# Book Reviews

## Who Was George Herbert Mead?

Daniel R. Huebner.
Becoming Mead:
The Social Process of Academic Knowledge.
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George Herbert Mead.
Mind, Self & Society
[The Definitive Edition].
Edited by Charles W. Morris.
Annotated Edition by Daniel R. Huebner and Hans Joas.
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George H. Mead became a classic within a discipline in which he did not teach – on account of a book that he did not write. The discipline in question is sociology, and the book is entitled *Mind, Self, and Society*, originally published in 1934. Those who have studied Mead beyond that book, have suspected that the above may be the case, but the issue had not received the treatment that it deserves, until Daniel Huebner took it up. His approach is the sociology of ideas, he draws on a mass of empirical historical data, and he has achieved impressive results. Mead scholarship takes a big leap forward with these two contributions, and in more than one sense. Namely, the title of Huebner's monograph, *Becoming Mead*, is equivocal. The volume deals both with George Mead's intellectual development and with the formation of his reputation, during his lifetime as well as posthumously. Mead's reputation is closely related to the aforementioned book *Mind, Self, and Society*, so that the way it has come about and how it has been received are both important questions.

The ordinary text-book image about Mead as a sociologist is misleading; he was a philosopher by profession and self-conception. However, like many persistent myths, even this one is not completely groundless. Mead was keenly interested in social issues; he certainly did not philosophize in an ivory tower, but participated actively in the civic life of his home town Chicago. Already before Huebner it has been said that one wonders how Mead could find time for his academic work, amidst his involvement with public affairs. Huebner now shows how exactly Mead was involved, by adding a new feature to his profile: that of a

public speaker. Mead was in wide demand and high esteem as a speaker, addressing audiences of hundreds, sometimes even thousands of listeners. Even many of his theoretical academic publications originated in texts for public talks.

Accordingly, though Mead was strictly speaking not a sociologist, his knowledge about goings-on in society may very well have matched that of any sociologist. That knowledge was not generalized on a single case (Chicago), either, but it was based on a comparative viewpoint. Namely, Mead had close connections to the then U.S. territory of Hawaii (the birthplace of his wife), and he followed its social and political development at close range.

In this respect, Mead resembles his contemporaries, the classical sociologists. He differs from them when it comes to the conception of science. Mead's conception was much closer to the practice (not just principles) of natural science, and it stemmed from his experience with empirical laboratory research, gained during his studies in Germany. During those studies, Mead appears to have been more involved with empirical physiology and psychology than with systematic philosophy (his main subject), so that Huebner has reasons to conclude as follows (p. 59): "Mead got his hands dirty quite literally in calibrating mechanical apparatuses, handling animals, and dissecting and preparing neurological specimens. As a result, when he spoke and wrote about psychological measurement, the nature of animal perception, or the physiology of emotion, his opinions and claims were based on his own actual tests and engagement with contemporary work by others. These were topics in which he was trained and in which he conducted independent investigations." Later on, Mead made his career more on lecterns than in laboratories, but he always kept abreast with scientific advances in those disciplines that bear on the study of human behaviour. Regrettably, knowledge about Mead's scientific outlook has not survived very well; it rather "has been written out of the ways in which Mead [has been] understood," as Huebner notes (p. 61).

It is well-known that Mead's posthumous volume *Mind, Self, and Society* does not consist of prose written by him, but does it not, at least, consist of words spoken by him? In academic history, there are other widely recognized books (by Max Weber or Émile Durkheim, for example) that have been put together from lecture materials. Mead's book is reportedly based on stenographic records, rather than mere student notes so that it *prima facie* seems to follow its originator's intentions more truthfully than is usually the case with posthumous books based on lectures.

In point of fact, while the bulk of the text-body is based on stenographic records of Mead's lecturing, the printed text nevertheless does not always answer to his original delivery. Huebner, who has compared the text with the original transcriptions, shows this in the 100-page text-critical Appendix that he and Hans Joas have added to the new, definitive edition of the book. The Appendix brings out that the final edition occasionally deviates from the chronological order of the original lectures, later materials appearing ahead of those that were delivered earlier. The published version is also much shorter than the original corpus of lectures, so that for example all audience questions and Mead's answers to them have been edited out. Furthermore, some text passages do not appear in original transcriptions at all, but are added by the volume's editor, Charles W. Morris, including the subtitle *From the Standpoint of a So-*

*cial Behaviorist* that the book originally had.

How has such a curious editorial outcome been possible? Huebner brings to light the hitherto unknown history behind the publication of the book. Decisions to publish some of Mead's literary remains were made soon after his death in April 1931. His former student Morris undertook the endeavour of producing a volume about Mead's social psychology. Morris collected notes and transcriptions from people who had attended Mead's classes, so that the final book is based on twelve such sets altogether. However, the most comprehensive set of stenographic transcriptions was originally unknown, and it was discovered only when Morris was well under way with his editing. He had already made up his mind about how to organize the book, and this pre-decided structure was a kind of Procrustean bed for the newly-found comprehensive transcription set. Huebner tells that some two thirds of it was utilized in the final edition, but not exactly as Mead delivered the lectures in the classroom.

The text that appears on the pages of *Mind, Self & Society* is not self-evidently sociological; "psychological" might be a fitting epithet, insofar as Mead's insistence on the inherently social constitution of the human mind is not forgotten. The idea that the book contributes specifically to sociological theory is a social construction. It was constructed at the University of Chicago sociology department, where the book had its most devoted champions, whereas its reception among psychologists and philosophers was not quite as enthusiastic. Those champions were in particular Ellsworth Faris and Herbert Blumer. Both were Mead's former students, Blumer also a former student of Faris's. Their admiring references to Mead's work and to *Mind, Self, and Society* in particular set the tone in Mead's reception and ultimately created for him a status as a sociological classic.

Huebner's magisterial study has brought Mead's image much truer to life. As is the case with all excellent studies, it invites further investigations in its vein. Huebner reminds that thousands of pages of primary materials are still unpublished. There thus still is some archival research to be done, and yet another systematic elucidation of Mead's theoretical thought might be in order as well. Two of his former students have contributed to keeping his name alive; in philosophy Charles Morris (1901–1979), who edited two posthumous volumes, and Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) in sociology. Although the two appear not to have clashed publicly (Huebner p. 174), their views about science and Mead's legacy did not coincide, but rather were opposite in some respects. Blumer originally outlined an approach to social psychology, known as "symbolic interactionism," in order to take distance from behaviourism and natural science methodology. Morris, for his part, added benign references to behaviourism to his Mead edition and wanted to bring pragmatism (Mead's legacy included) closer to logical positivism. Both of them also claimed to be faithful followers of Mead. Intelligent scholars that they were, neither probably had completely misunderstood Mead, but rather had captured something substantial about his thinking. A question now arises: How have these rather contradictory interpretations been possible? A hypothetical answer would be that Mead's thinking apparently transcends the ordinary interpretive, and natural-scientific perspectives about human behaviour by including elements from both. As Hans Joas, the doyen of current Mead scholars, sums up in his foreword to the new, definitive edition: "Nobody has as profoundly and consistently inaugurated an understanding of the inherent sociality of human action as George Herbert Mead did. Sociality for Mead is not something that is added to human agency but, rather, is at its core."

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