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### G. H. Mead. A System in a State of Flux<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Despite decades of scholarship on G. H. Mead, we are still far from an adequate understanding of his intellectual edifice. Making use of the entirety of Mead's writings, including numerous unpublished manuscripts, this article provides a more accurate portrait of Mead's thinking. A system in a state of flux is perhaps the best description of an intellectual building comprising three ever-evolving pillars: experimental science, social psychology, and democratic politics. This article's chief finding is that history of theory and theory building are related enterprises. Contemporary democratic theory, in particular, has much to gain from this historical re-examination of Mead's oeuvre.

#### *AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT*

Among sociologists all over the world, there is a widespread belief that “Mead,” the sociological classic, is an intellectual reference for his seminal ideas on the social character of human subjectivity. George Herbert Mead's book *Mind, Self and Society* is read as if comprising the essential of his social psychological ideas, and is seen as a precursor for the symbolic interactionist sociological current that emerged in the United States in the 1960s as an alternative to Talcott Parsons's structural-functionalism. As a consequence, Mead's place in the sociological canon is essentially due to his referential analysis of the human self, with little or nothing to say about industrialization, war, politics, or science. The present article is aimed at showing that this image, however ingrained in the discipline's self-understanding, does not correspond to the truth. In fact, this image of “Mead” as a social psychologist solely concerned with the social nature of the human self is no more than a reflection of a long story

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of anachronisms, partial appropriations of his thought, and of the poor editorial situation of his writings.

My chief aim is thus to provide an original, more accurate intellectual portrait of Mead. My reassessment of Mead's thinking is founded, in methodological terms, upon a historically minded yet theoretically oriented strategy. *Pace* Merton's plea for the separation of the history of theory and the "systematics" of theory in sociology<sup>2</sup>, I wish to suggest that theory building is very much a function of the way past contributions are appropriated. My reconstruction of Mead is aimed at showing that to rigorously reconstruct a classic author's ideas is but a necessary theoretical precondition for theory building in the social and political sciences. In particular, Mead's system of thought is submitted to a historical reconstruction in order to grasp the evolution of his ideas over time, and to a thematic reconstruction organized around three major research areas or pillars: science, social psychology, and politics. The original character of such a reconstruction, as well as its theoretical relevance, are demonstrated by a discussion of Jürgen Habermas's influential reading. If one re-examines the entirety of Mead's published and unpublished writings from the point of view of contemporary social and political theory, one can see that his contributions transcend the field of social psychology. In fact, Mead's insistence on the internal connection between science and democracy, a generally neglected aspect of his work, should be regarded as one of his most important theoretical contributions to the understanding of the societal shift to modernity. The "Mead" I am suggesting in this article is thus a crucially different "Mead" from the one that figures in the sociological canon.

#### HABERMAS'S MEAD: THE COST OF BECOMING A CLASSIC

One has to admit that Habermas's central theoretical concern is not the history of science, nor even the history of ideas, but a specific kind of interpretative social science. His model of social science stands between a positivistic approach, which denies the methodological uniqueness of the social and human sciences, and a hermeneutical perspective, which questions the appropriateness of the notion of science when applied to the humanities. As Habermas puts it in *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (1967), this approach can be described as a "hermeneutically enlightened and historically oriented functionalism" (1996a: 187). The basic idea is that of providing a normative reconstruction of the more

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<sup>2</sup> See Merton, 1967 (1949).

advanced states of the learning processes of modern capitalist societies in the light of which systemic disturbances can be identified. This normative reconstruction is supposed to be grounded on a theory of language, whose first versions appeared in the early 1970s (e.g., Habermas, 1970, [1976] 1991), and was published in its most developed form in Habermas's *magnum opus*, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). With the publication of this two-volume book, Mead's image in sociology changes dramatically. Mead is no longer simply the first of the symbolic interactionists; he is one of the discipline's founding fathers, to whom we owe the paradigm shift from purposive to communicative action. The aim of the present section is, then, to evaluate Habermas's appropriation and criticisms of Mead, namely his alleged neglect of the processes of "material reproduction" of modern societies and his lack of development of a theory of language. Whether or not there are good reasons to level such criticisms at Mead is what I wish to discuss in the following paragraphs.

In the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas begins his reconstruction of Mead's social psychology by focusing on the latter's phylogenetic account of the emergence of language. Mead conceives of the concept of "conversation of gestures" as the evolutionary starting point that leads first to signal language and then to propositionally differentiated speech. Human language evolves firstly as signal languages, which mark the transition from gesture-mediated to symbolically mediated interaction, and secondly as the basis for normatively regulated action. There are, however, problems with Mead's account. According to Habermas, Mead's distinction between, on the one hand, symbolically mediated interaction and, on the other hand, linguistically mediated and normatively guided interaction is not adequate. In order to solve this difficulty, Habermas resorts to Wittgenstein's concept of rule. Habermas's point is that the transition from gesture-mediated to symbolically mediated interaction involves the "constitution of rule-governed behavior, of behavior that can be explained in terms of an orientation to meaning conventions" (1987: 16). In Habermas's view, Mead does not give the same weight to the three prelinguistic roots of the illocutionary power of speech acts. Mead did realize that language was the primary mechanism of socialization (which is linked to the emergence of norms and identities) and coordination of action (which is related to the world of perceptible and manipulable objects), but failed to inquire into the possibility of normative solidarity. As Habermas explains, Mead "focuses on language as a medium for action coordination and for socialization, while leaving it largely unanalyzed as a medium for reaching understanding" (1987: 27). Thus Habermas focus his attention on

Mead's ontogenetic account of the origin of personal identities and of objective perception (see 1987: 29-42).

The outcome of this analysis, arguably one of the most sophisticated readings of Mead's theory of ontogenesis, is the critical remark that Mead "is moving in a circle" (Habermas, 1987: 44). In Habermas's view, Mead tries to explain the phylogenetic transition from symbolically mediated to normatively guided interactions by resorting to a concept which figures only in his theory of ontogenesis, namely the "generalized other." It is in order to overcome this difficulty that Habermas then turns to Durkheim's theory of religion. This theoretical move, however, is not without problems. In particular, the way Habermas supplements Mead and Durkheim's proposals does not strike me as especially convincing. Although it is the case that Mead did not develop systematically a phylogenetic explanation for the "generalized other," if one takes into account Mead's conception of science and social psychology it is possible to trace back in the history of the human species the origin of such a concept. In fact, Mead reconstructs the evolution of the human species in terms of a constant and gradual increase of human rationality, based on the usage of vocal gestures that in the course of evolution acquire symbolic meanings, and that leads to, on the one hand, growing universality, abstraction and impersonality (the Kantian features, as it were, of the generalized other, as well as the attitude of the research scientist and of the critical moral agent), and, on the other, an increasing trend towards individuality, authenticity and originality (Mead's version of the Hegelian dialectic of the recognition).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the evolutionary framework within which Mead develops what Habermas calls "social individuation" contains the seeds for a phylogenetic account of the "generalized other."

When, some sixty pages later, Habermas returns to Mead his purpose is to assess the extent to which Mead's contribution in fact supplements Durkheim's proposals. If Durkheim throws light on the phylogenetic origins of what Habermas designates as the "linguistification of the sacred," i.e. the transfer of the societal functions of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization from the religious realm to the structures of communicative action, Mead provides the explanation for these evolutionary trends from the perspective of socially individuated human beings. In other words, Mead is the first author to acknowledge the societal trend that Habermas calls the "communicative rationalization of the lifeworld" (1987: 107). However, Habermas still has some reserves concerning Mead's approach. The first is related to the formalist character of Mead's analysis of the societal processes

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<sup>3</sup> For an account that also emphasizes Mead's attempt to reconcile Hegel and Kant, see Aboulafia, 1995.

comprised in the rationalization of the lifeworld. The second and more crucial reservation has to do with Mead's alleged "idealism." Habermas turns to functionalism in order to avoid the "neglect of economics, warfare, and the struggle for political power" (1987: 110), in which Mead supposedly incurred given his "idealistic" theoretical model. Hans Joas's critique of Habermas is of importance here. According to Joas, it is a serious oversimplification of Mead's thought to reduce his conception of symbolically mediated interaction to the level of communication in signal language. Contrary to what Habermas's reading suggests, Joas asserts that Mead's "works cover the entire spectrum ranging from the dialogue of significant gestures to complex scientific or public political discussions" (1991: 107). This contention is in accord with my argument that today's social and political theory incorporates only a fraction of Mead's potential contributions, since contemporary theoreticians pay attention only to the pillar of social psychology. In fact, Habermas's reservation concerning the idealistic character of Mead's theory of society stems from his more general claim that Mead's sole contribution to contemporary social theory is a theory of the self that postulates the social character of human subjectivity. The point I wish to stress is that Mead's place in the canon was ultimately earned at the cost of the neglect of the two other pillars comprised within his system of thought – the fundamental connection between science and democracy is thus forgotten. The remainder of this article will thus be devoted to the discussion of what Habermas accused Mead of having neglected – the pillar of politics – as well as to the rest of the edifice, a intellectual structure whose thematic organization and systematic nature are ignored by most commentators.

