

In The Image of Leibniz's God: Of Metanarratives and Congeries

Herman Gibson, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Sociology

Postmodernism is a very nebulous term denoting sometimes contradictory sociological, anthropological, philosophical, and historical dimensions characterizing late Twentieth Century mass society. Mills' argued that we were now entering a "post-modern period" in his 1959 work *The Sociological Imagination* saying that "our standards of reality tend to be set by the media rather than our own fragmentary experience" (1956: 311). The ethos of such a society is based upon an unrelenting slew of visual images leading to a slowly enveloping sense of meaninglessness. In 1943, Pitirim Sorokin foresaw what we now call "Postmodernism" in his concept of the sensate society in which "the whole of reality has been reduced by Visualism to the mere passing impression of momentary appearance...to self deceit and dreaming..."(1957: 138). Sorokin believed that ideational structures of meaning, analogous to metanarratives, breakdown under the intense Visualism of sensate society leading to a society without thought or judgement in which he says "the eye eats the brain in it." The intent of this paper is to show that the concepts by Robert Redfield and Pitirim Sorokin clarify the nature and dynamics of metanarrative change and collapse in postmodern culture.



Four motor driven-arms swing on a pivot. From each hangs what appears to be the flayed carcass of a deer or wolf.... These casually suspended mock bodies are covered in graphite paint, and they drag the floor, producing an irksome scraping noise and leaving a silvery trail behind them. You shudder at the gratuitousness of their posthumous torment, and its parody of that source of childhood pleasure, the fairground carousel with its friendly animals. It is a glimpse of Hell.

Robert Hughes (1997: 576-577)

Reference to Bruce Nauman's 1988 Artwork "Carousel."

THE CAROUSEL

Bruce Nauman's "Carousel" symbolizes the power of postmodern imagery and what Sorokin (1957) referred to as the "carnalization" of ethical values through a sensate Visualism reducing them all "to those of mere bodily comfort and enjoyment." Nauman's art stands in stark contrast to the ethos of modernity, which stressed among other things technology, capitalism, and, the

grandest referent of all, “progress.” Truly *Carousel* is the antithesis of Robert Redfield’s image of the community as an “ethical system of ‘conceptions of what good conduct is’” (Redfield, 1973: 243). Robert Hughes (1997: 575-576) observes:

What Nauman mainly practiced was a form of psychic primitivism, or atavism if you prefer. His art is chiefly about two states: compulsion and regression. When you see a videotape of him smearing himself with black paint, you aren’t sure whether he’s disguising himself or simulating the fecal games of a backward child. Autism is the governing metaphor of his works “look.”—the long-winded rituals of trivial movement, the ejaculatory phrases, the bouts of ungovernable rage.

Through *Carousel*, we receive a graphic impression of the impact of what Schusterman (1988: 347) called the “Postmodern Wasteland,” whose landscape is shaped by moral atomism, relativism, and nihilism.

POSTMODERN AS INCREDULITY TOWARD METANARRATIVES

A central theme of postmodernism is a fragmented ethos characterized by metanarrative collapse and fragmentation. Kellner (1988: 242) notes that, according to Jean Baudrillard, society “is the site of an *implosion* of all boundaries, regions, and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition.” The cultural ethos preceding the emergence of postmodernism was generally visualized as consisting of deeply interrelated systems of meaning in this case referred to as “metanarratives.” These systems of knowledge and meaning could be thought of as stories articulating prevalent themes of the worldview of a given society. They are discourses on the truths, values, positions, and what Redfield (1972: 89) would have termed “laws of thought” characterizing a given world-view. A primary function of such metanarratives is providing legitimation and meaning to all other forms of discourse within a society.

Metanarratives tend to be holistic for example like Christianity, Marxism, Democracy, Capitalism, and Justice. These structures of meaning form stories about the “foundation of knowledge,” whether it be positivistic or metaphysical (Kellner 1988: 253). Jean-Francois Lyotard (1998) defined postmodernism relative to the idea of discursive metanarratives, which he introduced as a primary concept. He denotes (Lyotard, 1998: 482) the term modern:

...To designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative such as the dialectics of Spirit... or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement of truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative in which the hero of knowledge works towards a good ethico-political end—universal peace. [In essence] this metanarrative [implies] a philosophy of history [that] is used to legitimate knowledge.

