

Introduction to the Interview on the Moral Self with Filipe Carreira da Silva

By Abby Jitendra ¹

The ideas of George Herbert Mead have made him one of the most important voices in the psychological and sociological canon. A professor of psychology in the University of Chicago from 1894 until his death in 1931, his theories developed within the scientific discourses of pragmatism, where the function of theory was to solve problems. His lifelong academic engagement with Dewey's work, as well as the personal friendship between the two, attest to the pragmatist milieu he was involved in, though Mead's psychology differs fundamentally from that of Dewey.

*His influence, however, extends beyond his field of social psychology to politics and sociology. *Mind Self and Society*, a book published after his death outlining some of Mead's ideas, introduced his notions of the "self" as a process of reflexive communication and action between the individual and society to a broader audience, and these ideas have been used by academics in the social sciences to counter the reductionism prevalent in some theories of human nature. Notably, Jürgen Habermas employed Mead's conception of the communicative process as the basis for the cohesion of society and the self in his "theory of communicative action", though he saw Mead's social theory as insufficient to provide a substantive theoretical basis for his own. Mead's thinking also provides a theoretical framework for the "symbolic interactionist" perspective, which was developed by Herbert Blumer, an American pragmatist sociologist hugely influenced by *Mind, Self and Society*, and also to sociologists studying the construction of "deviance" in society, such as Stanley Cohen's study of "moral panics".*

*Filipe Carreira da Silva's engagement with the work of George Herbert Mead stretches back over ten years, and has refined the conception of Mead's work and redefined its relevance to sociology today. He, too, employs a somewhat pragmatist approach to sociology, utilising Mead's contribution to sociology to think about problems pertinent to today's society. This book broadens the scope of our knowledge of Mead's work, emphasising the relevance his ideas have on politics and science as well as the social psychology for which it is known. It also further problematises the relevance of *Mind, Self and Society*, the work which constitutes popular conception of Mead's writings, yet was written by Charles Morris, a student of Mead. Finally, it presents a response to authors like Habermas and Blumer whose rendering of Mead's ideas, though impressive and useful in itself, does not depict the full scope of Mead's work.*

Interview

A: It was intriguing seeing Mead be so precise about concrete issues like social settlements in your recently published book on Mead entitled *G. H. Mead, A Reader*, Routledge, 2012. I'd like to ask you about the process of finding the articles, emotions surrounding that exploratory period and the process of deciding which pieces would be featured in the book.

F: The pieces featured in the book are there for several reasons. First, I'm reminded of Chicago. I was a PhD student in Cambridge, studying Mead, when I first realised, in 2009 that I had to go to Chicago because of the George Herbert Mead archive. I had a thesis

but I needed the materials, the empirical evidence to support my ideas. So I went there, and I got my first look at the materials in the archive. After many months of work I got enough material to put my PhD thesis together; but, it is a very big archive and I soon realised that I needed time to come back in the future. I finished my PhD and decided to move and change my topic to a more contemporary topic. That lasted a few months; I wasn't actually interested. The new topic was about pluralism and liberalism, the coexistence of languages in the European Union. It took me three months to see I was very bored! And, since then (2004-5), I've been working on and off on Mead. Every time I had a few months free, I would go back to Chicago. I had friends there, and of course, I would return to the archive.

Knowing people working in the archive, accessing it was easy. And, importantly, it is very central to the university. In the main library, you have the museum, a swimming pool and cafeterias within really easy reach. So for many years I spent many hours there, and to return to your question, in the end it was easy to see what was missing from the material. It was Don Levine, an American professor specialist in Simmel, who first asked me to publish a Mead reader using research from my years in the archive. This was in 2007/8, and I thought about for a while from then on. I contacted a few presses and Routledge said yes. And so, in less than a year I had a book. This is because most of the book was already published. I had to add the other parts myself and so the challenge was to select. In the book there are 30 articles by Mead himself. That was the first challenge; to ensure that each piece was signed and I can ensure the author was GH Mead. The second was, of course relevance; is the text important for readers of Mead? That is more complicated, because you have a lot of material and the decision is often a very personal one, and that choice is always my responsibility.