## THE BUILDING AND ITS PILLARS

One of my goals consists in showing that Mead's thinking can be reconstructed as a theoretical system which evolved during the course of his career. In particular, the present article constitutes the first attempt to reconstruct Mead's intellectual building both from a genetic perspective (in order to grasp its evolution over time) and from a thematic point of view (so that its various problem-areas can be identified). I am thus framing my argument in the Mead scholarship literature, where Joas's *G. H. Mead. A Contemporary Re-examination of his Thought* (1985) and Gary Alan Cook's *George Herbert Mead. The Making of a Social Pragmatist* (1993) stand out as the most recent and authoritative studies on Mead. In the case of the Joas, one can identify two different parts in his book. In the first half, Mead's thought is reconstructed from the point of view of the evolution of his ideas, starting with a discussion of

his personal biography and leading to a comprehensive study of the concept of “symbolic interaction.” In the second half, Joas suddenly abandons this presentation strategy and systematically discusses various topics: ethics, the constitution of the physical object, the theory of time, and philosophy of science are the areas successively analysed. What this inconsistency entails in terms of Joas’s contribution to this debate is that his reconstruction of Mead meets its purposes only halfway. By reading Joas’s account one can learn how some of Mead’s ideas evolved over time and grasp the internal coherence of certain thematic areas. What one cannot see, however, is how Mead’s system of thought evolved during the course of his career. This is precisely what I wish this article to provide – a discussion of the several pillars of Mead’s system of thought in the light of their evolution from the early 1890s until 1931. Cook’s study is in essence a historical reconstruction, particularly interested in discussing the genetic evolution of Mead’s ideas in the light of the various settings in which he operated. In its own genre, Cook’s study is a carefully argued and well-documented work. In my view, though, it can be criticized for assuming that the chronological presentation of one’s ideas is tantamount to a critical assessment of one’s thinking. The re-examination of an author’s thinking requires not only the kind of historically-minded analysis provided by a work such as Cook’s, but also a rational reconstruction that allows for an evaluation of its systematic nature.

To use an architectonic metaphor, it will be suggested in the course of the present article that Mead’s intellectual edifice is sustained upon three pillars. The first is the pillar of science that establishes the criterion for an internally democratic community of communication, a community that can be said to reflect the social implications of the “method of intelligence,” i.e., the scientific experimental method. The pillar of science takes logical precedence over the two other pillars since it is as a scientist that Mead examines the world around him. Mead’s conception of science permeates through all his writings, including the ones on social psychology and politics. The second is the pillar of social psychology that derives from the former pillar, given the scientific character that Mead claims for this discipline, and whose object is the social process of the formation of the human self. Finally, a theory of participative democracy and social reform, whose ethical implications must be submitted to scientific treatment, is the last pillar of an “ambitiously projected but unfinished building,” as Horace Thayer aptly once put it (1968: 235). Furthermore, this theoretical system will be presented as a systematic effort to understand the societal shift towards modernity. Mead, contrary to what is widely assumed, developed not only an analysis of “modern times” from

the perspective of a social scientist concerned with the developmental logic of human consciousness, but studied the economic, political, social, and moral consequences of the process of modernization as well. A central purpose of this article, then, is to bring out the systematic order of these fundamental elements of Mead's intellectual edifice. If there is coherence to his thought, I believe it will be reflected in the internal coherence of these three pillars as well as in their interconnectedness. I shall now proceed with a presentation of these pillars from the double perspective of their internal coherence and their relative positioning within Mead's system of thought.

### THE PILLAR OF SCIENCE

The central and prior position enjoyed by the pillar of science in relation to the others is justified by the way Mead understands the nature and function of scientific activity. By conceiving of science as a systematic problem-solving activity, specially oriented to the solution of cognitive action problems, Mead not only grants the scientist the main role in the process of understanding reality, but also establishes the objects of social psychology and moral and political theory. In both cases, specific problems of cognition are supposed to be solved – hence the self is a “cognitive affair,” and ethical and political problems can be solved only by the “method of intelligence.” Science, then, is conceived as a rational program of conflict resolution, the completion of which, according to Mead,

awaits the solution of the scientific problem of the relation of the psychical and the physical with the attendant problem of the meaning of the so-called origin of consciousness in the history of the world. My own feeling is that these problems must be attacked from the standpoint of the social nature of so-called consciousness. (1917a: 220)

This is a rather characteristic statement by Mead insofar as it reveals a clear intention of mobilizing the findings of science to shed light upon the emergence and development of the human psyche. In fact, it can be traced back to the earlier days of his career, some twenty years before these lines were written. It is noteworthy that Mead's early writings on the history and philosophy of science and on social psychology were conceived under the influence of Hegel, which made him particularly receptive to the ideas of Royce and Baldwin. Indeed, in a series of book reviews, as well as in his first substantial published article, Mead

stated what could be considered to be the first outline of his social psychological theories, in which one can see an account of subjectivity clearly indebted to Hegel's ideas.

Mead's early Hegelianism can first be seen in his engagement with a German historian of natural philosophy, the neo-Kantian Kurt Lasswitz (Mead, 1894a, 1894b), in a book review of C. Lloyd Morgan's *An Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (Mead, 1895), then in the 1897 review of Gustav Class's *Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Ontologie des Menschlichen Geistes*, an attempt to combine Schleiermacher's conception of "personal individuality" with Hegel's notion of "objective spirit," and in his review of D'Arcy's *Idealism and Theology* (Mead, 1901). Still, the most significant text of this period of Mead's career is the article "Suggestions Towards a Theory of the Philosophical Disciplines" (1900). In this article, Mead, drawing on Dewey's article on the reflex arc, offers a neo-Hegelian classification of the various philosophical fields, including metaphysics, psychology, deductive and inductive logic, ethics, aesthetics, and the general theory of logic. One significant point Mead makes in this article concerns his criticism of psychological parallelism. Mead rejects the "parallelist theory" for it operates with a distinction – the one that opposes the immediate content of perception against the physical theory of these perceptions – that fails to address the deeper distinction between the world of unquestioned validity and the state of consciousness that emerges whenever a problem questions that validity. One can see here what is perhaps the most important notion of Mead's conception of science, namely the 'world that is there', whose validity we do not question until a problem casts doubt on a specific segment of that world. In the system of philosophical disciplines envisaged by Mead in this 1900 article, ethics is related to the application of human intelligence to solve moral problems. In face of a problematic situation, human intelligence can reconstruct it so that action can be resumed in one of two ways: it can either apply the deductive method of organizing one's world upon the basis of old ideas, or the inductive method of drawing from immediate experience the material needed to reach a new universal (Mead, 1900: 2). Mead favors this latter approach to the resolution of moral problems. In the light of such an inductive method of moral reconstruction, the only moral duty that might be justified is the obligation of taking into account all the values at stake. Failing to do this entails a situation similar to that of a scientist who tries to solve a problem, taking into consideration only some of the conditions involved.

Hegel's influence is still very much present at this time but it would be a mistake to infer from this fact that Mead supported some sort of metaphysical speculation about ever-subjective entities. Hegel's dialectic is, in Mead's reading, a useful tool for coping with the action problems humanity faces. It is a method of thought, whose experimental scientific potential was not adequately developed by Hegel himself since he gave *sein* a status that transcended being a moment in the dialectic to assume the condition of the very goal of that dialectic. Mead's allegiance to a conception of science that had been in the process of development since the seventeenth century in Europe, and whose historical track he reconstructed on various occasions, not only explains his reservations about Hegel's endeavor but also throws light on something of deeper significance – the foundations of his system of thought.

In the remainder of this section my goal is to analyze Mead's conception of science from a dual viewpoint. I shall first present and discuss an unpublished set of notes on a course offered by Mead some time after the publication of his first book reviews and articles on science, social psychology and reformist politics. Secondly, I will proceed with the reconstruction of the pillar of science from the point of view of its evolution over time, now focusing on the period between the publication, in 1917, of "Scientific Method and Individual Thinker" and Mead's last written work, the 1930 Carus Lectures published posthumously in *The Philosophy of the Present*. The main topic of discussion will be Mead's theory of the act, a model of action with significant social psychological and ethical implications.

