundt is the father of psychology, you know that a very, very important figure. So unlike, say, the other scholars who Mead found so far, unlike Weber, or Marx, or Durkheim who were in the realm of political economy, philosophy and political theory.

Here, Mead, a spent lot of his time among psychologists, psychologists and philosophers, so that is why he is able to look at this society or he is able to look at the interaction between society and individual through a completely different kind of a perspective. And he joined, he went back from Leipzig, to the US and joined University of Chicago and taught there until his death on 1931.

And he was an extremely important figure. And it seems quite a lot of his, writings are the verbatim translations or transcripts of his lectures that used to give at the University of Chicago, he emerged as an extremely important figure, a person who could promise a very-very worthwhile examination of sociological analysis from a very distinct for.

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Intellectual Influences



Mead was influenced by

- 1. Utilitarianism: Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham

Utilitarians saw human action as being carried out by self-interested actors seeking to maximize their "utility" or benefit in free and openly competitive marketplaces. often tended to emphasize—indeed, to overemphasize—the rationality of self-seeking actors. The utilitarian position partially inspired his view of the human "mind" as a process of reflective thought in which alternatives are covertly designated, weighed, and rehearsed.



So now, let us try to understand the intellectual background of G H Mead. What were the kind of intellectual strands or what were the philosophical and theoretical arguments that shaped G H Mead's thinking? And, first and foremost, Mead was influenced by utilitarianism, and this we have discussed, what does utilitarianism mean; especially all the important people in in economics, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, then in political theory, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.

So what is utilitarianism say? And why that or how that Mead was influenced by utilitarianism? Utilitarians saw human action as being carried out by self-interested actors seeking to maximize their utility, or benefit in free and openly competitive marketplace. So, the logic questions, how do people act, what prompts people to act, what prompt people to act in particular manner.

And utilitarians had very concrete answer for that they argued that it is a self-interest. So, it the utilitarians looked at human beings as motivated solely by self-interest to achieve certain goals. And they understood it as this open up competitive market often tended to emphasize indeed, and to overemphasize the rationality of self-seeking actors. So they looked at human beings as selfish, as very people with very clear ideas and motivations. And people use rationality to achieve their goals.

That is why quite a lot of economists use this particular theory to explain economic behavior. Because we know that usually, economic behavior is seen as the most irrational behavior, is not it? You do not bring in other elements like your affection or your emotions and tradition and other things in the economic activity, where it is seen as on the basis of very precise, specific rational thinking.

The utilitarian position partially inspired Mead's view on the human mind as a process of reflective thought in which alternatives are covertly designated, weighed and rehearsed. So, while utilitarianism explained human behavior, what was interesting for Mead was the applicability of this theory to understand this entity called as mind. And you know that these theoretical arguments; philosophical as well as psychological arguments about what constitutes mind is very, very fascinating.

We use this term mind very loosely in our conversation, we say that he lost his mind and are you out of your mind? So, what do we mean by this term mind? Is it, we know that it is not an entity that exists anyway. So is it a same thing as brain? Is it, has it got a particular structure? Or is it a kind of a process that that happens? Or what is the connection between the development of mind and that of society, these are all extremely important questions that are have really fascinated the scholars from ancient times.

And why utilitarianism became an interesting theoretical platform for Mead because it provide him with the opportunity to look at the mind as capable of reflection through alternatives. So that we have the ability to assess or evaluate different options in front of us, is not it? For any, we take, 1000s of 100s of decisions in our everyday life. Not maybe very major decisions, but every decision, what kind of dress we are supposed to wear? What do we cook today? Or which hotel do we go for food today? Or whom do we invite for a party at home?

Starting from this kind of very mundane, everyday examples, our mind actively takes 100s of 1000s of decisions every day. And Mead argued that this ability to use, the ability of the mind to weigh in different options, to evaluate different options and then finally reach the most suitable one. And whether the most suitable one is it the most rational one is a different question.

We know that human beings, we do not really go by all the typical rational explanation, even if something appears rationally correct, we might not opt for that, because there could be more important emotional or cultural reasons for certain things. But for Mead, this was something very important, he understood mind as capable of looking at various options, evaluating their pros and cons and then take something and then choose something as their final option.

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2. Darwinism

- Mead used the theory of evolution as a broad metaphor for understanding the processes by which the unique capacities of humans emerge. Mead believed all animals, including humans, must seek to adapt and adjust to an environment; hence, many of the attributes that organisms reveal are the products of efforts to adapt to a particular environment. Mead borrowed from Darwinian theory the metaphor of adaptation, or adjustment, as the key force shaping the nature of humans.

3. Pragmatism

- Pragmatism was primarily concerned with the process of thinking and how it influences the action of individuals, and vice versa. pragmatists became concerned with symbols, language, and rational thinking as well as with the way humans' mental capacities influenced action in the world. Mead accepted the metaphor that thought and action involve efforts to adjust and adapt to the environment. He embraced the notion that such adaptation is a continuous process of experiential verification of thought and action.



