SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM:
A "LEFT-MEADIAN" INTERPRETATION[*]

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I Introduction

In their general disdain for American thought, and in their fascination with such Continental philosophies as Marxism and phenomenology, American radicals have failed to appreciate the critical import of the work of George Herbert Mead. Mead is one of the most creative and, at the same time, one of the most neglected of original American thinkers. It is true that his social philosophy is the foundation of the symbolic interactionist school of social psychology; and the critical implications of Meadian theory have received expression in the work of such writers as C. Wright Mills, Peter Berger, Hugh Duncan, Erving Goffman, and John Seeley.[1] Several European social theorists[2] have also begun to take Mead's writings seriously; e.g. the Swedish sociologist, Joachim Israel, has argued that symbolic interactionism and Marxism are complementary approaches to the problems of alienation and reification in modern society.[3] But symbolic interactionism is, after all, a minority movement in American social theory. Orthodox functionalist theorists (e.g. Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton) have largely rejected symbolic interactionism as insufficiently deterministic; and radical theorists (e.g. Herbert Marcuse) have simply ignored the symbolic interactionist perspective.

There is, however, some indication that the attitude of some radical social theorists toward Mead's thought is changing. Such radical writers as Richard Lichtman, Ernest Becker, Leon Shaskolsky, Thomas Szasz, and R.D. Laing have begun to pay serious attention to the work of Mead and his followers. Lichtman, a Marxist, has noted "the humanizing insights of symbolic interactionism" and has pointed out that the symbolic interactionist perspective occupies an important place in the contemporary development of critical social theory.[4] Becker has praised Mead's contribution to the "discovery of the fictional nature of human social meanings" and has suggested the significance of this contribution in the critique of ideology and false consciousness.[5] According to Shaskolsky, symbolic interactionism is "a worthy attempt" at a philosophical defense of the highest ideals of American society, i.e. humanism and democracy.[6] And both Szasz[7] and Laing[8] have acknowledged the significant impact of Mead's writings on their own critical social theories.

But along with the words of praise have come several negative criticisms of Meadian theory. These criticisms fall into two major groups: (1) criticisms of Mead's concept of the self; and (2) criticisms of Mead's concept of the structure of society.

There are, according to Lichtman, two basic defects in Mead's theory of the self: (a) Mead's analysis of the relation of self and society is non-dialectical; (b) Mead's "social behaviorism" ends in the dissolution of "the self as a self-conscious subject of its own existence."[9] Lichtman refers rather sketchily to Mead's distinction between the "me" (that phase of the self which reflects the social process) and the "I" (that phase of the self which responds to and transcends the social process), and argues that the outcome of Mead's analysis is the obliteration of the "I." In Lichtman's view, Mead treats the "me," the objectified and socialized self, as "actually given" in experience, and removes the "I," the self-as-subject, from the realm of actuality. To back up this interpretation, Lichtman quotes an essay of 1912 in which Mead speaks of the "me" as the "actual self" and refers to the "I" as "a *fictitious* 'I'" (Lichtman's emphasis).[10] This, so far as I know, is the only place in Mead's writings where the "I" is called "fictitious." But Lichtman makes a great deal of this rather early formulation of Mead's concept of the self, and concludes that Mead's analysis leads to the loss of the self "as experienced subject, agent, initiator, possessor of . . . [its] own conscious being."[11] The "I" is rendered fictitious, a mere Kantian postulate, and the self is reduced to the "me," the self-as-object which is enmeshed in the social matrix. In this, way, according to Lichtman, "the self becomes a passive and even trivial aspect of social life," and the sense of the dialectical relation of self and society is subverted. "The self as transcendent agent is lost."[12]