The main point of interest of the 1911 course on the "Logic of the Social Sciences" lies in the expository structure envisaged by Mead. Firstly, the emergence of human consciousness is discussed so that its social nature is emphasized; there then follows a discussion of human rationality via the scientific attitude brought about by experimental science, and finally, the method of intelligence is applied to the case of morals. The interrelationship between these various dimensions is encapsulated in Mead's observation, in the 1911 course, that the evolutionary nature of the human mind is the common denominator of the different perspectives from which one can approach the problem of the self in modern times. Yet the realm of institutional politics remained impermeable to such a project, as Mead acknowledged years later (see Mead 1923: 234).

Perhaps for that reason, Mead's intellectual production on politics and morals suffered a slight decrease during the 1920s. In turn, his writings on a four-phased theory of action, on the theory of perception of the physical object that stems from it, and on his theory of time became more frequent and eventually came to assume a central position in his later thought. To begin with, Mead's early Hegelianism is substituted by his engagement with Henri Bergson and Whitehead.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Mead's model of action cannot be understood without reference to Whitehead's philosophy of organism. An "act," according to Mead, refers to the relation between organism and environment, an "ongoing event that consists of stimulation and response and the results of the response" (1938: 364). Mead soon extends this conception from its initial bearings upon the stimuli and responses related to the life of the organism to all fields of reality. It is at this point that Whitehead's influence is more pronounced. As Mead explains, rejecting the traditional doctrine of the relation between organism and environment that "assumes a field that is independent of the organism," the analysis of perspectives offered by Whitehead in *The Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919) and *The Principle of Relativity* (1922), presupposes that "the environment of the form is in such a sense an existence in nature that it cannot be stated in terms of a situation to which the organism is indifferent" (1938: 541-2). Mead's dismissal of absolute idealism (e.g., Mead, 2002 [1932]: 171) is connected with the endorsement of the relativistic theories of Bergson and Whitehead. The existence of one single absolute perspective precludes the objectivity of individual perspectives, as well as evolution, novelty and creativity. On the contrary, Mead's social theory of human consciousness and Whitehead's relativistic philosophy share the same emphasis on the "objectivity of perspectives" (see Mead 1938: 114). What Mead wishes to select from the latter's proposal is its "conception of nature as an organization of perspectives, which are there in nature" (2002 [1932]: 173). Individual perspectives emerge from a social perspective which, in turn, transcends the mere collection of individual perspectives. But how can one secure the objectivity of individual perspectives? In Mead's view, the answer to this question lies in a pragmatic test. An individual perspective, understood as an organization of events, is considered to be objective or real if it leads to the consummation of an act that was previously inhibited.

At this point, it is necessary to bear in mind that Mead conceives of the act as comprehending four stages. Firstly, there is an impulse, in the sense of a physiological

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<sup>4</sup> On Mead's criticism of Hegel see, e.g., Mead (1938: 505). On Mead's endorsement of Whitehead's relativist "philosophy of organism" see, e.g., Mead (1938: 280).

predisposition of the organism to respond to a given stimulus; secondly, the organism perceives either an object or a segment of the surrounding environment; thirdly, the organism manipulates the perceived object, either physically (e.g., an apple) or intellectually (e.g., a past event); fourthly, the organism attributes a certain value to the object in question thereby consummating the act (1938: 25). This is the defining element of Mead's model of action, and indeed of his entire system of philosophy. From the point of view of my thesis, which is concerned with the triadic nature of Mead's system, founded as it is upon the pillars of science, social psychology, and ethics and politics, the insistence on the social character of the act and on the moral nature of its last stage acquires a significance that is overlooked by most commentators.

Within Mead's system of thought, the pillar of ethics and politics cannot be dissociated from the pillars of science and social psychology for his notion of "value" stems from his theory of the act and his social psychological theory. In particular, I wish to underline the location of the value of an object in the phase of the consummation of the act, insofar it illustrates the logical priority of Mead's theory of action and its theory of perception of the physical object over his treatment of ethics. According to Mead's theory of action, in each of the various phases of the act one can observe a specific kind of relation between subject and object. In the phase of perception from a distance, the subject can establish a cognitive relation with the "secondary qualities" of the object, such as its color or sound. However, it is in the next phase, the one of manipulation, that the highest objectivity can be attained. At this stage it is the "primary qualities" of the object (e.g., its mass) that are apprehended by the subject. Finally, in the phase of consummation the subject is able to evaluate the object, even if his judgment at this point is more vulnerable to cultural or historical factors, diminishing its objectivity. It is upon these foundations that Mead erects his ethical theory, according to which values can be the object of rational examination even if he rejects both an objectivist and a subjectivist conception of value. The value of an object is neither an objective given thing, nor a subjective mental affair; rather, it arises in the context of the relation between the subject and the object.

## THE PILLAR OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

My aim in what follows is to suggest a historical reconstruction of Mead's social psychology in its evolution from the early Hegelian functionalism of the 1890s and 1900s to

his mature “social behaviorism” of the 1920s. In particular, I would like to stress that phylogeny and ontogeny are the two themes that will guide my historical reconstruction of Mead’s “scientific social psychology.” This pillar of Mead’s system of thinking evolved as a line of inquiry into the socio-linguistic origins of human consciousness. From this point of view, Mead’s pragmatism has a very distinct flavor, for none of the other major pragmatist thinkers (namely, Peirce, James, and Dewey) embraced such a scientific endeavor into the social and linguistic roots of human psyche.

In several articles and book reviews published at the turn of the century, one can see Mead’s first attempts at articulating a social theory of the structure and function of the human consciousness; only years later would he address the phylogenetic origins of the human species. When discussing ontogeny, Mead’s outlook is functionalist. Not surprisingly, it is in Mead’s intellectual circle that one finds the origins of such a theoretical stance. Indeed, both in James’s *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and Dewey’s “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896),<sup>5</sup> Mead discovered inspiring insights for his own work. In “Suggestions Toward a Theory of the Philosophical Disciplines,” Mead asserts that a modern scientific psychology can supersede a traditional metaphysical system insofar as we conceive of subjectivity as entering experience as a “position midway between the old universals, whose validity is abandoned, and the new universal, which has not yet appeared” (1900: 7).

The example Mead adduces in this article, a subtle way of linking his thesis to Dewey and James (who both made use of the same example<sup>6</sup>), refers to a child playing with a candle. When confronted with a flickering candle, the child has two conflicting tendencies for action. The child might either withdraw his hand from that object that burns (it is assumed that the child has been burned before), or might try to grab it if it sees it as something to play with. While this conflict lasts, the candle is not a stimulus for action, but only a sensation. However, Mead notes, the candle “can be sensation no longer until it again becomes the center of a problem episode in experience” (1900: 1). Once this happens, the child is able to reach a universal which is abstracted from the conflicting elements of the problem at hand. This is so because when the child hesitates when faced with the candle, he has before him

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<sup>5</sup> In this seminal article, Dewey contends that experience should be conceived of as an organic unit in which “stimulus” and “response” should be viewed “not as separate and complete entities in themselves, but as divisions of labor, function factors, within the single concrete whole, now designated the reflex arc” (1972 [1896]: 97).

<sup>6</sup> The recovery of Mead’s intention when choosing this particular example is only possible because, following Skinner’s contextualist approach (see Skinner 1969, 1988), I am taking into account the intellectual context in which this text was written. Mead makes explicit reference only to Dewey’s usage of the child-candle example. See Dewey (1972 [1896]: 98-9). The same example can, however, also be found in James (1981 [1890]: 36-8).

neither the object that burned him nor the plaything. In that precise moment, the candle is simply there in the world. Conduct, however, is inhibited by this abstraction resulting from conflicting reactions. Action can be resumed only if the child “makes the bright moving object merely the starting point of a scientific investigation” (Mead, 1900: 7).

Three years later, Mead develops these insights in what was his most detailed paper to date, “The Definition of the Psychical” (1903). This article constitutes Mead’s first attempt to provide his “scientific social psychology” with a conception of human subjectivity that does not fall prey to the difficulties faced by psychological approaches that postulate a dualism between inner experience and external conduct. Mead’s functionalist conception of the psychical is still under the influence of James and Dewey’s positions, but one can already identify a certain dissatisfaction with the former’s notion of the “stream of consciousness.” In order to supersede both materialist and idealist positions, as well as the traditional dichotomy between the mind and the body that still haunts James’s proposals, Mead suggests that the psychical should be conceived of as

that phase of experience within which we are immediately conscious of conflicting impulses which rob the object of its character as object-stimulus, leaving us in so far in an attitude of subjectivity; but during which a new object-stimulus appears due to the reconstructive activity which is identified with the subject “I” as distinct from the object “me.” (1903: 109)

One of the reasons why this definition of the psychical is relevant concerns the introduction of the two phases of the self, the “I” and the “me,” in Mead’s social psychological apparatus. It was James who had originally introduced these terms in his 1890 book. By the time Mead adopts them, they had already gained a relative popularity within the circle of functionalist psychologists. The “I”/“me” distinction is introduced by Mead as part of the explanation of how could an individual perform the function of cognitive reconstruction when the object of such a reconstruction was himself. Since the individual as a “me” is not able to carry out this reconstructive function, since such “an empirical self belongs to the world which it is the function of this phase of consciousness to reconstruct” (Mead 1903: 108), Mead suggests that, in this kind of situation, it is to the individual as an “I” that we should turn when looking for the agent of reconstruction. Moreover, Mead suggests that the “I” can be immediately experienced, i.e. the agent of reconstruction of problematic situations is not socially constituted. What Mead will later argue is that even the spontaneous and

unpredictable 'I' can be experienced only through the mediation of social experience. Faced with this difficulty, Mead will come to recognize that this first attempt at clarifying self-reflective thought was articulated "somewhat obscurely and ineffectually" (1910b: 175).

