

A Classic with no Author

G.H. Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society*

Filipe Carreira da Silva (ICS-UL); Mónica Brito Vieira (York University)

Introduction

Founding fathers and classic texts are the main protagonists of a certain way of viewing the history, and of thereby defining the identity, of different disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. However, the relationship between authors, texts and authorial-textual achievement is arguably a complex one, and it has produced a vast literature and heated debates over the last few decades. It is by achieving a classical standing that a text contributes to an author's canonization as one of the discipline's greats. But despite the agentic and individualistic connotations of the "author" concept, it is not always possible to trace exemplary texts back to a determinate author, who can be posited as their source. Texts can become classics in their own right, even when their authorship is loosely collective, doubtful or unknown. There can be, so to speak, a relative autonomy of texts regarding authors. Sometimes this results in equivocal situations and phony performances. Just consider the recent *faux pas* of India's foreign minister, S.M. Krishna, who inadvertently read out the speech of the Portuguese foreign minister at a UN Security Council meeting.¹ But the relative autonomy of texts vis-à-vis their purported sources does not only produce embarrassing political situations like the one described. It can, and often does, raise serious scholarly questions. It is one such case we discuss in this chapter. The text is *Mind, Self, and Society*, and the author is George Herbert Mead.

The placing of an author name on a text has momentous consequences for the way in which that text is understood and evaluated. This is because the mere suggestion of “authorship” triggers sweeping and relatively unexamined views on literary property, the origins of a text and the identity of the person accountable for it. *Mind, Self, and Society* is a unique site for questioning these assumptions about the relationship between authors, texts and authorial-textual achievement. In it the naming of an individual as author conceals questions of the utmost importance regarding what counts as an author. Yet this circumstance did not prevent that text from being retrospectively sought as the foundation of a distinctive sociological approach, and turned into a sociological classic (Camic, 2008: 326). Alongside books such as Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Howard Becker’s *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), or Herbert Blumer’s *Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method* (1969), *Mind, Self, and Society*, a monograph edited by Charles Morris and published by the University of Chicago Press in 1934, has come to be regarded as one of the seminal texts responsible for establishing symbolic interactionism as a distinctive sociological tradition.

One would look in vain for a categorical set of evaluative criteria defining the classicality of a text. And one would certainly be misguided in concentrating exclusively on the intellectual merits of the text, if one’s purpose is to understand how it came to achieve classical standing. Texts such as *Mind, Self, and Society* do not achieve such a standing for factors residing in the text itself alone. Their classic status is contingent on their appropriation by subsequent generations of practitioners in the field, and from a complex process of transmission and diffusion where they find “agencies”, namely individuals and institutions, committed to their promotion (Baehr, 2002: 133). Internal and external factors are interwoven, however. These texts are

classics because they have a life beyond their own time of publication, which is conferred upon them by their being continually read and reflected upon. The continuity of this appropriation depends, in turn, on their lasting cultural resonance, flexibility and utility for the scholarly community employing them. This can reflect itself, for instance, in the text's ability to open new avenues of research and provide an exemplar to subsequent generations on how to conduct research in the field. In addition, and crucially, the canonisation of sociological classic texts also performs important disciplinary self-legitimizing and integrative functions. As R.W. Connell puts it, the canon provides "a symbolic focus, a shared language, and some kind of identity, for academics and students in sociology", who are increasingly entrenched in uncommunicative specialized subfields (Connell, 1997: 1544). In fact, in the past few decades, the disciplinary self-consciousness of these functions, and their connection to a politics of disciplinary legitimation (Wolin 1981), has grown substantially. Each year an overwhelming quantity of monographs and journal articles are published discussing what a canon is, which authors and texts belong to it, and why (e.g. How 2007, 2016). Positions such as Robert K. Merton's distinction between the history and the systematics of theory have suffered a powerful blow by this post-positivist, new history of science, whose arguments and empirical evidence are simply too significant to be ignored (see Lamont 1988). As a result, it is increasingly difficult to perpetuate a mythological view of the past according to which sociology emerged as the effort of the "Marx-Weber-Durkheim" quasi-divine trio, followed by a second team of founding fathers, of which Mead would be part. Textbooks provide a good illustration of this: a rapid glance at the major social theory textbooks published in the last five years shows that in virtually all of them at least some effort of contextualizing the contributions from past authors has been made.²

Sociology's social constructionist view of its own past is not limited to these novel empirical or deconstructive approaches to the discipline's history, although it necessarily includes them.³ If one takes a post-modern, relativistic approach, the main virtue of applying the social constructionist thesis to sociology itself is that one can deconstruct its canon radically, by showing that canonization has little to do with a work's intrinsic value, and almost everything to do with hegemonic domination, resulting in arbitrary patterns of inclusion and exclusion.⁴ This view falls into the trap of finding an excessive intentionality on the part of the sociological community in the construction of the canon, while, at the same, it turns the blind eye to the long debates, probing theoretical confrontations, and continual critical engagement that classical texts undergo in that community, and that validate classical texts as such. Others, such as Connell, hold a more sophisticated view. They argue that it is not enough to use social constructionism to expose the artifactual nature of the canon and to turn the exclusions constructing the discipline into part of its self-knowledge. It is equally important to employ the constructionist approach to replace a pseudo-history of a few towering figures and classic texts, mainly concerned with the process of modernization, with the history of sociology as a collective product, shaped by social relations, engaging a vast number of practitioners, and being primarily formed within the culture of imperialism. This she designates as an "encyclopaedic view" of the sociological past. Such a sociological history of the discipline, it is claimed, yields significant theoretical dividends, especially the re-conceptualisation of the nature of sociology, and of which problems count as sociological problems, namely by pushing gender, sexuality and race relations, "core issues for evolutionary sociology", from the margins back into the mainstream of sociological inquiry (Connell, 1997: 1545). What this approach fails to address, however, is how we are to deal with the

complexity generated by an encyclopaedic view of the past, and, more importantly, how we are put this view to perform major functions currently performed by the classics: namely, the reduction of complexity (Alexander, 1989: 27); the representation of paradigmatic choices and theoretical dilemmas (Sherman 1974); the offering of models of exemplary practice (Mills 1959); the provision of “toolkits” of concepts, vital perspectives and methods which might guide actual social research endeavors (Coser 1981). Can sociology as a discipline afford to do without these functions? Additionally, it is not always clear whether the encyclopaedic view is merely replacing a master narrative of sociology, or a myth of monogenesis, with another, and retrospectively seeking a new meta-foundation to anachronistically legitimize the disciplinary centrality of the theorist’s own research agenda. However, the proponents of the encyclopaedic view are correct in emphasizing some potential positive impacts of a better and more inclusive history of social theory on the practice of theory making. A case in point is the work of Hans Joas, who puts the historically rigorous reconstruction of a social constructionist intellectual tradition at the heart of his strategy of doing theory. Joas typically moves back and forth between the production of a sophisticated historical scholarship on classical American pragmatism, with an emphasis on Mead’s work, and the development of his own sociological theory of action, which extracts from this historical labour key insights into the way to overarch the traditional dichotomy between rational action and normatively oriented action (Joas 1996). Better history of a relatively marginalized sociological tradition is put here at the service of innovative theory building.