Metanarratives are not so much strictly scientific but rather philosophical, mythic, and/or metaphysical structures of meaning serving a unifying function by providing guiding principles, relating everything to sets of ideals, and encompassing an holistic Idea or Ideas (Lyotard 1998).

All knowledge is ultimately articulated via language games (discourse) through these particular interrelated structures to gain some level of legitimation. Social and cultural knowledge become holistically linked through these plausibility structures providing referents and goals. Growth of knowledge in general reflects what Lyotard (1998: 485) calls the “speculative spirit.” They integrate our realities, staving off chaos by providing meaning through their totalizing processes.

For Lyotard, the years after World War II, which ushered in technology and capitalism, hallmarks of the new post-industrial society, marked the real beginning of Postmodernism. Much like Mills, he saw these changes associated with rise of corporate power and the increasing ability of these political entities to use technology to control society. Lyotard (1998:482) says:

...I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly the product of progress in sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it...The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements... Conveyed with each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.

Pragmatism and efficiency become the legitimating references of our society— the paramount referents for our society that have undermined the metanarrative infrastructure of our reality. Society no longer needs metanarratives for justification, all that is needed is the criterion of technological “operativity.” The discourse of everyday life is marked by “ discontinuity, plurality, and ‘paralogy’ (logically unjustified conclusions)” (Cahoone, 1998: 481). Through the paralogy of our technoschaft society, we pursue new ideas, thus freeing ourselves from the traditions of the grand narratives.

... Justice is consigned to the grand narrative in same way as truth... Where, after the metanarratives can legitimacy reside? The operativity criterion is technological: it has no bearing on what is true or just... Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities: it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is the not the expert’s homology but the inventor’s paralogy. (Lyotard, 1998:482-483)

The nature of metanarratives can be illuminated by a brief discussion of Robert Redfield’s concept of the ethos of community and also by Sorokin’s of referential principles.

THE REDFIELDIAN ETHOS

The role of metanarratives may be better understood through a brief discussion of Robert Redfield’s (1973) concept of ethos. Indeed, in a sense, a cultural ethos is composed of metanarratives. In the Redfieldian conceptualization, grounded in traditional communities, the ethos, at least at one level, provides an all-encompassing ethical canopy giving individuals shared ideas about the meaning of their lives. An ethos is an ideal vision that even filled with contradiction still provides a cognitive map shaping the community mentality in regard “to conduct, the expected and the realized” (Redfield 1972:46). Redfield (1973:46) sees the ethos as

a

.... System of ethical directives, a set of signposts to the good and virtuous life. But in any journey men are tempted to stray from the path, and ... even though it may take place in the orderly moral landscape of simple and stable communities, the signposts are not always consistent, nor do they provide for every contingency of life. ... One of the elements of every life that makes difficult and uncertain the moral instruction issued by the social structure is the presence of conflicting moral imperatives.

Ethos provides relatively clear boundaries for the life world of those within any given community even in spite of the inherent contradictions individuals encounter.

Redfield (1972) sees the ethos as an “outlook on life,” a “world-view,” that provides reference to the entire range of life experience. Within this world-view, normative aspects have the most importance, for they serve as guideposts for what is good so they provide an ethical and moral orientation. Conception of reality reflects the normative, cognitive, and affective influence of the ethos. Above all, the ethos is holistic—a sort of unifying theme texturing the collective stock of knowledge making up social reality. Most importantly, Redfield (1972:86) says:

[The ethos] ... is their order, their categories, their emphasis.... Every world-view is made of the stuff of philosophy, the nature of all things and their interrelation, and it is the native philosopher whose ordering of the stuff to which...[to]... listen.

Clearly, the traditional ethos provides for a very emically bounded form of world maintenance.

