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of George Herbert Mead*

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Hans JOAS & Daniel R. HUEBNER (eds.), *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead*, Chicago, and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2016, 349 pages

- The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead* is a significant contribution to the recent “Mead renaissance.” It gathers some contributions first presented at the conference celebrating the 150th anniversary of the birth of George Herbert Mead held in April 2013 at the University of Chicago and organized by Hans Joas, Andrew Abbott, Daniel Huebner, and Christopher Takacs. The volume brings scholarship on G.H. Mead up to date highlighting Mead’s relevance for areas of research completely ignored by past Mead’s scholars who were mainly concentrated on Mead’s contributions to sociological disciplines. The volume is structured in three parts devoted to the three main areas in which, according to the editors, Mead’s work is currently inspiring contemporary scholars: “History, Historiography, Historical Sociology;” “Nature, Environment, Process;” “Cognition, Conscience, Language.” The five contributions of the first part deal with the potential of Mead’s work for fields of historical research and to new historical contextualization of Mead’s thinking. The four studies on “Nature, Environment, Process” which form the second part of the volume are devoted to Mead’s relevance for the history and philosophy of nature. The third part on “Cognition, Conscience, Language” is the largest of the volume, it gathers six contributions devoted to the increasing relevance of Mead’s work for cognitive science.
- Among the impressive contributions of the first part, Camic’s first chapter puts in lights the importance Mead gave in *Movements* to “research method” and the “concept of modern science” as his first topics. Whereas in the second chapter of the volume

Daniel Huebner deals with Mead's relevance for the history of science. In particular, Huebner broadly refers to Mead's archival materials and secondary sources to show how Mead's interest in the history of science was always intertwined to his pedagogical convictions. In "Pragmatism and Historicism: Mead's Philosophy of Temporality and the Logic of Historiography," the third chapter of the first part, Hans Joas explores the similarities between American pragmatism and German historicism, claiming that pragmatists developed ideas that allow us to overcome the dichotomy between objectivism and relativism in historiography. In chapter four, Robert Westbrook shows Mead's contributions to the idea of democratic inclusiveness superior even to Dewey's views, whereas Karl-Siegbert Rehberg focuses the fifth chapter to a reevaluation of the relationship between Mead and the intellectual traditions that include phenomenologists like Max Scheler and philosophical anthropologists like Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. Particularly noteworthy is Charles Camic's first chapter, "Changing 'Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century': Historical Text and Historical Context," which focuses on Mead's *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. This volume is a posthumous compilation of notes based on some lectures Mead gave in 1928 in a course with the same title and subsequently edited into book form by Merritt H. Moore. This is one of the most neglected texts by Mead's scholars, although, as Camic correctly argues, the circumstance that *Movements* is the result of edited course stenographic notes would hardly seem enough to relegate this work to the interpretative sideline, since the most famous *Mind, Self, and Society* is likewise the result of edited course notes. According to Camic, the reason for such scholars' reluctance to tackle *Movements* is mainly attributable to "the book's seemingly small payoff for readers interested in the fundamental Meadian topics of the self, the intersubjective foundations of the social self, the role of language in social interaction, and so on [...] but not concerned with considering these subjects in relation to Mead's claim that human thought is fundamentally historical" (17-8). Camic traces back to the lectures Dewey gave at the University of Michigan in 1891-2 with the same title of *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, and which would be transplanted at the University of Chicago after 1894. He aims at reconstructing the genealogy of Mead's 1915 and 1928 courses and identifying "what is historically specific about this course" (18). He then juxtaposes the three versions, using Dewey's 1891-2 as the "historical baseline from which to understand how the course changed in Mead's hands in connection with various contextual changes that occurred" (25). The most apparent overarching difference that Camic notes is that in both Mead courses the strongly teleological account of Dewey's 1891-2 course is replaced with "an account cast in terms of historical contingency and structured in terms of the pragmatist view of history" (26). In particular, Mead's pragmatist premise is that progress is not toward a known goal, rather it takes place through the appearance of problems and their solutions, the latter deriving from the creative capacity of human agents. In addition to this difference, Camic points out three other changes across the three versions of the lectures. The first change is "the significantly increasing role occupied by science, as a research-based activity, among the principal movements of modern thought" (26). While Dewey speaks about the organized unity of intelligence which has mostly given way to specialized scientific research (according to his Hegelian narrative structure of the time), Mead's 1915 and 1928 lectures draw out the implications of the movement of scientific thought in the nineteenth century by explaining that modern philosophy emphasized on method, not on metaphysics. As he claims, "the history of science since the Renaissance is really a

