1978

George Herbert Mead And Social Reform: His Work And Writings

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GEORGE HERBERT MEAD AND SOCIAL REFORM: 
HIS WORK AND WRITINGS

MARY JO DEEGAN AND JOHN S. BURGER

G. H. Mead, the eminent social psychologist, had an active civic life. His work in social reform was directly influenced by and derived from his philosophy of man and society. This facet of his life is relatively unexamined today, although most of his publications during his lifetime were concerned with the application of science for the good of the community.

There are two popular myths concerning the eminent philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead: that he published little during his lifetime and that *Mind, Self, and Society* is his most important sociological work. This misrepresentation of Mead’s contributions is partially grounded in the neglect of his work and writings on social reform. The misrepresentation of the significance of the almost seventy articles Mead wrote during his lifetime distorts the meaning of his concepts and has profound implications for symbolic interactionists who claim Mead as one of their founding fathers.

We accept Joan Huber’s thesis that “the SI (symbolic interaction) tradition shares with the philosophy of pragmatism, from which it originates, an epistemology which makes it reflect the social biases of the researcher and of the people whose behavior is observed.”

In this article we will document some of Mead’s concern with the use of science for the betterment of society. The areas he studied included labor, the social settlement, education, justice, and ethics. His work for a school for handicapped children and participation in a citizens’ committee involved in the settlement of a labor dispute provide documented support of his application and development of pragmatic philosophy and illuminate some of his social biases.

**MEAD: HIS PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND REFORM**

There is a consistent attempt in all of Mead’s published writings to understand the development of society through time. Society is seen as steadily improving in an evolutionary manner, which could occur at an even faster rate through the application of intelligence and science to the resolution of social problems. The relation between science and social problems leads to analytic thought.

The authors wish to acknowledge and thank the following people who read earlier drafts of this paper: Gregory P. Stone, Alan P. Bates, John Breamen, Joan Huber, Inge Worth, and David Lewis. The authors take final responsibility for the statements made in this paper.

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Contary to the assertion that Mead’s “central preoccupation is with the genesis of the self and the nature of mind,” T. V. Smith, a former student and colleague of Mead, writes, “Amelioration Through Understanding — that is the most dominant motif in Mead’s social philosophy.” Mead expresses this motif when he states that scientists are problem solvers: “This is what we are doing: we are solving problems, and those problems can appear only in the experience of the individual. It is that which gives the importance to the individual, gives them a value which cannot be stated.” An individual can usually solve problems peculiar to himself, and this self-understanding becomes more effective through the use of science: “It [science] is an instrument by means of which mankind, the community, gets control over its environment.”

The development of intelligence is dependent upon the emergence of a self that is a function of the evolution of society:

A self which is so evidently a social individual that it can exist only in a group of social individuals is as much a result of the process of evolution as other biological forms. A form that can co-operate with others and respond to them, is possible through the development of great tracts in the central nervous system that are connected without processes of articulation, with the ear and so with the various movements that can go on in the human form.

The examination of the biological basis of man, the evolution of society which is mirrored in the development of the self, and the use of science as a method for the individual to change society and, in effect, to change the generalized other, are all componental aspects of Mead’s view of man, his mind and self.

The following sections examine these concepts in relation to Mead’s special activities in social reform.

The Chicago Physiological School

At the invitation of John Dewey, Mead went to the University of Chicago in 1894. In 1899 Mary R. Campbell (the founder and director of the Chicago Physiological School) approached officials at the University of Chicago about opening a school for children who were unable to function in public schools. Miss Campbell summarized the populations and purpose of the school as follows:

The school will be prepared to furnish instruction either by classes at the Hospital School or private instruction by the hour, in the correction of speech defects and speech inaccuracies. This phase of work will cover cases of stammering, stuttering, major and minor speech inaccuracies — enunciation, pronunciation, cases of retarded speech development, and lip-reading whereby those having lost hearing may be taught to read lips of others. Instruction will also be given to young deaf children, and children of slightly imperfect hearing.