Redfield and Kellner (1988) as well, noted that the ethos and metanarratives have synchronic and diachronic properties. Synchronic narratives focus on a particular point in the history of a community to define the past, present, and future. Diachronic narratives have a more analytic function by trying to make sense out of social change, sociocultural discontinuities, and cultural “ruptures” (Kellner, 1988: 253). Redfield’s (1973: 101-102) comment about the village of Chan Kom provides some insight into the properties of the ethos:

It is the story of how these villagers, leaders, and followers, made up their minds to something and then did it. The unity of history lies in the central fact of conspicuous collective effort of the people to make their community a progressive community of their region. This is a small history with a central theme—a purpose and its outcome.

From a historical perspective, synchronic and diachronic narratives serve to define a society’s past, present, and future. They represent articulations of central themes giving reality its meaning.

The ethos of any society then consists of a world-view or cosmology phenomenologically based upon symbolic interaction (Lyotard’s “language games”) revolving around various interrelated metanarratives. Redfield conceives of the ethos as providing a general structure for thought. World-views are characterized by the assumptions according to Redfield (1972: 94-95):

.... All world-views are visions outward from the self; in other words, it supposes that in every human community everyone distinguishes his own self from other things...

.... The scene of their lives upon which all men look is conceived by them as having some order... that chaos is not a possible vision for anyone...

.... This order included elements that in my language are connoted by the words “man,” “nature,” and “god,” however these elements may be connected or distinguished in other world-views.

.... Finally, for all men existence has some structure of direction or possible consummation, so that there are characters, themes, and story in the world-view.

Pre-modern and modern cosmologies have been characterized by these traits where the sacred and profane are distinguishable, where the real and unreal are separate, and where a certainty separates the individual from all else. The discursive narrative structure of the ethos provides a sense order and stability—an overarching symbolic canopy. Postmodernism represents a sociocultural condition in which metanarratives and the boundaries of the ethos collapse-- a sort of implosion leaving individuals in an enveloping sense of meaninglessness.

SOROKIN'S REFERENTIAL PRINCIPLES

Pitrim Sorokin is not often associated with Postmodernism, but his discussion of Sensate society had much relevance to understanding the nature of this phenomenon. In his work, *Sociocultural Causality, Space and Time* (1964), he discusses some properties of sociocultural systems of meaning that shed further light on metanarratives or grand narratives while complimenting Redfield's ideas.

For Sorokin (1964), all sociocultural realities are reflections of “meaningful-causal systems” that condition our perceptions of causality, space and time. Indeed, these sociocultural meaningful-causal systems provide us with sets of referents giving these dimensions a holistically interrelated context. These systems that are analogous to metanarratives determine the very stuff of meaning. At any one given moment, humans sense reality is perceived through the orderly sociocultural matrixes of causality, time, and space. Ultimately, we can perceive none of these dimensions in a purely objective fashion but depend upon a maze of sociocultural meaningful-causal systemic referents and guideposts. Causality, time, and space simply have no extra-systemic existence. At the core, each is qualitatively meaningful and even quantitative, purely scientific definitions of these concepts still rely upon some sociocultural systemic base.

In the Sorokian paradigm, all social systems, whether they be the family, the State, universities, schools, churches, or whatever, are reflections of complex systems of meanings. He notes (Sorokin, 1964: 21-22)

These social systems are but objectified or socialized system of meanings, with their appropriate vehicles and agents. As such, they differ from one another; as such, each one of them is a causal unity; as such, they are sociocultural realities. Whoever speaks of the family, the State, or the

Roman Catholic Church speaks primarily in meaningful and then in causal terms. As pure causal systems, none of these institutions has existed, does exist, or ever will exist.

... Every sociocultural system is at the same time meaningful, and its "causitiveness" is based mainly upon the system of meaning it incorporates.

Essentially, the entirety of social reality is an incarnation of these interdependent meaningful-causal systems providing a "living unity."

The nature of these systems of meaning revolves around three components (Sorokin, 1964: 4):

... (1) Immaterial, spaceless and timeless meanings; (2) material ... vehicles that "materialize, externalize, or objectify" the meanings; and (3) human agents that bear, use, and operate the meaning with the help of the material vehicles.