So with those two things in mind I decided to include thirty articles. But why thirty? Well, the three parts reflect the way I conceive of Mead's work. This follows the claim in my PhD thesis that Mead's thinking cannot be reduced to social psychology. Instead, it is triadic; social psychology is, indeed, one. But you also have science and politics. And this selection follows this structure but I am selecting, editing and also putting forward an interpretation of Mead. That's my responsibility. Now, this regards the justification. If we come to the present, I can say that I honestly believe that reading Mead in this way, as compared to the Mead presented in *Mind, Self & Society*, you learn much more. This is also a challenge to my read, to compare and think for yourself and see if you get more from this than MSS. There's an advantage with this book because you know Mead wrote it. With MSS, there's no idea; he might have said those words in 1938, but he may have not.

A: It's interesting you say that, MSS seems much more diffuse and less impassioned and directed than this book. I agree that the questionable authorship makes MSS less useful to students, and while studying Mead I found it more productive to glean ideas from works confirmed to be his own. My next question would be whether you had a specific agenda when constructing the book's contents. You seem deeply aware of your project as a somewhat political one, as putting forward someone's ideas, even if it is simply publishing their works, is not a "neutral" act.

F: Yes, you can never go back into the past without an agenda. Going into the past involves archives, books, data, and you have two options when confronting these. Either you go into the past aware of your agenda, or unaware. I prefer to go to the past with the best knowledge possible of my intentions and my limitations. In this case my agenda or interest was first to enter into controversy with Jürgen Habermas. Why? Because Habermas had helped canonise Mead, and my entrance to the field was a critique of Habermas. I respect Habermas a lot, and his engagement with Mead is one of the reasons why. Then again, there, of course, other authors and schools of thought that also played a role in the way I go back into the past. One of those, Quentin Skinner, is very much related to Cambridge University, where I teach. The way they work on intellectual history has also been very influential. The idea is that one should go back and reconstruct the context in which an author writes, not to recreate the author's intentions but to examine the historical context. This gives you an insight into what the author was trying to do with their words. This is the Skinnerian approach, which is very different to going back to Mead's texts and trying to find an internal problem, such as "agency and structure", and see what Mead has to say about that problem.

However, I started reading Skinner and his colleagues more than ten years ago, and I am now starting to have doubts about this method. I now see that Mead as a thinker was looking at problems himself, trying to solve problems. Perhaps not "eternal" problems that some of us assumed he was trying to solve. Perhaps very specific problems, or problems in another scientific field or related to the context of the time or the city. But I think you can actually retrieve a connection between those specific problems and the larger, general problems. Looking in this way, I think, gives us an interesting way to see what sociology is; a problem-solving activity of certain social problems. And I am now starting to believe every single author, in a book, or a document, is illustrating or addressing a certain problem. Now what these problems are is, of course, up for question. But this problem-solving activity is very specific, because you are thinking about sociologists since the 19th century, from the US and Western Europe, studying problems. But their ideas coalesce in constellations of problems, which then become what we now think of as the larger, general problems, such as "agency and structure" and the "individual and society". Of course, some authors are worried about larger problems. But that's not the rule. The rule is, I think, if you look at the history of sociology, the subject of study is a lot more limited than previously thought. This is something I've grown aware of because of my work on Mead.

A: Habermas is an interesting topic. His is a general theory of action, formulated to make a claim about how we *should* behave, just as the Mead one sees in MSS puts forward a general theory of development in order to prescribe behaviour. In your previous books, you have suggested that Mead's writings have been "misread" or "misrepresented" by writers like Habermas and Blumer. It's notable that you, and your books, constitute another way to read Mead; this is especially notable as you teach in Cambridge, where the canon obviously holds great importance. In what sense do you feel you have contributed to Mead's canonisation?

