

Finally, what happens downstream, in the crucial years around 1930? Notice that Mead's last works—*The Philosophy of the Present*, *The Philosophy of the Act*, his interpretation of relativity theory (rather like Whitehead's *Process and Reality* in the 1920s)—are more idealist than what he had been saying in the early 1900s, especially when he was associated with the animal behaviorist John B. Watson.

A telling comparison arises in Huebner's treatment of Blumer and Morris. Ellsworth Faris began to slice off the distinctively social-psychological version of Mead in his courses. But Blumer makes a stronger effect, promoting a full-scale movement that he calls Symbolic Interaction, by inspiring further generations of students at Chicago and Berkeley to create a style of research focused on situational processes that would generate its own stream of discoveries. Blumer energized this movement with his criticism of positivistic methods as remote from the action. This too was crucial organization-building, since intellectual life is energized by conflict.

Morris took the other tack. He stayed in philosophy and developed Mead's work

into a general theory of signs. It was a favorable time to do this, since the movement of what became semiotics was burgeoning in the 1920s and '30s on many fronts, in Russia, Europe, and England. Morris makes some important contributions to semiotics, but he loses his reputation by pushing further into a grand philosophy in the Hegel-Nietzsche-Spengler vein. He expands his theory of signs into a cosmological and moral system, attempting to synthesize a world religion. Here Morris is truer to the evolutionary-processual-mind-in-nature philosophy of Mead. But Morris fails to attract followers, and the position dies.

Blumer's selection from Mead's works survives and thrives downstream. Morris's selection does not. It is a powerful demonstration of how downstream networks shape ideas, both as successes and as failures.

References

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George Herbert Mead as a Macro-Sociologist: The Promise Unfulfilled?

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George Herbert Mead's place in the sociological canon took time to secure. When in 1921 his colleagues at the University of Chicago brought out the *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, they didn't think his works merited inclusion. The burst of interest in Mead following the posthumous publication of his writings proved short-lived. In 1937, Herbert Blumer, Mead's onetime teaching assistant, wrote a book chapter in which he hailed Mead as a key figure in social psychology and identified his perspective as "the symbolic interactionist approach." He had no use for this label for nearly two decades, however, resurrecting the moniker in the 1950s when it came to designate a theoretical and empirical current

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that would become known to the world as "symbolic interactionism." Ever since, the debates have continued to rage about Mead's scattered pronouncements about sociology, the interactionist perspective on society, and the best way to carry out his research program.

George Herbert Mead's Concept of Society, by Jean-François Côté, is the latest addition to

the body of literature aiming to reconstruct Mead's theory and correct assorted misinterpretations. Already in the 1920s, according to the author, Mead's ideas had been misappropriated. As the Chicago tradition was transmitted through generations, these ideas were "lost, deformed, or even partially forgotten" (p. 111). Blumer is singled out as the main culprit because of the scant attention he paid to the role that social institutions play in Mead's thought. The author sets out to correct "Blumer's pretension of giving a full account of Mead's theoretical perspective" (p. 123) through a close reading of what Mead had to say about the nascent discipline of sociology and the concept of society as a whole.

Several points distinguish this reconstruction from previous interpretations. One is the insistence that "Mead's thought is much more indebted to Hegel's philosophy than has been recognized up to now" (p. 139). The other is an attempt to reconstruct the Meadian perspective on the unconscious by interrogating Freud and Lacan and showing that each of these thinkers "takes into account the biological substratum of human beings" but "ends up relying on language" to explain the intricacies of self-regulation (p. 47). Côté also updates Mead by aligning his views on mass democracy with postmodernist thought, specifically with the notion that "a postmodern society assumes its self-conscious transformation to be a permanent state" (p. 140). Throughout, the author works to buttress the case that any theory faithful to Mead must encompass his notion of modern society as a self-constituting system incorporating the principle of revolution into its core.

The broadest parallel between Hegel and Mead, according to Côté, is evident in these authors' perspective on human agency as a force that dialectically transcends historical dualisms through a collective process that increasingly brings the individual to self-consciousness as a product and producer of objective reality. In Hegel's terminology, the "subjective spirit" endemic to individualism comes into conflict with the "objective spirit" institutionalized in the legal state, with both sublated in the "absolute spirit" embodied in the Hegelian science of logic

guiding humanity to perfection. Mead brings Hegelian abstractions down to earth by replacing the master-slave dialectic undergirding self-consciousness with the dialectics of mind, self, and society; casting the absolute spirit as the practice of ongoing scientific inquiry; and interpreting Hegel's ideal state pragmatically as the cosmopolitan community engaged in self-conscious reconstruction. The author ends his study with the call to move beyond symbolic interactionism and formulate a full-blooded concept of society true to the logic of Mead's theory.

