Module 7  Key Thinkers

Lecture 39  
Georg Simmel, Thorstein Veblen and Karl Mannheim

Georg Simmel (1858-1918) is best known as a microsociologist who played a significant role in the development of small-group research. Simmel's basic approach can be described as "methodological relationism," because he operates on the principle that everything interacts in some way with everything else. His essay on fashion, for example, notes that fashion is a form of social relationship that allows those who wish to conform to do so while also providing the norm from which individualistic people can deviate. Within the fashion process, people take on a variety of social roles that play off the decisions and actions of others. On a more general level, people are influenced by both objective culture (the things that people produce) and individual culture (the capacity of individuals to produce, absorb, and control elements of objective culture). Simmel believed that people possess creative capacities (more-life) that enable them to produce objective culture that transcends them. But objective culture (more-than-life) comes to stand in irreconcilable opposition to the creative forces that have produced it in the first place.

Primary Concerns

Simmel's interest in creativity is manifest in his discussions of the diverse forms of social interaction, the ability of actors to create social structures, and the disastrous effects those structures have on the creativity of individuals. All of Simmel's discussions of the forms of interaction imply that actors must be consciously oriented to one another. Simmel also has a sense of individual conscience and of the fact that the norms and values of society become internalized in individual consciousness. In addition, Simmel has a conception of people's ability to confront themselves mentally, to set themselves apart from their own actions, which is very similar to the views of George Herbert Mead.

Simmel is best known in contemporary sociology for his contributions to our understanding of patterns or forms of social interaction. Simmel made clear that one of his primary interests was association among conscious actors and that his intent was to look at a wide range of interactions that may seem trivial at some times but crucially important at others. One of Simmel's dominant concerns was the form rather than the content of social interaction. From Simmel's point of view, the sociologist's task is to impose a limited number of forms on social reality, extracting commonalities that are found in a wide array of specific interactions.

Along these lines, Simmel attempts to develop a geometry of social relations. The crucial difference between the dyad (two-person group) and triad (three-person group) is that a triad presents a greater threat to the individuality of group members. In a larger society, however, an individual is likely to be involved in a number of groups, each of which controls only a small portion of his or her personality. Distance also determines the form of social interaction. For example, the value of an object is a function of its distance from an actor. Simmel considered a wide range of social forms, including exchange, conflict, prostitution, and sociability.
One of the main focuses of Simmel's historical and philosophical sociology is the cultural level of social reality, which he called objective culture. In Simmel's view, people produce culture, but because of their ability to reify social reality, the cultural world and the social world come to have lives of their own and increasingly dominate the actors who created them. Simmel identified a number of components of objective culture, including tools, transportation, technology, the arts, language, the intellectual sphere, conventional wisdom, religious dogma, philosophical systems, legal systems, moral codes, and ideals. The absolute size of objective culture increases with modernization. The number of different components of the cultural realm also grows. What worried Simmel most was the threat to individual culture posed by the growth of objective culture.

The Philosophy of Money

In The Philosophy of Money, Simmel assesses the impact of the money economy on the inner world of actors and the objective culture as a whole. Simmel saw money as linked with social phenomena such as exchange, ownership, greed, extravagance, cynicism, individual freedom, style of life, culture, and the value of personality. In general, he argued that people create value by making objects, separating themselves from those objects, and then seeking to overcome distance, obstacles, and difficulties. Money serves both to create distance from objects and to provide the means to overcome it. Money provides the means by which the market, the economy, and ultimately society, acquire a life of their own that is external to and coercive of the actor. Simmel saw the significance of the individual declining as money transactions became an increasingly important part of society. A society in which money becomes an end in itself can cause individuals to become increasingly cynical and to have a blasé attitude.