Sociological classicality will be always dependent on such a dialectic of the value of a text and the richness of its interpretative appropriation. But, as Peter Baehr rightly stresses, not “all classics follow the *same* pattern in attaining their status” or

“become classics for the *same* reasons” (2002: 119 – our emphasis). The singular process through which *Mind, Self, and Society* achieved a classical standing, we will see, throws much needed light onto the complexities of the process of canon-formation in sociology. But before we embark on the analysis of our case study a couple of preliminary remarks are in order.

Although sociology, the so-called “science of modernity”, was born out of Enlightenment secularism and empiricism, its self-understanding is still very much permeated by religious ideas. In particular, the process of canonization of an author or a text as a “sociological classic” bears some resemblance with certain religious rituals, from the Roman Catholic Church’s process of beatification to ancient sacred totemism. The core meaning of the word “canon” is “rule” or “measure”, and it became quickly entangled with the notion of “authority”, a normative sense of “canon” that was strongly reinforced by its application to a Church edict or, more generally, to the group of texts accepted as “authentic” or “sacred” by a particular religion. If it is true that the sociological canonical texts, unlike the theological ones, are neither determined by decree nor set once and for all, but rather introduced to an ongoing critical colloquy by means of reader appropriation and social diffusion, it is also patent that in creating a common frame of reference they allow for the emergence of a more unified interpretative community akin to a religious community with a gospel. More importantly to our purposes here, perhaps, the “tangible form” of the totem that Durkheim describes in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), which allows the “intangible substance” (i.e. its spiritual force or “mana”) to be represented (1995: 201), stands close to the idea of the sociological classic as a symbol: in the case of the totem, a symbol of the mana; in the case of the sociological classic, of sociology’s own identity. Second, such a symbolic condensation of

meaning in a classic makes it something akin to an icon.⁵ Icons are, from a cultural-sociological perspective, objects whose aesthetic shape conveys meaning. Consider the example of William Shakespeare, perhaps the most important Western cultural icon. When one is confronted with the name “Shakespeare” (or with his portrait), the meaning conveyed far surpasses that of a specially gifted writer who lived in the British Isles during the seventeenth century; it represents the apex of English literature; it is the embodiment of the English language itself with all the awe, amazement and emotional identification it implies.⁶ Yet this meaning is conveyed not through a linguistic or cognitive process, but through a sensuous experience. It is through a “feeling consciousness”, a concept Jeffrey C. Alexander retrieves from Mead, that one can be iconically conscious: “[i]t is to understand by feeling, by contact, by the “evidence of the senses” rather than the mind” (2008: 782). Sociological classics are, similarly, iconic symbols that perform important functions of creating frames of reference, providing legitimation and securing knowledge transmission.

Despite the lasting resonance of the notion of “feeling consciousness”, Mead did not become the iconic symbol of symbolic interactionism through his essay “The Social Character of Instincts”, where he introduces it, and which forms one of the chapters of a book he came close to publishing in 1910. For this was also a book that, not uncharacteristically, Mead would eventually abandon, with the galley proofs in his possession.⁷ It was rather through a posthumous work, *Mind, Self, and Society*, that Mead would come into the limelight, and would achieve the classical status that makes him an attractive choice for authoritative peer citation. It is then to the history of this other more influential book that we turn in the remaining part of the article. After examining the way in which the book came into being, we will concentrate on

two episodes of the history of its reception in sociological circles, first in the US and then in Europe, while we also assess how the peculiar story of the book's formation both governed and affected this reception. The protagonists of these episodes are Herbert Blumer and Jürgen Habermas, arguably the two single most influential actors in the process of disciplinary canonization of G.H. Mead.

The History of the Book

But before we proceed to the history of *Mind, Self, and Society*, let us address a pressing preliminary question. What exactly makes a book like *Mind, Self, and Society* a legitimate object of sociological inquiry? In an age where the “return to the empirical” is often presented as the latest and dominant trend in the discipline, one might have doubts about the interest of conducting an analysis of the vagaries of a book. Yet there are good reasons to think otherwise. First, if we look back at the history of sociology as a practice, we will find that books have long been objects of sociological inquiry. In effect, today's sociological analysis of reading habits has a historical precursor in the very same milieu and time in which Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* originated. In 1929, one year after the lectures that would become Mead's book were offered to students of the University of Chicago, the Graduate Library School of the same university was created. With it, a whole new field of sociological inquiry was inaugurated: reading studies (Waples 1931; see also Darnton, 1981: 80). In the intervening decades, sociology's interest in literacy issues increased dramatically. First, works such as Riesman's influential paper on the oral tradition and the written word (Riesman 1955) and Robert K. Webb's *The British Working Class Reader* (1955) cleared the way for a more systematic sociological analysis of

literacy. Later, from the 1970s onwards, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture further explored this line of research, albeit with a more pronounced concern for issues of power and inequality. In recent decades, the study of literacy and reading practices has been incorporated in, but has not come to exhaust, an area of interdisciplinary enquiry which has enjoyed a remarkable development, and which is of especial relevance for our analysis: the "history of the book" (known in France as "*histoire du livre*", and in Germany as "*Geschichte des Buchwesens*").⁸ Besides literacy and reading practices, its objects of study include relations among publishers, authors, and readers, and different aspects of the material culture of the text, especially its production, circulation, and reception from manuscript to the electronic text. Among sociologists, however, it is still a relatively minor specialism. For example, few journal articles or monographs address the history of the book *Mind, Self, and Society*.⁹ In this chapter, we address this neglected aspect of Meadian scholarship, while deepening sociology's self-critical understanding. In particular, we operate within a post-positivist approach to theory construction. This differs from other approaches to the history of sociology insofar as our object is not individual intentions or the contextual factors (say, institutional constraints or professional networks) within which sociological ideas were created, but one of the written media through which those ideas were circulated and their authors attained the recognition of their peers. This is why our analysis of Mead's canonization focuses not so much on his inherent intellectual abilities or on his career in Chicago and his influence upon the students or colleagues there, as on the mediating role performed by *Mind, Self, and Society*, the main written source through which generations were introduced to his work.

The study of the historical circumstances in which sociology's classic texts emerge, are defined and redefined, has the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of the emergence and growth of sociology as a discourse spoken by various authors and as a discipline endowed with a distinctive identity of its own. A second good reason why sociologists should pay more attention to the history of books refers to the very discursive nature of the discipline, and the meaning-saturated nature of the book. A cultural-sociological analysis of ideas simply cannot afford to ignore the history of communication by print. This fact can, of course, also be seen as a challenge. If sociological empirical research is not so much "observing" as it is "reading" a meaningful social world (Reed and Alexander, 2009: 30), then the sociological analysis of texts amounts to an indispensable exercise of hermeneutical reconstruction of the decisions and meanings associated with a given text, from the decision of those who produced it to the meanings attributed to it by those who have interpreted it and used it to guide and/or legitimize their own research (what Darnton designates as "communication circuit"). From this perspective, and as often happens with posthumously edited and published volumes (just consider Marianne Weber's role in the edition of her husband's *Economy and Society*), the sociological "reading" of the communication circuit built around *Mind, Self, and Society* is particularly demanding. It needs to account for a wide range of elements, from its material history (which includes the often controversial decisions made by the editor and an examination of the publisher's archives) to the dense history of the reception of its ideas. In this section we deal with the former. We leave the latter for the sections that follow. Let us now proceed with the analysis of what was to become one of the most influential texts in twentieth-century American sociology.

