

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Filipe Carreira da Silva**, *Mead and Modernity: Science, Selfhood, and Democratic Politics*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008, 252 pp. \$US 70.00 hardcover (978-0-7391-1511-4).

**I**n *Mead and Modernity*, Filipe Carreira da Silva situates George Herbert Mead's ideas biographically, politically and historically. Other writers, notably David L. Miller, Hans Joas, and Gary Cook, have undertaken similar projects in the past. What makes Silva's book different is a new model with which to interpret Mead's thought as a whole, organized around three mutually supportive intellectual pillars: science, selfhood, and reformist politics. Together, these pillars form his conception of modernity, and accord with a dialogical and processual view of how to account for progress and development at the both the individual and societal level. Through this exercise, he puts into context some of Mead's major interpreters, and where necessary, corrects the record with some very insightful critiques. His goal is to suggest some ways in which Mead's ideas could inform contemporary social theories of modernity. The result is a short but informative book on a broad range of topics associated with Mead's thought, and a useful corrective to some of the ways he is misrepresented in contemporary sociology.

Silva takes into account all of Mead's published writings, and his myriad unpublished papers, amounting to "over nine-hundred pages of unpublished materials, comprising both items written by Mead and transcripts of his classroom lectures" (p. 38). As scholars in this tradition have long emphasized, Silva argues that there is much more to Mead than *Mind, Self and Society*. He corrects a common self-perpetuating myth in standard classroom accounts of this famous text: "*Mind, Self, and Society* is widely assumed to be the edited version of notes taken by students, while in fact it is the result of a professional stenographer who attended Mead's lectures in 1928" (p. 139). Hence, this classic book is a more credible portrayal of Mead's ideas at the time than is often assumed.

Silva also discusses the relevant secondary commentators on Mead, and uses them as both resources and objects for critique. This is particularly important for Silva, as "the way in which the history of social theory is reconstructed is directly linked to the theoretical objectives of

the social scientist who reconstructs it” (p. 54). He considers the work of many commentators on Mead, including Lewis Coser, David L. Miller, Hans Joas, and Gary Cook, but takes particular aim at Herbert Blumer and Jürgen Habermas. These two are perceived to be the most responsible for Mead’s reputation among sociologists, yet have provided the most distorted presentation of his ideas in pursuit of their own academic agendas.

Silva argues that as part of a strategy to “put symbolic interactionism on the map of sociological theories” (p. 51), and oppose structural functionalism, Blumer used Mead’s thought to argue for the social interactional source of meanings, the constructed nature of action, and the negotiated aspects of social organization. For Habermas’s grand theoretical synthesis in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Mead’s work was useful for developing arguments about the centrality of communicative action in the lifeworld, but was used as a straw man when it came to issues of power, structure, and the material forces acting in society. These two interpretations have resulted in what Silva calls “a highly selective appropriation” of Mead’s thought and “the ‘idealist’ profile imposed on Mead” (p. 56). Contemporary scholars of Mead have been trying to dislodge this profile by drawing out his more pragmatist and materialist ideas, a goal that Silva furthers with some success in this book.

The pillars of science, selfhood, and politics are put in this order because, Silva argues, they represent the sequential and logical progression of Mead’s thought, each building on the principles of the previous. The argument is that Mead’s philosophy of scientific method led him to analyze the self from an empirical, naturalistic standpoint, leading to an organic and evolutionist model of development. Once this social and processual view of selfhood was fully developed, in contrast to classical theories of the atomistic and autonomous individual, the process and content of political participation also had to be re-conceptualized. Further, the pillar of science informs his conception of politics as well. Mead had a great faith in science as a problem-solving activity, and hence, believed that this “highest form of intelligence” could be usefully applied to solve social problems and lead to pragmatic political reforms.

