

George Herbert Mead and Creationism

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(George Herbert Mead: Philosopher, Psychologist, Sociologist)

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Moscow: Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Lingvistsicheskii

Universitet, 2006

Elena Kravchenko, a professor of sociology at Moscow State University, has written a book billed as the first monograph-length study of George Herbert Mead in Russian. The volume covers Mead's philosophy and social psychology, features three excerpts from *Mind, Self, and Society* and *Philosophy of the Present*, and provides a bibliography of his works. The discussion is lucid and wide ranging, and it is bound to turn heads in Russia and beyond.

The author draws on Meadian scholarship, mostly writings by such philosophers as David Miller, Charles Morris, Paul Pfoetz, George Cronk, Hans Joas, and James Baldwin. Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman make a brief appearance; Anselm Strauss, Tamotsu Shibutani, Joel Charon, and Larry Reynolds are mentioned in passing. Vidich and Lyman's 1985 *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions* is put to an unorthodox use, but no other more recent sociologically minded studies of Mead are consulted to any appreciable extent. Also missing are the Mead symposia in *Symbolic Interaction*, theoretical works developing Mead's sociological legacy, and empirical studies seeking to test Mead's theories.

While the difficulty of stocking Russian libraries after the Soviet Union's collapse may have something to do with these lacunas, it is harder to fathom why the author did not draw on Russian scholars who have written about Mead since the 1960s—Lev Rubinstein, Igor Kon, Leonid Ionin, N. V. Melentieva, and others. Kravchenko remedies the situation somewhat by drawing instructive parallels between Mead and Russian thinkers who independently from the American pragmatists explored the human self—Aleksei Leontiev, Aleksei Ukhtomsky, Peter Anokhin, Dmitri Uznadze, and, to a lesser extent, Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin.

The discussion opens up with a lively biographical sketch that paints Mead as a lapsed Protestant searching for meaning in a world fractured by the Industrial

Revolution: Mead drifts into philosophy and eventually settles on a career that afforded his inquisitive mind a chance to tackle weighty issues in the safety of academia. Kravchenko aligns herself with the Vidich-Lyman thesis, holding that Mead's theory was a secularized version of evangelical Christian teaching. Exploring the parallels and tension between Mead's views and the Christian doctrine is probably the most original part of the book, even though it yields conclusions that are bound to raise some eyebrows.

"Mead is much too strict and unbending in his rejection of the idea of Divine creation and Christian eschatology, and, as a consequence, is often imprecise," writes the author (p. 99).¹ "In reality, the biblical narrative vividly describing the process of creation of the world and man not only doesn't contradict the theory of evolution but, on closer examination, substantially deepens and enriches it" (p. 99). I had to reread the passage to make sure I got its meaning right, but there was no mistake: the author defends creationism against Mead's secular evolutionism. Kravchenko praises Mead for merging mind with the world, making the self a reflection of a larger universe, and treating the individual as a microcosm of an ever-expanding moral universe, but then chides Mead for his failure to transcend scientific conventions and appreciate that "conscious mind is a manifestation of the spirit transcending natural laws" and that "consciousness which, according to the Bible, God personally grants to the human being, antedates speech" (p. 99).

Mead's social theory is a crypto-theological construct, according to Kravchenko, and she takes it upon herself to peel away its secular garments to reveal the solid theological core. "Like the Creator, the social community 'shapes out of the earthy clay' the live human spirit. A little thing that remains to be explained is why in contrast to the most advanced animals, the human community achieves such spellbinding results in shaping human mind. Theology, it seems to me, offers a more consistent and life-affirming answer to this query" (p. 108). Mead has much to say about the mechanism of consciousness, according to Kravchenko, but is "very unconvincing when it comes to explaining what causes consciousness to appear in the first place." He touches the unknown, gazes into the rationally incomprehensible depth of human existence, but in the end is thwarted by his secularism from making one last step and acknowledging the divine origins of the noumenal self, of the unfathomable "I" that, according to Kravchenko, is hopelessly subordinated in social behaviorism to the mundane "Me" (pp. 129–30). Having insulated himself from biblical scholarship, Mead fails to plumb the mysteries of being and the depths of human self. He is too much of a pragmatist and a utilitarian in his moral outlook to give sound advice on how we can come together in a world torn by strife. Not surprisingly, the author concludes that "Kant is far deeper and more insightful than Mead" on the issues of moral responsibility and ethical commitment (p. 167).

It is not that Kravchenko's critique lacks subtlety. Indeed, it makes one wonder what a dialogue between a sociologically minded theologian and religiously versed social scientist could have achieved. But the book is a poor substitute for such an encounter. It mixes scientific and theological discourses in a manner that does not

do justice to either. Readers will be hard pressed to find there an intellectual defense of Christian personalism or an attempt to grapple with issues of the evidence confounding creationism. The assertion that the Darwinian theory of evolution adopted by Mead is “consistent” with the biblical account of human genesis remains just that—an assertion. The author casually tosses in creedal statements as if her audience would not think of questioning the matter, but sociologists schooled in the pragmatist tradition and committed to scientific conventions could hardly take such opinions for granted.

This is unfortunate, for once Kravchenko gets off her theological horse and squares with Mead’s concepts, she shows a solid grasp of issues, a welcome attention to detail, and a genuine appreciation of Mead’s genius. I found enlightening the parallels the author drew between Mead and Russian writers, particularly Gagik Nazloyan, a psychiatrist who took to sculpting his patients as a way to draw them back into social discourse, to aid their efforts at reconstructing their own selves (pp. 118–19). Throughout the book, the author tackles issues familiar to Mead scholars and expresses a range of opinions, some of which I do not share (e.g., that Mead’s functionalism undermines human creativity and stifles prospects for social reconstruction), but there is room for an honest difference of opinion on such issues. What kept me uneasy—and this feeling strengthened as I delved further into the book—was the thought that this text might be symptomatic of the latest trends in Russian sociology.

After the Soviet state relinquished its control over the social sciences in the late 1980s, sociology in Russia was marked by diverse theoretical, methodological, and organizational currents. In the last year or so, however, there have been efforts to reestablish state control over academe, with a group of stalwarts getting together last June to set up an organization called the Union of Russian Sociologists (the Russian acronym is SSR). The planning for the meeting was shrouded in secrecy, leading sociologists were kept in the dark, and an invitation-only audience allowed to attend the inaugural session. This organization enjoys the support of Vladimir Putin’s government, bills itself as an instrument of the state, insists on developing the “national” sociological agenda, aligns itself with the Russian Orthodox Church, and promotes the idea of compulsory teaching of Christian doctrine in school.

I do not know if Kravchenko supports the SSR, but I find worrisome her enthusiastic endorsement of the eighteenth-century Russian luminary M. V. Lomonosov, who famously opined that “science and religion are sisters, daughters of the Heavenly Father, and they can never be cross at each other, except in a feat of vanity.” “Does Mead agree with that?” Kravchenko asks and then answers: “Unfortunately not” (p. 215).

I hope that sociologists in the United States pay attention to the current turmoil in Russian sociology, which may turn the attitude toward Mead into an unlikely linchpin of the newly emerging orthodoxy.

NOTE

1. All translations are mine.