Objective Culture

The increasing division of labour in modern societies leads to an improved ability to create the various components of the cultural world. But at the same time, the highly specialized individual loses a sense of the total culture and loses the ability to control it. As objective culture grows, individual culture atrophies. The massive expansion of objective culture has had a dramatic effect on the rhythm of life. For example, our means of communication are more efficient, meaning that slow and unpredictable communication has been replaced with readily available mail, telephone, and e-mail service. On the positive side, people have much more freedom because they are less restricted by the natural rhythm of life. On the negative side, problems arise because the growth of objective culture generates cultural malaise, cultural ambivalence and, ultimately, a tragedy of culture.

Secrecy

Simmel's work on secrecy is characteristic of his work on social types. Simmel defines secrecy as a condition in which one person is intentionally hiding something while another person is seeking to reveal what is being hidden. Simmel examines various forms of social relationships from the point of view of reciprocal knowledge and secrecy. According to Simmel, confidence is an intermediate state between knowledge and ignorance about a person. Acquaintanceship is a relationship in which there is far more discretion and secretiveness than there is among intimates. Friendship is not based on total intimacy, but rather involves limited intimacy based on common intellectual pursuits, religion, and shared
experiences. Marriage is the least secretive form of relationship. Simmel sees the secret as one of man's greatest achievements because it makes for a strong "we-feeling" among those who know the secret. But the secret is always accompanied dialectically by the possibility that it can be discovered. Simmel thought that the social structure of modern society permits and requires a high degree of secrecy. The money economy, for example, allows people to hide transactions, acquisitions, and changes in ownership.

**Criticisms**

Simmel is most frequently criticized for the fragmentary character of his work. He did not devise a systematic sociology on a par with Marx, Durkheim, or Weber. Marxists criticize Simmel for not seeing a way out of the tragedy of culture—an analytic equivalent to Marx’s concept of alienation.

**Thorstein Veblen** (1857-1929) is known in sociology for his famous work on conspicuous consumption. He also shares with the classical theorists of his day a focal interest in issues relating to production, especially the contradiction between the potential of industrial production to fulfil society's needs and the interests of businessmen to earn a profit.

**Intellectual Influences**

Veblen's work is influenced by a range of social thinkers, including Karl Marx, evolutionary thinkers like Herbert Spencer, and economists like Adam Smith.

Both Veblen and Marx share a materialist perspective that holds that society is shaped by the means of procuring a livelihood. Yet, while Marx thought that labor was the creative force in society, Veblen sees the industrial arts, especially technology, as creative forces.

Influenced by Darwin and the Social Darwinists, Veblen views society as being dominated by the struggle for existence, with the fittest social institutions and habits of thought surviving. Still, the selective adaptation that lies at the core of evolution is never totally successful, because institutions adapted from the past can never catch up with changing social circumstances. Veblen's two-stage model of social evolution posits the development from primitive societies characterized by peace and cooperation, and predatory barbarism characterized by its warlike and competitive character. A key aspect of this process is the shift from free workmanship in primitive societies to the control of industry by pecuniary interests under barbarism.

Although Veblen was known in his lifetime as an economist, he thought that most economic theory was static, hedonistic, rationalistic, teleological, and deductive. His work sought to focus on larger cultural and institutional issues instead of making theoretical deductions.

**Basic Ideas**

Veblen has a strong sense of human nature and its importance in social life. He thought that the primary human instinct was an instinct of workmanship involving the efficient use of available means and adequate management of available resources. The parental bent (an unselfish solicitude of the well-being of the incoming generation), idle curiosity, and the desire to emulate persons of distinction and achievement are also important instincts. In
addition to human nature, the industrial arts (technological knowledge) are a common stock of knowledge, skill, and technique that play a major role in shaping society.

Veblen operates with a theory of cultural lag in which advances in science and technology outpace changes in the system of law and custom. From his point of view, cultural artifacts like the right of ownership have become a barrier to the progress of the industrial arts. Societies not only develop their own industrial arts, but they also borrow from other cultures. Borrowed ideas have great utility because they come to their new culture without the excess baggage of ritual restricts. Borrowing cultures also have the advantage of being able to create new versions of innovations more quickly than innovating cultures that are liable to get mired in the legacy of their achievements.