Most commentators suggest that, around this time, Mead suddenly changed his views on functionalist psychology.<sup>7</sup> In my view, however, the textual evidence available suggests otherwise. In all his social psychological writings, from the early 1890s until the late 1920s, never did Mead renounce Dewey's organic conception of action. Well on the contrary, there is a continued effort to provide an alternative to the mechanical stimulus-response model of action, an alternative that should conceive of consciousness "functionally, and as a natural rather than a transcendental phenomenon" (1997 [1934]: 10), as Mead told his students in 1928, decades after the alleged rupture with functionalism. What Mead never accepted was the dualism between body and soul present in psychophysical parallelism, a criticism that reveals his lifelong pragmatist reservations concerning Cartesian philosophical models. Another approach that Mead kept rejecting from his early writings up to his mature essays and lectures was introspectionism, against which he insisted on the social character of self-consciousness.

This holds true for his account of the history of the human species and of the infancy of the human beings. In the 1900s, Mead wrote three articles where he addressed specifically the issue of phylogeny. The first two are "The Relations of Psychology and Philology" (1904) and "Concerning Animal Perception" (1907). In the former essay, Mead confronts Wundt's theory of language to the Herbartian school of philology and its associational psychological implications. Mead clearly favors the former. In his view, a psychology that conceives of the content of consciousness as comprising only "ideas and their connections" (Mead 1904: 379), ignores the process of socio-historical constitution of the human language. Against this intellectualism, Mead asserts the virtues of Wundt's voluntaristic psychology that reconstructs the history of language from its historical beginning – the primitive impulse to expression through a vocal gesture. In the second article, Mead compares human perception with animal perception. Still operating within the limits set by Dewey's organic model of conduct, Mead

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<sup>7</sup> See Reck (1981 [1964]: xxix), Wiley (1993: 114-5), and Joas (1997 [1985]: 64). As far as I know, only Cook tries to trace the development of Mead's social psychology in a similar way to the one I am suggesting. Yet there are two crucial differences between our accounts. Not only does Cook overlook the scientific character that Mead wanted his social psychology to have, but he also does not do justice to Mead's parallel reconstruction of phylogeny and ontogeny. See Cook (1993, pp. 48-77).

emphasizes in this essay the importance of the manipulatory phase of the act to perceptual consciousness. From an evolutionary point of view, the human hand is the physiological element that concurs for the superior human ability to manipulate physical objects. Unlike lower animals, human beings perceive the objects that surround them through manipulation. Following Dewey's thesis on the reflex arc, Mead argues that human perception is neither eating nor fighting; rather, it is a process of mediation within the act, a mediation by which we are conscious of physical things. Perceptual consciousness and abstract reasoning are, then, no more than different aspects of the same process: "any form that perceives is in so far carrying on a process of conscious mediation within its act and conscious mediation is ratiocination" (Mead 1907: 390). For Mead, the historical evolution of speech in the development of the human species and the first linguistic activities of children are entwined processes, two aspects of the same evolutionary process whose reconstruction can be undertaken only by a scientific social psychology. Up to this point in Mead's career, though, human action is still analyzed as an individual affair.

In 1909, Mead's model of action undergoes what can be called a "social turn." Even if Mead had long acknowledged the social character of human consciousness, his model of action remained essentially ahistorical and individualistic. It is precisely the recognition of the social nature of human conduct that Mead tries to articulate in "Social Psychology as a Counterpart to Physiological Psychology" (1909). Criticizing the proposals of McDougall, Royce, and Baldwin for their emphasis on imitation as a mechanism of social interaction, Mead observes that the important character of social conduct lies in that "the conduct of one form is a stimulus to another to a certain act, and that this act again becomes a stimulus to first a certain reaction, and so on in ceaseless interaction" (1909: 406). One can see here the first outline of Mead's socio-linguistic theory of the origins of meaning and reflective consciousness. Connecting his approach to Wundt's theory of the vocal gestures, Mead argues that language is to be conceived of as the outgrowth of a particular kind of gesture, the vocal gesture. This vocal gesture first emerged as an expression of emotion, but in the course of phylogenetic evolution, it came to express intellectual meaning as well. The reason for this lies in the circumstance that the evolutionary process is eminently social and cooperative. The meaning of an act of a certain individual is defined with reference to the response of the other individual. Symbolic interaction then emerges, from this perspective, as the condition for reflective thought. Mead concludes this article by introducing the notion of "social

consciousness,” referring to the “chorus of others to whom we rehearse our reasonings by word of mouth or through the printed page” (1909: 408).

These initial insights concerning the phylogenetic origins of human psyche are given a decisive development in a series of articles published between 1910 and 1913. The common theme of these essays is Mead’s attempt to adapt Wundt’s concept of gesture to his own purposes. In the first article of this series, “Social Consciousness and the Consciousness of Meaning” (1910*a*), Mead reverts once again to the example of the child and the candle in order to illustrate his argument. This time, however, Mead does not equate meaning to the reaction of the other individual to one’s response. Mead now opts to define meaning as the “consciousness of response or readiness to respond” (1910*a*: 399). The flickering candle as such is simply there in the world: what it means for the child is a completely different thing. It is only when the child distinguishes between the object and what it means, i.e., between the “symbol and what is symbolized” (1910*a*: 401), that the child can solve that action problem and proceed with his conduct.

In “What Social Objects Must Psychology Presuppose?” (1910*b*), Mead discusses the contours of a “psychological theory of the origins of language and its relation to meaning” (1910*b*: 177). The socio-linguistic analysis of the phylogenetic history of the human species is thus explicitly related to the structure and functions of individual consciousness. The concept of “conversation of gestures” is here introduced for the first time as the social condition for the emergence of human consciousness. Mead’s working hypothesis is that at the stage of the “conversation of gestures” an individual simply reacts to an action by another individual by the appropriate response; however, as soon as that individual is able to anticipate the response of the other and articulate his response accordingly, the “conversation of gestures” gives way to a symbolic interaction. In Mead’s account, linguistic interaction emerges as the crucial element in the development of subjective self-consciousness. In fact, self-reflectivity is only possible because human beings can interact in terms of vocal gestures that are immensely more complex than other kinds of gestures.

The significance of vocal gestures is not limited to their complexity; their oral nature is of importance too. This fact is underlined by in both in “The Mechanism of Social Consciousness” (1912) and in “The Social Self” (1913), the last article of the series. In the first article, language and reflective thinking are said to be closely related processes, both

phylogenetically and ontogenetically. In the latter case, the “me” arises, i.e. human beings are able to see themselves as an empirical object, because they can stimulate themselves as they stimulate others and can respond to their own stimulations as they respond to the stimulation of others. In this way, Mead is able to argue that the “me” of introspection is actually an importation from the world of social experience to the inner sphere of subjective consciousness. Once inside the self, this material is organized and “brought under the control of the individual in the form of so-called self-consciousness” (Mead, 1912: 405). Mead is now in a position to reconsider his earlier claim that the “I” could be immediately experienced. Indeed, in “The Social Self,” Mead rules out categorically such a possibility, and explains that when an individual remembers a past action, in the very act of remembering the subject of self-reflection (the “I”) is always slipping into the past, leaving only the “me” as an object of self-observation. This entails a significant implication. An individual becomes a subject to himself when he finds himself acting with reference to himself as he acts towards others. Mead thus rejects the introspectivist claim that the self might be directly conscious of itself whenever he analyses himself. The acknowledgement of the thoroughly social character of the structure of the self allows Mead to supersede his 1903 position. He now claims that the “observer who accompanies all our self-conscious conduct is then not the actual “I” who is responsible for the conduct in *propria persona* – he is rather the response which one makes to his own conduct” (1913: 376; emphasis in original). Once cognition is conceived of as a inner forum of conversation, the mechanism of introspection loses its subjective character and reveals its social nature: it is because we have the ability to perform meaningful vocal gestures by means of which we communicate with others, that we attain self-consciousness.