The best way to start is with a flash-forward: that is, with a glimpse into the way in which, every year, in classrooms around the world, freshmen sociology students are introduced to the reading of *Mind, Self, and Society*. The text is normally described as the most representative exemplar of the work of George Herbert Mead, the founding father of microsociological, symbolic interactionist sociological approaches. As to Mead himself, he is often presented as someone who was much more at ease with teaching than with putting his ideas in writing. The result of this attitude towards writing, students are told, is that he published very little. Against this background, the book *Mind, Self, and Society* emerges as the almost perfect solution to an unfortunate situation, which might have otherwise deprived us of contact with Mead's ideas. Due to the felicitous initiative of a group of former students, led by Charles W. Morris,¹⁰ two sets of student notes were taken from Mead's course on advanced social psychology in the late 1920s, which were subsequently gathered together in one book and thus made available to the public. This narrative has been reproduced again and again, since the posthumous publication in the 1930s of Mead's writings.¹¹ Very few articles or books on Mead directly question this narrative.¹² But while it is the case that some students made extensive efforts to collect notes of some of Mead's most popular courses, the fact is that this particular "mythology" (Skinner 1969) of the bringing of *Mind, Self, and Society* into being does not accurately describe what happened. To de-mythologize it, another, more rigorous history, must be told.

In the original copy of the transcript of the course in social psychology from which *Mind, Self, and Society* was created, a mysterious note, written on the last page, reads: "*Reported by W.T. Lillie*".¹³ Who was W.T. Lillie? Was he one of the students attending Mead's course? After all, these notes are listed in the Mead Papers Archive

as “student notes” and all the literature agrees that *Mind, Self, and Society* was created from them. But why then would a student use such an awkward expression? One’s doubts are confirmed as one examines the list of students enrolled in that course: there is no one with that name.¹⁴ If Lillie was not a student, who was he?

Let us return to the book for a moment to begin to begin unravelling the mystery. In the preface of *Mind, Self, and Society*, Charles Morris explains that George Anagnos, a former student of Mead, found in Alvin Carus “a sympathetic fellow-worker who was able to provide the means necessary to employ persons to take down *verbatim* the various courses”. To this Morris adds that “(t)he whole is by no means a court record, but it is certainly as adequate and as faithful a record as has been left of a great thinker’s last years” (Morris, 1934: vi). Precious additional information about how *Mind, Self, and Society* was put together is found in the correspondence exchanged between Charles Morris and Henry and Irene Tufts Mead (the son and daughter-in-law of G.H. Mead).¹⁵ In those letters, Morris informed the Meads of the existence of stenographic notes in Alvin Carus’s possession and asked them whether they were willing to pay for them, in which case he could use them to assemble a book. The Meads, who were interested in having George Herbert’s ideas published in book form, agreed to pay the amount requested. Finding himself in possession of copies of Carus’s stenographic transcript made by W.T. Lillie from Mead’s Winter 1928 “Advanced Social Psychology” course, Morris set out to edit *Mind, Self, and Society*.

Editors sometimes take controlled liberties for the sake of readability. They may, for instance, advise the change of the order of materials or even the addition of new materials that might contribute for a deeper understanding of the text. As a rule, however, such changes are agreed with the author, or, that being impossible, they are

meticulously brought to the reader's attention as resulting from an editorial decision, whose rationale is explained. Unfortunately, however, Charles Morris failed to observe these basic scholarship rules. This editorial failure, we will see, would have far-reaching consequences for the reception of Mead's ideas. A systematic comparison between the published version of Carus's notes and the copies at the Mead Papers Archive at the University of Chicago reveals the extent of the creativity of Morris's editorial work. Significant materials were omitted. Mead's typically short sentences were rewritten into long-winded ones. And over a fifth of the volume was added from a 1930 set of student notes, typed from six months to two years after they had been taken, and, possibly as a result of this elapse of time, even more "creative" in their re-writing. To give an example, all of Chapter 11 of *Mind, Self, and Society*, which Morris entitled as "Meaning", is taken from this latter set of notes, albeit also rather freely assembled from different parts of them, and, what is more, it contains two contradictory accounts of the notion of "meaning", which the note taker warned Morris was something he (the note taker) could not attribute to Mead as opposed to his own lack of clarity. Morris's distortions are magnified by the fact that once a "clean copy" of his edited version of the 1928 notes was finished, he never used the original again, as he decided to work rather from further re-typing and from the 1930 typed notes. This decision lies, for instance, behind Morris's misidentification of the course as "1927" in the book's preface.¹⁶ Another glaring example of Morris's editorial license, and one that would have momentous consequences for the interpretation of Mead, is the decision to introduce the label "social behaviorism" both in the title and in Part I of *Mind, Self, and Society*. "Social behaviorism" is Morris's term, not Mead's. Mead never used this term to describe his ideas. Nevertheless, it became the standard depiction of Mead's strand of behaviorism, as

opposed to more positivistic, externalist types of behaviorism, such as the one espoused by John Watson, Mead's colleague at the University of Chicago.¹⁷ As we shall see in more detail in the next section, this editorial decision in particular entailed substantial theoretical consequences: it provided supporters of a more hermeneutically sensitive sociology, such as Herbert Blumer, with a seemingly authoritative argument against those who wished to read Mead in a different light (see e.g. Blumer 1980).

The fact that *Mind, Self, and Society* has all the sensible appearance of being a book, and has been treated as such by generations of practitioners and students, has conferred upon it an elusive air of finality, authenticity, textual authority and authorial control. However, from the history of its production it is clear that we are before a text marked by a "radical instability".¹⁸ This is a book which resulted from the assemblage of words uttered by Mead at different times, before different audiences, with different illocutionary forces, and which is punctuated by the addition, or perhaps better, the intrusion, of yet more words of various other external provenances: of the students, of the stenographer, of the editor himself. Such plural "writing" turns the published text into an almost collective enterprise, and it explains the murkiness surrounding the authorship of the book, and even the inflections of the language in which it is written, if the book can be properly thus described. Mead's control over the published text was none, in striking contrast to the editor's, whose license entirely justifies, but has rarely prompted, considerable skepticism about the received image of the book's author. The modern paradigm of single authorship is hardly applicable to this work, but it looms very large in the imaginary of those who have read it (or even just vaguely know of it). If the proper name on the cover of a text is normally taken to encapsulate an account of its origins, and of who may be accountable for it,

such a straightforward attribution of meaning, intention and responsibility must surely be suspended when it comes to *Mind, Self, and Society*.

It is not only that Mead delivered the different lectures from which the book was assembled with no understanding that they might be put together in the form of a book – something which would only be carried out posthumously. He – who had always been so careful about what to publish, and as to whether to give his output to print – had no say in the decision to transform a peculiar material – *lecture notes* – into the volume that would make his reputation. This aspect is worth stressing, because within the modern authorial paradigm not all kinds of speech are equated with authorship, and not all the author’s discursive activity is considered to be an equally worthy subject of scholarly discussion. If anything, lecture notes, today commonly thought as the raw material for (at best) textbooks, fare quite poorly on this “authorial” scale. There are reasons for this. For one, in Western culture, and in particular in academic culture, the written word is privileged over the spoken word, as it is thought to allow for greater control, rigor and reflexivity, as well as creating the time for doubt and critical engagement on the part of readers. It does not therefore come as a surprise that Niklas Luhmann should associate the emergence of philosophy with that of writing: “the formation of cities, cities for writing, and *writing for philosophy*” (1995: 354, our italics). Behind this association lies the idea that the externalization involved in writing invites greater reflexivity, eliciting the writer to turn back on his own previous ideation, to question it, and to take it apart; this would be much less so with the spoken word, whose immediacy would preclude reflection. Hence, although our civilization was shaped by a handful of canonic figures who wrote nothing, and yet exercised great intellectual influence – chief amongst which is Socrates, who many credit as the founder of Western philosophy – it is also true that

we know Socrates from written discourses featuring him as protagonist, the so-called “Socratic dialogues”, which became a sub-genre in their own right in Antiquity. This did not happen by accident. When detached from the immediate context which defines the spoken word by being fixed in writing, ideas gain an added life span and a new capacity for circulation by virtue of becoming common property resources, constantly subject to de- and re-contextualisation, appropriation and re-appropriation, by “an audience which extends in principle to anyone who can read” (Ricoeur, 1981: 139). In other words, the written word has the benefit of becoming reading material as well.