The radical critique of Mead's theory of society runs as follows: Becker argues that Mead's social theory cannot explain "social discord and friction."[13] According to Shaskolsky, Mead's philosophy is a reflection of the American belief-system, i.e. Mead gives philosophical expression to the *belief* in the uniqueness and freedom of the individual, the *belief* in the open and empathic interrelationship of the individual with others, and the *belief* in "gradual change to meet society's fluctuating needs."[14] Mead's thought, then, is a rationale for (and rationalization of) the "American dream." To say this, however, is to raise the question of the relation between dream and reality, between spirit and substance. Symbolic interactionism is a reflection of the *ideals* of American society, but is it "a reflection of the *substance* of that society?"[15] Shaskolsky raises the question of social conflict with reference to . . . [African-Americans] and wonders whether the symbolic interactionist thesis of "the smooth interaction between individuals in 'defining the situation'" can comprehend the inequalities that exist in American society. What, Shaskolsky asks, does symbolic interactionism have to say about the gap between American ideals and the implementation of those ideals?[16] Like Becker and Mills, Shaskolsky views Mead as a "consensus theorist" who cannot come to terms with the reality of social conflict. As Mills puts it, Mead's

conception of the social process is based upon "an inadequate theory of society and . . . [upon] certain democratic persuasions" which have little relevance to the disharmonious development of political life.[17] This is a serious criticism, for it suggests that Mead's thought is merely an ideology that covers up (or "mystifies") the hard realities of American society.

In the following pages, I shall attempt to answer the above criticisms, which I consider to be erroneous, through a careful reconstruction and interpretation of Mead's views on the dialectic of self and society. My analysis, then, is offered, on the one hand, as a critical response to certain criticisms of Mead by these radical theorists, and, on the other hand, as a positive response to the need for a reassessment of symbolic interactionism as a means of facing up to the on-going conditions of radical social change.

II Mead's Theory of the Self

In my view, Lichtman misses the point of Mead's analysis of self and society. A careful reading of Mead's social theory reveals, not only a persuasive account of the degree to which the self is defined in the socialization process, but also an elucidation of the limits of socialization. Mead's philosophy is, in effect, a philosophical anthropology in which the actuality of human freedom is established, and in which the hope for progressive social reconstruction is grounded, not in a utopian world of dreams, but in the concrete world of social development and human action. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, Lichtman's contention that Mead's theory of the self is a non-dialectical obliteration of the "transcendent" subject is based upon a superficial reading of Mead's work and, as such, is a gross misrepresentation of the actual theoretical significance of Mead's position. Mead's account of the self is exactly what Lichtman says it is not: an account of the reality of the transcendent subject and of the dialectical relation between that subject and the social process which is transcended.

Mead views the self as a social emergent. This social conception of the self (which, it would seem, is consistent with Marxist theory) entails that individual selves are the products of social interaction and not the logical or biological preconditions of that interaction.

> The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.[18]

The self, moreover, is a reflective process, i.e. "it is an object to itself." For Mead, it is the reflexivity of the self that "distinguishes it from other objects and from the body." For the body and other objects are not objects to themselves in the way that the self is. It is, furthermore, this reflexivity of the self that distinguishes human from animal consciousness.[19]

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Mead points out two uses of the term "consciousness": (1) "consciousness" may denote "a certain feeling-consciousness" which is the outcome of an organism's sensitivity to its environment (in this sense, animals, in so far as they act with reference to events in their environments, are conscious); and (2) "consciousness" may refer to a form of awareness "which always has, implicitly at least, the reference to an 'I' in it" (as when the term 'consciousness' means self-consciousness).[20] It is the second use of the term 'consciousness' that is appropriate to the discussion of human consciousness. While there is a form of pre-reflective consciousness that refers to the "bare thereness of the world," it is reflective (or self-) consciousness that characterizes human awareness. The pre-reflective world is a world in which the self is absent.[21]

In the mode of self-consciousness, the "individual enters as such into his own experience . . . as an object."[22] How is this objectification of the self possible? The individual, according to Mead, "can enter as an object [to himself] only on the basis of social relations and interactions, only by means of his experiential transactions with other individuals in an organized social environment."[23] Self-consciousness is the result of a process in which the individual takes the attitudes of others toward himself, in which he attempts to view himself from the standpoint of others.[24] Thus, the self-as-object arises out of the individual's experience of other selves outside of himself. Mead's notion of the objectified self does not, contra Lichtman, cancel out the subjective, but places it within the realm of intersubjectivity.

