

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### **G.H. Mead. A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought**

By Hans Joas

Translated by Raymond Meyer

Oxford: Polity Press and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, 266 pp.

**Reviewed by Dmitri N. Shalin, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale**

Somewhere toward the end of the book, on page 224, buried in footnote no. 47, appears a remark that offers a clue to the author's basic intent. Here we learn about "an aggressive rejection of any connection between German idealism and Mead" that the author encountered among American sociologists. To prove the salience of this connection is one of the book's primary objectives. Not only does the author attempt to show that the German intellectual tradition is central to Mead's thought; he also reverses his thesis and makes an ingenuous argument that Mead is a missing link in the history of German social thought or in Joas's own words, "the most important theorist of intersubjectivity between Feuerbach and Habermas" (p. 2).

There is an additional and not so hidden agenda that gives the present endeavor its original thrust. The book is intended to aid in "a contemporary reformulation of historical materialism" (p. 1), and as such it falls in with the work of Anthony Giddens, Steven Lukes, and other kindred thinkers who have sought in recent years to reappraise classical social theory from the standpoint of the democratic socialist left.

The introductory chapter situates the author's efforts in the long tradition of Mead scholarship and lays out the agenda for the book. Chapter Two traces the development of Mead into "a radically democratic intellectual" from his apprenticeship at Harvard through his studies at the University of Leipzig to his long tenure at the University of Chicago. Chapters Three and Four examine Mead's early works, notably, his psychological writings, in which Mead attempted to redefine the subject matter of psychology from the pragmatist standpoint. Chapter Five is devoted to the origins of the concept of symbolic interaction. The remaining four chapters, less historical and more analytical in design, cover Mead's ethics, cosmology, metaphysics of temporality, and the role of science as an instrument of social progress. At the end of the book one finds the most complete (although still not exhaustive) listing of Mead's works, which supersedes all previously published bibliographies.

Among the many strengths of the book is its historical approach, which allows the author to reconstruct the genesis and evolution of Mead's ideas. Special attention is given

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to Mead's early publications, including his numerous book reviews, editorial notes, and substantive papers that have never been reprinted in original form. One thing that transpires from this genetical treatment is that Mead was a first-rate psychologist in his own right. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries he undertook to redefine traditional psychological phenomena of perception, stimulus, emotion, and so on, as phases in the unfolding process of acting. Mead shared an interest in the action-embedded character of psychic functions with other pragmatists, particularly Dewey, but in subsequent years he took special interest in the social dimension of the traditional discourse on the nature of the psychical. I must take issue here with Joas on one point. It is one thing to say that Mead's inquiry into the social underpinnings of consciousness went deeper than that of other pragmatists and another thing to claim that the emphasis on the social dimension of human existence was unique to Mead (p. 35). Dewey's interest in these matters was long-standing; it developed quite independently of Mead and was already evident in his early writings in which he proclaimed that "man is essentially a social being... the non-social individual is an abstraction arrived at by imagining what man would be if all his human qualities were taken away" (Dewey [1888] 1969, p. 232). This premise was later developed by Dewey in numerous works, including *Human Nature and Conduct*, and especially in his *Experience and Nature*.

Illuminating, even if less than overwhelming, is the information that the author provides about Mead's studies in Germany, which includes some details about the coursework, instructors, and professional interests of Mead during the time of his association with the universities in Berlin and Leipzig. The main conclusion that this discussion yields is that Mead was probably affected by the contemporary German debate about the status of psychology as a humanistic and scientific field and that he might have sought in some fashion to reconcile Ebbinghaus's view of psychology as a natural science with Dilthey's notion of psychology as a descriptive interpretative discipline.

I find convincing the author's argument that the romantic-idealist ideas about the nature of personality and self-consciousness play an important role in Mead's theory of the self. Indeed, great German idealists were the first to point out that there is no self apart from the other, that man has to objectify himself before he can apprehend himself as a separate individual, and that he realizes one's true potential only in and through society. I disagree, however, with Joas's somewhat narrow concept of romanticism, which excludes a number of thinkers such as Hegel, for instance. If Mead is mistaken in his linking Hegel to historical romanticism, then so are Kluckhohn, Barzun, Abrams, Peckham, Talmon, and scores of other recognized authorities on romanticism. Mead's broad definition of romanticism is, in my view, superior to the restrictive one because it brings to the fore the dialectical interplay between individual autonomy and the social whole. This tension is inherent in the premises of romantic idealism, and it is distinctly felt in Mead's social interactionism (see Shalin 1984, 1986). Whether or not Mead's treatment of romanticism is mistaken, it deserves the benefit of the doubt and should not have been written off as a self-evident error.