Mind, Self and Society embodies the paradoxes of a culture marked by moments of constructed crossover between the spoken and the written word. The text that would lead to Mead’s canonization is a text which, like the ones in which Socrates is protagonist, testifies to the dialogical nature of thinking, as put into play in a process of interaction, which is also one of immediately reciprocal orientation – this time, not the streets and households of Athens, but the modern university classroom. *Mind, Self, and Society* springs (with much questionable mediation, as we have seen) from words uttered in the classroom before mixed cohorts of graduate and undergraduate students, an apt context for rehearsing ideas in a more casual way (as Mead, whose writer’s block was known, would probably have preferred), and for conveying them in a pedagogical style that typically combines simplified argumentation with rhetorical intention for the audience’s persuasion. One possible way to conceive the distinction between teaching and writing is to put it in terms of a distinction between intentional and reflexive thought. One would think the former to be less effective than the latter in communicating with the expert audience of the academic journal or the academic monograph, in the guise of which *Mind, Self, and*

Society would end up circulating. After all, the stylistic qualities of “classical texts” are a decisive factor in their capacity to stand out, to set themselves apart from the ordinary, and to persuade. In an almost paradoxical, yet intelligible way, the great appeal of *Mind, Self, and Society* seems to lie in its violation of contemporary academic writing conventions: in speaking to us in a fluid, almost conversational tone, which contrasts strikingly with the much denser style of works written by Mead, and has survived Morris’s long-winded insertions. This enhanced accessibility of the volume has contributed greatly to its wide reception, social transmission and diffusion. What the work loses in grounding in a more systematic argumentation, and in response to alternative arguments (thought about other author’s thought is almost absent from it), it gains in suppleness.¹⁹ *Mind, Self, and Society* seduces also in its liveliness, for its almost face-to-face quality, for the stock of devices it deploys to allow abstract ideas to become embodied in examples, and have a forceful impact on a less specialized audience. Chief amongst these devices figure the reassuring repetition, the almost pictorial illustration, the movement back and forth from the empirical to the historical-philosophical argument. For all its editorial flaws, *Mind, Self, and Society* has become a “vital” classic – that is, a text that is continuously read and reflected on. And in assuming that quality it is the living proof that the reasons and processes that make a text a “classic” can be very different indeed.

The Reception of *Mind, Self, and Society*

The case of Herbert Blumer

In the previous section, we have examined the way *Mind, Self, and Society* was put together, and discussed some of the larger questions this process opens. The

historicizing of this text, which was to become a “classic” of sociology, brought to the fore the contingency surrounding its production, and raised anew old questions regarding the nature of a text, of a book, and of authorship. We have then proceeded to the analysis of some of the stylistic features that, despite their unconventionality, might explain the profound impact of *Mind, Self, and Society*, and the wide readership it has found. But if stylistic qualities are important, as “textuality” (in this case, “textuality” extracted from the spoken word) is also rhetorical performance, it is through the process of reception (Jauss 1970) that texts attain recognition, and ultimately achieve their classic standing. Cultural resonance, textual suppleness and reader appropriation (Baehr, 2002: 125) are key contributing factors to the success of this process. That is, the text must be able to continue to “speak to” readers; it must invite their response throughout time; it must not offer full closure, but rather lend itself to profitable interpretation and re-interpretation in markedly different epochs, cultural milieus, and situations; and it must be continually appropriated by different readers, either with a view to integrate it positively into their own texts, theories and research projects, or in order to re-open controversy, and distance themselves critically from it. It is to a few especially relevant episodes in this process of appropriation of *Mind, Self, and Society*, which was in no way smooth and cumulative, that we turn in what follows.

In early 1931, when Mead fell seriously ill (he would die in April that year) he realized the need to find someone to replace him in the instruction of his advanced social psychology course, the same course which would serve as the basis for *Mind, Self, and Society*. Mead’s choice fell on a young sociologist, on whose dissertation committee he had served, Herbert Blumer. Mead knew Blumer well. Blumer was a Chicago sociology graduate (he had done a Ph.D. with Ellsworth Faris on the topic of

“Method in Social Psychology”), and had taken several of Mead’s courses. This opportunity to succeed Mead in teaching his by now celebrated social psychology course seems to have been a consequential point in Blumer’s definition of himself as a scholar of the human condition (Morrione, 2004: 181).

And it would in retrospect prove to be the key stepping-stone of a long and influential career. In post-war American sociology, Blumer was one of the few sociological theorists who developed a consistent alternative to Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism.²⁰ That alternative was “symbolic interactionism”, a term coined by Blumer himself in the 1930s (Blumer 1937), but which would, in due course, appropriate Mead as its “founding father”. Later, in the 1960s, Blumer’s *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method* became the standard theoretical and methodological presentation of the central tenets of this hermeneutically sensitive sociological approach.²¹ Symbolic interactionism, according to Blumer, is premised upon three basic ideas: first, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that those things have for them; second, the meaning of such things arises out of the social interaction between social actors; third, these meanings are handled in and modified through a interpretative process (Blumer, 1969: 2). Blumer then distinguishes a number of “root images” on which symbolic interactionism is grounded. First, there is the nature of human societies. Societies, according to symbolic interactionism, are made not of structures or abstract systems, but of “people engaging in action” (1969: 7). Second, social interaction emerges from the interaction between actors, not of external factors imputed to them. Mead’s distinction between “the conversation of gestures” and “the use of significant symbols”, that is, between non-symbolic and symbolic interaction, is presented as the inspiring source of this second root image of symbolic interactionism. Third, objects are defined as

anything that can be indicated or referred to, that is, human social life is a process in which objects are being created, transformed or cast aside (1969: 12). Fourth, human beings are conceived of as acting organisms. But, contrary to the then prevailing Parsonian conception of human behavior as a response to a certain number of factors (income, education, etc.), symbolic interactionism suggests “a picture of the human being as an organism that interacts with itself through a process of making indications to himself” (1969: 14). Fifth, human action is understood as individuals fitting together their different lines of action through an interpretative process – hence “joint” or collective action. Sixth, responding to criticisms that Mead’s work was inadequate to address macro-sociological issues, as raised, for instance, by Merton (1967), Blumer presents the notion of “interlinkage of action”, the last “root image” of symbolic interactionism: at a more general level than joint action, Blumer points out, people’s actions are organized at the level of the whole society in a way that is not to be reduced to external factors or subsumed into an overarching structure (1967: 17).

