

MEAD MARKET OR SLAUGHTERHOUSE?

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Real symbolic interactionists devour real Mead; they attend Meadings; and on occasions such as this, they don their armor and swift as can be, transform into Meadiators (*Meadians plus gladiators*), ready to do battle for the correct interpretation of their hero. Randall Collins comes fully armed to this coliseum of the mind, with ritual interaction chains and a portfolio of capital ideas in what could very well ultimately be a hostile takeover attempt. How does that saying go, "One man's Mead is another man's poison"?

Collins shrewdly begins his article with a statement meant to draw on the "cultural capital" of symbolic interactionists: He proclaims George Herbert Mead to be America's greatest sociological theorist. This is a long shot at best. Collins goes on to give a refreshingly irreverent yet irritatingly externalist biography of Mead. The externalism of this biography is no accident, but is fundamental to Collins' thought: The Wall Street sharp's view of society. Hence contemporary standards of publishing are applied to turn-of-the-century promotion to justify Collins' ungrounded speculations on Mead's tenure and promotions. Hence "pragmatism had a slot available for a new move within the intellectual field." Hence Idealism, "remained a part of Mead's philosophical bag of tricks."

Idealism is a taboo word for Collins; a theorist who is "idealist" is tainted, though Collins never tells us why. Peirce seems to be tainted by "Idealism" in Collins' view, but it is clear that Collins does not know that much about Peirce other than the externals, and even they are misleading. James and Dewey are apparently less tainted, but do not receive much attention. Perhaps this is because Mead seems more scientific to Collins, but then Mead does not compare well to Peirce, who contributed a number of original discoveries to a variety of hard sciences in the late nineteenth-century. If I follow one line of Collins' thought, he is discussing Mead because that is where most of the cultural capital of symbolic interactionism has been invested (and who can deny that there is a Mead industry and a thriving Mead market, even if, like the stockyards, it is no longer centered in Chicago). Yet does not Collins himself somewhere mention that theories are also autonomous to some degree, so why then must he buy into the Mead Myth which

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provides the creation narrative for symbolic interactionism? Collins seems to me to be only apparently attempting a radical revision; he never critically confronts the provincial assumption of symbolic interactionists that Mead is the chief spokesman of pragmatism. As I have said elsewhere, the "Meadian" is no longer the mode! In my opinion Mead is an important theorist, yet in many ways the least significant of the pragmatists. His basic ideas were good but few, and not very well expressed. I do not mean to undervalue Mead's contribution, but only to place it within the broader context of the pragmatic movement.

Contrary to Collins' removal of Peirce from American psychology (and contrary to Collins' statement that Peirce's "career" was "launched" before functional psychology developed—Peirce's "career" was never really launched), Peirce was the first experimental psychologist in America, having set up a lab during his brief stint at Johns Hopkins University. Peirce was also a major influence on the psychology of William James and G. Stanley Hall. He wanted to translate Wundt's work on experimental psychology soon after it first appeared but could not find an interested publisher: Wundt was finally translated by someone else years later; Peirce was too ahead of his time.

Collins' assertion that Peirce "never generated a movement," that he "did not like the term pragmatism," that he was merely a "forerunner," is misleading and wrong. The movement which Peirce generated, which James and Dewey admitted Peirce generated, misused Peirce's pragmatic maxim, and so Peirce decided to call his method "pramaticism" because that term was "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" (or should we say "Peirce snatchers"?). Collins' theory of a "forerunner," as applied to Peirce, is an example of externalism, in which the politically powerful would receive the credit due to the intellectually powerful. This would amount to "cultural capital punishment," if you will pardon my punishness. I suppose Aristotle was not an Aristotelian, but merely a "forerunner" to that tradition which only began in the century after Aristotle's death.

To give further example of what I regard as externalism, Collins says that the pragmatists "were upstaged by the analytical and positivist schools," who assumed "a far more militant position in attacking Idealism and religion . . . and in focusing on physical science." Elsewhere he says that Mead "bolstered" pragmatism's "seeming inability to account for scientific knowledge of the natural world . . . because of its seeming lack of objectivity." This is a screamer!