Mead's account of the social emergence of the self is developed further through an elucidation of three forms of intersubjective activity: language, play, and the game. These forms of "symbolic interaction" (i.e. social interactions which take place via shared symbols such as words, definitions, roles, gestures, etc.) are the major paradigms in Mead's critique of socialization, and are the basic social processes which render the reflexive objectification of the self possible.

Language, in Mead's view, is communication via "significant symbols." A significant symbol is a gesture (usually a vocal gesture) which calls out in the individual making the gesture the same response which is called out in others to whom the gesture is directed. When the individual making a gesture understands the response of another to his gesture, he is capable of significant communication (language). In gesturing significantly, the individual responds to his own gestures as others might respond. For example,

> You ask somebody to bring a visitor a chair. You arouse the tendency to get the chair in the other, but if he is slow to act you get the chair yourself. The response to the . . . gesture is the doing of a certain thing, and you arouse that same tendency in yourself.[25]

Within the linguistic act, the individual *takes the role of the other,* i.e. responds to his own gestures in terms of the symbolized attitudes of others. This

"process of taking the role of the other" is the primal form of self-objectification and is essential to self-realization. "When the response of the other becomes an essential part in his behavior – then the individual appears in his own experience as a self; and until this happens he does not appear as a self."[26]

It ought to be clear, then, that the self-as-object of which Mead speaks is *not* an object in a mechanistic, billiard-ball world of external relations (as Lichtman implies), but a basic structure of human experience, which arises in response to other *persons* in an organic social-symbolic world of internal (and intersubjective) relations. This becomes even clearer in Mead's interpretation of playing and gaming. In playing and gaming, as in linguistic activity, the key process in the generation of self-consciousness is the process of role-playing: "It is only by taking the roles of others that we have been able to come back to ourselves."[27] In play, the child takes the role of another and acts *as though* he were the other (e.g. mother, father, cowboy, Indian, and countless other symbolized roles). This form of role-playing involves a single role at a time. Thus, the other which comes into the child's experience in play is a "specific other. "[28]

The game involves a more complex form of role-playing than that involved in play. In the game, the individual is required to internalize, not merely the symbolized character of a single and specific other, but the roles of *all* others who are implicated with him in the game. He must, moreover, comprehend the (explicit or implicit) rules of the game which condition the various roles.[29] This configuration of roles-organized-according-to-rules brings the attitudes of all participants together to form a unity – this unity is what Mead calls the "generalized other." The generalized other, then, is "an organized and generalized attitude[30] in reference to which the individual defines his own conduct. When the individual can view himself from the standpoint of the generalized other, "self-consciousness in the full sense of the term" is attained. As we shall see, the rise of the self vis-a-vis the generalized other is the condition, not only of self-consciousness, but also of social control of the individual.

It is within the context of Mead's analysis of the above-outlined structures of intersubjectivity that the significance of his distinction between the "me" and the "I" becomes apparent. The self is not merely the passive reflection of the generalized other. The individual's response to the other is active: he *decides* what he will do *in the light of* the attitude of the other; his conduct is not mechanistically determined by that attitude. There are two phases, or poles, of the self: (1) that phase which symbolizes the attitude of the generalized other; and (2) that phase which *responds to* the attitude of the generalized other. The "me" is the socialized phase of the self, and the "I" is a response to the "me." Mead defines the "me" as "a conventional, habitual individual," and the "I" as the "novel reply" of the individual to the generalized other.[31] The "I" is the foundation of individuality; the "me" is the principle of conformity. Berger and Luckmann are correct in characterizing Mead's social philosophy as a "theory of the dialectic between society and the individual, "[32] and this dialectic takes the form of the

polarity of the "me" and the "I." The "me" is the internalization of roles which derive from such symbolic processes as linguistic interaction, playing, and gaming; whereas the "I" is a "creative response" to the symbolized structures of the "me" (e.g., to the generalized other).

