

REVIEW ESSAY/ ESSAI BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

A LOOK BACK AT GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

Daniel R. Huebner. *Becoming Mead: The Social Process of Academic Knowledge.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 349 pages.

George Herbert Mead. *Mind, Self & Society: The Definitive Edition.* Edited by Charles W. Morris, Annotated Edition by Daniel R. Huebner and Hans Joas, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 515 pages.

Anyone interested in George Herbert Mead has much occasion to rejoice these days: in the aftermath of the 150th anniversary of his birth (in 1863), a new range of studies have been published, showing that the renewed interest in this seminal figure in classical sociology is bearing fruit around the world. Prominent among these efforts are the two books under review here: Daniel Huebner's *Becoming Mead: The Social Process of Academic Knowledge*, and the "definitive edition" of Mead's *Mind, Self & Society*, presented and annotated by Huebner and Hans Joas. The former is certainly the most remarkable book published on Mead in the last few decades, and the latter should now stand as the final authoritative version of the relatively controversial book published under Mead's name – the one that was to make him famous in sociology. In order to put these two books into perspective at the outset, and to get to the heart of the matter, let's quote Huebner's overtly provocative statement fuelling his own magnificent inquiry: "Put in admittedly oversimplified terms, Mead is known in a discipline in which he did not teach for a book he did not write" (3).

This statement introduces us to what has been known for a long time (in fact, since the publication of *Mind, Self & Society* in 1934), but came under serious scrutiny only recently – or more precisely, starting with Hans Joas's book *George Herbert Mead: A Re-Examination*

of *His Thought* (English translation in 1985 of the 1980 German version). Charles W. Morris's edition of *Mind, Self & Society*, as much as it appeared as a sociological landmark and an attempt to preserve an author from possible, if not probable, oblivion, also inaugurated an intense debate about authorship, since the whole book was based on stenographic transcripts and students' notes of Mead's teachings in social psychology from the late 1920s and early 1930s, rearranged and edited by Morris. Since Mead died in 1931 without having published a single book of his own – either in philosophy or social psychology, let alone sociology – *Mind, Self & Society* became the main reference for students and scholars alike, with all the possible attendant confusion about his place among the social theorists. The confusion stems mainly from two original sources: Morris's own intervention in (and interpretation of) Mead's works, and Herbert Blumer's self-appropriation of Mead's ideas in the service of his own brand of sociological theory, called symbolic interactionism. Since Blumer and Morris were two of Mead's students, their authority in establishing him as an important thinker prevented the possibility of returning directly to Mead to get a different reading of his thought for almost fifty years. This started to change gradually though, beginning with debates in the 1960s in symbolic interactionism, then between Anselm Strauss's and Blumer's slightly but also significantly different views on Mead, followed by a major re-evaluation of Mead's legacy by J.D. Lewis and R.L. Smith in *American Sociology and Pragmatism: Mead, Chicago Sociology and Symbolic Interaction* (1980). This re-evaluation was pursued in Joas's 1980 book referred to earlier, and finally in Cary Cook's 1993 book *George Herbert Mead: The Making of a Social Pragmatist*. Parallel to these, partial appropriation of Mead's thought began to appear at the same time, first in American sociology by Erving Goffman, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Mary Jo Deegan, and others. Other appropriations and interpretations of Mead then came from abroad, by Jürgen Habermas, and more recently in the introduction of Daniel Cefaï and Louis Quéré's new French translation of *Mind, Self & Society* of 2006, and also by Felipe Careira da Silva. Huebner's new book, within this tradition of what we might now call Meadian Studies, opens up many vibrant new directions for inquiry.

The argument that stands at the core of Huebner's analysis in *Becoming Mead*, which is based on his doctoral dissertation, is that Mead was created by the social environment in which he found himself, first during his lifetime, and second (and perhaps more importantly) after his death – an argument that seems to mirror Mead's own definition of the self, given we consider this relation to be dialogical. There are clearly two distinct figures that appear here: Mead the public intellectual, devot-

ing a lot (if not most) of his time to public speeches and social debates (on education, civic issues, national politics, etc.), and Mead the philosophical theorist, torn between his teaching, his own experimentation in his laboratory, and his observations in the experimental elementary school (with John Dewey) at the University of Chicago – together with his voracious reading in philosophy, social psychology, and the social sciences. This apparent split between the two figures helps Huebner to locate Mead’s general intellectual situation, and partly explains the time he did not devote to writing books – although he published numerous articles (well over 60) between the 1890s and early 1930s. The first part of Huebner’s book (“Rethinking Mead”) retraces in three excellent chapters the various aspects of Mead’s biography, which is especially helpful in understanding the specificity of his engagement with the social world of Chicago (as well as Hawaii, where his wife Helen Castle came from, and where he travelled frequently). Huebner draws the figure of a public intellectual always on the move, totally immersed in the intense transformations of U.S. society in the first third of the twentieth century, when labour-union struggles, immigration issues, and various economic, educational and political challenges were being addressed. Huebner’s work here not only presents a nuanced understanding of Mead’s relations to his social environment, but also a comprehensive look into Mead’s own character, especially his pervasive curiosity about science and social organization, and his unflinching progressive views and trust in the value of social reform and mass democracy. This portrait, in itself, certainly provides the best image so far published of the public intellectual that Mead was in his lifetime.