As early as October 1900, President William R. Harper contacted Mead concerning the school’s association with the University: “The Board of Affiliations have voted to recommend the Chicago Physiological School as under the supervision of the University provided the departments of Philosophy and Neurology will assume the responsibility. Will you kindly consult with Mr. Donaldson and report about this matter.”

It seems safe to assume that Mead willingly responded to this request. Immediately prior to this time, in 1899, he had published “The Working Hypothesis in Social Reform.” We infer from Mead’s concern with the amelioration of social problems through the application of social science that he envisioned the hospital as a setting for generating and testing “working hypotheses.” (The possible influence of the school on Mead’s theoretical framework is discussed below.)
Shortly after this, a prestigious board of trustees was assembled with Mead as its president. Other members of the board were President Harper; Nicholas Senn of Rush Medical College; Henry H. Donaldson, Chief Consulting Neurologist at the University of Chicago; and James Rowland Angell and John Dewey of the Department of Philosophy at the University.

The remaining school records point to a shaky financial base, which led to the board assuming full responsibility for the school on 24 September 1902. The first indication of financial trouble came when Donaldson had to take out a personal note against the school's debts in April 1903. This action temporarily ameliorated the problem, but in September, Mead, Donaldson, and Harper were forced to reorganize the board to save the school. Reorganization and increased tuitions reduced the debt by $2,400 in April 1903. The improved financial situation prompted Miss Campbell to suggest the appointment of a building committee. Soon new board members joined expressly to help the building committee, and Miss Campbell found a donor willing to contribute $20,000.

Unfortunately, the improvement in finances was only temporary. In August 1903, McKeown Brothers, a carpentry and building firm, asked payment of their long overdue bill of $314.15. A second major debt of well over $1,000 was owed Marshall Field & Co. Representatives of the company began pressing for payment in October, and Mead wrote to Harper agreeing that Marshall Field should be paid first. "Mr. Donaldson and I agree with you that Mr. Selfridge's offer to wipe out the debt of Marshall Field & Co. against the Hospital School for $600.00 should be accepted, and that we three should agree to make up what the School cannot advance in case it is not able to raise the entire sum."

Mead, Donaldson, and Harper made desperate efforts to raise the money to pay the school's debts without having to use more of their own money. They were able to do this in March 1904, when Mead reported they had settled the McKeown account for $235. They were the only remaining board members by March of that year, and having taken complete responsibility for the school's difficulties, each felt morally obligated to pay the debts and keep their standing in the community. Obviously, Mead was actively involved in the management of the school and committed to its survival.

The direct scientific impact of the school's population on Mead's work cannot be clearly determined, but one can assume from his profound interest in physiological psychology and the biologically based development of human behavior that he was strongly involved in scientific examinations of the physically and mentally handicapped. One can infer the importance of the school on Mead's writing by examining his publications from two different periods. The first set was published during the school's existence, or immediately after its closing, and the second includes posthumous publications from Mead's class notes, written more than two decades later. Selected quotations from all of these writings support our interpretation of the importance of physical and mental handicaps for Mead's theoretical framework.

Mead assumed that all social action was based on the "biologic individual." Although he generally analyzed only the "normal" body, on occasion he did comment specifically on the handicapped. Referring to communication, he writes:

This process is, of course, dependent upon a certain physiological structure: if the individual was not sensitive to his own stimuli which are essential to the carrying-out of the response to the other form, such communication could not take place. In fact we find that in the case of the deaf and dumb, if no care is given to the development of language, the child does not develop normal intelligence, but remains on the level of lower animals.
Mead wrote of the deaf on several occasions and emphasized the vocal gesture:

The vocal gesture is of peculiar importance because it reacts upon the individual who makes it in the same fashion that it reacts upon another, but this is also true in a less degree of those of one's own gestures that he can see or feel.25

The vocal gesture is not the only form which can serve for the building-up of a "me," as is abundantly evident from the building-up gestures of the deafmutes. Any gesture by which the individual can himself be affected as others are affected, and which therefore tends to call out in him a response as it would call it out in another, will serve as a mechanism for the construction of a self.26