When, a decade later, Mead returns to this question he does so from the perspective of a behaviorist. Let us now see the extent to which the social psychological positions that I have reconstructed so far are maintained and developed, as my hypothesis claims, or modified, as most commentators suggest. In “A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol” (1922), Mead once again reiterates that phylogeny and ontogeny are to be interpreted as entwined processes by noting that the mechanism of “taking the role of the other” (a notion that he had introduced in the 1913 “Social Self”) is a development that “raises gradually in the life of the infant and presumably arose gradually in the life of the race” (1922: 160). Focusing on the evolution of the structure of the self during childhood, Mead adduces for the first time the distinction between the developmental stages of “play” and “game.” It is in the play period that the child learns how to put himself in the role of another individual. At this stage the

process of generalization associated with “significant symbols” is not yet fully carried out since the child is not able to assume the role of the “generalized other,” a notion that Mead introduces here for the first time. It is only when the child is able to play games that he is able to put himself in the role of all other members of the group and he is aware of the rules that regulate that social and cooperative activity. At this second developmental stage, the child learns how to generalize his viewpoint.

In “The Genesis of the Self and Social Control,” arguably one of Mead’s most important single philosophic papers, the ontogenetic process of acquisition of significant symbols from the perspective of a behaviourist psychology is further elaborated. In this essay, Mead presents his social psychological theory in the light of Bergson and Whitehead’s philosophies of nature. From the former’s philosophy of change, Mead retains the idea that life is a process rather than a series of static psychical situations; from the latter’s doctrine of relativity, Mead learns that social life can be conceived of as a series of individual stratifications that exist in nature (see Mead, 1925: 259-60). This is the starting point of Mead’s reconstruction of the phylogenesis of the human self, which would later give him the basis for criticizing Cooley’s sociology (see Mead, 1930: 706). In Mead’s discussion of the phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins of self-consciousness, the notion of “taking the role of the other” emerges as the fundamental psychological mechanism that allows both the primitive man and the child to become self-conscious. In my view, what distinguishes this account from previous ones is not his alleged abandonment of functionalism in favor of behaviorism. In fact, Mead reiterates his rejection of a mechanical stimulus-response model of action in favor of a conception of conduct as adjustment in which the organism not only responds to the stimulus, but also interprets it.<sup>8</sup> The distinctiveness of this account derives, instead, from its pronounced systemic character. Indeed, Mead’s suggested parallel between the genesis of society and the beginning of the act which he evokes in order to explain the emergence of self-consciousness reveals a clear intention to unite his social theory of the self and his four-staged model of action. Behind these two elements of Mead’s system of thought, one finds the master concept of reflexive role-taking. If, on the one hand, “it has been the vocal gesture that has pre-eminently provided the medium of social organization in human society,” on the other hand, the vocal gesture “belongs historically to the beginning of the act, for it arises out of the

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<sup>8</sup> In a happy formulation, Sandra Rosenthal suggests that Mead’s social behaviorism is “pervaded by a phenomenological or experiential dimension in which the dynamics of experience are grasped from within” (1999: 62).

change in breathing rhythm that accompanies the preparation for sudden action, those actions to which other forms must be nicely adjusted” (Mead, 1925: 271).

At this point when the main traits of Mead’s social psychology have been reconstructed, I find particularly enlightening to confront my findings with the interpretation proposed by Habermas in *The Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988). I wish in this way to establish the theoretical relevance of my historically-minded reconstruction of Mead’s social psychological theories. In that book, Habermas offers what is arguably his most detailed treatment of Mead to date. In a chapter entitled “Individuation through Socialization. On George Herbert Mead’s Theory of Subjectivity,” Habermas addresses the problem of individuality throughout the history of philosophy, presenting Mead as the first social thinker to have reconciled individuation and socialization. This is something the sociological tradition is said to have failed to account for. In Habermas’s view, if Hegel could appeal to the notion of “individual totality” in order to explain why individuality is not exhausted by the mere diversity of predicative determinations, the sociologist lacks an equivalent concept that could avoid confusing the processes of individualization with the processes of differentiation. Mead’s social psychology is thus said to be the first “promising attempt to grasp the entire significance of social individualization in concepts” (Habermas, 1992 [1988]: 151). It is worth noting that Habermas opts in this essay to reconstruct Mead in a historically minded fashion. Indeed, Habermas discusses the internal evolution of Mead’s intersubjective model of the human self, from the 1903 “The Definition of the Psychological” to the 1913 “The Social Self,” and then to a number of other published articles. In his view, what this genetic reconstruction of Mead’s arguments shows is that the “early Mead,” still under the influence of Dewey’s instrumentalism, was not able to explain the emergence of conscious life as the “later Mead” is (Habermas, 1992 [1988]: 174).

In the light of my own historical reconstruction, however, Habermas’s rejection of the naturalism of the “early Mead” is ultimately untenable. As I have shown, there are no grounds upon which to distinguish between an “early Mead,” close to Dewey’s functionalist psychology, and a “later Mead,” supposedly critical of functionalism and naturalism. Mead had a lifelong commitment to Dewey’s insights; in no way can he be said to have rejected Dewey’s functionalist psychology. Rather, Mead analyzed systematically by means of his “scientific social psychology” what Dewey had only outlined, namely the social origins of the

human consciousness. This particular misunderstanding has vast implications for Habermas's interpretation of Mead's account of the relation between the "I" and the "me."

Unlike some commentators suggest (e.g., Dews, 1999), Mead conceives of the dual structure of self as a mechanism sensitive to the socio-historical surrounding environment. As I have tried to show, Mead's social psychology is a scientific attempt to explain the socio-historical foundations of the human psyche. Habermas is therefore right when he suggests that the I/me duality can be interpreted in the light of the societal transformations taking place in modern industrial societies and their influence upon the structure of personality. Habermas maintains that, at the post-conventional stage of personality development, the relationship between the "I" and the "me" is reversed. At the conventional stage of moral development, the "me" was supposed to capture the spontaneously acting "I." However, the "me," which still tries to follow the "I," "is now no longer made possible through an *antecedent* interactive relationship;" at the post-conventional stage, the "I," Habermas asserts, "*projects* the context of interaction that first makes the reconstruction of a shattered conventional identity possible on a higher level" (Habermas, 1992 [1988]: 187).

There are two different questions at stake here. Firstly, whether this interpretation is faithful to Mead's original intentions. Secondly, and more importantly, whether this interpretation is theoretically relevant for the purposes of a critical theory of society. In my opinion, Habermas transforms Mead's conception of the relation between the "I" and the "me" in order to better serve his own purposes. Whereas the "me" is reduced to a conservative force blindly subjugated to external social controls, that even after being internalized remains external, the "I" is given the function of guaranteeing the continuity of one's history of life. Distinguishing between an epistemic self-relation and a practical relation-to-self, Habermas suggests that the "I" in this second sense performs the function of reassuring ourselves about ourselves as a free will (Habermas, 1992 [1988]: 181). The implication of this is not merely a question of factual record. It is a theoretical question of the greatest importance. This is so because Mead's emphasis on the creative aspects of human action, in itself one of his chief contributions to contemporary social theory, is replaced by Habermas's own emphasis on the question of "self-affirmation." In other words, Mead's "I," with its capacity for unleashing creativity, originality and unpredictability, is a conceptual tool more attuned to the features of post-conventional personalities than Habermas's "I," limited to the maintenance of one's identity over time. In Mead's view, to be reassured of our uniqueness is not the only thing that

matters; one has to be unique in relation to the community in which one lives. I can now turn to the research area Habermas considered to be lacking in Mead's communicative theory of society, the pillar of politics.

## THE PILLAR OF POLITICS

My aim in the following section is to discuss the last pillar of Mead's system of thought, the pillar of politics. This is the realm where Mead's endorsement of the pragmatist orientation to connect theory and practice most clearly comes to the fore. As I will try to show, Mead wrote and published a significant amount of essays on democratic politics, communicative ethics, social reform, labor relations, immigration, and industrialization at the same time as he participated in various voluntary organizations and social movements. A second but related claim is that, in theoretical terms, Mead's conceptions of science and of social psychology are systematically connected to his moral and political thinking. In a nutshell, if the notion of "reconstruction" is a central element of Mead's conception of science as a problem-solving activity as well as of his four-staged model of human action, the related idea of "social and moral reconstruction" is the cornerstone of Mead's political and moral thinking.

In his seminal *Uncertain Victory* (1986), James Kloppenberg asserts that these ideas, "moderate, meliorist, democratic, and sensitive to the possibility that no perfect reconciliation of liberty and equality can be attained, are the consequences of pragmatism for politics" (1986: 194; also see Fine, 1979). Mead's allegiance to this incremental, piecemeal reformism accompanies him throughout his life. The systematic nature of Mead's thought allows him to mobilize similar formulations of the concept of "reconstruction" in different problem-areas, slightly adjusting its meaning to the field in question. Either by claiming that "[l]ife is a process of continued reconstruction involved in the world as experienced" (Mead, 1972 [1936]: 292), or by asserting the need for social reconstruction, Mead is suggesting the same flexible and in-the-making worldview. What unites these different formulations of the concept of reconstruction is Mead's allegiance to the principles of the method of modern experimental science. Hence the logical priority of the pillar of science over the pillar of politics one finds in Mead's intellectual edifice.