Blumer always emphasized the American roots of this approach, from classical American philosophical pragmatism (Tucker 1988; see also Shalin 1986) to the Chicago-style sociology in which he had been educated. The role played by Blumer’s image of Mead in this narrative was pivotal. Mead’s ideas, and specially Mead’s social psychology as presented in *Mind, Self, and Society*, were systematically presented as a crucial legitimating element of Blumer’s version of symbolic interactionism: he quoted extensively from this text, presenting it as the chief intellectual reference of the “Chicago school of sociology”. Blumer went as far as presenting his theoretical proposals as if these represented Mead’s opinions: for instance, he begins one of his most cited papers by stating that his “purpose is to

depict the nature of human society when seen *from the point of view of George Herbert Mead*” (Blumer, 1966: 535 – italics added). In this case like in many other cases, authorial legitimation follows the route of – a more or less artificially construed – iteration.

Besides signaling the beginning of Blumer’s long intellectual career,²² the biographical circumstance that he saw himself as Mead’s “appointed successor” had an important consequence for his reading of *Mind, Self, and Society*. The fact that this book had been assembled from notes from the very same course which made him Mead’s intellectual heir helps explain why Blumer never seriously addressed any of the many editorial issues that plague the book. He was more interested in controlling its interpretation, with a view to also governing a certain tradition of scientific inquiry, than in questioning what interpretation it was of. In what surely is one of sociology’s greatest ironies, Blumer, the creator of one of sociology’s earlier and most accomplished social constructionist approaches,²³ failed to adequately address the constructed nature of his view of the discipline’s past.²⁴ Instead, Blumer’s account of his early Chicago days, despite contributing greatly to Mead’s canonization, often amounted to little more than a self-serving mythology – a blind spot in his otherwise brilliant analysis that cost him greatly for it did not pass unnoticed to his critics,²⁵ all too aware of the rhetorical spin Blumer put on the construction of the disciplinary controversies he was involved in (Mills 1942). Blumer then “reads” Mead in two distinct senses. Besides interpreting Mead’s words for social-scientific purposes, he creates (upon pretence of “discovering”) another “Mead”, the inspiring figure of symbolic interactionism. Blumer’s double reading results, as almost without exception happens in the process of reception, from his own theoretical agenda, and, more unusually, in this case, from the particular biographical circumstances

connecting him to Mead. But both conditionings concur equally to a problematic non-questioning of the limitations of *Mind, Self, and Society* as the privileged entry point into Mead's thinking.

These limitations first began to be systematically exposed in the 1970s. Critics of Blumer, such as Clark McPhail and Cynthia Rexroat (1979), came to offer a new, more historically minded view of Mead's influence upon symbolic interactionism. Drawing "primarily upon Mead's articles" and other writings by Mead himself instead of "student lecture notes, e.g., 1934 [i.e. *Mind, Self, and Society*]", McPhail and Rexroat were among the first to move beyond Morris's volume and seriously question Blumer's "Mead". In the wake of the historicist revival of the 1960s and 1970s, the next decades would witness a complete revolution in this regard, with the publication of various journal articles and academic monographs offering rigorous historical reconstructions of Mead's life and work. One of the central topics of this literature – the complex network of influences linking together symbolic interactionism, American philosophical pragmatism and the "Chicago school" of sociology – has only been subject to sound historical scrutiny from the 1970s onwards.²⁶ Mead's actual influence upon his colleagues of the sociology department, for instance, has been questioned, and in the process the place Blumer reserved for Mead in the 1930s "Chicago school" of sociology has been exposed as a case of backward-projection of his later centrality in the tradition articulated from that school by the hand of Blumer – symbolic interactionism.²⁷

Still, Blumer's role in Mead's canonization should not be diminished. His use of Mead's ideas helped found and develop a consistent alternative to Parsons's structural functionalism and, by appropriating Mead to construct it, Blumer contributed actively to a redefinition of the sociological pantheon with the inclusion

of his former teacher. Whereas Parsons can be said to have exerted a crucial influence in canonizing Weber and Durkheim through his 1937 *The Structure of Social Action*, it is due to Blumer's work that Mead started to earn a place in the canon as the founding father of symbolic interactionism. The cost of this positioning was a significant blurring of the purported "founder's" work by the discourse around it. Blumer's very selective appropriation of Mead's ideas, drawn overwhelmingly from a single textual source, *Mind, Self, and Society*, resulted in a limited appreciation of the range of Mead's contributions to contemporary social theory. But this effect can be seen more clearly when we follow the history of the reception of *Mind, Self, and Society* across the Atlantic, in post-war Germany. This is what we do next.

***Mind, Self, and Society* in German Social Theory**

The elevation of a text to "classic" status is highly dependent on its capacity to allow for multiple readings and adoptions in different contexts. *Mind, Self, and Society* illustrates that, in that it was key in attempts to bridge the traditional Anglophone-continental divide. Although its first German translation dates from 1967,²⁸ copies of the original version were available in Germany well before, since 1945. This fact helps to account for the second encounter between German idealism and American pragmatism. The first encounter took place in the second half of the nineteenth-century, with the reception in the US of the idealism of Hegel, Humboldt, and Fichte, chiefly through the "Metaphysical Club", a conversational club formed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1827, by Peirce, James and others (Menand 2001). At least part of the second German-American encounter took the form of the reception of Mead's ideas in Germany.²⁹ The relevance of the reception of Mead in post-war Germany

stems from the fact that it was a German intellectual current – German idealism – that, along with Darwinism, made the strongest impact on the first generation pragmatists. In this light, it is of added significance to examine how German social thinkers tried to re-establish, in completely different social and political conditions from those of America at the end of the nineteenth-century, the intellectual connection between “their” sources of German idealism and American pragmatism.

The bridge was first re-created by Arnold Gehlen, a cultural conservative, with ties to the Nazi regime. In the 1950 edition of his *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (1940), Gehlen uses the naturalistic theory of action he finds in *Mind, Self, and Society* to overcome the Cartesian body-soul dualism, a goal he shares with the American pragmatists.³⁰ Despite selectively overlooking the pragmatists’ emphasis on democracy as a way of life, and the thoroughly intersubjective character of Mead’s theory, Gehlen’s interpretation of Mead had the merit of putting *Mind, Self, and Society* in the reading lists of 1950s German philosophy students. One of these students, Karl-Otto Apel, would play a pivotal role in the history of the reception of this book in Germany. For it was Apel who, in Heidelberg in the early 1960s, introduced *Mind, Self, and Society* to his friend and colleague, Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1985: 76-7).

Together with Blumer, Habermas is one of the sociological theorists who have done the most to explore Mead’s contributions to contemporary sociology. Again, like Blumer, Habermas appropriates Mead’s ideas to build his own sociological theory, but through a new horizon of preoccupations and from the critical tradition of which he is part. Habermas, unlike Blumer, is a critical theorist who wishes to reconnect functionalism with symbolic interactionism in order to build a communicative theory of society (see also Joas 1993: 141).

By tracing the role played by *Mind, Self, and Society* in Habermas's interpretation of Mead at the beginning of the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) – Habermas's *magnum opus* and a crucial work in the process of Mead's canonization – one gains a clearer understanding of the theoretical implications of Morris's editorial work and of the somewhat hazardous history of this particular book for sociology.