Silva accurately depicts Mead’s account of science, although he could have provided more depth and detail to flesh this out. He shows that Mead viewed science as a dialectical process with an ever-present tension between the individual scientist finding isolated facts in problem-oriented contexts, and the background of assumptions about reality and universal knowledge held by the scientific community that structures the inquiry. Science, in this conflict-laden but progressive view, is for Mead the quintessential human institution for solving problems of action faced

by human communities. Science is an unfinalizable product, constantly expanding its scope to incorporate new and disconfirming facts; it is the Hegelian dialectic turned materialist, since empirical research science is bound up not just with the autonomous play of abstract ideas, but with real processes of action in concrete temporal and physical environments. As such, understanding Mead's views on science is an excellent way to understand his broader pragmatist epistemology. Silva shows that his theory of the perceptive act is a way to break through traditional philosophical dualisms of mind and body, as the physical, psychological, and the social are bound together through the same temporal processes of adjustment to environments of action. While his basic depiction of Mead's pillar of science is accurate, I think that Silva may have put his views on too high a pedestal. Mead did not have the benefit of social analyses of "science in practice" (e.g., Donna Haraway, Andrew Pickering, Harry Collins), although I believe he would have endorsed them with enthusiasm. Silva, on the other hand, might have used these studies to better scrutinize some of Mead's more optimistic conceptions of science. For example, are scientists really happy to discover disconfirming evidence? Do scientific advancements occur in a relatively free way, unfettered by private interests, funding agendas, cultural politics, and personal career considerations?

Mead's social conception of the self, Silva argues, was built on this general faith in science, and on the ideas of Charles Darwin. Silva also shows how Mead's views on social psychology changed as his thought matured. For example, the early Mead believed that the "I" was capable of experiencing itself in the moment of action; the later Mead dismissed this possibility, and argued that the "I" could only be experienced later, in the dialectical process of self-reflection as it is transformed into the past-tense "Me." Mead's view of the self shaped his views on practical educational policies and reforms in Chicago. If education resembles the ultimate form of a social process of self-development, Mead must have asked, then how can one best shape how this happens in practical contexts? Silva also pushes us to consider how Mead's model of the self might be studied in the context of modernity, arguing that "if there are indeed 'variants of modernity' then it should be possible to empirically analyze the different impact of these variants upon the selves living under their influence" (p. 162).

Finally, Silva shows that Mead's view of the self also shaped his conception of collective political reform. Since actors are no longer viewed as pleasure-seeking, rational need maximizers, but as people who find inner motivations in external physical and social environments, the stakes for politics change. In Mead's thought, actors are encouraged to take the

role of as many others as possible, and to consider all relevant points of view in solving community problems. This philosophy can be seen in Mead's practical engagements in community reforms (e.g., The Chicago Settlement House, The Chicago City Club, and The Immigrants Protective League), in his moral and political views on the first World War, and in his skepticism of trade unions, which he argued operate only according to narrow class interests. In Mead's account of radical democratic reform, people are required to utilize a broader vision of social betterment for the community as a whole. Silva celebrates Mead's unrelenting faith in scientific reason to solve social problems by taking into account all perspectives and facts toward furnishing creative solutions. However, Mead runs into the same problem as Habermas in his vision of maximizing "communicative action" and trying to foster the "ideal speech community" by broadening and strengthening the "political public sphere." Is it possible for people to take account of all viewpoints when powerful interests get in the way? Where does Mead allow for economic and symbolic power that creates imbalances in the "universe of discourse"? Where Habermas can account for these issues with his concepts of the social system, civil society, and the steering media of money and power, Mead barely considers these things. When he does, his only solution is a "change of attitude" on the part of actors who utilize too narrow a moral vision, or, ironically, in the case of World War I, the use of outright force to topple autocratic systems. Silva is very critical of Habermas' account of Mead, and fails to give him his due for integrating Mead's ideas, and his belief in radical democratic progress via communicative rationality, with structural issues faced in modernity.

In the end, we are left with the question of why theorists of modernity should still care about Mead's writings. While Silva builds on the contributions of recent theorists such as Axel Honneth to make the case, more might have been done to develop a thorough-going research agenda of his own. As it stands, the book is a detailed intellectual history and a careful study of the ideas of an important social theorist. I was not convinced that Mead's theories remain invaluable for informing contemporary analyses of the self in modernity, although hopeful glimpses of this possibility appeared at times. But the central thesis of Filipe Carreira da Silva's book is an excellent way to conceive of Mead's ideas as a whole, and his insights and critiques are both useful and original. It is an essential reference for Mead scholars, and would also serve as an accessible and comprehensive introduction to Mead's social theory for students.

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