history of *research process*.” In this view, pragmatism is emphasized by Mead as a system of philosophy out of the scientific method. The second change Camic suggests is “*the growing presence and increasingly positive evaluation of the Darwinian idea of evolution*” (27). Different from Dewey’s 1891-92 course Mead’s lectures are devoted to a description of Hegelian and Darwinian ideas of evolution, but if Hegel’s views are presented in a more critical light, those of Darwin are accepted and become in 1928 even more fundamental to Mead’s picture. Accordingly, Darwin’s doctrine of evolution is characterized as the principal result of the application of the proper scientific method and the guiding idea that modern science has undertaken in all investigations. A third change is “*the declining stature of past efforts to produce knowledge of society*” (28). In particular, Camic notes that Dewey and Mead devote roughly the same proportion of lectures to past social thinkers, but while Dewey’s tone is respectful to the various earlier social thinkers, Mead’s comments, on the contrary, are in line with a devaluation of the nineteenth-century social thinkers. He distinguishes between dogmatic theories and modern research science and relegates most of the *earlier* social writings to the ash heap of dogma. As Camic puts it: Mead’s dismissal is “his way of sweeping aside the pseudo ‘social science’ of the past, so as to clear the ground for the genuinely social-scientific work that is on the horizon” (30). Strictly related to this last point Camic addresses the question of local historical context in which Mead operated, claiming that the academic context that gave voice to an evolutionary consensus was particularly pervasive at the University of Chicago, probably more than at any other institution. In particular, there was the shared view among faculty members that, “the time had arrived for the so-called social sciences to become *sciences* by adopting the method of the modern research-based sciences” (33). This idea is openly expressed, for instance, by Thorstein Veblen’s question: “Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?” (1898), elaborated during the years he was at the University of Chicago. Now, I find Camic’s juxtapositions of Dewey’s and Mead’s lectures useful and illuminating for understanding the connections between the two colleagues’ approaches to the history of thought as well as for pointing out the autonomous modifications and developments Mead gave to the course. However, one has to take into account that such changes were strictly related to a changing perspective occurred to Mead well before the ‘turning point’ of 1910, and in particular after 1892, when Mead and Dewey began to work together on both the theory of emotions and the theory of “organic circuit.” With this clarification in mind, it seems plausible to suppose that if Dewey had to teach again the same course on *Movements* after 1894, he would have a pragmatist point of view akin to the one Mead had in his 1915 and 1928 lectures.

- 3 Trevor Pearce’s “Naturalism and Despair: George Herbert Mead and Evolution in the 1880s” opens the second part of the volume, devoted to Mead’s relevance for the history and philosophy of nature. Pearce examines Mead’s encounter with evolution. He argues that Mead could fully embrace the evolutionary perspective as essential to philosophy, and not just as a gateway to agnosticism, only after he found in the work of Josiah Royce and Hermann Lotze the “models for reconciliation of evolutionary science and traditional notions of what it meant to be human” (133). The sociologists Bradley H. Berwster and Antony J. Puddephatt devote their chapter to the original socio-environmental impulse of Mead’s work, aiming at exploring the potential of Mead’s ideas for environmental sociology. In particular, they argue that Mead’s theory of self-development, based on his creative re-conceptualization of dualities in their continual interdependent *mutual* relations, implies the possibility of a more ecological conception

of self. In continuity with Berwster and Puddephatt, in chapter eight Daniel Cefaï presents a detailed analysis of numerous dissertations of sociologists trained at the University of Chicago in 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, showing the theoretical complexity of ecologies of social words. Cefaï finds in Mead's understanding of ecology an important counterpoint to the human ecology practiced in Chicago in 1920s which, if extended to a political analysis of public problems, would also be a good starting point for a sociology of democracy. The last chapter of the second part is Michael L. Thomas's "Mead, Whitehead, and the Sociality of Nature." Thomas's contribution is devoted to comparing Mead's and Whitehead's idea of reality as a temporal, constructive process, as well as their concepts of the present, sociality, and the common world. He aims to give the ground to new questions about the role of social sciences in creating social change and the function of the sciences "in cultivating the creativity of action" (188).

- 4 The third part, "Cognition, Conscience, Language" is the largest part of the volume. It gathers six contributions devoted to the increasing relevance of Mead's work for cognitive science. The more recent pragmatist turn in embodied cognition has shed light to pragmatists' importance to the field of research that broadly includes neuroscience, cognitive psychology, linguistics and it is approximating more and more to an understanding of the social nature of mind and self. Until recent times, however, James's and Dewey's works more than Mead's work have been considered useful tools to deal with the social nature of mind in embodied cognitive science. The contributions gathered in the third part of "The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead" show, instead, how more fruitful would be to reexamine the work of Mead. Most of these works are in fact sign of a germinal attention to Mead. For instance, Ryan McVeigh's tenth chapter on "Mead, the Theory of Mind, and the Problem of Others" pays attention to the contribution of Mead's theory of mind and self to overcome the problem of other minds. Kelvin Jay Booth's eleventh chapter examines some claims on imitation and mind reading in apes, and he shows that there is no clear evidence for either and maintaining that Mead's theory of gestural communication offers much more plausible and fruitful interpretation of apparent mind reading. More specifically, in his impressive contribution Booth argues that there is no substantial evidence for the presence of imitation or a theory of mind in non-human primates. Nothing in research on animal imitation shows that Mead is wrong in claiming that non-human animals do not imitate in the sense that a gesture itself calls out the same gesture in another individual. These abilities are distinctively human. And while, contrary to Mead, "there is strong evidence for imitation in young children that becomes the basis for taking the attitude of role of the other," Mead was right in arguing that this is not an imitation instinct but rather a tendency for children to synchronize their movements with adults. According to Booth's hypothesis, these abilities are the product of a "lack of structure and an openness to being structured by repeating the actions of others. Rather than instinct, it is more like a lack of instinct" (247). To explain his point of view on the matter Booth makes use of the idea developed by Marcel Kinsbourne of an *interaction synchrony* between infants and adults based on human brains' predisposition to adopt rhythms that accord with those of others. More specifically, infants tend to synchronize their movements with the faces and voices of caregivers. This synchrony is based on the enjoyment of rhythm within repetition. It is particularly evident, as Booth maintains, in rhythmic music and in effectiveness of chants and rituals in which repetition brings structure to activity. Now, although Booth does not refer to Mead's embryonic physiological explanation of emotion and Dewey's behavioral theory of