Mead states that the "I" is implied in the individual's responses to the "me," but that it is never "an object in consciousness." "The 'I,'" he writes, "lies beyond the range of immediate experience" and "is the transcendental self of Kant, the soul that James conceived behind the scene holding on to the skirts of an idea to give it an added increment of emphasis. "[33] This quotation, from the essay of 1912 which Lichtman cites, seems to lend weight to Lichtman's criticism that Mead's account of the "I" is developed in a Kantian vein. But in an essay of 1913, also cited by Lichtman, Mead begins to move beyond the Kantian perspective. Although the "I" is not an object of immediate experience, it is, in an important sense, knowable (i.e., objectifiable). The "I" is apprehended in memory; but in the memory image, the "I" is no longer a pure subject, but "a subject that is now an object of observation."[34] We can grasp the structural and functional significance of the "I," but we cannot observe it directly – it appears only *ex post facto.* We *remember* the responses of the "I" to the "me"; and this is as close as we can get to a concrete knowledge of the "I." The objectification of the "I" is possible only through an awareness of the past; but the objectified "I" is never the subject of present experience. "If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the 'I' comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure."[35] The "I" appears as a symbolized object in our consciousness of our past actions, but then, it has become a part of the "me." This is not to say that the "I" is nothing more than the "me" (as Lichtman suggests). The "me" is that phase of the self which represents the past, the already-established generalized other. The "I" is a response to the "me" and represents action in a present which implies a restructuring of the "me" in a future. The action of the "I" is not "fictional," but actual in an unfolding present which opens upon a future. After the "I" has acted, "we can catch it in our memory and place it in terms of that which we have done," but it is now (in the newly emerged present) an aspect of the restructured "me." The "I," as the principle of subjectivity, cannot be reduced to mere objectivity or facticity.

Lichtman misses the liberating consequence of Mead's concept of the self: since the character of the "I" is determinable only *after* it has occurred, then the "I" is not subject to predetermination. Lichtman's oversight stems from his failure to appreciate the temporal-historical dimension of Mead's social psychology. Particular acts of the "I" become aspects of the "me" in the sense that they are symbolized and hence objectified through memory; but the "I" as such is not contained in the "me." The human individual exists in a social-symbolic situation and responds to that situation. The situation has a particular character, but this character does not completely determine the response of the individual; there are alternative courses of action. The individual must select a course of action (and even the decision to do "nothing" is a response to the situation) and act

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accordingly, but the course of action he selects is not dictated by the situation. It is this indeterminacy of response that "gives the sense of freedom, of initiative."[36] The action of the "I" is revealed only in the action itself; specific prediction of the action of the "I" is not possible. The individual is determined to respond, but the specific character of his response is not fully determined. The individual's responses are thus *conditioned,* but not determined by the situation in which he acts. Human freedom is conditioned freedom. This analysis of human transcendence is very close to what Lichtman takes the Marxist approach to be.[37]

The "I" is an emergent event within the social process of symbolic interaction. Mead defines emergence as the principle of novelty. Despite the rationalistic and scientific demand for determination, explanation, and prediction, the world is not fully determinable, explainable, or predictable; the world emerges before us, i.e., it develops in unexpected and therefore surprising ways. The concept of emergence, according to Mead, is the philosophical expression of the perception of novelty in experience. It is the action of the "I" that gives the social process its unexpected and surprising events. It is the "I" that interprets, defines, and reinvents the symbols which arise in the processes of intersubjectivity:

> The common language is there, but a different use of it is made in every new contact between persons; the element of novelty in the reconstruction takes place through the reaction of the individuals to the group to which they belong. That reconstruction is no more given in advance than is the particular hypothesis which the scientist brings forward given in the statement of the problem. [38]