Meanings not objectified through this process are "hence objectively nonexistent."

Non-systemic meaning is found in what Sorokin (1964: 14) terms "congeries," which "assume the form of either isolated meanings or groups of unrelated propositions." These congeries may become incorporated into systems of meaning, but in and of themselves they present no interdependent meaning or sense of unified meaning. His analogy (Sorokin, 1964:12) is to see it this way:

An assembled automobile is a causal system. An unassembled automobile, with the parts scattered on the floor of a factory, is a mere congeries of physical objects.

Systems are distinguished from congeries by the interdependence of meaning elements upon other meaning elements, the meaning of elements derived from the holistic systemic context, and holistic system's reliance upon the meaning elements for its own sui generis meaning (Sorokin, 1964: 14). Additionally "the identity of the meaning permeates all the parts; [and] the harmonious and logico-esthetically necessary co-ordination of meanings and subsystems of meanings [emerges] in one new indivisible unity" (Sorokin, 1964: 15).

Once a system has become reality, certain reflexive processes enter in that immediately begin to change them. These human constructions rely upon what Sorokin calls "the language vehicle," which greatly affects how these meanings are expressed, interpreted, or otherwise understood. Whatever "purity" a given system may have in the beginning is quickly lost to the unpredictability of linguistic change through interaction and the impact of the empirical world back on these systems. This ongoing interactive process can lead to degenerative systemic changes that produce congeries. Sorokin (1964: 24) notes that:

As a result [of the language vehicle] they become infected by congeries, misunderstandings, contradictions, and other "sins" and imperfections. Many systems of meaning that appear faultless in their pure state... are transformed after their union with their... vehicles and agents into something very different from their pristine perfection. They invariably become so infested with congeries and distortions that they often lose their original identity and degenerate, under

the influence of the natural properties and relationships of their vehicles and human agents, into something distinctly different.

This natural ongoing transformation of systems of meaning takes a more profound impact under rapid social change producing more congeries.

Congeries can reflect the full degeneration and disappearance of a system and/or constitute the building blocks for a new system born out of the syncretic processes of interaction; hence, they have dialectical properties. Moreover, Sorokin (1964: 24) says:

After being in the empirical world, many a sublime utopian ideal is converted into something flat and prosaic. When such exalted systems as Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism was translated into a socialized causal system, much of its purity was sacrificed; vulgarized and distorted, it became but a pale reflection of its erstwhile meaningful form.... And so it is with almost any complex and delicate set of meanings that passes into the world of culture....

Each system has a “self directing unity” that determines its potentialities for development. These potentialities are affected by external cultural factors influencing how they become actualized. Sorokin (1964: 26) notes that:

The principle role of external factors is to accelerate or retard, facilitate, or hinder the unfolding of these potentialities; sometimes, however, they destroy the system itself.

Sensate societies represent environment of rapid secularization and change affecting maximum external pressure on systems of meaning.

All sociocultural systems change manifesting either ideational, idealistic, or sensate phases. Of this, Sorokin (1964:27) says:

...A sociocultural system is marked by alternate periods of growth and decline. Sometimes it becomes extinct, and in rare cases it is resurrected.

Sorokin (1956: 426-428) noted that in a sensate society, Visualism becomes the dominant aspect in which images eclipse the discursive ideational central components of a society:

[Sensate systems are]...more relative, more earthly, and more carnal than... they were during the greater part of Greco-Roman history. This “carnalizaiton” of all ethical values in the public mentality at the present time has gone exceedingly far and has reduced all ethical values to those of mere bodily comfort and enjoyment.

Carnalization centers around the dominance of images simply conveying non-discursive impressions. Such images of the mass media might amount to congeries assuming the form of isolated meanings unrelated to each other (Sorokin, 1964: 13). Through mass media, society is immersed in streams of disconnected images ungrounded in any ideational meaningful-causal system.