From an early stage in his life, Mead develops a critical political consciousness, guided by radical democratic principles and oriented to the betterment of his community. In fact, even before Mead started his academic career he was already a concerned citizen with clear

political allegiances. Unlike some commentators suggest,<sup>9</sup> Mead was never a Republican, having wholeheartedly supported the Democrat President Woodrow Wilson. After a brief stay in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Mead eventually settles in Chicago, where he will be able to put into practice these projects he shared with his friend Castle, who unfortunately would not live long enough to see it. Chicago was by that time a fast-growing metropolis that attracted millions of immigrants from Europe and was one of America's main poles of industrial activity, a city undergoing a process of profound social change and economic expansion. The risk of major social conflicts in such a modern industrial city was very clear in the minds of all of those who, like Mead, shared a belief in the possibilities of science to conduct human affairs. After being guaranteed an academic position at the University of Chicago in 1894, Mead emerges as a "radically democratic intellectual," to use Joas's happy phrase (1997 [1985]: 10).

Mead's civic engagement in reformist, voluntary activities was long and varied. From Mead's support of and writings on the social settlement movement,<sup>10</sup> to his involvement in the Immigrants' Protective League (which he helped to found in 1908), his participation on a citizens' committee established to solve the so-called "garment strike" of 1910, and his long membership in the City Club of Chicago (which he joined in 1906), there are numerous examples of Mead's belief that the "study and work" of social and political reform should go hand in hand. While Mead was engaged in these voluntary activities he kept developing his theoretical position on "intelligent social reconstruction." As a first-generation modern theorist, Mead considers the best remedy for the ailments of modernity to be the human activity that best represents that very modernity, i.e., experimental science. From the perspective of contemporary social theorists, though, this can seem as a sign of overconfidence on the possibilities of science. As soon as one takes into account Mead's insistence in the internal connection between science and democracy, what looks like a possible naiveté emerges as a critical program aiming at articulating science, social psychology, and democratic political theory in a communicative theory of society that seeks

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<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Shalin, possibly misled by the title of an early essay of Mead, contends that despite his "admiration for Wilson, Mead would remain loyal to the Republican party throughout his life" (1988: 920). This is by no means a correct description of Mead's political allegiances. Mead's admiration for Wilson was not an oddity, but the very expression of his sympathy for the Democratic Party. As his personal correspondence shows, Mead never supported a single Republican presidential candidate, quite the contrary.

<sup>10</sup> Once again, unpublished manuscripts reveal their importance. In effect, the most complete account of Mead's view on the social settlement movement is not the brief discussion one finds in "The Social Settlement: Its Basis and Function" (1907-8), but the unpublished essay "On the Role of Social Settlements" (n.d.), where Mead discusses at great length his views on this social movement. One of the very few analyses of Mead's views on the settlement movement is Cook (1993: 99-104); unfortunately, and even if this is one of the most historically-minded studies of Mead to date, Cook's analysis is solely based on the short published abovementioned article.

to reconstruct the socio-linguistic roots of human rationality both in phylogenetic and ontogenetic terms.

This can be seen as early as in the 1899 essay “The Working Hypothesis in Social Reform,” where he rejects “utopian” and “doctrinaire” political doctrines, such as socialism, in favor of a scientifically grounded social reformism. As Mead asserts, in social reform “what we have is a method and a control in application, not an ideal to work toward. As has been stated, this is the attitude of the scientist in the laboratory” (1899: 369). In two unpublished manuscripts written in this period, Mead addresses the conditions for intelligent social reconstruction in a period of rapid modernization. In one of those occasions, Mead discusses the social and political implications of the process of industrialization, wondering whether “we can ever hold to any democracy consistently till we give every child a trained skill which shall guarantee him an economic and social status” (“On the Effects of Industrialization”: 38). By giving priority to the need for an informed citizenry, on the part of the community, over the need for vocational training, on the part of the industrialists, Mead puts forth the radical democratic claim that without concrete material equality of conditions, the abstract theory of political rights is no more than an abstraction which benefits some at the expense of the many. In another unpublished manuscript, the sociological notion of “social control,”<sup>11</sup> emerges as the political expression of the pragmatists’ ideological commitment to intelligent social reconstruction. Mead, believing that “the most effective government is through public opinion” (Mead, “On the State and Social Control”: 7-8), posits in the social cooperation through the exchange of rational arguments by a cognitively competent and informed public opinion the solution for the value pluralism of modern mass societies. Building on this assumption, Mead’s endorsement of a theory of communicative ethics and a conception of deliberative democracy, which will be discussed later in this section, are but the logical corollary of his commitment to the ideal of uncoerced and informed dialogue. However, before I turn to Mead’s conception of radical democracy, I wish to address his involvement in the single most important international event of his lifetime – the First World War.

Indeed, the Great War constituted a challenge for the intellectuals and scientists of the beginning of the twentieth century. It is fair to say that a whole generation of social thinkers,

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<sup>11</sup> Mead defines “social control” as a form of self-criticism that “far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and inextricably associated with that individuality” (1997 [1934]: 255). For an analysis of the usages of this concept by American sociology in the first decades of the twentieth century, see Janowitz, 1975.

including sociology's classic figures, was offered the chance of superseding particularistic and non-scientific prejudices in the name of scientific objectivity and impartiality. Most of them, however, failed to meet that challenge (e.g., see Joas, 2003: 55-81). In my view, this is not true of Mead. His wartime personal correspondence and political writings, some of them still unpublished, show us a social scientist deeply concerned with the humanitarian consequences of war but willing to provide a scientific explanation for the causes and nature of that human tragedy. In this respect, Mead's social psychological explanation of the fusion of the two phases of the self in patriotic moments is of particular relevance.<sup>12</sup>

Mead's personal correspondence with Irene Tufts Mead, his daughter-in-law, and son, Henry, right before and after America's entry into the war shows, at first, a profoundly distressed individual whose anti-militarism led to hope for a pacific solution,<sup>13</sup> and later someone increasingly convinced of the fairness of the alliance of the values of democratic self-rule and labor rights against autocratic militarism.<sup>14</sup> This change of opinion can also be identified in Mead's published writings. Following the evolution of the events in Europe from 1914 to 1917, Mead starts by expressing serious doubts about the war's rationale in the 1915 "The Psychological Basis of Internationalism."<sup>15</sup> Both for personal and intellectual reasons, Mead followed the evolution of the war with great attention and growing concern.<sup>16</sup> After the United States' entry into the war on 6 April 1917, in a series of newspaper articles published in the *Chicago Herald* in that summer, he shows a different understanding of the war. Reiterating his lifelong anti-militarism, Mead argues that the war had become a "war for democracy" against the autocratic and militarist German regime (see 1917b).

Furthermore, and refuting Habermas' claim that Mead had neglected the material reproduction of modern societies, here we see Mead applying his theoretical outlook (in a way

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<sup>12</sup> One of the very few texts devoted to this point is Campbell, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> "(...) what America ought to insist upon is the right to continue her life in the international society, while she remains out of that war in which she has refused to join" (Mead to Irene Mead, 18 February 1917, Mead Papers, box 1, folder 14).

<sup>14</sup> "I have never felt so strongly the necessity of America's fighting as I do now. The democratic issue that we fight for should be made clear not only by the president but also by the people" (Mead to Henry Mead, 7 March 1918, Mead Papers, box 1, folder 15).

<sup>15</sup> This essay was originally published in the journal *Survey* in 1915. I was able to determine the exact date this article was written because in a letter to his son Henry, dating from 21 January 1915, Mead makes the following remark: "I have written an article on Militarism which I was asked to write for the *Survey*" (Mead Papers, box 1, folder 8). During my archival work at Chicago I managed to locate its original version. Wrongly filed as an unpublished paper, it was held in the Addenda, box 3, folder 1, under the title of "Militarism and Nationalism," and included an unpublished handwritten conclusion.