**The Theory of the Leisure Class**

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen argues that under predatory barbarism, social honour is based on demonstrating tangible evidence of prowess and aggression. Under this system, private property becomes the basis of esteem and everyone in society seeks to emulate those who have a great deal of it. In an earlier era, wealth was seen as evidence of the instinct of workmanship, but more recently wealth itself is understood to be meritorious. Originally, the leisure class sought to demonstrate its wealth by ostentatiously not working – it consumed time non-productively out of a sense that productive work was unworthy. But, as industrial society evolved, conspicuous consumption became the most practical way to demonstrate one's wealth to a transient population. The leisure class is expected to consume the best in food, drink, narcotics, shelter, services, ornaments, apparel, amusements, and so on. Because the leisure class stands at the pinnacle of the stratification system, it is incumbent on all classes that rank below them to emulate the way they live.

The consequence of this system of invidious distinction is waste. While people do not usually waste time and money intentionally, they do so in a wish to conform to the accepted canons of decency in society. Veblen rails against such wasteful expenditures as the ownership of pets and the use of beauty products. Overall, the leisure class is associated with waste, futility, and ferocity, and it stands in opposition to the needs of industrial society to efficiently distribute goods—they are the embodiment of the cultural lag.

**Business and Industry**

Veblen sees an inherent conflict between what he calls, somewhat idiosyncratically, business and industry. Veblen's two-class model of social stratification includes a business class, which owns wealth invested in large holdings, and an industrial class, whose conditions of life are controlled by others and who live by work. On the one hand, today's business leaders are almost exclusively concerned with financial matters—especially profit—and make no contribution to production. Veblen sees these captains of industry as parasitic and exploitative. On the other hand, industry is oriented toward workmanship and production. Unlike the businessman's pecuniary orientation, the industrial orientation is an impersonal standpoint of quantitative relations and mechanical efficiency.

Business leaders obstruct the operation of the industrial system. For example, business leaders attribute the yields of the modern industrial system—what Veblen called free income—to intangibles like patents. Such intangibles impede the ability of the industrial
system to produce as much as possible. Similarly, Veblen argues that prices are kept artificially high by sabotaging production. For these reasons, industrial society would be run most efficiently by production engineers who would look out for the welfare of all members of society rather than the vested interests of business.

**Higher Education**

Veblen also investigated the effects of business interests on higher education, suggesting that the American educational system could be more profitably directed toward serving the needs of industry. Veblen believed that the university should be dedicated primarily to scientific and scholarly inquiry rather than to undergraduate education. He thought that undergraduates would be better served in professional and technical schools where practical knowledge could be imparted efficiently without corrupting the university's essentially impractical mission. University administrators are too oriented toward business and stand in opposition to science and scholarship because they seek to run the university with businesslike efficiency. For example, Veblen was critical of the university's interest in competition with other universities. He thought that this impulse too often resulted in wasteful expenditures like manicured lawns and expensive buildings. Similarly, the faculty does quasi-science dedicated to supporting the status quo rather than real science. Veblen holds out little hope of the academic world changing until the larger economic system is overhauled.

**Politics**

Veblen approached politics in much the same way he did the economy. He saw political leaders as tools of the captains of industry. Too often, he believed, the government takes action to serve the interests of business leaders abroad without considering the international development of industry. Tariffs and wars are examples of the predatory behaviour of nations acting to fortify the interests of business leaders.

**Mannheim, Marx, and Ideology**

Although he never produced a systematic grand theory of society on the scale of Marx or Weber, Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) is an important figure in sociology because he invented the field called the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim credited Marx for creating the beginnings of this field through his theory of ideology; however, Mannheim was critical of Marx's notion that ideologies involve the conscious intention to distort reality. According to Mannheim, ideology "has no moral or denunciatory intent." Mannheim also questioned Marx's belief that ideologies emerge only from social classes. While Mannheim believed that the most significant source of ideology originated from class stratification, he acknowledged that all social groups produce ideologies, such as generations. In contrast to Marx, Mannheim attempted to study the social sources of distorted thinking in a scientific manner rather than exclusively focusing on the political sources of ideology. This, according to Mannheim, was one of the premises of the sociology of knowledge.
Mannheim's Sociological Approach