As the ideational center of metanarratives has disappeared under the unrelenting influence of materialism, technology, rationality, roles, consumerism, and science, an intensely hedonistic, narcissistic, and even nihilistic sensate society has emerged.

THE METAPHYSICS OF DIGITALITY

Sorokin never fully anticipated the extreme impact of mass-media imagery and digital imagery on our society. Baudrillard (1998: 447) believed that “simulacra” or simulations would come to constitute the world in what he termed “The Code” of neo-capitalist cybernetic order.

The great man-made simulacra pass from the universe of natural laws into a universe of forces and tensions, and today pass into a universe of structures and binary oppositions. After the metaphysics of being and appearance, after energy and determinacy, [we pass now] into the metaphysics of indeterminacy and the code. Cybernetic control, generation through models.... Digitality is its metaphysical principal (Leibniz’s God), and DNA is its prophet.

God, for Leibniz, was found in the “mystical elegance of the binary system where only the zero and one count, the very image of creation... The unity of the Supreme Being, operating by means of a binary function...” (McLuan from Baudrillard, 1998: 447).

Gottfried W. Leibniz, Seventeenth Century mathematician and philosopher, believed in a “mathematically pure system of theological and political thought such as would bring the world to a fully reasoned existence” (Hodges, 1999: 4). For him God reality consisted of *monads*, tiny particles mirroring the entire universe completely controlled by God in his mathematical precision and perfection.

Baudrillard (1998: 454-455) termed this reality based upon media simulations as *hyperrealism* that

...Effaces the contradiction between the real and the imaginary. Irreality no longer belongs to the dream or the phantasm, to a beyond or a hidden interiority but *to the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself*.

... An Abyssal vision...[an]...infinite refraction is nothing more than a another type of seriality in which the real is no longer reflected, but folds in on itself to the point of exhaustion.

Our entire sense of reality becomes based upon what C. Wright Mills (1956: 314) called the “formula of a pseudoworld which the media invent and sustain”:

(1.).... [Telling] a man in the mass who he is—they give him identity; (2.) they tell him what he wants to be—they give him aspirations; (3.) they tell him how to get that way—they give him technique; and (4.) they tell how to feel that he is that way when he is not—they give him escape.

This pseudoworld is much like Baudrillard’s notion of a hyperreality, where the lines between the real and unreal implode into indistinguishable parts for the individual. As Baudrillard

(1998:456) observes:

...*Today reality it itself is hyperrealist.... Today everyday, political, social, historical, economic, etc., reality has already incorporated the hyperrealist dimension of simulation so that we are now living entirely within the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality. The old slogan 'reality is stranger than fiction,' ... has been outrun, since there is not longer any fiction that life can possibly confront, even as its conqueror.*

...The real and imaginary are intermixed in one and same operational totality...

A sensate society in the extreme is analogous to a postmodernism, for Sorokin (1957: 138) says “since the whole of reality has been reduced by Visualism to the mere passing impression, to the momentary appearance, the reality amounts to a mere illusion and mirage, to self deceit and dreaming; even those being purely fugitive and momentary.” In essence, Visualism leads to a sort of social, cultural and psychological illiteracy, a hedonistic euphoria centering around spectacle and celebrity, in which Sorokin (1957:139) says, “the eye eats the brain...”

THE MECHANICAL BRIDE

We have become what Susan Sontag (Lash 1988) called the “hypertrophy of the intellect,” in which capitalism and the mass media serve up enjoyment and instant gratification. Postmodern Visualism demands that “sermons, lectures, philanthropic actions, even execution and murder be enjoyable and entertaining” (Sorokin, 1957: 427). A visually based culture demands little thought or discourse of the metanarratives once at the core of our culture. The Fetishism of the Image serving as an “opiate for the masses” has led to a mass society that is mindlessly being led by Leibnitz’s God of Digitality. Again Marshall McLuhan, author of *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), is quoted as saying:

...The real use of the computer [is] not to expedite marketing or solve technical problems but to speed the process of discovery and orchestrate terrestrial, and eventually galactic environments and energies. In a Christian sense this is a merely a new interpretation of the mystical body of Christ, and Christ, after all, is the ultimate extension of man (Shankey, 1996).