The Theory of Communicative Action revolves around a classic sociological theme, the societal shift towards modernity. According to Habermas, modernization entails a process of rationalization that is better captured if one distinguishes between the “system” component of societies (market economy and the state bureaucratic apparatus) and the “lifeworld” (culture, society, and personality). Each author Habermas discusses in the work is said to have made a significant contribution to the sociological understanding of this process of societal rationalization, from one perspective or the other. For instance, Weber is credited with having created the tradition of critique of rationalization, a tradition later developed by Lukacs and the Frankfurt school. This Marxist tradition equated the rationalization of society with the reification of consciousness. As a result, this conceptual strategy is, for Habermas, marred with paradoxes, the so-called “aporias” of the paradigm of consciousness that impose the need for a paradigm change. The first contribution for this paradigm change comes, in Habermas's view, from “Mead with his communication-theoretic foundation of sociology” (1987: 1); the second, complementary contribution is Durkheim's theory of religion. And, at a stroke of the pen, Mead is placed, not in a second team, but right alongside the original triumvirate of sociological classics. “Mead and Durkheim belong, like Weber”, Habermas writes at the opening page of volume 2, “to the generation of the founding fathers of modern sociology” (1987: 1).

Because in *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas's Mead is for the most the author of *Mind, Self, and Society*, it is through this text that the canonization of Mead as one of the discipline's greats continues to take place. Habermas's interpretation of Mead's social psychology in Part V of volume 2 of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is arguably one of the most detailed and competent readings ever produced on that aspect of Mead's theorizing. In little more than 100 pages, Habermas scrutinizes all major aspects of Mead's social psychology; confronts it with several other authors, including Wittgenstein and Durkheim; compares his interpretation of Mead with that of others (such as Tugendhat's); and draws important lessons to contemporary social theory. Yet Habermas's interpretation of Mead is severely limited by two different problems.

The first is related to Habermas's misunderstanding of the authorial status of *Mind, Self, and Society*. Habermas reads this text as if there were an author with absolute authorial control over it, and that author being, of course, George Herbert Mead: "Mead presented his theory under the rubric of "social behaviorism" *because he wanted to stress the note of criticism of consciousness*" (1987: 4; our emphasis); "*Self and society are the titles under which Mead treats the complementary construction of the subjective and social worlds*" (1987: 25; emphasis in the original); "Mead was fully aware, however, that in going from the individual to society, [Marked in the text by the break between parts 3 and 4 of MSS.] he would have to take up once again the phylogenetic viewpoint that he had already adopted in explaining symbolically mediated interaction" (1987: 43; our emphasis). These passages suffice to illustrate the point we are making: Habermas draws a number of conclusions from portions of *Mind, Self, and Society* which he takes as representing Mead's ideas, whereas they exclusively reflect Morris's editorial decisions or

insertions (decisions that we can sometimes safely say to be at odds with Mead's original intention). This problem is aggravated with a second but entirely connected one: the centrality Habermas concedes to *Mind, Self, and Society* in his interpretation of Mead's work. Despite being aware of the posthumous character of this text, and of the existence of other published writings by Mead on the topics that interest him, Habermas resorts overwhelmingly to this text at the expense of Mead's own writings: of the 63 citations of Mead in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 52 come from *Mind, Self, and Society*. There is also the question of Habermas's peculiar interpretative framework, and of the ways it leads Habermas to overlook aspects of Mead's thought that could prove very useful in dealing with his (Habermas's) preoccupations. Habermas reads Mead, as well as all other sociological classics, from the perspective of his distinction between "system" and "lifeworld". From the imposition of this dual interpretative framework results a limited (and rather predictably one-sided) appreciation of Mead's thinking. Mead is credited with having cleared the way for a communicative conception of rationality, essential for the analysis of the process of rationalization of the lifeworld, but the ability of Mead's communicative social theory to account for the reproduction of society as a whole is readily dismissed. This is how Habermas arrives at his "second, more radical reservation" concerning Mead's theory of society: its allegedly hopeless *idealistic* character, deemed unable to address issues related to the "material reproduction of society" such as economics, warfare, and politics (1987: 110). Hence the need to complement Mead's communicative social theory, which is useful for the study of the "lifeworld" (namely, its "personality" component), with a functionalist analysis, in Habermas's structurally bipartite view, the only realistic theoretical approach to the "system" dimension of modern societies.

Mead's alleged "idealism", however, is as much a consequence of Habermas's own interpretative framework as of the dominance of *Mind, Self, and Society* amongst Mead's works. The theoretical fruitfulness of Habermas's theoretical lens is accompanied by a conceptual rigidity that precludes the degree of historical learning that other, less categorical frameworks, would allow for. Habermas appropriates Mead through his distinction between "system" and "lifeworld", a binary framework that opposes instrumental vs. communicative types of rationality and action. In such a scheme, the theoretical space for other types of action, or for an overarching conception of action such as the one proposed by Joas (drawing on the pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey, and Mead), is very limited. In addition, Habermas has a peculiar strategy of theory construction: he constructs opposing poles of theoretical positions, selects certain elements from each pole, highlights their complementarity, and then reassembles them in a synthetic, new theoretical proposal. Such an instrumental reading of the past has inevitable costs: he learns considerably less from those in the past than he would if he read them more in their own terms. Also as a result of this, Habermas's ability to question his beliefs and theoretical presuppositions by confronting himself with them diminishes. No less impoverishing is the imposition of external, artificial categories upon the work of past authors. Mead is reckoned "idealist" only insofar as he is assessed according to Habermas's theoretical benchmark. Once Mead is re-contextualized in the "progressive era", and of American philosophical pragmatism, one realizes there is no systematic neglect on the part of Mead of "materialist" issues: besides a philosophy of science and a social psychology, Mead is responsible for a systematic treatment of moral and political issues, underpinned by questions of war, urbanization, international relations, amongst others (see e.g. Silva, 2008). But to appreciate this, one needs to take into

account the entire corpus of Mead's writings, and not limit oneself to *Mind, Self, and Society*.

The early history of *Mind, Self, and Society* helps to put into perspective Habermas's reading of Mead as an idealist thinker. As Baehr rightly observes, whenever a founding is invoked, a legitimation claim is never far behind (2002: 5-39). *Mind, Self, and Society* was from the start constructed as the crib of Blumer's symbolic interactionist programme, whose main focus is on interpersonal intimacy, a theme not central to Mead's original analysis.³¹ Just as Blumer used Mead's authority to sanction his research agenda, so did he turn to Mead when he wanted to confront contending functionalist views of society and of the best ways to study it. The symbolic interactionist methodological focus on qualitative, ethnographic case-study research was erected upon a theoretical perspective that stressed the importance of a symbolic understanding of social action, and was polemically contrasted with the quantitative, survey-based sociology emerging in the East Coast and dominant after 1945.³² In other words, Blumer placed *Mind, Self, and Society* right at the centre of a key disciplinary controversy between symbolic interactionists and functionalists, as he legitimized his methodological choices against theirs by their theoretical anchoring on Mead's analysis of the self in *Mind, Self, and Society* (Blumer, 1937: 180-4). But while Blumer and his followers were thereby keeping Mead alive, they were also rendering him suspect in the eyes of mainstream sociology, which, from the 1930s onwards, was dominated by a structural functionalist type of analysis.³³ It is no surprise then that the mainstream turned to Europe in search of its founding fathers: Marx, Weber and Durkheim (e.g. Mills 1959). It is only after the mid-1960s, a decade of social upheaval, generational conflict, and culture wars, that symbolic interactionism gains a reinvigorated cultural resonance and that a new generation of

practitioners begins to question the nature and limits of the existing sociological canon. As a result, Mead's name gradually makes it to social theory textbooks and sociological treatises (e.g. Coser 1971). That this canonization occurs mainly through *Mind, Self, and Society*, which was so instrumental to Blumer in his controversy against the functionalists, helps explain Habermas's depiction of Mead as an "idealist". But Habermas's inability to go beyond this previously construed cleavage attests to the limitations of his sources and theoretical strategy.

