

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Côté, Jean-François.** *George Herbert Mead's Concept of Society: A Critical Reconstruction.* London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 192 p, \$45.95 paper (9781612058054)

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There are two main directions one can take when studying a social theorist. The first is to figure out what theorists “really” meant, correcting the record from past interpreters, and more precisely grounding their ideas in the proper intellectual, social, and political contexts. The second is to extend the original scope of theorists’ work by re-reading them in light of present-day concerns, and imagining creative possibilities for these ideas from a more contemporary agenda. Jean-François Côté’s recent book pushes in both directions, examining Mead’s notions of society through close readings of his popular and lesser-known writings, and then considering the relevance of his core ideas given the problems of the more complex, connected and globalized world we live in today.

I confess I am part of the problem here. I have always had some kind of an aversion to Mead’s theory of society, finding his depiction of it vague and non-committal. Mead intended his theory of society to be relatively open-ended, while insisting on the importance of the self-society dialectic. Since society (like the self) is ever evolving, trying to “capture” society and sketch out its main features seems almost an exercise in futility. Any progress made in defining the structural rules/regularities of society damages the universality of the theory, and any failure to advance in this way renders it non-committal and analytically impotent. Being interested in Mead but continually dodging an engagement with his theory of society, this book was probably written for people like me. And I enjoyed it. Indeed, anyone with an interest in Mead scholarship, the problem of the individual and society, and the dynamics of institutional change, will find an engagement with this book useful.

Côté begins with a chronological genealogy of Mead’s treatments of society throughout his career, to examine how his ideas evolved over time, and “remained foundational until his last writings” (1). Côté then begins a closer analysis of Mead’s theory of society by linking his interest in the process of phylogenesis (the development of the species and society) with ontogenesis (the development of consciousness of the self).

Côté identifies Mead's interest in how self and society are two mutually supportive sides of the same coin of social evolution as they gain the ability to use symbols and achieve self-objectification (58). By drawing these together, Côté constructs a "topological" view of Mead's concept of society, which links the "I-Me" dialectic of selves to generalized others through institutional change over time (86-87).

This model points to differences in unconscious versus conscious development at both the level of self and society. Côté argues that the ability for society to grow self-conscious is a "relatively recent" (108) capacity, representing a revolutionary leap in societal development. Only by viewing one's own society from the imagined standpoint of others in an international order, can we become more self-aware and obtain a more objectified sense of collective identity, enabling reflective capacities for change. While recent global institutions surely provide new angles and vantage points for self-reflection, it is also true that traditional tribal, community, and national identities have long been established through wars and/or trading relations with neighboring civilizations and groups. More importantly, the phylogenetic development of our capacity for this reflective, collective consciousness, would emerge much earlier in human evolution. Côté exaggerates the degree to which unconscious societal development is a thing of the past, and conscious development the wave of the future. Society continues to evolve in unconscious ways, even in its most modern forms, as G.H. Mead (1923: 246-247) reminds us.

Côté also emphasizes the linkage between societal and self-development, since this is critical to understanding relative changes in either. He points out that for Mead, simple societies produce conformity and modern civilizations enable more complex individuality due to more heterogeneous sources of self-development (60). Côté shows how this connection between the evolution of self and society is central in Mead's approach to social and political reforms. By consciously changing the structure of educational institutions, for example (92), one generates immediate impacts on the process of self-development for the individuals socialized within them (see also Carreira da Silva, 2008). These reformations in selves, in turn, impact the future shaping of society.

Côté repeatedly celebrates Mead's idea that a distinguishing feature of modern democracy is that the mechanism of social revolution is built into its very institutions (e.g., 3, 27, 108, 141, 143, 151). This is extremely optimistic. Max Weber teaches us that the bureaucratic structures of democratic society are extremely difficult to challenge and dislodge, and Karl Marx would emphasize the bourgeois interests inherent to them, all important corrections put forward by Jurgen Habermas. In

this sense, the problem of power is little addressed in Côté's book, which was disappointing. Athens (2005) reminds us that Mead often wore "rose coloured glasses" in his views not only of science but also the hope of American democracy. Côté's creative reconstruction would have benefited by addressing these criticisms more explicitly, and challenging Mead's optimism and disregard of the many problems of structural inequality endemic to modern capitalist societies.

Côté also draws comparisons between Mead's theories of the unconscious and those of Jacques Lacan (80-87). Côté (81) argues that for Mead, "consciousness of meaning and self-consciousness are part of a much wider and deeper process that belongs to the unconscious as it appears in gestures, meanings, and symbols that exist prior to their inclusion in the field of direct or immediate experience." Based on this assumption, he argues that the unconscious play of symbols is something that Mead's system and Lacan's have in common. Yet this specific conceptual parallel is misguided. While Lacan does allow for "signifiers" (similar to Mead's notion of "significant symbols") to play at the unconscious level, Mead does not. It is true that for Mead, meaningful gesture-response relations, actions, and embodied experience can occur at the unconscious level, but they remain non-symbolic until they are transformed into symbols at the conscious level. This represents a crucial departure from, not a similarity with, psychoanalytic models.

I also question the affinity Côté constructs between Meadian and postmodern views of society. Côté defines postmodern society broadly, as a continually evolving, self-transformative and communicative form of mass democracy (139-140). If this is the definition of the postmodern society, then perhaps Mead fits the bill. Yet is this definition apt? What of the nihilism and skepticism that accompany postmodernist approaches, and the distrust of science and universal narratives? Mead's (1923) faith in science as the societal institution *par excellence*, and the best method for humanity to make genuine progress in its cultural, moral and political problems, is the very epitome of modernism. Indeed, to argue that Mead holds a postmodern view of society runs too far afield from some of Mead's most cherished beliefs and values. In trying to make Mead relevant to the world today, we are in danger of lifting him too far from his own intellectual world. Côté's book is a very worthwhile project, and a stimulating one, though at times he may be stretching Mead's theories a bit too far.

REFERENCES

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