The physical capacity to act is mentioned throughout Mead's writings. It is extensively considered in The Philosophy of the Act, with such concepts as "image," "sensation," and "manipulation." For example, Mead writes, "The human animal thus sees physical things, i.e., the initiated manipulatory response in the distant stimulus that sets free the activity of the organism."27 Similarly, the hand is vital for human behavior, "The great importance of the human hand for perception lies in the fact that it is essentially mediatory within the organic acts out of which the physiological process of life is made up."28

We see, then, that the handicapped person's social conduct and stimulation may be curtailed by both physical and mental handicaps. The social act is narrowed and confined by the handicap, and the ability of the individual to make gestures is limited. Education, another major interest of Mead's while the school was in operation, can be seen as a pragmatic step to aid the handicapped in constructing a social self. An in-depth discussion of Mead's physiological psychology is obviously beyond the scope of this article; nevertheless, there is strong support for our inference that Mead was concerned with the Hospital School for both altruistic and scientific reasons.

The Hospital School itself conducted a sizable amount of research which Mead supported wholeheartedly. Results of at least three different experimental studies were published during the short life of the school.29 In the case of "subnormal" children, Mead, Miss Campbell, and other researchers at the Hospital School sought to define the children in need of special education. At the turn of the century investigators were not even certain who belonged to this group or what term should be used to describe them.

Despite the ultimate financial collapse of the school, Mead retained a strong interest in and commitment to the existence of such an agency. In 1908 he wrote to President H. P. Judson of the University of Chicago seeking the establishment of a similar school and asserting its value for research, "The work commanded the immediate interest of the psychological and neurological departments."30 He maintained his belief in the potential benefits of such an approach, but he was unsuccessful in his attempts to convince others at the University.

The 1910 Garment Workers' Strike

Mead's second major "scientific application" of knowledge to social problems occurred during a labor dispute. During October of 1910 two young women sparked a wildcat strike in the men's ready-made clothing industry in Chicago.31 The strike began because of wage cuts and poor working conditions. Workers at Hart, Schaffner and Marx were the first to leave their benches, but within a few weeks 40,000 garment workers were out on the picket line, supported by the International Garment Workers' Union.
On 10 October 1910 a citizens' committee held a meeting at the home of Mrs. Louise deKoven Bowen, the treasurer of the Hull House Association, to discuss how to bring an early end to the garment workers' strike. Present were men and women from the social work community, civic reform leaders, and university professors like Mead and C. R. Henderson. The Committee selected a subcommittee to investigate conditions and workers' grievances. The subcommittee consisted of Mead, who was chairman, Sophonisba Breckinridge, a political scientist and social worker, and Anna Nicholes, the head of Northwestern's Neighborhood House.

Until a few years before the strike, most clothing was made at home or in small shops. It was only recently that Hart, Schaffner and Marx had organized a factory system for making clothing. Unfortunately, the system retained many of the bad features of the sweatshop operation, including the brutality of the foremen. In addition, many of the workers were immigrants from Eastern Europe who did not speak English. Mead felt that they were helpless, in need of protection, and were victims of the industry's transitional disorganization. In addition to these problems, there were rush and slack seasons. During the rush season garment employees were overworked, and in the slack season they were laid off to reduce costs and therefore could not earn enough to support their families.

Mead and the subcommittee made an in-depth investigation and reported to the citizens' committee on 5 November 1910. Mead, Breckinridge, and Nicholes met with striker representatives from the International Garment Workers Union of America (IGWUA), Thomas A. Rickert and Samuel Landers; M. Harry Hart of Hart, Schaffner and Marx; Harry Pflaum, president of the Wholesale Clothiers Association (WCA); and E. J. Rose of the National Wholesale Tailors Association (NWTA), in an attempt to end the strike.

The subcommittee interviewed a number of strikers representing the employees of seventeen firms and thirty-one shops out of the forty-one under the control of Hart, Schaffner and Marx. These workers represented various skills, such as pressing, cutting, basting, stitching, and finishing. Mead found that grievances took different forms depending on the worker's intelligence and skill.