And then second, important stand of influence or stand of theory, intellectual engagement that influenced Mead was Darwinism. We have discussed it when we discussed Herbert Spencer. Mead use the theory of evolution as a broad metaphor to understand, for understanding the process by which the unique capacities of humans emerge. This theory of evolution was something so influential for every scholars of that particular time and more so in the case with G H Mead.

Mead believed all animals including humans must seek to adapt and adjust to an environment okay, because evolution we understand is not only things that happened in your body, in your in your physical body, because of some mutations in the genes, but it is also heavily influenced by our adaptation with the changing environment. And that is a scientific theory which has been

proven that organisms both animals and plants and human beings, we adapt our body transforms on by trying to constantly adapt with the kind of environment.

Hence, many of the attributes that organisms reveal are the products of efforts to adapt a particular environment. Mead borrowed from Darwinian theory, the metaphor of adaptation or adjustment as the key force shaping, sorry, there is a gap here, shaping the nature of humans. So, he understood human beings as extremely capable of evolving depending upon the situation, it is not that human beings are produced in a particular way, they are always designed and then crafted according to certain laws and which they do not change.

So, interactionism has a very, very fluid understanding of society, unlike many of the philosophers for example, like Simmel or Comte, who wanted to create social laws, which are timeless. Interactions do not believe in any of such kind of stuff. So, they understood human beings as capable of evolving, capable of adapting with the environment and then changing the situation.

The third important intellectual orientation was pragmatism. Pragmatism was primarily concerned with the process of thinking and how it influences the action of individuals and vice versa. Pragmatists became concerned with symbols, language and rational thinking, as well as with the way humans mental capacities influence actions of the world. Mead accepted the metaphor that thought and action involve efforts to adjust and adapt to the environment.

He embraced the notion of such adaptation is a continuous process of experimental verification of thought and action. So, he understand, he accepts these arguments of pragmatists who argued that human beings use their faculties, use their rationality, use their culture, use various kinds of resources at their disposal of for adapting themselves with the society. So, so, this provides you with the picture of human beings are being extremely creative, human beings are being extremely imaginative, creative, in terms of adjusting with the society and then moving behind.

So, that these observations offer very important insights about the capabilities of human beings as a particular species, a particular species endowed with the high amount of intelligence and

endowed with this ability to interact with others and develop highly sophisticated mind and a highly sophisticated sense of collectivity. And, that sense of collectivity enable them to adapt with very challenging circumstances and then evolve successfully.

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3. Behaviourism

Experiments of Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849–1936).

- Mead rejected extreme behaviorism but accepted its general principle: Behaviors are learned as a result of gratifications associated with them. Most important, some of the most distinctive behaviors of humans are covert, involving thinking, reflection, and self-awareness.
- Mead postulated what some have called a *social behaviorism*. From this perspective, both covert and overt behaviors are to be understood through their capacity to produce adjustment to society.



And the third one, sorry, the fourth one, I think number would be wrong. The fourth point is behaviorism, especially experiments of Russian psychologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov that this as well really influenced behaviors. So, what does behaviorism? Behaviorism is basically used by this psychologist to explain why we also behave just like animals on the basis of stimulus and response.

We know you have learned a lot, you have heard a lot of stories about how we treat animals, especially dogs, they have done a lot of experiments for example, when you, at the time of feeding a dog, you make a particular sound and so that the dog gets to listen to the sound whenever he is fed. And after some time, even without the food, when he listens to that sound, he immediately, the dog immediately thinks about the food at that begins to salivate.

So, these experiments try to understand how human thinking is linked with certain kind of stimulus. So, how different animals or different species respond to the stimulus and then produce different kind of response, a kind of a stimulus response paradigm. And, but the problem with behaviorism is that it tends to be very restrictive, it does not give of so much of possibility, so much of space for the, in the animals or the individual to behave differently, it is a cause and effect kind of a relationship.

So, Mead rejected extreme behaviorism, but accepted its general principle. Behaviors are learned as a result of gratification as associated with them, a gratification associated with them. This is an extremely important, lesson, while Mead disagreed with extreme form of, because if you think that human beings are just like animals who behave to a given stimulus, then it really fails to explain why there is so much of diversity in the way in which people react to certain stimulus.

If you are afraid, then we the way in which we behave are very different, or to a situation of threat or to love or to certain sexual stimulus. So, people behave very differently to different situations. So, but for Mead, what was important was that behaviors are learned as the result of gratification associated with them.

So, you, the possibility of gratification, the possibility of satisfying your needs is an extremely important factor which influence your behavior. Most important, some of the most distinctive behaviors of humans are covert, involving thinking, reflection and self awareness. So unlike animals who, who do not really think too much before acting, many of our behaviors are, they are covert, they are hidden, they are not expressed openly, we know that in our everyday life, is not it?