Charles Peirce made original contributions to mathematics, physics, geodetic studies, astronomy, as well as mathematical logic, experimental psychology, statistical economics, and other areas, as well as inventing pragmatism and modern semiotic. His philosophy of science is of profound interest in contemporary thought—at least to contemporary thinkers not bound by sectarian beliefs about Mead. If Peirce is so tainted by "Idealism," why did he alone of the pragmatists contribute so much original thought to the natural sciences? Either "Idealism" is good for science and Collins is wrong or Collins' facile dismissal of Peirce as an "Idealist" is wrong.

And what does it mean to say that pragmatism was "upstaged" by analytical and positivist schools? Hasn't anyone told Collins of the abject failure of positivism because of its subjectivist account of objectivity: one lonely thinker "verifying" a fact through pointing at it (semantic reference). Pragmatism was "upstaged" by the ideology of

science, which put a scientific stranglehold on intelligence. It is only recently that philosophers of science have begun to appreciate how the stress on the social determination of meaning through the continuing critical and fallible interpretation of the community of inquirers—shared in different ways by the four major pragmatists—was a deep insight into objectivity well ahead of its time: An insight which was temporarily eclipsed by the machine-like ideology of scientism and its dogmatic fear of probable knowledge.

Collins is concerned to portray Mead as a “vulgar behaviorist” who held a “utilitarian” explanation of sociability. Although I am somewhat sympathetic to this interpretation—and against the tendency of Mead to depend too much on “rather mundane physical activities” for his examples and insights into social life, I find myself in disagreement with a number of Collins’ claims. Mead may have been overly “utilitarian,” for example, but he was not a utilitarian in the technical sense as Collins claims: Mead did not make discrete feelings primary to right or wrong or sociability, but rather took the triadic, socially mediated act as basic, including its inner dimension of the “generalized other.” I am sympathetic to Collins’ criticism of Mead’s vagueness concerning social structure. Yet I think that Mead’s processual theory of society can encompass large-scale social conflict, contra Collins, but that his progressivist American optimism prevented him from examining how deeply the distortions produced by modern industrializing society were rooted.

In short, I wanted to agree with the characterization of Mead as too utilitarian, but the reasons given seemed to me to be too literal a reading of Mead. Further, the syntheses attempted with Durkheim and Goffman would produce an even more utilitarian animal coerced by the pressures of interaction ritual whips, bound by ritual interaction chains! The turning of Mead’s theory of action toward ritual seems a promising direction, but the hyperrational view of ritual presented here, limited as it is to attention-getting techniques, as though focusing of attention and rising up the prestige ladder—the Wall Street sharp’s view of society—were the be-all and end-all of ritual life, is far too restrictive, and ignores the vital core of Mead’s pragmatist thought.

When one examines real ritual life, it is apparent that the ritual process involves “whole selves, wholly attending,” if I may paraphrase D.H. Lawrence. “Attending” is involved, but it is part of a field of activity which is expressive, dramatic, in which something is meant to be communicated, and in which wholeness itself is the usual purport, whether through ritual cure or divination, through dramatic catharsis, or through resolution of conflict. The equivalent of this ritual process in pragmatic thought is Dewey’s concept, shared by Mead, of “consummation” as the completion of the act (and not “drive reduction,” as Collins claims). The model of traditional ritual action and modern ritual-like action most resonant with pragmatic processual theory is the processual theory of anthropologist Victor Turner, whose masterful ethnographies reveal how crucial antistructural “liminality” is to the ritual process. The contrast with Collins’ understanding of the calculating mechanics of ritual could not be greater.

Collins’ view, I must conclude, is an extreme “Idealism” involving an assumed positivistic ideal of science and a capitalistic ideal of human beings. Mead was too naively optimistic in the face of the dark emerging forces of the twentieth-century, but Collins, in my opinion, is completely blinded by the ideology of Americanism. His “neo-Meadian theory of mind” is antithetical to Mead’s communitarian theory of mind, and is more

properly viewed as one further attempt by the machine of modernity to rid itself of humanity in the name of science.