

## FIVE CAVEATS while STUDYING THEORY

### CAVEAT ONE: Theories should be understood as word pictures which are not literal.

*"Reality is a perception located somewhere behind the eyes. But 'behind the eyes' there is a language process. We know that 'nature' never repeats or standardizes. We do it. And how we do it depends on the categories and classifications of our language system. It is only a slight exaggeration to say we 'see' with our eyes."*

- Postman & Weingartner

*"I gotta use words when I talk to you."* - T. S. Eliot

*"The word is not the thing, Korzybski insisted. Whatever you say something is, it is not."* - Postman and Weingartner

*"Words are merely figures of speech."* - M. A. Toth

### CAVEAT TWO: Theories are not ideologies.

*"I am not a Marxist."* - Karl Marx

*"I am not a Freudian."* - Sigmund Freud

### CAVEAT THREE: Theories are necessarily over-stated in their original form.

*"One of the ironies of the creative process is that it partly cripples itself in order to function. I mean that, usually, in order to turn out a piece of work the author has to exaggerate the emphasis of it in a forcefully competitive way to other versions of the truth; and he gets carried away by his own exaggeration, as his distinctive image is built on it. But each honest thinker who is basically an empiricist has to have some truth in his position, no matter how extremely he has formulated it. The problem is to find the truth underneath the exaggeration or distortion and include that truth where it fits."* - Ernest Becker

### CAVEAT FOUR: Every theory is partial and incomplete.

Five blind men and the elephant, a traditional folk tale

*"The central importance of entering into worlds other than our own - and hence of anthropology itself [and of sociology as well] - lies in the fact that the experience leads us to understand that our own world is also a cultural construct. By*

*experiencing other worlds, then, we see our own for what it is and are thereby enabled also to see fleetingly what the real world, the one between our own cultural construct and those other worlds, must in fact, be like."* - Walter Goldschmidt

*"How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm, Once They've Seen Paree."* - popular post World War I song, reflecting the eye-opening experience of American soldiers in Europe.

*"How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm, Once They've Seen the Farm"* - M. A. Toth's parody, suggesting the insightful potential of the sociological imagination.

#### **CAVEAT FOUR**, continued:

Since every theory is inherently partial and incomplete, it makes the most sense to approach human behavior utilizing the whole range of perspectives that we have available.

Each theory slices into social phenomena at a distinctive angle and provides a different set of insights. Combined together they give us our best opportunity to grasp the whole picture in our attempt to puzzle through the most basic sociological question:

#### **CAVEAT FIVE: Theories are ultimately metaphorical.**

*"All language is metaphor to one degree or another. The only reality that is not metaphorical is 'reality' itself. All human symbolization, therefore, is metaphor, an abstraction, as 'as if.'" - Postman and Weingartner*

*"Stating the unknown, metaphor evokes meanings not possible before.... The metaphor allows us to articulate aspects of experience for which we have no world.... The postulates underlying scientific theory quite often have origins in metaphors. New postulates are frequently necessarily metaphorical, in origin and form, as they are efforts to name an unknown aspect of experience.... Some have argued that the metaphor, the analogical factor, is the most powerful engine of the human mind, the origin of meaning." - Scott Greer*

*"Society is like air...." - M. A. Toth*