The kind of thinking that come through our mind when we sit in front of somebody, and sometimes we conceal that we never open up, we never we many times we put up an artificial face, many times we openly blatantly lie in front of the people. So, even when we state something to the people, we might be thinking of the exactly opposite thing. So, we are able to think covertly involve thinking reflection and self-affair awareness.

Mead postulated what some have called as a social behaviorism. From this perspective, both covert and overt behaviors are to be understood through their capacity to produce adjustment to society. Because, see, for a typical animal behaviorist like Petrovich Pavlov, they conducted experiments on the animals, and then they observed the way in which animal, behave.

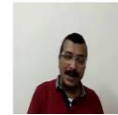
And you because you cannot communicate with the animal, you cannot really think what is going through this animal's mind. Whereas Mead wanted to create a kind of a social

behaviorism, which involves both the covert thinking as well as the overt actions, because we generally do that, we think, and then, on the basis of this thinking, we act overtly.

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- German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt- father of psychology. His views on gestures.
- William James and pragmatism- Mind as a process and not as an entity- "The only thing which psychology has a right to postulate at the outset is the fact of thinking itself, and that must be taken up and analyzed".
- Charles Horton Cooley. Key ideas include:(1) society is constructed from reciprocal interaction; (2) interaction occurs through the exchange of gestures; (3) self is created from, and allows the maintenance of, patterns of social organization; and (4) social organization is possible by virtue of people's attachment to groups that link them to the larger institutions of society.
- 'looking glass self theory'



Then the most important influence was from William Wundt, the father of psychology, who really, who was under whose influence Mead spent time at University of Leipzig, his views on gestures. So how gestures are important, how gestures represent a kind of a symbolic meaning and how this is understood why gestures have the ability to communicate with a large section of people, and those arguments were extremely influential.

And then William James and pragmatism, the mind as a process and not as an entity. It is something very, very important, whether mind is an entity, is it a structure? Or is it a process? It is something very, very important question. Is mind a structure or is it a process? Or is it both? What do you think? Is mind a process? Or is mind a structure? Or is it a combination of both?

Now, the only thing with psychology has a right to postulate at the outset, is the fact of thinking in itself, thinking itself and that must be taken up and then analyzed. So what is this process of thinking? So when you say that the thinking is a psychological process, it is an activity that happens within your brain. What does it mean? What does it mean? What are the kind of various other factors involved in it? What do we mean by when we say that it is thinking and how do mind think by taking by interacting with the ideas from the outside world?

Yet another important influence on G H Mead is Charles Horton Cooley yet another American sociologist, sociologist as well a psychologist, whose key ideas include a number of very, very important arguments and especially his argument about this looking Glass self-theory has been extremely important. So, Cooley's arguments include one; society is constructed from a reciprocal interaction, society is not an entity out there but it is a constructed through reciprocal interaction and here you will see some kind of a of a resonance with the Durkheimian argument about society when people come together, when they interact and that interaction itself goes to a next level, goes to a much higher level and it is constructed through a reciprocal interaction. An interaction occurs through the exchange of gestures.

So, now, what does interaction mean that is the focal point of this scholars who belong to this interactionist school, you know that almost every scholars including Tony's and Weber and Durkheim argued that societies made possible through interaction, but these people they focus on the question, what is the meaning of interaction, how is interaction made possible? Or what transpires when we say that people interact with each other? And what are the different forms of interaction.

Especially when human beings have the language, a highly developed sophisticated medium of communication at their disposal. What is the role played by verbal communication? What is the role played by a written communication? And more importantly, what is the role played by gestures; hand gestures, face gestures? And more broadly or more theoretically, what is the role of the symbols? Because each of these things, whether it is a written communication or oral or gestures, these are all symbols, symbol that it stands for something else.

A symbol stands for something else, it only conveys a particular meaning, a traffic signal, a red light; a red light only emits light in red color, but it conveys a meaning, it conveys at least in a modern society it conveys a universal meaning of danger or stop, whereas, this particular red light does not, will not convey any meaning to people who are not exposed to this modern world, it does not convey anything to a isolated tribe people, they only look at it as something very, very interesting a different color which they may not have seen.

So, the whole question of a particular symbol having a particular meaning and the fact that it is understood evenly, it is understood equally by everybody, including the person who intended as well as the person who is supposed to be the recipient, these are extremely important point. And so, interaction occurs through the exchange of gestures and self is created from and allows the maintenance of patterned of, pattern social organization.

So, this is an extremely important point, what constitutes self? What constitutes self, what is the meaning of a self? And Mead has very fascinating analysis, which we will discuss, he makes a distinction between I and me, very, very fascinating discussion. But when we say that, I do not want something, you say that you are talking about you as a person, is not it? There is a very concrete, a crystallized idea of you as a particular person.