The grievance mentioned most frequently was that supervisors constantly attempted to increase the speed of the workers' output or the complexity of the task without corresponding increases in pay. Other complaints were the maintenance of shop discipline through the use of fines and penalties; the payment of foremen on the basis of their department's output (a practice Mead found particularly abusive); the undermining of personal freedom through continual supervision; the distribution of work during the rush and slack seasons (the factories continued to employ people during the slack seasons but did not pay them enough to survive); the hiring of too many apprentices, thus undercutting the wages of the skilled workers and; the inadequate training of apprentices.

Mead found that complaints about wages centered on the tendency to reduce the scale of wages by the dismissal of higher paid workers and the diminished demand for skill compared with speed. The last major complaint Mead's committee discovered was the existence of a blackball list that employers kept at a central employment office.

Mead felt that the only way employees could be protected was to establish a committee of employees and employers who would arbitrate grievances. It was no small matter, however, to bring together the various parties to work out a settlement.

The major conflicting groups in the dispute were the workers as represented by the IGWUA and its president, Thomas Rickert, the WCA represented by Harry Pflaum,
and the NWTA represented by E. J. Rose. This also included Hart, Schaffner and Marx, where the strike had originated. Other groups had to contend or cooperate with the Womens Trade Union League, the Chicago Federation of Labor headed by John Fitzpatrick, and Mayor Fred Busse. In November of 1910 the City Council set up a committee including Mayor Busse, City Clerk Connery, and three members of the Council to bring the strikers and manufacturers together to settle the strike. 37

The major impasse was the Association Houses, composed of clothing manufacturers representing the employers.

The Association Houses refuse to submit any grievances to arbitration. They state that they have received no statement of grievances from their employees. This is a subterfuge which can deceive no one. They certainly know as well as the community that the same sense of grievance existed in their establishments as existed in the shops of Hart, Schaffner and Marx, that the unanimous response of their employees to the call for the strike by the workers who went out from Hart, Schaffner and Marx could never have been if there were not the same reasons brought out [by] the workers from the shops of that firm. They have received from the representatives of their employees whom they refuse to recognize the statement of their grievances. These have been sent through the mails to all of these Houses. 38

Mead concluded that the Association Houses were open to the severest condemnation by the public. 39 At a meeting held at the University of Chicago on 30 November 1910 Mead said, “The public is justified in demanding that the central question be settled rationally.”

Mead, Professor Henderson, and other members of the subcommittee met with representatives of a number of the larger manufacturing houses on 2 November 1910 in an effort to pave the way for a settlement. Mead, along with others, sought to have the two sides agree to arbitration and some form of shop organization where workers could air their grievances and expect to get a fair hearing. 40 Three days later negotiations began between President Rickert (of the IGWUA) and some larger firms. 41 That same day the subcommittee reported to the citizens’ committee that “[there are] many grievances among the employees which they say can be remedied only through some form of shop organization which will protect individual workers from the petty tyranny of foremen who receive bonuses if they can turn out more than the regular amount of work in a specified time.” 42 Mead and members of the subcommittee appear to have been able to convince officials of Hart, Schaffner and Marx that arbitration was the appropriate way to settle the dispute, but settlement of the strike did not take place at that time. Mead and later Mayor Busse had not foreseen the workers’ unwillingness to settle and were unable to get the Association Houses to negotiate.

Conditions worsened, and Mrs. Joseph T. (Louise deKoven) Bowen, treasurer of an emergency milk fund, reported that 5,000 babies were starving from lack of milk and food. 43 On 3 December 1910, the Chicago Record Herald reported that the situation was at a deadlock because the associations refused to meet with the union, contrary to the workers’ demand that they do so. 44 A few days later the picture was still dark, but Mead, and others mentioned above, persuaded Hart, Schaffner and Marx to agree to remove as many grievances as possible that had been directly or indirectly responsible for the strike. 45 This opened the way for two months of negotiations between the workers, the unions (although they were never recognized), and Hart, Schaffner and Marx. Neither Mead, nor the Mayor, nor the workers could get the Association Houses to meet and resolve their differences.
Mead succeeded, with others, in getting Hart, Schaffner and Marx to negotiate and ultimately agree to arbitrate through the offices of an arbitration board. Despite the inequities endured by the workers, it was not until January of 1911 that some of the smaller companies began to settle and that the rank and file were also willing to accept the idea of arbitration. They feared that the company would fire them for being union supporters and would continue to use the foremen and shop inspectors to harass them. Mead appears to have understood their fears, as well as the basic issues which had precipitated the strike. On 14 January 1911, the workers and Hart, Schaffner and Marx finally settled.46