I have a few comments on this trenchant reconstruction that should interest Mead scholars and sociologists concerned with the history of their discipline.

Although Mead's debt to Hegel has been noted by many scholars, it deserves a closer investigation. Côté is right to draw parallels between these two authors by highlighting their emphasis on international community, drawing attention to the role social institutions play in evolution, and valorizing scientific inquiry as a tool for social reconstruction. The comparison cuts both ways, however, in that it points to the unresolved issues in Mead's corpus, notably to his optimism about social progress and prospects for rational community.

In the Hegelian spirit, Mead states that science "must be true everywhere," that it leaves no room for "narrow provincialism or patriotism," that it "is inevitably a universal discipline which takes in all who think," and that its conclusions will someday command assent of all "rational beings" (p. 42). While these statements express Mead's fondest aspirations, their relation to historical reality is unclear. A cursory glance at recent history doesn't yield much evidence that the world is unfolding in line with a scientific logic toward arrangements benefiting humanity as a whole. Scientists are known to doctor their data, engage in groupthink, squabble over scarce resources, form local and national cliques, and engage in interminable debates like the one over Mead's legacy—none of which inspires optimism regarding the prospects for an eventual consensus or universally acknowledged truth.

Hegel's discourse on the master-slave dialectic neatly underscores the social nature of

consciousness. It points to the evolutionary link between our ability to grasp ourselves and interactions with other human beings. It also hints at the long-term trend toward leveling social inequalities as society members grow increasingly dependent on and appreciative of each other. But like any metaphor, this one illuminates and obscures at the same time. The experience of American slavery attests to the fact that masters humiliated and scourged their slaves, sometimes for sheer sadistic pleasure. Their willingness to inflict suffering on fellow human beings was limited chiefly by this commodity's economic value. And why couldn't the need to have one's humanity recognized be satisfied by fellow slave owners? When the slavery system finally crumbled, it was not under the weight of reason but in the flames of the Civil War that took over 700,000 lives to make the point.

Blumer recognized the institutional dimension of social reality, but he had trouble operationalizing Mead's concepts like "generalized other," "social institutions," "society as a whole," "national identities," and "international community." We can say that he performed "structural epoché" by forswearing references to institutions qua nonexperiential entities, resolving instead to apprehend these phenomena as they manifest themselves in observable interactional settings. His followers conducted studies illuminating gang structures, systems of honor, racial prejudices, and negotiated orders where stratified resources significantly impact the outcomes and reaffirm social inequalities. Still, the issues of power, institutional constraints, and structural inequality are undertheorized in symbolic interactionism.

An alternative approach consistent with the Hegelian perspective would have sociologists spell in advance institutional imperatives transmitted to the agents programmed to pursue the approved values and reproduce social structures in the process. This is, more or less, what Talcott Parsons and his followers set out to do in the robust research program known as "structural functionalism." However, this theoretical perspective proved to be one-sided, too, as its proponents struggled to account for dissident, deviant, inchoate, and creative properties of social interaction—the starting point of interactionist sociology.

There is a vast difference between the metaphysical system of Hegel and the pragmatist teaching of Mead. Hegel-the-metaphysician saw the Prussian state as the embodiment of the absolute spirit and his own philosophical system as its ultimate codification. Mead-the-pragmatist would have nothing to do with this conceit. The perfect community for him is the one engaged in never-ending reconstruction, while science is a collective inquiry privileging experimental method over a particular outcome.

To be sure, Côté is aware of all this. What he needs to show is how his interpretation works in practice. To meet the pragmatist challenge, critics of symbolic interactionism might want to test their approach by applying it to the Ferguson riots, the union-busting in Wisconsin, the Tea Party rise, the Donald Trump phenomenon, Putin's popularity in Russia, or the ascent of ISIS in the Middle East—any phenomenon that demonstrates the power of structural constraints and attests to the analytical power of Mead's macro-sociological ideas.