F: Mead is in the sociological canon because of Habermas. Canonisation is by definition a political process. As I was saying before, you go usually aware of your intentions, especially regarding the classic figures of the field. Sociologists going into the past to say something about Marx, Weber, etc. go with a clear idea of their agenda. Partly because they are social theorists themselves, partly because they are interested in the issues of sociology and so they are already aware of what they are doing. For all these reasons, canonisation is not only a very self-reflexive process, the impact it has upon the present is immense. Why? Because the way you study sociology and the way you conceive is very much a consequence of that process. In the 1960s there were no “founding fathers” of sociology, whereas now it feels as if there has always been. This is blatantly, historically wrong. Even today, if you are in different countries, studying sociology, you will find slightly different versions of the “canon”. Of course, by now, the founding trio is universally established, but you do have important national variations and national traditions are very important. As for Habermas and his part in Mead’s canonisation, there was a period in the past where I suggested there was a more rigorous way of reconstructing Mead. This way was, for me, the Skinnerian way. I have doubts now. That was why I said it was a political process. If you see canonisation as a political process, by definition, you are addressing controversy. It’s about being persuasive, but not necessarily with more evidence. You win the debate by convincing your opponents this is the true Mead; Habermas has been very persuasive. He has convinced a generation of sociologists that sociology begins with the founding fathers but must also include others, like Mead.

So, what I’m saying is that there may be an evolution in my thought; from logic to rhetoric. I would say – actually, I believe – that the Mead I’m presenting is more real than that of MSS. But, I’m also saying if my Mead is to become the Mead which students and faculties study and see for the next 20 years, it is because I can show that it is the case. And for that I must show how productive it is to work with this Mead instead of the other Mead. That, again, is a political, persuasive, rhetorical act.

A: You seem very aware of your role in the process in Mead’s canonisation. How did you become interested in Mead?

F: I don’t study things that I like. I study things I feel might be interesting problems that could lead to unexpected answers. Studying Mead is a pretext to thinking about a problem. That problem was, and still is, how to reconcile the history of sociology with social theory. I picked this author because I thought he gave me a strategic entry point into that problem. It could be a pretext to think about this problem, read about it, and have something to say about it. So, it could have been Mead, Dewey, Simmel, even Durkheim. It is also a question of contingency. I used to teach social theory many years ago and I wrote a thesis on Habermas and the public sphere, and, again, Mead was part of this narrative. While applying for a PhD at Cambridge, I was aware of this, and also aware of my agenda. I knew there were members of the faculty interested in this author, so one thing led to another...

A: One of the interesting things about this volume is that this remains almost a definitive version of Mead’s works. Your contribution to his canonisation is a very concrete “collection” of his writings. How do you feel about this collection forming the basis of the study of Mead for future generations?

F: I would like to think the next generation of sociologists can access, through my intellectual intervention in the form of this book, Mead's ideas through his own words. When searching through the archive there was something that really struck me. Why are we dealing with second or third-person accounts, edited in the most creative ways when you have so much stuff by him right here. Mead himself wrote more than an hundred articles, over and above the material in this book, covering the three areas in this book and more. There is a huge body of correspondence as well – it was very clear for me that there was sufficient material for this book. As for the next 30-40 years, I wouldn't say this is the magnum opus or definitive work of Mead, because that work still has to be done. We do not have the definitive collected works of Mead. That is still not published. But what we have here is a reliable, comprehensive, collection of writings by him and if you learn something beyond the existing books then that alone justifies this book entirely. It would be an honour for me to say that I am a part of that process. For several reasons, but for one in particular. I've been working for many years on intellectual theory and I am aware of the influence this sort of approach has had on sociology in the last 40 years. And I cannot cease to feel, from Mead to actor-network theory, the influence that pragmatism, that semiotics, has had. Because of Mead's association with symbolic interactionism, these parallels have been obscured. This is just one example of what you're missing – the new Mead, the way you think about him through this book, has clear connections to authors like Latour. We could use this new Mead to think about human rights, citizenship – areas that are massively important now and where people are always trying to go back into the past to find a founding father. Mead is relevant here because he was an author who was always thinking about citizenship but also has a social theory to back it up. A consistent social theory of the self supports his ideas of political morality.