<sup>16</sup> Mead's son, Henry, had military training in the Chicago area in the second semester of 1917 and joined the war effort in early 1918. The correspondence between Mead and his son in this period can be found in Mead Papers, box 1, folder 9.

that also expresses his personal values and ideological commitments) to the analysis of an example of the societal phenomenon of war. What is a purely theoretical account of the process of fusion of the two phases of the human self in *Mind, Self, and Society*, can be seen, in the abovementioned 1915 article, being applied to the concrete example of patriotism, curiously enough an alluded example that Morris's editorial activity did not give us the chance of reading.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in that article, Mead starts his analysis of the war in Europe by taking note of its "great spiritual dividends" (1915a: 604). Arguing along similar lines as Simmel and Durkheim,<sup>18</sup> Mead asserts that individual members of societies can fuse into self-conscious nations in moments of exceptional emotional intensity. Like a tide of national consciousness that sweeps across the body of citizens, these emotional moments are as intense as they are brief. When these moments occur, Mead contends, there is a fusion of the "I" and the "me:" there is an absolute identification between the individual self and the social group. The fusion of the individual and the group is so complete that the individual can even lose himself "in the whole group in some sense, and may attain the attitude in which he undergoes suffering and death for the common cause" (Mead, 1918: 598).

Mead, however, is far from endorsing the irrationalist implications suggested by this psychological phenomenon. On the contrary, Mead's proposed solution for settling international disputes comprises two elements drawn from his scientific social psychology. Firstly, rejecting James's assumption of a masculine fighting instinct, Mead asks why reformist activities should be seen as "white-blooded" and "feministic," when actually they are a "vastly more intelligently conceived" formulation of the same patriotic principles (1915a: 607). In Mead's view, social and political reform thus conceived is intrinsically internationalist since it gives priority to the interests of humankind over the interests of any particular state. Secondly, both in the notion of self-reflexivity as the elemental mechanism for the development of the self and in the idea of democratic self-rule as the basic condition for a meaningful group life, the same insight is suggested. Just as an individual depends on the existence of other human beings to exist, so the national identity and the very life of a

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<sup>17</sup> Mead announces the discussion of the "attitudes of religion, patriotism, and team work," but the selection of the student notes made by Morris includes only his discussion of the other two attitudes (see 1997 [1934]: 273). For an account of Mead's views on patriotism in that book, one has either to go back to an earlier section, namely to the analysis of the function performed by the sense of superiority for the realization of the self (see 1997 [1934]: 207-9), or to the discussion of social conflict in a later section (see 1997 [1934]: 306).

<sup>18</sup> According to Joas, while Simmel conceives of war as a "deeply moving existential experience of an ecstatic feeling of security that liberates our personality from old inhibitions," Durkheim, in his sociology of religion, describes "collective effervescence" experiences as a "group ecstasy that has the function of shaping identity and creating social bounds" (2003: 65). Oddly, Joas fails to extend this parallel to the case of Mead's thesis of the fusion of the "I" and the "me."

political community is dependent on the existence of other nation-states. This is why Mead concludes this essay by stating that the solution for the problem of militarism, chief cause of the conflict, is of a psychological nature. It lies in a change of attitude on the part of the states of the Central Powers<sup>19</sup> that would indicate the willingness to accept the fact that they are a but a part of a vaster community of nations; this way, Mead believes, they would be able to “regard the states and the communities of which they are the instruments, as subject to and controlled by the life of the whole, not as potential enemies for whose assault each state must be forever on the watch” (1915a: 607).

When Mead returns to these issues in the late 1920s, he still seeks to approach the problems of international relations and warfare from a scientific social psychological perspective. In “National-Mindedness and International-Mindedness” (1929), Mead reiterates his earlier account of the “hostile impulse” in order to describe the social psychological instinct responsible for “the spiritual exaltation of wartime patriotism” (1929: 393). There is, however, one crucial innovation in this later analysis. Language, as a rational cooperative activity, is seen as a prominent mechanism for the resolution of international conflicts: it is by means of intelligent deliberation that contending parties should resolve their disputes. In Mead’s own words, over against the instinctive hostile impulse, one should resort to “the power which language has conferred upon us, of not only seeing ourselves as others see us but also of addressing ourselves in terms of the common ideas and functions which an organized society makes possible” (1929: 395). Retaining the evolutionary perspective that characterizes his theory of phylogenesis, Mead argues that nationalism is a historically recent phenomenon by which men suddenly realized that they belonged to communities that transcended their families and clans. In this sense, “national mindedness” is to be conceived of as a conversation with a “generalized other,” more general than previous forms of human association, but less general than the form idealized by Mead. As he puts it: “Can we carry on a conversation in international terms?” ([1934] 1997, p. 271) According to Mead, the “moral equivalent of war,” to paraphrase James, is to be found in the socially acquired capacity for rational linguistic expression of ideas, rather than in some fundamental social impulse. It is a rationalist and internationalist solution that Mead proposes.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> I.e., Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. Together, these countries formed the Triple Alliance which opposed the Triple Entente formed by Great-Britain, France, and Russia.

<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the League of Nations (whose creation on 28 June 1919 with the signature of the Treaty of Versailles was enthusiastically endorsed by Mead), or its predecessor United Nations, is the political institution whose function is to determine the common interests that lie behind every conflict of interests between national states.

This said Mead's contributions to contemporary social and political theory are not limited to his writings on international relations, industrialization, immigration and other civic issues. In fact, Mead's communicative theory of society comprises a normative conception of democracy and an ethical theory that deserve a closer scrutiny. What connects these two elements of Mead's political thinking is the ideal of a political community whose citizens are able to maintain social order by means of the exchange of rational arguments that leads to mutual understanding. I will thus devote the remainder of this article to the analysis of the socio-linguistic foundations of Mead's political and moral theory. Mead's discussion of the various "moods of language," as far as I know a completely overlooked element of his thinking, can be found in a set of student notes taken by G. Shelburg in the winter quarter of 1927.<sup>21</sup>

I should start by noting that these notes are significantly different from those taken by W. T. Lillie in the winter quarter of 1928, a professional stenographer hired by Alvin Carus, from which Charles Morris constructed *Mind, Self, and Society*.<sup>22</sup> In the Shelburg notes, one finds a whole new perspective on language and self-consciousness from the one discussed in *Mind, Self and Society*. Firstly, we have the imperative mood, a form of communication originally associated with a situation where social relations were regulated through force and coercion. In the course of social evolution, the imperative mood came to be the expression of the socially binding nature of obligations and duties (Mead, 1982: 160). Following this initial form of language, and associated with the physiological development of the central nervous system, two other moods of language have emerged – the subjunctive, associated with deliberation, and the optative, related to decision-making situations. The individual self could thereby express to himself as to the others alternative courses of action, which imply that he enjoys a certain degree of autonomy. The specifically political implications of this line of argument are far-reaching. The evolution of language accompanies the social evolution from a stage where one commands and the other obeys or refuses to obey, to a stage where individuals are no longer "forced to carry out the response by the social suggestion" (1982:

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<sup>21</sup> This set of notes was edited and published by David Miller in *The Individual and the Social Self* (1982). However, contrary to the indications he provides in the introduction to that book, these notes are not from the spring quarter of 1927 nor do they cover only 60 pages. They were actually taken by Shelburg in the winter quarter of that year, and run to over 100 pages. I will quote from the volume edited by Miller since it is available for the wide public, but I must say that his editorial work is far from being reliable.

<sup>22</sup> These notes can be found in Mead Papers, box 2, folders 4-13. In the last page of the original copy of this transcript, one can read 'Reported by W. T. Lillie' which is, as Harold Orbach pointed out to me, the typical phraseology used by stenographers at that time. It is to Orbach's long years of archival research, which go back to the mid-1970s, that we owe the true story behind *Mind, Self, and Society*.

161), being able to select their courses of action, in an autonomous and co-operative fashion. Moreover, consciousness emerges only with this subjunctive mood of language for, as Mead explains, the central nervous system “stands for the ability to present alternatives by introducing a temporal dimension into action. To get the different possibilities into the present situation, one can suggest the other alternatives. Here, then, is deliberation, conversation, an inner forum or council” (1982: 161). The outcome of such a deliberative and rational process is the emergence of an indicative “mood of language,” in which alternative courses of action are identified by the social actor. To carry out an act, however, the individual must take the attitude of the group given the conventional nature of language – “one is always speaking to audiences or communities, expressing universals that are significant to others” (Mead, 1982: 161).