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is empirical because he was interested in studying how social relationships influence thought; but he was neither a determinist nor a positivist. In fact, Mannheim was highly critical of positivism because it allowed no role for theory and, by focusing solely on material reality, neglected the importance of understanding and interpretation. Mannheim was also critical of phenomenology because it focused too much on mental or cognitive phenomena without addressing how these related to the material world. Mannheim viewed the task of the sociology of knowledge as one of integrating the empirical orientation of positivism with the cognitive orientation of phenomenology. He also argued that the sociology of knowledge should be informed by relationalism rather than relativism.

Mannheim believed that the sociology of knowledge could emerge only during an historical period characterized by social instability and lack of agreement over worldviews. Increasing social mobility was one factor that resulted in the lack of unity over worldviews. Mannheim distinguished between two types of social mobility: horizontal and vertical. The latter tends to lead to a democratization of thought. Another factor that encouraged the creation of the sociology of knowledge was the emergence of a socially unattached intelligentsia. The free intelligentsia first created epistemology and psychology as methods to investigate and understand the social world, but both approaches failed to integrate the individual mind with the larger community. The creation of the sociology of knowledge corrected this failure.

Ideology and Utopia

Mannheim discussed ideology and utopia as systems of ideas, or types of Weltanschauung, in Ideology and Utopia. According to Mannheim, an ideology is a set of ideas that "conceals the present by attempting to comprehend it in terms of the past," while a utopia is a set of ideas that "transcends the present and is oriented towards the future." In order to judge which ideas are ideological and which are utopian, one needs an objective point of view, or what Mannheim called "adequate ideas."

While Mannheim was concerned about the progressive disappearance of both ideologies and utopias in modern society, he viewed the demise of the latter as most problematic because it brought about a "static state of affairs." According to Mannheim, a utopia can emerge from a single individual. However, this individual's ideas must be translated into action by a collectivity to bring about social change. Four historical ideal types of utopia are identified by Mannheim: orgiastic chiliasm (carried by the lower strata), liberal-humanitarian (carried by the bourgeoisie and intellectuals), conservative (carried by the status quo), and socialist-communist (carried by the proletarian).

Rationality and Irrationality

Like Weber, Mannheim argued that a process of rationalization was coming to dominate all sectors of society. However, he believed that during his lifetime the irrational continued to thrive. Mannheim differentiated between substantive rationality and irrationality, which dealt with thinking, and functional rationality and irrationality, which dealt with action. He also discussed the systematic control of human impulses, self-rationalization, and the highest, most extreme form of rationalization: self-observation. Mannheim argued that industrialization led to an increase in functional rationalization and the irrational decline of
substantive rationality. It also led to the creation of mass society, which Mannheim viewed as a threat to democracy.

**Democratic Planning and Education**

In order to protect society from irrational threats, such as the rule of the masses, Mannheim advocated democratic social planning. He viewed this as the best alternative compared to other forms of planning, especially totalitarianism and laissez-faire systems. Mannheim believed that democratic planning could promote freedom, social justice, and cultural standards, and that it could balance the centralization and dispersion of power, as well as encourage the growth of personality. Reforming the educational system was another way to help people cope with societal crises. Mannheim argued that education should not be separated from everyday life, and he criticized the over-specialization of academic disciplines. He thought that the fundamental problem with the educational system was that if failed to teach "social awareness" and emphasize sociological perspectives of the real world.

**Critical Analysis of Mannheim’s Work**

Mannheim has been criticized for several reasons, including the fact that although he is credited for inventing the sociology of knowledge, he never offered a clear definition of the concept of knowledge in his work. He has also been criticized for obscuring the relationship between knowledge and society and for failing to solve the problem of relativism. Furthermore, Mannheim's fear of the masses has led many to claim that he was elitist and conservative.

**References**


Questions

1. Explain George Simmel’s contribution to sociology.

2. Explain Mannheim’s Sociological approach.