A: It's interesting you bring up the discipline of ANT, and I'll come back to that later. I would just like to discuss the notion of reading and misreading. One critique of Mead, which seems particularly unfair, is that he never managed to write a book of his own. Mead doesn't have a "magnum opus" partially because he died before he was able to do this, and exists in the past, just like many prominent social theorists, and successive sociologists make the dead 'speak' through successive interpretations. How did this impact upon the process of collating material for this book? It seems that there is a productive and destructive capacity of the sociologist, to reveal but also to misrepresent. Is this a worry?

F: First, Mead didn't write a book because he didn't want to – because he wasn't comfortable putting words into that shape. Basically, he had a writer's block – he complains about it in his correspondence. Compare him with Dewey, who wrote a book almost every year for 50 years. However, Mead wrote a lot in the form of articles. There is one partial exception. In 1910-11, there was someone visiting Chicago and she convinced Mead to write a book, which would include previously published articles and other unpublished ones. But Mead changes his mind, realises he no longer believes what he said in the past articles, and so he says no. The book was not published in his lifetime and has only recently been published. But, the fact is, he never wrote a book again. As to how we interpret, represent, misrepresent. When you write something, it's a public act. Once published, your

words have a life of their own. This is the case when you are alive, and more so when you are dead. In the case of Mead, the problem with all the books published after his demise was that authorship was never questioned. For two generations since the 1930s, especially in the US, people read those books as if they were Mead's own words. The intention of the author was assumed to be there. Of course, by the 1960s you started to hear critical voices, and by the 1970s it was impossible to maintain this myth. And then, people started to go into the archive, which was actually established at that time. And you see a growing historical awareness of problems of authorship, with the first historical study of the archive be in Hans Joas' in 1981. But, importantly, though these are Mead's words, this has nothing to say about what Mead meant or what they mean. In other words, you have to do your own thinking for yourself. What you do with these words I have made available through this book is up to the public to decide. They are in the public to be used as the public want and I do not have any control over that. And they will be very productive or not depending on what people do with it. I have tried to be historically consistent but that's all I can do. I don't have an intention or illusion of any control. If you want a more creative interpretation of Mead, go ahead.

A: There seems to be a prevalent metaphor of dialogue in Mead's writing and also in your interpretation of Mead. From my perspective, the Mead in your book may have been less misinterpreted if he was able to engage in a dialogue directly with readers through blogs etc. given his ability to merge logic and rhetoric.

F: We always read our authors in the present, and we must acknowledge this before we start saying anything about Mead himself. Of course, we can try to transcend context but always only to an extent. As to Mead and sociology today, to be honest I think there are a few areas where you have a lot to gain, but then again there are so many authors, and this is always the case in sociology. Here we have an extremely rich tradition to learn – if you want to engage in dialogue with your predecessors, do that with Mead, but not only with Mead. Human rights is an obvious area where you can engage with Mead, and I have been working on it for a while now and I am very convinced what Mead had to say about rights is not only original it is consistent, specifically for a sociological audience, gives you an alternative to the dominant perspective on rights. That is exactly what sociologists need at this moment in time if they want to study or support rights. And this is very interesting because Mead was writing at a time when he didn't have the UNDHR, but more importantly he didn't have the understanding of HR that we have. Our understanding of human rights as a very specific utopia, to do with representative democracy, advocacy, activism, is only something which occurs in the 1970s. So we're talking about an author whose theoretical model was developed 60 years before but at the same time, that structure is helpful for thinking about this problem. So context matters, but you can always transcend it. This is Mead, this is one author. But if you want to take the metaphor of dialogue seriously, you conceive of a different way to doing sociology. Instead of three founding fathers and the empirical study, you can actually mobilise a vast number of your resources, including resources beyond your own discipline. Because those voices are relevant and you can learn from them. If science is a problem-solving activity, what you need is important voices which help to tackle a problem. If they happen to be in sociology,

fine, and a lot of them will be. If they happen to be in economics, philosophy, history, then so be it. If you conceive of science as a particular method of problem solving, you have to become aware of how artificial scientific boundaries are. In the end, our conversations about funding and where to publish and so on, show a deep ignorance of what we are doing, what science and sociology are. And that, I'm afraid, I really dislike.