The "Definitive" *Mind, Self, and Society*

While Blumer and Habermas were pivotal in positioning Mead as a sociological classic, the current generation of Mead scholars has been trying to strike a balance between historical rigor and theoretical creativity. Much like the "new Durkheim studies" of the 1970s, Mead scholars such as Hans Joas (1985), Gary Alan Cook (1993), Filipe Carreira da Silva (2008), and Daniel Huebner (2014) have resorted to intensive archival research as a means to mitigate the poor editorial situation of Mead's *oeuvre*. As we write, there is still no complete critical edition of Mead's writings nor is there any plan to do it. This regrettable situation, of course, has not prevented a "Mead renaissance" from occurring in recent years in topics as varied as human rights or pedagogy, and in disciplines as different as history, historical sociology, cognitive sciences, or philosophy (e.g. Joas and Huebner 2016). Yet this renaissance is less and less indebted to *Mind, Self, and Society*, as the book's status as the privileged entry-point to Mead's ideas has been increasingly put into question.

This situation has been accentuated, paradoxically enough, by the new edition of *Mind, Self, and Society* by the University of Chicago Press annotated by Hans Joas

and Daniel R. Huebner (Mead 2015). Presented as the “definitive edition” of the work, this revised reissue of Morris’s volume provides instead the definitive demonstration of the radical instability that characterizes *Mind, Self, and Society*. The editors opted for reissuing a “slightly revised” version of the text originally edited by Charles Morris in the 1930s, dropping the original subtitle (“From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist”), correcting obvious typographical errors and completing the bibliographic references (Joas 2015: ix, x). This editorial option is justified with the argument that “no collection of Mead’s articles” “can replace the synthesis of his thinking that we find in the text of *Mind, Self, and Society*.” Such a claim is obviously unwarranted. First, because it reifies rather than questions the long-held misleading understanding that Mead’s thinking can be “synthesized” through one of his undergraduate courses, designed with obvious didactic purposes and covering only a tiny segment of his social theory. More serious than taking the part for the whole, however, is to ignore the fabricated nature of the text.

As we have seen, the text of *Mind, Self, and Society* has no discernable relationship with George Herbert Mead apart from the fact that it originates in lectures of his. Mead exerted no control over its edition or publication. He expressed no wish in having his lectures published posthumously. This is understandable as Mead regularly published the results of his work in a variety of outlets, from academic journals to collected volumes. This rather extensive and varied corpus of writings is what one should read if one wishes to access his thinking (e.g. Mead 2011). Commentators today resort to *Mind, Self, and Society* to illustrate minor points only (e.g. Shalin 2011; Cotê 2015). In the absence of an unequivocal relationship between text and author, to insist on relying on *Mind, Self, and Society* as an access-point to Mead’s thinking – however revised and annotated that edition may be – remains

fundamentally problematic. Actually, the more thorough the critical edition of the text, the more it seems evident its problematic character as an entry-point to Mead's ideas.

The University of Chicago Press 2015 edition includes an impressive 100-page appendix resulting from Huebner's exhaustive archival research on the historical circumstances involving the creation of *Mind, Self, and Society* in the early 1930s (Huebner 2012, 2014). Details such as the identity of W.T. Lillie, the stenographer who took the notes that would ultimately form the bulk of *Mind, Self, and Society*, have finally been revealed (Huebner 2012: 144, n. 29), as well as fundamental questions such as the extent to which Mead was directly engaged in conducting experiments, calibrating mechanical apparatuses, and dissecting neurological specimens (Huebner 2014: 40ff.). Huebner's meticulous historical research is at its best when applied to the origins of *Mind, Self, and Society*. The appendix provides a comprehensive, chapter by chapter, analysis of the original sources used by Morris as well as the passages that he eventually selected for deletion. Proving that paratexts sometimes perform unintended functions, Huebner's systematic reconstruction of the sources of *Mind, Self, and Society* ultimately results in a no less methodical deconstruction of the text's legitimacy as an introduction to Mead's social theory. As Huebner correctly emphasizes elsewhere, his research has exposed a rather complex "social process" resulting from a "particular temporal sequence of actions that were given direction (or changed direction) at identifiable moments because someone found or read particular texts." Despite bearing the name of "George Herbert Mead" in its cover, *Mind, Self, and Society* emerges from Huebner's research as a fabrication, "the work of different individuals who created physical materials for disparate purposes within their own social situations." (2014: 137, 136)

Mind, Self, and Society is, in other words, the ultimate example of a classic with no author. It derives its legitimacy from its ex post facto association with “Mead, the sociological classic.” The latter, in turn, is largely a by-product of the socio-physical assemblage that goes by the name of “Mind, Self, and Society,” whose conversational and accessible style has ensured it remained a vital classic in the field. What it does not provide, as its latest material incarnation definitely shows, is access to Mead’s theorizing. This he developed throughout several decades, motivated by a fundamental commitment to experimental science and democratic politics, and articulated in over one hundred scholarly publications, as well as in numerous reports, public talks, newspaper pieces, and lectures. But if the history of *Mind, Self, and Society* shows it needs to be ruled out as a valid access point to the ideas of its putative author, by the same token it offers us an important admonition against any simplistic understandings of the relationship between founding fathers and classic texts one might still entertain. If anything, it helps us realize that the link between text and author is all but evident, let alone unambiguous.

Conclusion

Books are legitimate objects of sociological inquiry. Sociology books, in particular, are inescapable objects of scientific study, since, amongst the social sciences, sociology, which has molded much of its identity around founding fathers and classic texts, has the most distinctive canonic view of its past. Through the analysis of the history of the book sociology gains a privileged access point to itself: to its founding myths and the processes leading to their formation; to the plurality of routes texts may take to classicality; to their deployment in a politics of legitimation, involving

contending sociological traditions, which set themselves retrospectively along these books' tracks; to the collective effort that is involved in their ongoing critical commentary, which is also an effort in disciplinary self-positioning, often harboring expectations of theoretical innovation. But if the history of the book unveils the contingency and constructedness of canon making, it also shows that some books' lasting vitality, albeit springing from their use value, clearly points to a value beyond it. Not all sociology books are worth the same. Some, as the case of the book discussed here, are regarded as special: they are reckoned "classics", worthy of continued reading and rereading, discussion, and critical commentary. This fruitful dialectic of singularly insightful work and interpretative appropriation leads to the canonization of their authors. That George Herbert Mead was canonized mainly through *Mind, Self, and Society* is a fact beyond dispute. But whether Mead should unreservedly be considered the author of that book; whether its unconventional conversational and accessible style, as derived from the spoken word, contributed to its classical standing; whether its canonization has unduly limited its subsequent contribution for theory building in sociology, are questions worth pursuing. This is no mere antiquarian exercise: it can prove essential to the future of the discipline. Whether better history leads to better, or at least, to richer theory, is something yet to be proved. But although the more sophisticated historical scholarship written on Mead in recent years has so far had a limited effect on sociological theory, it is laying the ground for that testing to be done. In the meantime, however, that historicizing effort has already produced tangible benefits. It has increased our awareness about the nature and consequences of classic books, which are all too easily relegated to an instrumental usage by "positive" social scientists. But it goes deeper. The historical analysis of books also helps one to question the narrow nature of the "empirical" that

social scientists tend to deal with. If books are central to the formation, the reproduction, the integration and the transformation of scientific communities, and societies comprising them, the “empirical” that social sciences so avidly (construct and) study must surely include the history of the book, and of the ideas circulating through it, no less than the opinions expressed by individuals in surveys.