The "I," then, is a "movement into the future" and is "not given in the 'me'"; what a person *has been* does not predetermine what he *is going to become.*[39]

Thus, the "I" and the "me" exist in dynamic relation to one another. The human personality or self arises in a socially defined situation. This situation structures the "me" by means of intersubjective symbolic processes (language, gestures, play, games, etc.), and the active organism, as it continues to develop, must respond to its situation and to its "me." This response of the active organism is the "I." The individual takes the attitude of the "me" or the attitude of the "I" according to situations in which he finds himself. For Mead, "both aspects of the 'I' and the 'me' are essential to the self in its full expression."[40] Both community and individual autonomy are necessary to identity. Mead summarizes his analysis of the "me" and the "I" as follows:

> I have been undertaking to distinguish between the 'I' and the 'me' as different phases of the self, the 'me' answering to the organized [and symbolized] attitudes of others which we definitely assume and which determine consequently our own conduct so far as it is of a self-conscious character. Now the 'me' may be regarded as giving the form of the 'I.' The novelty comes in the action of the 'I,' but the structure, the form of the self is one which is conventional [41]

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The "I" is process (specifically temporal action) breaking through structure. This is, contrary to Lichtman, a dialectical relationship: the "me" is a necessary symbolic structure which renders the action of the "I" possible, and "without this structure of things, the life of the self would become impossible."[42] And without the organic responsiveness signified in the "I," i.e., its ability to act with reference to others, the social self could not have arisen in the first place.

III Mead's Theory of Social Structure and Conflict

Mead's analysis of the self provides a basis for a theoretical understanding of the scope and limits of socialization and social control. The self, we have seen, arises when the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other toward himself. This "internalization" of the generalized other occurs through the individual's participation in such socialization processes as language, play, and games. The self, then, is of great value to society; the internalization of interactional symbolic structures allows for "the superior co-ordination" of "society as a whole," and for the "increased efficiency of the individual as a member of the group."[43] The generalized other, internalized in the "me," is a major instrument of social control; it is the mechanism by which the community gains control "over the conduct of its individual members."[44] "Social control," in Mead's words, "is the expression of the 'me' over against the expression of the 'I.'"[45]

The genesis of the self in social process is thus a condition of social control. The self is a social emergent which supports the cohesion of the group; individual will is harmonized, by means of a socially defined and symbolized "reality," with social goals and values. The socialization process (i.e., the internalization of the generalized other through language, play, and the game) brings the individual to "assume the attitudes of those in the group who are involved with him in his social activities."[46] By learning to speak, gesture, and play in "appropriate" ways, the individual is brought into line with the accepted symbolized roles and rules of the social process.

> The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; *and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs,* just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group.[47]

The self is therefore one of the most subtle and most effective instruments of social control. Because of his misconception of Mead's thematic, Lichtman fails to grasp this critical insight of Mead into the depth of social bondage.

Social control, Mead argues, is powerful, but ultimately limited. One of the limits of social control is the phenomenon of the "I" as described above. Another limit to social control is presented in Mead's description of specific social relations. This description has important consequences regarding the way in which the concept of the generalized other is to be applied in social analysis.

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The self emerges out of "a special set of social relations with all the other individuals" involved in a given set of social projects.[48] The self is always a reflection of specific social relations which are founded upon the specific mode of activity of the group in question. The concept of property, for example, presupposes a community with certain kinds of responses; the idea of property has specific social and historical foundations and symbolizes the interests and values of specific social groups. The idea of property is based upon an "organized attitude with reference to property which is common to all members of the community."[49] It is this sort of attitude that makes society possible.

Mead delineates two types of social groups in civilized communities. There are, on the one hand, "concrete social classes or subgroups" in which "individual members are directly related to one another." And, on the other hand, there are "abstract social classes or subgroups" in which "individual members are related to one another only more or less indirectly, and which only more or less indirectly function as social units, but which afford *unlimited possibilities* for the widening and ramifying and enriching of the social relations among all the individual members of the given society as an organized and unified whole."[50] Such abstract social groups provide the opportunity for a radical extension of the "definite social relations" which constitute the individual's sense of self and which structure his conduct.