A: Two issues emerge from your thinking – Mead's new perspective on rights and the links between Mead's dialogical notion of the self and thought, and the horizontal dialogue of ANT. Rorty was an important voice in linking Mead's ideas to those of rights; could you reconstruct Mead's thoughts and comment on his presentation of rights and Mead?

F: The problem with Rorty is that he does not use Mead. His pragmatism is more Deweyian than Meadian or Piercean. He did have a very important thesis on human rights. The fact is, the way I reconstruct Mead's vision of human rights in the first section of the book is by challenging other interpretations of rights, one of which is pragmatist theories of human rights, only to show the extent to which they ignore Mead. Interestingly enough, however, in fields like law, especially in the US, people are using Mead's ideas. If you want to study critical conscience, especially from the 1960s onwards, you are most likely to read authors who are neo-Meadians because of the ideas of symbolic interactionism, the social self and particularly the generalised other. For legal scholars, these theories are perfect explanations for how people, as legal agents, have ideas about rights.

In sociology our existing approaches to rights tend to ignore Mead's contributions. But then again, it's very easy to go into the past and see forgotten voices. What I think you should do is study why. And then you have two main responses: because they weren't actually that good, or that they were interesting but there were other reasons why they were ignored. It is only when you have done this work that you can go back to the established classic and confirm that works are really "classic". If you want to say Hobbes' *Leviathan* is a major turning point in how we conceive of politics in the history of humanity, you have to know what was there before, what was in Hobbes' time and what came after. You have a pinnacle and a valley, and you have to know the valley in order to say – Hobbes was really a classic.

A: Returning to the topic of ANT, do you think Mead has a valuable claim on ANT, or vice versa? How can one learn from the other?

F: If you are interested in semiotics of materiality, if you are interested in how humans and nonhumans interact, then I think you have a very good reason to go back to Mead's work. Why? Because he has a theory of objects which includes material objects, abstract objects, social objects and the self as an object. This self-objectification, for Mead, is the basis of self-consciousness. Actually, you cannot understand Mead without this. So, human rights is a specific sort of object; a legal, abstract object whose history you can trace, whose beginning you can pinpoint. What ANT makes us aware of is that once these objects are in the world, created by us in historical settings, they impact upon us. So, in the particular case of human rights, they start constituting us from subjects into citizens. The same is

true of science; you are applying a theory, studying it, but at the same time the theory has an impact on you because you subscribe to it and start to see the world in the angle it presents it. And this is very Mead.

Now, do you have reason to use ANT to think about Mead? I think ANT has a lot to offer that has nothing to do with pragmatism or Mead, and that's a very good thing. I'm not saying that we should be experts on Mead; on the contrary, Mead is one voice amongst dozens, in the past and in the present. What I'm saying is – let's listen to everyone. But in order to avoid chaos, let's focus on the problem we are interested in. So if you are choosing a problem, my suggestion is try to work from the voices, the contributions that you believe are important to solve it. Those contributions may be from beyond your discipline, but in certain cases may include Mead. If it doesn't – no problem.

A: It's interesting you mention that Mead presents a view of objects coherent with ANT; on the contrary, my reading of Mead was that he presented a theory where 'selves' were firmly human and the social was constituted only by humans. But it is true that his theories objectify the self. Do you see a contradiction in this?

F: Clearly, Mead would not endorse the view that the human and nonhuman are both equal "objects". He was a humanist; human beings had a special place in society. And that, I think, marks a very decisive break between Mead and ANT. That said, I don't think we all have to be post-humanist. Some of us definitely are, and I think most of us aren't – and I think in ten years we will all be discussing something else. I think, again, that the metaphor of solving problems is useful here. If, right now, regarding the problem we are facing today, the metaphor of "flattening" the divide between humans and nonhumans is useful, then fine, let's do it. But as soon as we see it is creating more problems than it is solving, then let's resolve to create another metaphor. That is something intellectual history gives you; if you go back into history, you see a vast ocean of ideas, of ways of thinking that have a certain structure.

