
Mead and Park: The Difficult Path Towards Pragmatist Sociology

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Abstract

G.H. Mead is still often recognized today as one of the strong pragmatist influences in the early development of sociology at the University of Chicago, where R.E. Park was also a prominent and leading figure. Mead, together with his colleague Dewey, would have had a significant impact on some of the students in the department of sociology (such as E.C. Hughes and H. Blumer), and Park was highly active both as a teacher and as a supervisor of many students in the same department. Yet the connection between Mead's social psychology and Park's sociology is not that obvious, and can even be put seriously into question, when we realize, for instance, that Mead is barely mentioned in Park's and Burgess's famous "green bible" (their Introduction to the Science of Sociology, of 1921). Although this problem of the place and influence of Mead in sociology at Chicago has often been treated (starting with Lewis and Smith's book in 1980, and up to Huebner's book in 2014), it is worth another examination from the angle of the epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues that are at stake. The relation between Mead's and Park's views on sociology becomes indeed even more questionable when we get a closer look at what they each proposed as analytical perspectives of social life; whereas Mead emphasized the importance of "self-consciousness" in his definition of self and communication, Park saw in the same concept of self-consciousness the "ultimate obstacle" to communication; where Park emphasized the direct empirical study of locations of city life according to an "ecological" approach, Mead developed a much more speculative view of the relation between "mind" and "society", that included taking into account wider ideas and bigger forms of social organization; and where Mead advocated the use of hypothesis in the experimental method for social sciences, Park relied more on factuality as a decisive device for conducting research. Can these differences be reconciled, or do they have to be taken as stark oppositions? Do they rest on simple details, ready to be dismissed when faced with the more global assumptions of pragmatism in general, or do they on the contrary point to major disagreements in two quite radically opposed definitions of pragmatism? In this presentation, we will come back to the respective epistemological positions of Mead and Park, which both took roots in the debates between neo-Kantianism and neo-Hegelianism of the late 19th century, in order to see how they condition their theoretical and analytical orientations. As a case in point, we will underline the different kinds of "naturalism" that they each apparently defended, that seem to be their own and respective translation of the pragmatist convictions that they had with respect to social analysis and social action. We will do so in order to get a better understanding of the different possibilities offered by Mead and Park at an historical level, but also in order to see which orientations can still provide us today with guiding principles for developing

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a pragmatist sociology. It is only by tackling the problems that appeared in this historical context, as they are exemplified by Mead's and Park's positions, that we can envision some possible solutions for a coherent pragmatist sociology today.

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