The company agreed to establish a labor department under the direction of E. D. Howard. More important, they agreed to the appointment of an arbitration board. On 14 January 1911, the workers engaged Clarence Darrow, the nationally known civil libertarian attorney, to represent them, and the company appointed Carl Meyer as their representative. There was to be a third representative selected by both sides, but after their first choice declined, the two men went ahead and worked out a settlement on various issues that were presented to them at a week-long meeting.47

The Arbitration Board heard the workers' grievances and, significantly, the company and the workers now agreed, through the Arbitration Board, that they should create a committee, a trade board, as a court of original hearing. It became apparent to the members of the Arbitration Board that:

because of the inadequate machinery at its disposal, [the Arbitration Board] was unable as a court of first instance to speedily and properly adjust all of the various questions arising — many of them of a technical nature and requiring practical tailoring experience and technical knowledge. . . . As a result of the said meeting the said corporation and its employees entered into an agreement, dated April 1, 1912, appointing this committee and authorizing it to establish a Trade Board to sit as a court of original hearing in all grievances arising between said corporation and its employees and to make such rules and regulations for the carrying on of the work of said Trade Board as the committee should consider proper.48

This agreement between the workers and Hart, Schaffner and Marx set the pattern for future labor agreements.49

For the scholar, the importance of Mead's work is his operationalizing of his working hypothesis.50 In the garment workers' strike Mead addressed a specific problem that needed resolution. He and the subcommittee made an investigation of all conflicting interests with this hypothesis in mind. Mead, like other pragmatists, believed man's behavior is governed by laws that can be influenced and changed. He did not envision a perfect world on a fixed ideal; rather, he believed that:

a conception of a different world comes to us always as the result of some specific problem which involves readjustment of the world as it is, not to meet a detailed ideal of a perfect universe, but to obviate the present difficulty; and the test of the effort lies in the possibility of this readjustment fitting into the world as it is. . . . Our reflective consciousness as applied to conduct is . . . an identification of our effort with the problem that presents itself, and the developmental process by which it is overcome, and researches its highest expression in the scientific statement of the problem and the recognition and use of scientific method and control.51

Basic to Mead's work in the garment workers' strike was his conviction that the environment could be altered and that the best method to determine those changes was the application of the scientific method and reflective consciousness.
Activities and Commitment to Other Social Problems

Mead strongly believed in the equality of man and the need to bring about a democratic world. Equality had not been realized, wrote Mead, but its realization had to be demanded. He believed that our institutions and government were seldom democratic and, more generally, were controlled by a minority. Despite this inequity, the ideal of democracy should not be surrendered, but maintained because man needs ideals. On a more concrete level, Mead participated in the Progressive Movement in an effort to realize his aspirations. In 1920 he was president of the City Club of Chicago, a municipal civic organization, and actively participated in committees of the group in attempts to eliminate corruption in the city. He also wrote several articles on labor that were published in the *City Club Bulletin*.

Mead supported women's suffrage and the fight for women's equality. In 1912 he spoke at a suffrage meeting, and in either 1917 or 1918 he marched down Michigan Avenue in the company of John Dewey, Jane Addams, and other distinguished Chicago citizens, for women's suffrage. In a personal letter to his daughter-in-law he supported her interest in a professional career and spoke of the need for women to become involved in daily life outside the home, thus displaying the consistent nature of his beliefs in equality.