There is a certain novelty in the notion of innovation but it is variations on a theme. This goes back 2000-3000 years, they are traditions – conversations. The conversations change, sometimes become completely different – but they are still conversations. And that is what we have to gain from the past; to listen and engage, in a certain historical way, to those conversations. If you can get something from them, then going back to our present day problems, you have so much more to say. If there is something in our modern times that makes me sad, it is the idea that you can live without your predecessors – that you can trust your method or software because the figures, with the right methodology, give you a pretty good idea of the meaning of any study. I just don't think that is the case. I am completely convinced you can know more from one paragraph in Leviathan than many articles trying to crunch numbers. And the reason why is very simple. We don't ask ourselves, when doing studies and surveys – what does this mean? Who put the question first why, what are the concepts being used, and, crucially, how were they implemented? Sociologists don't ask these questions systematically, because you have a few weeks or days to publish your article – you take for granted that this is a science and is reliable. But by taking this for granted, you doing a disservice to science. A paragraph in Hobbes opens your eyes. Once you finish that paragraph you will think of the world in a different way.

And that is what I like to think of as science, the best of science – to pose questions, to disrupt ways of thinking. And again, most of the work we do nowadays is repetitive is repetitive, non-disruptive. And in the end it's plainly wrong, or irrelevant.

A: What do you think is the most important problem to be solved, apart from the many misdemeanours of sociology?

F: That's up to you to decide – that's exactly something I would never prescribe. I think I would be very happy to solve or think about 5 or 6 problems over my career. Problems I generally think are interesting. Once I get the problem, then I will find materials to help me navigate through the literature and then have something to say about it. But it's my problem.

A: So how do you engage with these problems, and what are the others besides human rights?

F: See, I don't like human rights! I am sceptical of the utopia of human rights. I am not an activist and will never be. Human rights are a fantastic object because they provide me with very difficult problems to solve from a sociological point of view. Sociologists so far have had difficulties in dealing with this concept, which is a very difficult one. It's impossible not to think about politics today with human rights. At the same time, sociology had very little to say about human rights. You have activists, philosophers, legal theorists but not sociologists. And that was the reason I chose to study it; I have no interest at all in human rights.

A: Interestingly, sociologists and anthropologists seem generally more sceptical of human rights.

F: One of the reasons I don't like human rights is that if you criticise it, think about the position you are putting yourself in – you are supporting dictatorships, torture. How can you criticise human rights. This is in my view, antidemocratic, and also a fascinating thing to study.

A: The problem with human rights as a concept is precisely that it is presented as so unproblematic. It seems like part of your project, taking seriously the claims Mead has on human rights, is somewhat Foucauldian, in reconstructing one string of Mead's thought and presenting a genealogy of his ideas. Have you engaged with Foucault's thought in your work on Mead?

F: My work with Mead is more a genealogy than an archaeology. But no – I wasn't thinking about Foucault. Of course, he is an influence because Skinner is influenced by Foucault. But I have become more interested in Foucault – not because of Mead – but in the idea of historical discontinuity. One of my lines of research regards social rights back home, during a revolutionary period. So you have a political revolution, a constitutional revolution, and I did an ethnography of that period. So nothing to do with Mead at first, until you start thinking about what to say about it. I am a social theorist and it took me awhile but then, what I did have to say about it was the idea that you can see the history of that country (or

any country) as partly informed by a political narrative. This comes back to genealogy, as well.

In the Portuguese case the political narrative is one of democracy. In 1974-5, we are becoming a democracy, we are breaking away from the dictatorial past, from poverty. We are moving to a future of parliamentary democracy and also development. The welfare state becomes pivotal. The democratic state is co-original with the welfare state, in that country. The implications were tremendous. In the next 25 years you have the building of institutional democracy. At the same time you have the building of a national health service, social security and so on. So this narrative informs, socialises, an entire generation. This is the first discontinuity. But then you have the crisis in 2008, and now you are living the second discontinuity, because this narrative is being put into question. The new narrative is that we no longer can afford the welfare state, we have to recalibrate, to cut. But then, the welfare state is linked to democracy. If you say one of these two has to go, what happens to democracy? So you have a huge political debate about the future of the welfare state but also about the future of the democratic regime. So if you look at these two discontinuities, you see how all the figures you can give me about economic development and voting behaviour and so on can only make sense if take the question of “what does this mean” into account. If you don’t take this into account, you simply won’t “get it”. And this is very Foucauldian, one way of looking at the past using Foucault.