Technology and science have been primary components of modernity. Through these new Messiahs, a new utopia would emerge that would be rational, empirical, and utilitarian. Technoscience would do what religion never could—ultimately conquer disease, death, and suffering. This new kind of secular scientism, as Mills once called it, was naturally antithetical to the truths contained within the metanarrative cultural core.

Peter Berger (1967: 107) argued that by secularization:

...We mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and dogma.... When we speak of culture and symbols, however we imply that secularization is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature, and most important of all, in the rise of science as an

autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world.

Berger sees secularization largely with respect to the decline of religion, yet the same process affects all levels of metanarrative structure and content. For example, he notes that secularization has led to a massive reduction of religious contents, especially as seen in the modern development of Protestantism, which “it can be said ...[has]... divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and powerful concomitants of the sacred—mystery, miracle, and magic.” (Berger 1967: 111). He terms this sociocultural phase as “disenchantment of the world.”

Postmodernism is seen by Jack Solomon (1998) as an adaptation to technology that has produced a “technological consciousness.” For Solomon (1998: 36):

In the most general sense, postmodernism represents a new mode of perception fostered by an age of instant communication: by radio, cinema, and most important by TV. Viewing the world as a television camera views it, the postmodern eye reduces the length and breadth to two-dimensional spectacle, to a carnival of arresting images and seductive surfaces.... Gazing upon the world as if it were one vast variety show, the postmodern eye perceives the course of human events as narrativeless and nonsensical series of skits, as one long episode of ‘Monty Python.’

Rich narratives have been replaced by a fetishism of images—disconnected figural congeries—reducing complex systems of meaning down to what Sorokin called simplistic, meaningless “bald formulas.” C. Wright Mills (1957) pointed out the growing power of television to control society through the artificial creation of “The Celebrity.” Again, Solomon (1998: 47-48) observes:

Celebrities are people with attractive surfaces, images that play to the cameras. They are like mirrors, reflecting back the dreams and desires of those who worship them. Whatever human reality lurks behind the image, whatever doesn’t show up on the camera, is irrelevant. In fact, in the postmodern age, one often gets the impression that there is nothing behind the image.

CULTURE ITSELF IS DEAD

Robert Brightman (1995) in his article “*Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification*” addresses the growing postmodernist challenge to anthropology’s “longstanding darling”—the concept of culture. The very themes that made up the concept of culture are being challenged: holism, localism, totalization, coherence, homogeneity, primordialism, idealism, ahistoricism, objectivism, foundationalism, and discreteness (Brightman, 1995: 512). Culture, on one level, used to be conceived in terms of ideation and meaning, but now some have argued that the focus should be on behavior, practice, action, and interaction. Brightman (1995: 511) remarks that these objections to the concept of culture represent a “complex skein of partially discrete, partially convergent influences from political economy, modernist and postmodernist anthropologies, varieties of feminist writing, cultural studies, and other diverse sources.”

In essence, these challenges have led some to theorize that the concept of “culture itself is judged expendable, evanescent, or already ‘dead’” (Brightman, 1995: 511). Wherever this discourse

leads, it seems reflective of the ongoing trend of “fragmentation” and “implosion” affecting postmodern sociocultural systems of which anthropology is a part. Perhaps these challenges reflect the growing sense that culture is no longer holistic and that, gradually, the “living unity” it once provided is ebbing away under metanarrative degeneration. The metanarrative of culture now lacks legitimacy collapsing into a pile of conceptual congeries.

ACCEPT ANYTHING USEFUL AS GOD

Sorokin (1957: 426-428) theorized that a number of dominant traits characterize the contemporary Sensate “mentality:” utilitarianism; hedonism; “money madness;” a contemporary leadership of successful money-makers; and moral atomism, relativism, and nihilism. Our entire society is pervaded by the utilitarian idea that everything that is materially useful must be good. Values are seen in this respect as well, where he observes (Sorokin, 1957: 426):

If God himself should come to us, His acceptance or rejection would depend upon whether he is useful or not. If useful, we accept anything as God; if not we reject Him.

