George Herbert Mead brings language and communication symbols to the forefront of our discussion of society’s organization, showing how, through them, self and society compose each other. Mead asserts that mind and self arise from society and vice versa, through systems of symbolic interaction, and challenges the notion of a fully autonomous self on which other philosophers and social scientists hang their societal theories. Mead’s theory allows for an ongoing process of meaning-making in society, where rational beings reacting to and interacting with each other self-consciously combine symbols in novel ways, reinscribing self on society and society on self as time and place provide context. Interestingly, Mead’s theory is quite dialogical, and does not easily fit into the paradigm of chain causality from which we have worked this semester.

We immediately see the difficulty of isolating elements of Mead’s dialogical theory, noting how the key terms of it are defined in terms of each other. However, since language is the key to Mead’s theory, we will attempt to define *mind*, *self*, and *society*. First, the *self*, according to Mead, functions quite like a depository for the conversation of gestures that appear in social context. The self appears in biological man and non-humans, but does not participate directly in societal meaning making. Instead, it depends on a rational tool, the *mind*, which, in social man, orders the symbols around it and formulates reactions and responses to and through them, always framed by the broader social meaning of these symbols. Symbolic meaning arises from *society*, a concept which, though not explicitly defined by Mead, appears as the co-operative of diverse
individuals making meaning through shared symbols and processes of writing themselves on the symbols. Through this ongoing process, society comes to resemble the individuals that compose it, as individuals simultaneously accept its influence, and embody the meaning inscribed on shared symbols reflected back to them.

The universal symbols embodied by human language are the mechanisms for the creation of the mind, self and society. However, before societies become comprised of fully developed selves with rational minds, a social self must arise from a biological self with a mind mediating the two. The individual’s biological self responds to impulses, some of these being social. In order for individuals to cooperate during the social impulses, communication, language, and, finally, the mind arise. Once this happens, a rational social self is created which uses reasoning to react to society. Thus, we see how language differentiates the human world from the animal world in its creation of rational social selves.

Language is also important to Mead’s theory in that it allows individuals to elicit attitudes, or, an “organized set of responses,” from the community at large (161). In order for a certain symbol (e.g. property) to have universal meaning, it must elicit a similar response (or attitude) from all members of the society. This “organized set of responses” is achieved by what Mead calls the “generalized other,” or, the organized social group whose attitudes reflect the attitude of the whole community (154). According to Mead, an individual is only fully developed insofar as the self is constituted by the “organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other of the social group as a whole to which he belongs” (158). As the individual internalizes the attitudes of the “generalized other,” the mind arises as the mechanism that identifies group attitudes and applies them to behavior.
This ability to reason and apply group attitudes to individual behavior is what makes humans “rational beings” (334).

Although an individual may internalize group attitudes, Mead in no way suggests that conformity necessarily follows this internalization. Mead illustrates how the self asserts his individuality through the distinction of the “I” and the “me.” According to Mead, the attitudes of the generalized other are generally manifested by what he terms the “me.” It is the “me” that is conventional, that is a member of the community (196). However, this is not to say that the individual does not have his own rights. In fact, Mead writes that “the individual not only has rights, but he has duties…he is the one who reacts to this community and in his reaction to it….changes it” (196). It is here that the “I” comes into play. While the “me” reflects the “generalized other,” the “I” reacts to society as he himself experiences it using the reasoning mechanism of the mind (196). This response, then, serves to change the community and illustrates how society and the individual are interdependent. Thus, while the “me” may serve as a censor that reflects the “generalized other’s” attitudes, it does not win over the will of the “I” or vice versa. Instead, Mead describes a constant, rational dialogue between the “I” and the “me” in which context dictates the ultimate behavior of the individual.

Mead describes several social groups through which the “I” becomes differentiated from the “me,” all of which are societal constituents. Mead states that the fundamental unit of organization in society is the family (229). From this unit of organization, an individual learns to differentiate himself by recognizing his place inside this family unity. A child learns about himself as a physiological being, capable of sexually reproducing only with a different type of physiological being, and an emotional
being, taking part in the child/parent relationship. While the family arises out of biological necessity, it is also socially necessary, and it is from this point that all other social organizations develop. Like the family, the institution is based on the relationships between members. In the institution, individuals adopt a collective consciousness, they express common responses to situations which occur in society. In this respect, institutions are valuable because they organize individuals. At the same time, Mead emphasizes that institutions do not have to be restrictive. Unlike Durkheim, who discusses ideas of social control and conformity, Mead believes that institutions are conducive to individuality (262).

To this end, Mead suggests that more “abstract social relationships” can also be understood by the interaction and integration of the self and society (289). Mead posits religious, economic, and political relationships as worlds of “universal discourse” through which individuals from different social groups find their commonality in the functional development of such systems. As he explains, relationships of economic exchange rely on any individual understanding that he has something to offer, simultaneous with the understanding that everyone else will also have something to offer, as well as something they need. In this sense, the symbolic discourse of the marketplace depends on both a shared understanding of exchange, as well as a differentiation of individuals who have different needs and diverse offerings to exchange. Rather than viewing the “superficiality” of such a market system as one which positions individuals in competition with one another, Mead asserts that “in carrying out these [economic] activities the individual has set up a process of integration which brings the individuals closer together” (297).
Mead notes that most historical examples of political, religious, and economic relationships do not reflect this perfect integration of the self and society. He is, however, hopeful that this perfection can be realized through a truly democratic society. For Mead democracy symbolizes not the homogenization of individuals, but rather a perfect harmony between the expression of individuality and communication:

The individual can be as highly developed as lies within the possibilities of his own inheritance, and still can enter into the attitudes of others whom he affects. There can still be leaders, and the community can rejoice in their attitudes just in so far as these superior individuals can themselves enter in to the attitudes of the community which they undertake to lead (326-327).

The focus on the multiple dialogical relationships between the “I” and the “me,” the “self” and the “generalized other,” the child and family, the “leader” and “community,” then, provide very different fodder for social examination than the structural theories of Marx, Weber or Durkheim. Does an examination of an economic exchange via Marx and an examination of economic exchange via Mead necessarily imply theoretically opposed positions? Furthermore, if Mead argues that the relationship between these pairs is ever-active, how can causal chains be created? If one starts with the assumption that an examination of communication language/symbols can help elucidate the on-going relationship between these pairs, what generalizations can be draw from observations at any given moment in these cyclical interactions? How can observations of multiple, diverse “selves” be instructive in understanding the societies in which these selves are constituted?