The second part of the book (“Notes and Books”) first highlights the fertile intellectual environment at the University of Chicago, and then proceeds to a central and crucial chapter, “The Construction of *Mind, Self & Society*,” in which we are led through the fascinating details of the editing of Mead’s most famous book. In this chapter, Huebner displays the full strength of his scholarship, reconstructing patiently the steps that made possible the compilation of Mead’s book, all while emphasizing some of the liberties taken by Morris. These include the initial selection process from the various sources that would come to constitute the text, their rearrangement to fit a coherent stream of thought – a crude necessity when starting with notes taken by stenographers or by students in Mead’s classes – as well as the introduction of notions not used by Mead, such as “social behaviorism,” a disputable and complicating addition to Mead’s overall argument. This excellent chapter fully explores the background of the editing work, paying due respect to the painstaking process that Morris engaged in for over two years, but in a critical fashion at

the same time. (Huebner writes with the patience and perspicacity of a fine researcher and analyst – a task that he will thoroughly pursue in the 100-page appendix of the “definitive edition” of *Mind, Self & Society*, in which he retraces, paragraph by paragraph, the original sources of the text.) The point of this critical examination is that the editing process, with all its various interventions, “disguised the contextual nature of Mead’s lectures and manuscripts and has prevented easy access to an understanding of Mead’s intellectual development,” such that the book serves to record not just “his thought as such, but evidence of a variety of complex social projects” (136). In short: “From this perspective the dominant understanding of Mead has become, itself, a problem for analysis, rather than a presumed starting point. How is it that a few texts, passages, concepts, or propositions come to stand for a person’s thought and in what sense can they be said to do so?” (137). This is a point that any future interpretation of Mead will definitely have to take into account.

For Huebner himself, the consequence of this social process of creating academic knowledge necessarily leads to a reconsideration of Mead’s legacy. In the third and final part of his book (“Influence and Interpretation”), he first addresses the issue of how Morris and Blumer each played their respective roles in promoting Mead in the academic domain, before turning to the influence this “constructed Mead” has had in the discipline of sociology, by showing through citations statistics charts how he came to be widely read and known. In the conclusion of *Becoming Mead*, Huebner addresses the more general issue of the production of social knowledge by looking back at his own analysis and method used in studying and reconstructing Mead. He then proposes that it is basically his status as a ‘practical social actor’ that defines Mead’s accomplishments in social theory, and further that it is always the immediate social environment that provides us an understanding and self-understanding of knowledge production. Huebner’s book, then, stands as this attempt at reconstructing Mead’s social experience, set in the complexity of the empirical social situations which provide the latter its form and content. Huebner’s position in this allows him, as he puts it, “to avoid the problematic and normative decisions about what should ultimately count as canonical,” and to consider that “knowledge is found in social action and has consequences for social action” (213–214). It seems to me that this is all very true, and that, reading Huebner, we cannot but be persuaded that his analysis situates a new perspective on Mead, closer to the biographical-historical reality of Mead’s time, nested in Mead’s social environment.

And yet, there is at least one other issue that is not adequately covered here in relation to the knowledge produced by and about Mead:

his constant dialogue, both critical and dialectical, with the figures that accompanied his reflections and teachings. These figures, as references of past eras and historical periods, both remote and mixed with his more immediate social environment – philosophers like Hume, Hegel, Aristotle and Kant, and scientists like Darwin, but also the environment of his own intellectual formation, both in the United States and Europe in the late 19th century – were as present for Mead as was his immediate surroundings. It is also in Mead's dialogues and dialectical oppositions to them, through various explicit and implicit debates and positions, that he could ultimately determine the crucial reorientations in scientific and philosophical knowledge that came to characterize his theoretical views. These figures and their works then, which Mead not only read but often taught, were at least as present and as important in his life and intellectual development as were the colleagues and students of his more immediate social environment that Huebner focuses on. Taking them into account could also help, in a different context, to better situate the overall originality, validity, and fecundity of Mead's thought. Hans Joas pointed this out more than thirty years ago, as did Dmitri Shalin more recently in his 2011 book *Pragmatism and Democracy*. A hermeneutics linking Mead's own biographical and historical experience with the larger and deeper context with which this experience was in dialogue would also provide insights about the direction taken by his thought. And access to this dialogue is possible, this time, through his original writings (the numerous articles he wrote over 40 years of his intellectual development), into which he took position, for or against ideas and concepts that he struggled with. Today, thanks to the online accessibility of most of Mead's original articles published during his lifetime through Robert Throop and Lloyd Gordon Ward's "Mead Project" (<https://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/inventory5.html#sectM>), part of this task is greatly facilitated.

The presentation of a "definitive edition" of Mead's *Mind, Self & Society*, by Joas and Huebner, also helps in many ways to deepen the understanding and interpretation of the intellectual figure Joas describes as follows: "Nobody has as profoundly and consistently inaugurated an understanding of the inherent sociality of human action as George Herbert Mead did" (xi-xii). In this new edition, Joas and Huebner have corrected typos, added bibliographical references, and an imposing appendix where Huebner shows how Morris worked in editing Mead's book. This invaluable appendix, entitled "The Sources of Mind, Self & Society" and meticulously prepared by Huebner, gives us access not only to the original sources used, from which we can see the kind of work Morris did on the stenographic transcripts and student notes (and con-

scientifically commented on by Huebner), but also to numerous passages that were simply eliminated (or not selected) in the editing process. From this, we get another fresh look at Mead, extending the pragmatist view that Mead Himself once expressed in relation to scientific thought, referencing Einstein's contribution to physics: "A scientifically reconstructed idea becomes a member of the ideas of science only under the conditions that those ideas will be reconstructed, so that they can be stated in terms of the new idea" (457).

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