In 1927 democratic ideals may have had a part in Mead's assisting Captain Harry F. Dean, a Black sea captain, to get his autobiography published. Dean had returned to Chicago after spending several years in California, where he promoted trade and commerce between the United States and West Africa. He founded and operated a nautical school for Black sailors, hoping to make Blacks a seafaring people, because he believed that the most powerful nations were those with commercial and military navies. Mead, in conjunction with Edward Schiebner Ames from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, introduced Dean to Sterling North, a young poet who helped Dean write his autobiography.

Conclusion

Consistent with his philosophical pragmatism, Mead believed in practical working solutions based on the scientific method and repeatedly acted on that belief. He felt that social and physical problems both impede the evolutionary progress of man and stimulate reflexive thought and the development of intelligence. His activities in social reform provided an arena both for developing his hypotheses about social problems and the nature of man, and for testing them.

At the beginning of this article it was suggested that the prevalent opinion that Mead published little during his lifetime and that his major preoccupation was the genesis of the self and the nature of the mind, is challenged by Mead's work and publications in the area of social reform. These publications are an integral and significant part of his thought.

If the assertions made here are accepted, then it is necessary to ask how this major area of work and influence was so easily ignored. First, the popular notion that the individual citizen could adequately deal with social problems became less viable as a result of the Depression and the obvious inability of philanthropy and the scientific method to deal with the problems resulting from economic collapse. Second, after Mead's death in the early 1930s, sociology generally moved away from reform or amelioration as a proper goal of the discipline. Positivistic sociology, and particularly value-free sociology, emerged as a strong element within the profession. Third, *Mind, Self, and Society*, one of
the most influential posthumous publications, is based on the 1927 lectures in Mead’s social psychology course. The same course taught at a different time or others taught by Mead could have emphasized ideas in social reform, pragmatism, and social change which could extend or modify those concepts presented in the posthumous publications now available. This assertion is supported by David Miller’s comment on John M. Brewster’s class notes:

I am somewhat confused about them since Mind, Self, and Society was taken from 1927 class notes, according to Morris’s introduction, but they are not the same. The same subjects and problems are discussed, but from a most refreshing new angle and often, I think, more penetratingly. Mead may have given the same course twice that year. These are very good and I think they should be published.58

The contributions that Mead made in his total approach to social behavior have only begun to be examined. Contrary to a predicted decline in the vitality of symbolic interaction,59 its proponents appear to be exploring new intellectual depths within a burgeoning national network.

NOTES

11. Ibid., p. 360.
12. Ibid., p. 382.
13. The hospital had three names during its brief existence: the Chicago Physiological School, the Chicago Hospital School for Nervous and Delicate Children, and the Hospital School for Abnormal and Delicate Children.
15. Harper to Mead, 11 October 1900, Presidents Papers.
16. Members of the School came from the Departments of Sociology, Philosophy, Economics, and Education. As pragmatists they were active in social reform at Hull House, the Chicago Settlement House, the Chicago Civic Federation, the Chicago Civic Club, and similar organizations. Chicago was an experimental laboratory for these scholars. It seemed natural that Mead would be active in the social reform movement because of his pragmatic philosophy and the work of his colleagues. For further discussion on these Chicago pragmatists see Darnell Rucker, *The Chicago Pragmatists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969).
17. Campbell to Harper, 24 September 1902, Presidents Papers; Report of the Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the Chicago Hospital School, 19 April 1903, Presidents Papers.
20. Mead to Campbell, 5 March 1904, Presidents Papers.
24. Ibid., p. 234.
30. Mead to Judson, 2 December 1908, Presidents Papers.
34. Ibid.
35. George Herbert Mead Papers, University of Chicago Archives, hereafter cited as Mead Papers, Box 9, no. 22.
36. Mead Papers, Box 9, no. 22, pp. 3-6.
38. Mead Papers, Box 9, no. 22, subcommittee report.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 28 November 1910.
44. Ibid., 3 December 1910.
45. Mead Papers, Box 9, no. 22.
47. Mead Papers, Box 9, no. 22.
51. Ibid., p. 371.
54. Irene T. Mead to authors, 7 July 1975.
55. George Herbert Mead to Irene T. Mead, 28 August 1920. Mead Papers, Box 9, no. 22.
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