And how did this particular entity come into being, how was that shaped, how was that constructed, what is the process involved in it? And we know that a child does not have a sense of self, a small child, a toddler he never sense of self, and it actually grows, as a person grows this sense of self gets formulated, and that is an extremely interesting process that these people were interested in.

So, self is created from and allow the maintenance of patterns of social organization and fourth point social organization is possible by virtue of people's attachment to groups that link them to the larger institutions of society. So, social organization is possible by virtue of people's attachment to groups that lead them to the larger institutions of society. So the connection between an individual, his immediate groups and with that of the larger institutions of society, and how that helps that shape the mind, that shapes the concept of self.

These are extremely important arguments by put forward by C H Cooley. And these arguments definitely shaped Mead's thinking as well. And one of the very interesting theory about have C H Cooley's Looking Glass Self Theory, which argues that you, without other you simply have no concept of yourself, without other you simply have no concept of yourself. Is it very difficult to understand? Because we think, whenever we think about we, we believe that we are only looking invert.

But Cooley will not agree with that, just like you, when you stand in front of a mirror and by looking at the mirror, you get an impression about how you look, how handsome you are or how smart you are, Cooley argued that the similar thing happens in your formulation of the self, but here instead of the mirror or instead of the glass, it is the others, the others reflect you, you look at the others in order to create a impression about yourself; Looking Glass Self Theory.

So you gauge others interpretation, others action towards you and then on the basis of others action, others response, others attitude towards you, you create a kind of an image about that, Looking Glass Self Theory, very, very interesting argument. And I am not going into the details, but those who are interested you can look into that it is a very, very fascinating theoretical argument.

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- John Dewey and arguments about pragmatism.
- Pragmatism is guided by the metaphor of the "creative solution of problems by an experimenting intelligence," rather than the idea that people's conduct and beliefs are determined by static, objective criteria such as their class position or the collective conscience"

• Humans are unique by virtue of their behavioral capacities for mind and self. Conversely, mind and self emerge from gestural interaction in society. Once they emerge, however, mind and self make a distinctive form of gestural interaction and an entirely revolutionary creation: symbolically regulated patterns of social organization.



John Dewey and arguments about pragmatism, pragmatism is guided by the metaphor of the creative solution of problems by an experimenting intelligence, rather than the idea that people's conduct and beliefs are determined by static, objective criteria, such as their class position or the collective conscience.

And here you will come the kind of a, you will come to know the kind of difference between arguments of C H Mead and that of a person like Emile Durkin. So pragmatism is guided by the metaphor of the creative solution of problems by an experimenting intelligence. This interactionism has enormous faith on the creativity and potential of people. It thinks that human beings have the unique ability to find solutions somehow, they are very creative, they are very creative, they are very, very capable of overcoming hurdles, they are not the puppets who act on the basis of certain larger social structures.

Whereas Durkheim would argue that, Durkheim would argue that human beings have very little freedom or agency or onto themselves, they are entities who simply act as the basis of social facts. That is, I hope you remember, that is what when he talks about collective conscience, when he talks about social facts as having coercive impact on people.

But here, pragmatism would argue that, rather than the idea that people's conduct and beliefs are determined by static, objective criteria, such as their class position or the collective conscience, they are able to move differently, they are able to actively construct and create their own life. So, humans are unique by virtue of their behavioral capacities for mind and self.

Conversely, mind and self emerged from the gestural interaction in society, once they emerge, however, mind and still make it distinctive form of digital gestural interaction and an entirely revolutionary creation, symbolically regulated patterns of social organization. So on the basis of all these influences, now we are coming to the core of Mead's argument, Mead proposes that humans are unique by virtue of their behavioral capacities of mind and self.

Conversely, mind and self-emerged from the gestural interaction in society. So, unlike a typical sociologist Mead wants to identify, wants to argue that mind and self are the products of social interaction. So by using all these arguments or being influenced by all these intellectual traditions or intellectual arguments, Mead formulates his own arguments about the relation between mind, self and society.

So he argues, so he postulates that humans are unique by virtue of their behavioral capacities of mind, and self. Conversely, mind and self, emerge from gestural interaction in society. So this is his very important argument, it is not that you have a mind and then not the basis of this mind you get into this gestural action. It is not that from the understanding that you begin to act in certain ways, it is the other way around.

Once they emerge, however mind and self, make a distinctive form of gestural interaction and an entirely revolutionary creation. So this mind and self is the one which actually it leads to symbolically regulated patterns of social organization. So, it is a very interesting argument that from the mind and the self, it leads to a kind of a patterned forms of symbolically regulated pattern of social organization or otherwise society. So Mead has a very important connection between mind, self and society, and that is what we are going to discuss in the coming classes. Thank you.