We live by what he calls the “survival value of science” in which our entire culture is apprehended by operational criteria for truth.

As a society dominated by endless search for enjoyment and materialism, systems of meaning have become fragmented into “moral atomism, relativism and nihilism,” generating a pervasive form of moral anarchy, for now there are no longer any absolute truths or values. Every person becomes his or her “own moral legislator.” In the absence of internally cohesive values, force and violence herald the emergence of Durkheim’s anomie, which Sorokin believed we had reached.

Sorokin theorized that societies, by and large, passed through ideational, idealistic, and sensate phases and then back again. Unlike contemporary postmodernists who imply that we are in a sort of death spiral on the event horizon of an anomic black hole, he believed that there is only so much chaos a society can take before it begins self-correcting back to the ideational phase. Postmodernism from Sorokin’s perspective would likely tend to be just an extreme form of the sensate phase. In closing, he (Sorokin, 1957: 428-429) writes:

... We all feel sharply enough the “carnal inconveniency” of [the] overripe Sensate morality: it has robbed us of our security in life, of our comfort, of sensate well-being, of our position, of our self-respect, of our dignity, of almost everything. With a further movement in this direction, this “uncomfortable feeling” is likely to increase until it reaches the stage when a shift to the absolute moral standard becomes unavoidable, with it, a reaction to these “constituents” of overdeveloped happiness will set in. Then the curve of the ethics of principles will rise again while that of the Sensate ethics will decline once more. So it has been, and so it will go.

References

Baudrillard, Jean. (1998). Symbolic Exchange and Death. *From Modernism to Postmodernism:*

An Anthology. Lawrence Cahoone, Ed., Blackwell Publishers, 437-460.

Berger, Peter. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy*.

Brightman, Robert. (1995). Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification. *Cultural Anthropology*, 10, 509-546.

Cahoone, Lawrence. (1998). *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*. Blackwell Publishers.

Dickens, David & Andrea Fontana, eds., (1994). *Postmodernism & Social Inquiry*. New York: The Guiliford Press.

Featherstone, Mike (1988). In Pursuit of the Postmodern: An Introduction. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 195-215.

Friedman, Jonathan. (1988). Cultural Logics of the Global System: A Sketch. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 447-460.

Hughes, Robert. (1997). *American Visions*. Knoph Publishers.

Kellner, Douglas. (1988). Postmodernism as Social Theory: Some Challenges and Problems. *Theory, Culture, & Society*, 5, 239-270.

Lash, Scott. (1988). Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a 'Regime of Signification.' *Theory Culture & Society*, 5, 311-336.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. (1998). The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*. Lawrence Cahoone, Ed., Blackwell Publishers. 481-513.

McLuan, Marshall. (1951). *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*.

Mills, C. Wright. (1956). *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mills, C. Wright. (1957). *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Redfield, Robert. (1973). *The Little Community & Peasant Society and Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Shusterman, Richard. (1988). Postmodernist Aestheticism: A Moral Philosophy?. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 337-356.

Solomon, Jack. (1998). Our Decentered Culture: The Postmodern Worldview. *The Postmodern Presence*, Arthur Asa Berger, ed., Altimira Press: Walnut Creek, CA.

Sorokin, Pitrim. (1957). *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. New York: Porter Sargent Publications.

Sorokin, Pitrim, (1964). *Sociocultural Causality, Space, Time: A Study of Referential Principles of Sociology and Social Science*. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc.

Van Reijen, Willem. (1988). *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* Read as Allegory. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 409-430.

Biographical Sketch

Herman (Doc) Gibson, a native of the Louisiana Delta, grew up in Clayton along the Tensas River. He received a B.A. in sociology from Louisiana Tech in 1974, an M.A. in cultural anthropology in 1976 from Louisiana State University and a doctorate in sociology in 1979 from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He presently is an Associate Professor of Sociology serving as Chair of the Department of Sociology and Human Services at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas where he has been on the faculty since 1995.

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.