
George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct, by **Herbert Blumer**. Edited by **Thomas J. Morrione**. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004. 196 pp. \$72.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-7591-0467-0. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 0-7591-0468-9.

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The Herbert Blumer archives include a term paper he wrote for George Herbert Mead in the late 1920s bearing his teacher's comment, "A most satisfactory statement opening up the field of the world of objects within which the self arises" (p. 1). So impressed was Mead with this studious lad that he invited him to be his teaching assistant and later asked Blumer to take over his social psychology class. For the rest of his life, Blumer carried his master's legacy, using it to fight what he perceived to be misguided structural functionalism and teaching his students to look at social reality as a process.

Thomas Morrione is among the scholars whose sociological imagination was fired by Blumer and his vision of society as "symbolic interactionism." The two met in 1971 when Morrione gave a talk on Parsons and Blumer that caught the latter's attention. With time, the mentorship grew into a friendship that lasted until Blumer died in 1987. Shortly before his death, Blumer asked Morrione to look after his papers, which are now gathered in the Herbert Blumer Collection at Colby College where Morrione teaches sociology and edits Blumer's opus postumum.

The book under review is the first of three projected volumes collecting Blumer's unpublished works. It contains a near-book-length manuscript on Mead, correspondence with David Miller, several brief notes on interactionism, and a short essay interpreting two philosophical poems on the meaning of self. A biographical note based in part on interviews with Blumer concludes the book.

The main manuscript appears to be part of a more ambitious and apparently unfinished project exploring Mead's relevance for the social sciences. Midway through Blumer mentions topics he plans to cover "much later in this book" (p. 50), including the interfaces between organizational structure and human conduct, but the discussion falls short

of this aim. The text covers mostly familiar territory—symbolic and nonsymbolic communication, the self and self-interaction, objects and their social meanings, individual and joint acts—all against the backdrop of a sustained polemics with cultural, structuralist, and psychological perspectives in social science. The exposition is lucid, well-structured, and generous on examples illustrating Blumer's approach, and suggesting possible lines of empirical inquiry.

New to me was Blumer's treatment of impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation as key phases in the act carried out by agents who slip in and out of self-consciousness as they rehearse the images of future selves and situations individuals are about to take up as projects. Equally unexpected was the critical stance Blumer took toward Mead whose thoughts on several issues Blumer finds marred by "ambiguity" and "inconsistency" (p. 94). Thus, the notion of "generalized other," according to Blumer, glosses over the fact that modern communities rarely speak with one voice, which leaves the individual, and the researcher, unsure how to make the jarring perspectives coalesce into a generalized reference frame.

The gist of Blumer's argument is that humans are as much a product of society as its producers. Any account bent on reducing interaction to variables extraneous to situations where it unfolds misses the creative, emergent properties of human phenomena. Neither the psychological perspective that endows humans with attitudes waiting to be triggered by external stimuli, nor the sociological theory that derives behavior from structurally programmed role expectations can do justice to the indeterminate facets of symbolically mediated activity. Or as Blumer puts it, "symbolic interaction is a generative or formative agency in its own right and not a mere medium for the operation of other factors that are supposed to account for what takes place in interaction" (p. 31).

It is easy to see why scientifically minded sociologists would be uneasy about the prospects of tracking the ever changing meanings individuals assign to their situations and numerous objects comprising them. An ordinary chair, Blumer reminds us, can be used as a stepladder, a barricade, a weapon, or kindling wood, and we can determine which object it really is only by immersing

ourselves in the situation. But then, in 98 out of 100 cases, the thing in question will probably be deployed as an object for sitting. Structuralists have a good reason to treat certain social objects as variables with a predictable value-response in a particular community, just as they do with a range of sociodemographic factors. Still, sociologists who take meaning for granted and ignore its situational metamorphoses are likely to miss the subtle strategies self-conscious agents use to dodge, fake, subvert, and reinvent supposedly impervious structural norms. For some three generations, interactionists have been exploring such strategies, following Blumer's call to study the social world in the making.

An especially interesting part of the book for me was the correspondence between Blumer and Miller, two scholars committed to exploring and extending the legacy of their teacher, George Herbert Mead. Among other things, the exchange sheds light on the controversy surrounding a book by Lewis and Smith in which the authors charged Blumer with misinterpreting Mead, whose views they artificially aligned with Peirce's and juxtaposed to those of Dewey and James. No need to rehearse the arguments here, as they have been covered extensively in various sociological and philosophical forums. Suffice it to say that the broadside caused Blumer much pain. He felt compelled to recite his credentials and encouraged Miller to accept the invitation to review the book for a sociology journal. Without the slightest hesitation, Miller took Blumer's side in this controversy, rejecting the realism-nominalism dichotomy on which Lewis and Smith fashioned their argument and defending Blumer's bona fide as a Mead scholar.

Unfortunately, Blumer's letters are published in this collection only in excerpts reflecting his theoretical interests. No appellations, exit niceties, or daily minutiae are available to provide a better feel for the person. And what a colorful person Herb was, a protean man who dropped out of high school to help his parents with the failing business, enrolled in sociology classes he thought would help him spread socialism in America, traveled with the Chautauqua educational group, chaired the Public Panel of the War Labor Board; and how many sociol-

ogists can boast being elected captains of their college football and forensics teams?

I wish the editor had reproduced some of the letters in their entirety to give us a more embodied look at this remarkable man whose self-made qualities and can-do attitude might offer a clue to the brand of social interactionism he espoused. The reader could also use more specifics about the editorial decisions pertaining to manuscript editing and dating. One thing that struck me was the gender-neutral language Blumer uses throughout his Mead manuscript. None of his published works or letters seem to pronominalize the individual as "he or she." If that is the language of the original, then Blumer is one of the first in our discipline to adopt the gender-neutral format. If this is an editorial addition, it should have been noted as such, along with other decisions the editor must have made while preparing the manuscripts for publication.

The collection ends with a talk Blumer gave in the mid 1970s on two poems, "The Secrets of the Self" and "The Mysteries of Selflessness," written by Sir Muhammad Iqbal, a prominent scholar and an influential figure in modern Islam. Blumer hails the author as a man "engaged in profound and brilliant expeditions of thought that are in striking accord with the most advanced thinking in my areas" (p. 173). The discussion shows Blumer's less known, lyrical side. Alas, Iqbal's plea for Muslim reawakening that Blumer endorses has a different ring to it in the post September 11 world.

George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct is an important addition to the corpus of writing by Herbert Blumer. The book will be welcomed by those interested in symbolic interactionism, its philosophical roots, historical development, and still evolving theoretical and methodological agenda. The book is also a testimony to the role the teacher-student bond plays in preserving ideas for posterity and cementing the ties between the generations of scholars who keep the tradition alive while continuously expanding it in new directions.