At this light, both Mead’s conception of deliberative democracy and his communicative ethics gain added significance. In the first case, any theory of democracy revolves around a certain notion of citizenship. However, this concept is treated only in passing in Mead’s published political writings. To find Mead’s conception of citizenship one has to resort, once again, to his unpublished manuscripts. Indeed, in the unpublished essay “How Can a Sense of Citizenship be Secured?,” Mead introduces citizenship as the political correlate of the self’s social character in a rather Aristotelian tone. The continued, committed, and disinterested exercise of the rights and duties associated with the membership in a political community is the condition for a truly democratic society. Only a society where all the citizens exercise their rights and duties diligently and to the full extent of their rational abilities meets Mead’s communicative ideal of a free and democratic society. Furthermore, only if all particular interests are given equal attention do political decision-making processes express the “common good.” Thus far, Mead’s conception of citizenship, with its civic-republican emphasis on the virtues of democratic participation, is not that different from Dewey’s. However, Mead supersedes Dewey’s radical democratic conception when he, drawing a parallel between life in a social group and life in a political community, observes that, in both cases, individuals act in the context of institutions whose structural nature is beyond their consciousness. Only when conflicts occur, do individuals, either as social actors or political citizens, gain consciousness of the fundamental social values embodied in institutions like the family, the school, or the parliament. Arguing similar lines than in the Shelburne notes, Mead then goes on to suggest that we “get hardly more immediate meaning out of the constant process of the evolution of social institutions than we do out of the processes of dialectical

changes which take place in our mouths (...) as *great laws of speech*" (Mead, n.d.: 10-1-; emphasis added).

Having this last remark into account, it should not be difficult to understand Mead's insistence on the communicative nature of his ethical theory. Again, it is around the notion of "reconstruction," only this time "moral reconstruction," that Mead constructs his theory of moral problem-solving. As he explains in the 1923 article "Scientific Method and the Moral Sciences," both the ethical ends and the means to attain them can be subject to "restatement and reconstruction" by the "intelligent method of science" (1923: 244). Such a connection between science and morals can already be seen in the earlier essays "The Social Self" (1913), where Mead states for the first time the possibility of solving problematic moral situations by means of a creative rational moral reconstruction that supersedes the disintegrating moral conflicts, leading to moral growth (Mead, 1913: 379), and "The Psychology of Punitive Justice" (1918), where he equates moral growth with the advance that takes place "in bringing to consciousness the larger social whole within which hostile attitudes pass over into self-assertions that are functional instead of destructive" (1918: 581).

Mead's theory of solving moral problems, despite never have been explicitly connected to Mead's analysis of the "moods of language," shows, nonetheless, a communicative character, as well as some proceduralist and universalistic features. The proceduralism of Mead's ethics, heavily influenced by Mead's conception of science, derives from its emphasis not on the definition of a determined final end that is supposed to motivate moral action (Mead rejects defining the "common good"), but on the definition of the procedures of a democratic and experimental moral method. The universal character and the communicative nature of Mead's ethics are entwined points. Both the research scientist and the critical moral agent have to take into consideration all the relevant facts. The solution of moral problems lies in being able to have the wider perspective possible so that all the conflicting points of view, interests, or ends are fully appreciated. Since bearing in mind all the perspectives is ultimately a problem of communication, Mead's ethics are necessarily communicative: every part in conflict must be able to express his viewpoints in an intelligible way for all the others. Hence, Mead's theory of ethics is universalistic given its orientation to the rational perspective of the "generalized other," and, in particular, to the "rational community that is represented in the so-called universe of discourse" (1997 [1934]: 202).

In a similar way, Mead suggests that the experimental method of science and democratic politics are internally connected given their reliance upon the same communicative type of rationality. Both in a scientific discussion in a research laboratory and in a political discussion in a parliament, the human ability to communicate in a rational fashion is the basis upon which the coordination of the conduct of individuals, either as scientists or as citizens, is carried out. To the social scientist is reserved the function of analyzing these situations by reconstructing the “great laws of speech” both from a phylogenetic and from an ontogenetic perspective. From this point of view, it is only natural that Mead is skeptical about a merely quantitative analysis of democratic politics. Much more important than the “clumsy method of registering public sentiment which the ballot box affords in a democracy” (Mead 1923: 244), are, to Mead as to Dewey,<sup>23</sup> the continued and informed debates by a cognitively competent and civically engaged citizenry. Indeed, the communicative nature of Mead’s theory of society gains, in the field of democratic political theory, a deliberative tone. Failing to see this amounts to fail to grasp the very core of Mead’s intellectual system: the scientific reconstruction, both in the history of the human species and in the history of the child, of the communicative dimension of human rationality.

## CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this article, I criticized Merton’s view that the history of the theory and the “systematics” of the theory should be dealt with separately. In fact, this article tries to demonstrate precisely the opposite: theory building in sociology has much to gain from incorporating historically-minded reconstructions of our founding fathers. At this point, however, I would like to retain another aspect of Merton’s conception of science, his rejection of what he called “theoretical monism” in favor of a pluralistic view of sociology (Merton, 1975). It is in Donald N. Levine’s dialogical perspective that one finds the answer for connecting, on the one hand, the rejection of the separation between theory and history of theory, and, on the other hand, the endorsement of a pluralistic conception of sociological

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<sup>23</sup> In a book published shortly after Mead’s article, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey subscribes to a similar position to the one argued by Mead. Dewey writes: “Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it never is *merely* majority rule. (...) The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public” (1984 [1927]: 365; emphasis in original). This pragmatist understanding of democratic politics is of central importance for Habermas’s discursive conception of deliberative democracy. Habermas acknowledges this fact in his latest major political work, where he quotes approvingly Dewey’s words (see Habermas 1996 [1992]: 304).

theories.<sup>24</sup> Dialogue between current practitioners and our forerunners is only possible if one carefully reconstructs the context where figures like Marx, Weber, Simmel, Durkheim, or Mead developed their analyses of modernity. Although firmly grounded on evidence (every single manuscript written by Mead was taken into account, as well as the student notes taken from his classes), my argument is framed in a more general sociological literature than Mead scholarship. This article is thus an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of historically rigorous yet theoretically minded reconstructions of past contributions for a *dialogical* conception of sociology, as suggested in Levine's writings.

My main contention is that Mead's thinking comprises three distinct yet interconnected research areas, which evolved during the course of Mead's career. The systematic nature of Mead's thinking is revealed as soon as one looks at the different ways he relates science, social psychology, and politics. To begin with, the psychological mechanism of "taking the role of the other" can be seen operating in the attitude of the research scientist, in the attitude of the social actor (both from a phylogenetic and a ontogenetic viewpoint), and in the attitude of the citizen. On the other hand, there are different kinds of social environments within which the human self develops its activities by meeting problems and adapting to changing circumstances: the scientific community, the social group, and the political community. These pillars are linked in other aspects too. Given the priority of the scientific pillar, the two others can be seen as scientific approaches to specific problems, either the problem of the social origins of the individual self, or the problem of the moral and political organization of modern industrial societies. The relative importance of the second pillar is reflected in a distinctively social psychological approach that is mobilized to analyze, for instance, the political phenomena. Finally, one can find a categorical conception of democracy in all layers of Mead's writings. The notion of an egalitarian, impartial, open to participation and discussion social order pervades all aspects of his system of thought, from the inner forum of conversation to international relations between nation states.

There are, then, multiple levels at which Mead's conceptions of science, social psychology, and politics intersect. What gives unity to this edifice is Mead's insistence on the communicative character of human rationality. While it is the case that this is hardly a new insight for anyone minimally familiar to Mead's work, the fact remains that there is not even one single remark in all the secondary literature on Mead concerning his theoretical model of

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<sup>24</sup> See Levine (1995), and especially Camic and Joas (2003).

the various linguistic stages of development. As I have tried to show, Mead's remarks on the various "moods of language" are not only closely related to the way he conceives of deliberative democracy and communicative ethics, but are also associated with his ontogenetic and phylogenetic theories.

Seen as a stage of the evolutionary process of the human species, the indicative mood of language paves the way to the overcoming of the individual vs. social dichotomy. In a situation where social relations were governed by superior force, the imperative mood of language expressed the non-existence of a "generalized other" that could exert social control; this all changes when the subjunctive, optative and the indicative moods of language allow for the emergence of self-conscious individuals, more autonomous than their ancestors, yet members of their communities to an extent unknown in the history of the human species. The evolutionary character of the successive moods of language is reflected in the ontogenetic process of evolution too. As the most advanced moods of language emerge in the course of social evolution, the successive stages of psychological development show individuals increasingly capable of apprehending meanings in their fullest generality.

The insight that the cognitive and social character of human discourse provides political theory with a mechanism for conflict resolution that transcends the blind power struggle between states ranks amongst Mead's most original political theoretical theses. It would be an anachronism to suggest that Mead "anticipated" by over 50 years the deliberative turn in democratic political theory. It would be an even greater error, though, not to recognize that Mead's analysis of the late 1920s comprise the conceptual elements upon which, already in the 1990s, political thinkers resorted to produce their deliberative proposals. This is precisely what intellectual history has to offer to social and political theory building: long-forgotten ideas that, if adequately integrated in contemporary social and political theory, are able offer us the possibility of engaging in dialogue with our predecessors about the best way to solve the problems we wish to tackle. Mead's system is thus a system in a state of flux not only for its steady development and continuous escape from the written, final form, but also because its guiding idea is precisely the notion of "continued reconstruction" of scientific research questions, of social psychological mechanisms and processes, and of political and moral problems.

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