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¹ Information obtained from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12445515>.

² See, for example, Turner (2008), Ritzer (2008), Seidman (2008), Joas and Knobl (2010), Baert and Silva (2010).

³ A good anthology on this literature is Camic (1997).

⁴ This extreme position is illustrated by David Parker's assertion that: "Teaching Marx, Weber and Durkheim first and only *then* introducing 'the others' merely reproduces the narrative we should be disrupting" (1997: 141-2).

⁵ We follow here Alexander's analysis on iconic consciousness (2008). For a discussion of the role of icons based on the work of Thomas Hobbes, see Vieira (2009).

⁶ No wonder, then, that Shakespeare's portrait is one of British Library's main commercial icons: <http://shop.bl.uk/mall/departmentpage.cfm/BritishLibrary/101494/1/1>

⁷ The editor of *Essays in Psychology*, Mary Jo Deegan, mistakenly titles this article as "The Social Character of Instinct" (Mead, 2001: 3). The original, however, reads "The Social Character of Instincts," and can be found in *Essays on Psychology*, Mead Papers, Addenda, box 1, folders 9-14 (fol. 9). There were good reasons behind Mead's decision not to go ahead with the publication of *Essays in Social Psychology* in 1910. Mead was then undergoing a major revision in his social psychological ideas and he no longer subscribed to the positions he had argued for in those earlier writings. See Silva (2008: 140ff.).

⁸ See Darton (1981) for an apt description of this field, as well as for a fascinating illustration of its contributions to intellectual history more generally through the example of Voltaire's *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*. A recent important institutional development in this area was the creation of the Center for the Study of Books and Media at Princeton University in 2002. In the UK, the HoBo website

(formerly known as “History of Book at Oxford”) has been an important source of information on book history since 1996 (see <http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/hobo/>).

⁹ A partial exception to this was a paper presented in 1983, in a meeting of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism, by Harold Orbach (1983). Orbach’s paper, however, focused on the early history of the book, and did not address its history of the reception nor did he explore the implications of the history of *Mind, Self, and Society* for the history of sociology itself.

¹⁰ Morris was a former student of Mead, under whom he did his PhD. Between 1925 and 1931 he taught at Rice University in Houston. In 1931, he returned to Chicago as associate professor at the philosophy department of the University of Chicago and assumed the task of editing and publishing *Mind, Self, and Society*. Morris pursued a career as philosopher, having published numerous books including *The Pragmatic Movement in American Philosophy* (1970), which includes a mistaken account of Mead’s intellectual affiliation as independent from Dewey’s (1970: 33).

¹¹ For instance, in his 1936 review of *Mind, Self, and Society*, Ellsworth Faris asserts: “But Mead never wrote his book on social psychology. The present volume was assembled from the notebooks of students who heard him in the latter part of his career” (1936: 809).

¹² An exception is Silva (2008). Even Gary Alan Cook’s historically minded study asserts that *Mind, Self, and Society* “is based upon student notes taken in several different offerings of Mead’s course on advanced social psychology” (Cook, 1993: xvii).

¹³ These notes can be found in Mead Papers, box 2, folders 10-17.

¹⁴ Advanced Social Psychology (Philosophy 321), Winter Quarter of 1928. Mead taught this course between 1918 and 1930. See Lewis and Smith (1980: 267-71).

¹⁵ Mead Papers, Box 2, folder 1.

¹⁶ We thank Harold Orbach, who kindly provided us with this particular information in an exchange of e-mails in 2003.

¹⁷ A good illustration of this is Lewis’s “A Social Behaviorist Interpretation of the Meadian “I””, in which the author, relying primarily on *Mind, Self, and Society*, tries to suggest a re-examination of Mead’s social psychology. It never occurred to Lewis that his starting point, “social behaviorism”, is an apocryphal depiction of Mead’s social psychology. See Lewis (1991).

¹⁸ We borrow the notion of “radical instability” from Stephen Orgel’s essay “What Is a Text?” (1981), which provides a reflection on the authorship of Renaissance drama. However, our sense of the freely “collaborative” nature of *Mind, Self, and Society* is rather different from Orgel’s.

¹⁹ To a certain extent, the lectures from which it is constructed document Mead’s cognitive processes, becoming justifiable sources of new scholarly interest for revisionists, especially when their study is combined with that of Mead’s manuscripts and texts written and published by Mead himself.

²⁰ In his course on “Social Psychology”, however, Blumer was more interested in contrasting Mead’s ideas to instinctual determinism, per Freud; Watsonian behaviorism, and cultural determinism, per anthropology. We thank Donald N. Levine, a pupil of Blumer in that course, for this information.

²¹ A good analysis of the current situation of this sociological approach is given in Fine (1993).

²² After retiring from teaching in 1967, Blumer remained as professor emeritus in Berkeley, California, until 1986.

²³ Starting with W.I. Thomas’s classic notion of the “definition of the situation”, through to Becker’s labelling theory (1963) and Goffman’s frame analysis (1974), there are innumerable examples of how a symbolic interactionist approach to social reality perceives it as, at least, partly constructed both by social scientists and social actors themselves.

²⁴ For a sophisticated social constructionist analysis of the past, see e.g. Zerubavel (1981).

²⁵ Joseph Woelfel, for instance, criticizes Blumer’s role as Mead’s “official interpreter” by pointing out that “it makes no sense at all to try to discover what Mead “really said” or “really meant”. Blumer’s article itself, then”, Woelfel concluded, “is logically absurd according to Blumer’s own reasoning” (1967: 409).

²⁶ For a history of the development of symbolic interactionism and its link with the Chicago school of sociology, see e.g. Fisher and Strauss (1978).

²⁷ See, e.g., Fisher and Strauss (1979), Lewis and Smith (1980), Camic (1995), Abbott (1999).

²⁸ *Mind, Self, and Society* was translated as *Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft aus der Sicht des Sozialbehaviorismus*, and published by Suhrkamp at the suggestion of Habermas. This is not a reliable translation, though. As Ernst Tugendhat observes, the translator’s choice of numerous terms (e.g. “self” was translated as identity (*Identität*), even though there is a German word for self (*Selbst*)) is highly questionable. See Tugendhat (1991: 170-1). It has been nevertheless widely used by the German-

speaking readership as it has been reprinted several times (1973, 1975, 1978, 1983, 2000 and 2008) and has been cited over 4.000 times (information obtained through Google Books).

²⁹ We say “part” because the ideas of other pragmatists, including James, Peirce, and Dewey, had already been subject to scrutiny by German thinkers since the 1920s.

³⁰ See Honneth and Joas (1988) for a critical analysis of Gehlen’s interpretation of Mead’s ideas.

³¹ A good bird’s eye view analysis of this tradition is provided in Joas (1987).

³² We refer to Harvard, where Parsons worked all his life, and Columbia, where (from 1941) Merton and (from 1940) Lazarsfeld were.

³³ Parsons’s 1937 *The Structure of Social Action* makes no reference at all to Mead or to the Chicago school; Merton’s *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949) makes only cursory remarks on Mead’s work.