On the issue of Mead's social behaviorism, which has recently emerged as a subject of controversy, the author assumes the middle ground. He criticizes the tendency to subjectivize Mead, correctly pointing out that meaning, for Mead, is first and foremost an objective, behavioral phenomenon. At the same time, he rejects the attempts to behaviorize Mead, which undermine the autonomy and the creative potential of the human

being. The individual is both the subject and the object of the historical process, and it is in this dual capacity that he can assert himself as a self-conscious agent of social change.

I found particularly interesting the pages of the book that deal with the ideological underpinnings of Mead's substantive ideas. Indeed, today we know a lot about Mead as a pragmatist philosopher and social psychologist and relatively little about his political views. Yet much of Mead's writings were devoted to political subjects and clearly reflect the ideological battles of the day. Mead was critical of contemporary capitalist society, and his ideological commitments left a definite mark on his social thought. "Through the theory of the social formation of the self," Joas argues, "one of the cornerstones of bourgeois ideology in the strict sense is eliminated, namely possessive individualism" (pp. 34–5). Mead's preoccupation with science as an instrument of social reconstruction, which he shared with Dewey, is also indicative of his political progressivism. Joas's fine distinction between the positivist and pragmatist views of science is pertinent in this respect, for it refutes the common notion of pragmatism as necessarily bound to scientism and committed to the doctrine of value-neutrality. Mead's stance on this issue is quite telling in that it implied that social reconstruction should lead "not only to efforts of amelioration but also to judgments of value and plans for social reform" (Mead [1930] 1964, p. 399). Joas's contribution to our understanding of this facet of Mead's work is most impressive. A few critical remarks, however, should be made here.

I cannot agree with Joas's assertion that in the 1920s Mead lost much of his interest in politics and that his writings of this period were devoid of political concerns. It is true that in the last decade of his life Mead concentrated on philosophical subjects, but within his technical writings he continued to address issues of clear political significance. A number of his articles published in this period (e.g., "Scientific Method and the Moral Sciences" and "The Nature of Aesthetic Experience") contain some of the most scathing criticisms of American society he ever wrote.

A qualification is also needed with respect to Joas's assertion that Mead showed no sympathy for the Russian Revolution. First, one should distinguish between the February and the October revolutions. Regarding the first, Mead (1917) wrote, "We can only wait, with patience and profound sympathy, the outcome of the Russian revolution." As to the October Revolution, Mead pointed out in a letter to his daughter-in-law that it was "one of the greatest revolutions that the world has seen" and that mistaken were those who believed that "Bolshevism was but as mist which in a little time would be gone" (Mead to Irene Tufts Mead, March 20, 1919, Mead Papers, Box 1, folder 16). It is true, nonetheless that he had serious reservations about the October Revolution. Mead thought that the British Labour Party's political program offered a more promising way of realizing socialism's humanitarian objectives than Lenin's brand of social democracy (Mead, 1918, pp. 637–8). His opposition to the October Revolution stemmed not only from "very abstract objections" such as the Bolsheviks' neglect of the role of profit as Joas suggests (p. 27). It also reflected his skepticism about the efficacy of coercive means employed in the service of legitimate, even noble goals and specifically his distinctly pragmatist belief that progress achieved at the expense of civil rights is likely to be spurious and short-lived. Looking from the vantage point of the present, Mead's misgivings about the Russian version of socialism seem well founded.

Finally, I thought that the author could have relied more extensively on Mead's unpublished works. He is familiar with Mead's archives at the University of Chicago and

makes good use of some of its materials, yet he leaves largely unexplored the exceedingly interesting papers contained there, which pertain to Mead's views on socialism. On numerous occasions Mead raised the claim that "Socialism presented at least for some decades the goal that society must contemplate, whether it will or not [be] a democratic society in which the means of expressions and satisfactions are placed at the disposal of the members of the whole community" (Mead Papers, box 2, addenda, folder 27). Given the author's interest in the democratic socialist rereading of Mead and pragmatism, he could have benefited from the analysis of the unpublished political works of Mead. Perhaps that is a task for the future.

It is impossible to do justice in a brief review to many fine aspects of this book. One final point I want to make is that Joas has written an important work that is bound to become required reading for Mead scholars and is likely to be a valuable source for all sociologists, interactionists and noninteractionists alike who are interested in the interplay between politics and social theory.

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### **Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society**

By John O'Neill

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985

**Reviewed by John P. Hewitt**, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Sociology, among its many guises and embodiments, is an extended commentary on the modern world. Its theoretical and research apparatus has been shaped by the intellectual and moral responses of its practitioners to the social transformations wrought by capitalism, industrialism, the growth of cities—in short, by the transformation of society by what we too glibly call modernity. Far from being merely the science that many would like it to be, sociology is an integral part of the culture and social structure of modern society, an expression of its ethos as well as an instrument of its social arrangements.

Critical theorists such as John O'Neill would agree with the foregoing but would find it stated too mildly. Sociology, they might say, not only expresses the culture of modernity but is integral to its production and reproduction; and it serves, through its provi-