Mead's radical critics, in portraying his social theory as a consensus theory, have failed to notice that human society, in Mead's formulation, contains *a multiplicity of generalized others.* The individual is capable of holding membership in different groups both simultaneously and serially and may therefore conduct himself with reference to different generalized others at different times; or he may extend his conception of the generalized other by identifying himself with a "larger" community than the one in which he has hitherto been involved (e.g., he may come to view himself as a member of the human race as such rather than as a member of a particular nation). *The self is not confined within the limits of any one generalized other.* Mills misses the point when he says that, for Mead, the generalized other is an internalization of "the whole society." On the contrary, Mead's analysis culminates in a conception of a plurality of generalized others, each of which is rooted in what Mills calls "selected societal segments."[51] It is true that the self arises through the internalization of the generalized and symbolized attitudes of others, but there is no limit to the individual's capacity to encompass new others within the dynamic structure of the self. The temporality of the self makes the project of strict social control difficult if not impossible.

Mead's description of social relations also has interesting implications vis-a-vis the sociological problem of the relation between consensus and conflict in society. It is clear that both consensus and conflict are significant dimensions of social process; and in Mead's view, the problem is not to decide *either* for a

consensus model of society *or* for a conflict model, but to describe as directly as possible the function of *both* consensus *and* conflict in the social world.

There are two models of consensus-conflict relation in Mead's analysis of social relations. These may be schematized as follows:

(1) Intra-group consensus – Extra-group conflict
(2) Intra-group conflict – Extra-group consensus

In the first model, the members of a given group are united in opposition to another group which is characterized as the "common enemy" of all members of the first group. A great many human organizations derive their *raison d'etre* and their sense of solidarity from the existence (or assumed existence) of the "enemy" (communists, atheists, fascist pigs, foreigners, or whatever).[52] The generalized other of such an organization is formed in opposition to the generalized other of the enemy. The individual can view himself as "with" the members of his group and "against" the members of the enemy group.

Mead's second model, that of intra-group conflict and extra-group consensus, is employed in his description of the process in which the individual reacts *against* his own group. The individual opposes his group by symbolizing and appealing to a "higher sort of community" which he holds to be superior to his own group. He may do this by appealing to the past (e.g., he may ground his criticism of the bureaucratic state in a conception of "Jeffersonian Democracy"), or by appealing to the future (e.g., he may point to the ideal of "all mankind," an ideal which has yet to be realized). Thus, intra-group conflict is carried on in terms of an extra-group consensus, even if the consensus is merely assumed, or posited (e.g., the Old Left insistence upon the unity of the proletariat). This model presupposes Mead's conception of the multiplicity of generalized others, i.e., the field within which conflict is possible. It is also true that the individual can criticize his group only in so far as he can symbolize to himself the generalized other of that group; otherwise he would have nothing to criticize, let alone the motivation to do so. It is in this sense that social criticism presupposes the social-symbolic process and a social self capable of symbolic-reflexive activity.

The above analysis of Mead's description of the dynamics of consensus and conflict should make it clear that Mead cannot be characterized as a consensus theorist. The radical tendency to place Mead's thought in a consensus context stems from a failure to grasp Mead's conception of the generalized other. According to Becker, Mead's theory implies that "each person should have the identical social contents," since each "learned the same vocabulary as those around him."[53] But since human society is constituted of a plurality of groups, there are many "vocabularies" and many generalized others. The reality is, and Mead recognized this (albeit with some sadness), that human beings do *not* share "a world view in complete harmony" (Becker's phrase[54]), but are divided against one another in nations, social classes, races, and so on. Contrary to Becker and other radical

critics of Mead, conflict is a central concept in Mead's social philosophy, and there is no difficulty in applying Mead's theory of social structure to the disharmonies and conflicts which take place in the social world. Becker's contention that Freud and Marx are superior to Mead on this score does not stand up in the light of Mead's writings.