emotion, his hypothesis is especially noteworthy for its being in line with Mead's and Dewey's theory. Rhythmical aspect is in fact for both Mead and Dewey at the basis of human actions. More specifically, according to Mead the arising of emotional tones of consciousness lies in the physiological reply to symbolic stimuli connected to the *rhythmical* repetition of physiological stimulation. These stimuli have an esthetic value expressed in war and love dances, and the instinctive acts on their basis, which call out a vaso-motor process connected to the sensorimotor system. This explanation seems akin to Booth's idea that "we like rhythms and rituals" (242). It also seems useful in favor of Booth's proposal to see imitation as "self-imitation" as well as a repetition of the behavior of others and a mutual doing. Furthermore, Booth's referring to the abilities of children to synchronize their movements with adults as a lack of instincts, seems to be in line with Mead's using the notion of "impulse" as distinct from instinct.

- 5 In chapter twelve Frithjof Nungesser takes up a comparison of Tomasello and Mead, focusing on the transition from animal to human-specific communication. Behind Nungesser's proposal, there is a need to re-evaluate the transdisciplinary perspective of Mead's work overcoming the tendency of nowadays to sever the connections between the diverse fields integrated into Mead's arguments to the natural sciences. Thereby, his aim is double. On the one hand, he wants to show that Tomasello's studies "can contribute to an empirically saturated and refined account of both the evolutionary and ontogenetic logic of cognitive development described by Mead" (254). On the other hand, he claims that Tomasello fails to "decouple the *phylogenetic* explanation of the emergence of human-specific social cognition and motivation in situations of cooperation from a *systematic* account of the intrinsic sociality of all human action" (267-8). The conclusion reached is that Tomasello's conceptualization of human action must be revised in the light of Mead's pragmatist principles. The thirteenth chapter, namely Joshua Daniel's "Conscience as Ecological Participation and the Maintenance of Moral Perplexity," is instead devoted to Mead's conception of self, in particular to the I/Me distinction, and to its possible contribution to an understanding of conscience as related to situations of moral perplexity. In his essay, Daniel argues in favor of the *maintenance* of the moral perplexity related to moral problems resulting from plural, competing interests, thus moving away from Mead's confidence about the possibility of the rational resolution of moral dilemmas.
- 6 Particularly noteworthy is Roman Madzia's "Presentation and Re-Presentation: Language, Content, and the Reconstruction of Experience." Madzia aims to problematize the neo-pragmatists original conviction that our relation to the world is at every instant mediated by language, so that "our primary relation to the world is the relation of a disembodied mind to an omnipresent linguistically structured content" (297). He does it demonstrating how Mead's theory of symbolically constituted self and the world, together with the currently flourishing area of situated cognition, present "an interesting and *empirically responsible* alternative to the increasingly untenable contemporary positions of various forms of neo-pragmatist" (297). In particular, he argues that Mead "tried to think the cognition not primarily as a mental but bodily activity. In other words, we are *bodies* whose ways of conduct are, among other things, pre-structured by shareable significant practices (propositional language being just one of them)" (312). In the last chapter, Timothy Gallagher shows how Mead's writings fit with the conceptual framework known as "Tinbergen's Four Questions," which informs research today on the nature of human speech. Gallagher maintains that Mead fares

well on the four issues, going beyond them by developing a non-dualistic and non-reductionist theory of the relationship between language and consciousness.

- 7 In short, the contributions gathered in *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead* testify that Mead's work is still informing scholarship from different fields of knowledge, from the philosophy of history to sociology and social psychology, from anthropology and ethology to neurosciences, showing that no sharp lines are traceable between the different fields of research. The three areas of scholarship in the volume provide a detailed analysis of Mead's importance to innovative areas of scholarship – as cognitive science, environmental studies, social ethics, historiography, history of the natural and social sciences, democratic epistemology and social ethics. They highlight the relevance of Mead's interdisciplinary approach to the complexities of questions and problems of language, consciousness, natural and social evolution, offering original and unorthodox approaches to Mead, and testifying to the theoretical and methodological contribution that his thought still provides in various fields of knowledge.

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