F: The topic of the welfare state is very pertinent to Mead, and the reader includes many articles displaying Mead’s engagement with social issues in his own community, specifically his article discussing the merits of social settlements in Chicago. He uses the Heideggerian metaphor of “neighbourliness” and shared experience as a fact of being to solve the problems of poverty and illiteracy. That seems like an example of Mead’s thinking being a very useful way to think about the problem of poverty and the welfare state today. Are there any more examples you think are pertinent?

A: If you abandon the paradigm of the lonely agent, the thinking, solitary agent and you endorse this more social, interactionist perspective on agency, then there is scope to apply this to science, social problems or, as you were saying, the welfare state. The impact of that first conception of agency determines how you conceive of the specific problem. In terms of Mead’s work on social settlements, it’s part of who he was, rather than how he thought of issues. Mead’s civic activities are an aspect of his life that should be emphasised. For many years, he did not write a book but was very engaged with a vast number of activities in Chicago, such as immigration and poverty, and dozens more. And this is just one example of him trying to do something. Being there, and doing something as a member of the community, as a citizen. But he was also a faculty member in a very prestigious university and so when he spoke, people listened. And when he spoke, he would speak from his perspective, he would apply his ideas. But I would like to stress that he was first and foremost a civic agent consistently engaged in his community. I was say that is true of almost all of Mead’s generation. If you want to study, say, feminism, it is the same thing. You have a number of social issues which are now very trendy, but then were not at all. And people like Mead were at the forefront of putting these problems on the agenda and

fighting for them. I have read the correspondence, there are days in the entries where he describes the bodies of the dead lying in the streets because of the riots. Violence on a level that we cannot imagine today was very much part of the surroundings of these people. They were there, trying to do something about it, and in this sense they are radically democratic. This is something I tend to repeat which some of my readers don't like, because they tend to see Mead as more conservative. But if you see the evidence, this is wrong; he was radically democratic.

A: Activism is a very interesting topic; sociology and social theory seems to get involved in great debates but is distinctly separate from political ones. The decline of critical sociology and activism as we knew could be seen as evident with the rise of ANT and other such disciplines. Do you agree?

F: I am a bit wary of “engaged” sociology in general, for the simple reason that I have seen how it can blur facts. Not to sound old-fashioned, but you do have an orientation towards truthfulness. Again, I see first-hand how easy it is to forget this with a political agenda. Now, I love politics, and I am very politically oriented, but if I did politics I would cease to be a social scientist. I would run for office, get elected, then do my thing as a politician. I would not mix those two facets of my life because I think that the risk of contaminating my objectivity is too high. I try to do my work as rigorously as possible. One of the reasons why I do not like to study things that I love is because I think the risk would be too great. So this gives me a detachment, a distance, to think more freely. That is what I really cherish, to think freely without any restraint. In terms of politics and sociology, of society, I think people will listen to you if what you are saying is original, consistent and fresh. In terms of orientation, I think we should have clear principles because I have seen how easy it is to impose my own subjective beliefs into our work. I think that is a disservice to the disservice.

A: Returning to Mead, do you think his civic engagement was a detriment to his social theory?

F: The topic of disciplinary boundaries was something I was working on years ago, when I began my work on Mead. If you read his work you see he was aware of this conflict, this tension between two facets, a classic Weberian notion, of course. You see the tension but you also see a priority emerge between science, politics and social psychology. Mead is first and foremost a scientist, so impartiality is what really matters. And he applies this to problems, such as the social self and so on. His is not a perspective that looks at problems first, then returns to science. It is the other way around. So in that sense, he managed to conciliate a rigorous academic activity with a very genuine civic engagement. But that is because they were separate. He was a citizen of Chicago and he was also an academic, writing articles and teaching, and he also had a nice family. Human being, several facets.

Notes

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