IV The Dialectic of Self and Society

An interesting consequence of Mead's analysis of social conflict and social change is that the reconstruction of society will entail the reconstruction of the self. As pointed out earlier, the "I" is an emergent response to the generalized other; and the "me" is that phase of the self that symbolizes the social situation within which the individual must operate. Thus, the critical capacity of the self takes form in the "I" and has two dimensions: (1) explicit self-criticism (aimed at the "me") is implicit social criticism; and (2) explicit social criticism is implicit self-criticism. For example, the criticism of one's own moral principles is also the criticism of the morality of one's social world, for personal morality is rooted in social morality. Conversely, the criticism of the morality of one's society raises questions concerning one's own moral role in the social situation. Thus, in the widespread criticism of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, the question as to the moral responsibility of *all of us* has naturally arisen.

The fact that the self arises in social process does not entail complete control of the individual by society. Self-assertion is possible, and the individual can oppose himself to his society. In this opposition, however, the individual in still a social being who responds to the attitudes of the generalized other: "One attains self-consciousness only as he takes, or finds himself stimulated to take, the attitude of the other. Then he is in a position of reacting in himself to that attitude of the other."[55] The generalized other is part of one's self; and opposition to the group, therefore, is also opposition to one phase (the "me") of the individual's own self. While the generalized other is an instrument of social control, it is also a condition of human liberty or, at least, a foundation for the *possibility* of individual and group liberation from social pressures and structures. The generalized other, internalized in the "me," is the occasion for the action of the "I." Since self and society are poles of a single process, change in one pole will result in change in the other pole. It would appear that social reconstructions are effected by individuals (or groups of individuals) who find themselves in conflict with a given society, and once the reconstruction is accomplished, the new social situation generates far-reaching changes in the personality structures of the individuals involved in that situation. "In short," writes Mead, "social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are the two sides of a single process – the process of human social evolution."[56] Personality change and social change are interacting variables. This argument, in my view, is essential to the development of radical social theory since the hope of radical theory is the creation, not only of a "new society," but also of a "new man."

The dialectic of the "me" and the "I" takes place within the temporal structure of the human world.

> There is present in the human world a past and an uncertain future, a future which may be influenced by the conduct of the individuals of the group. The individual projects himself into varied possible situations and by implements and social attitudes undertakes to make a different situation exist, which would give expression to different impulses.[57]

The "me," we have seen, symbolizes the past to which the "I" responds, whereas the "I" is that phase of the self which aims at the future. The "I" is the basis for social criticism. Mead describes the telos of the "I" in metaphors that are both spatial and temporal: on the one hand, the appeal is to a "larger" community; and on the other hand, this larger community awaits realization in the future. The appeal of the "I" is made to "posterity." Social criticism, in so far as it entails social reconstruction, is inherently future-directed.

Social criticism and social action, then, are responses to present social problems, and the future is the field in which these problems are to be solved. But the structure of the future cannot be predelineated with an definiteness or certainty. The future emerges out of the conflicts of the present, but cannot be accurately predicted on the basis of the present. Social reconstruction, and especially *revolutionary* social reconstruction, takes the form of *a negation* of the present and past. Mead points out that most definitions of freedom and human rights have been framed in negative terms ("Congress shall make no law . . . ," etc.). Revolution is a negation of an established (and pernicious) state of affairs, and the revolutionary conception of natural rights has been "the expression of certain negative conditions under which men in society and under government could express themselves."[58] No positive definition of man and his rights (i.e., a definition of *what is)* can anticipate with any accuracy future conceptions of man, rights, liberties, and so on.

> Of one thing we may be sure – that the next struggle for liberty, or our liberties, will arise out of some infraction that will not have reference to the definition we have formulated of what . . . man should be and, consequently, of what constitutes his liberties. On the contrary, we will find in all probability that the struggle will lead to a quite different definition from the one with which we started.[59]

Projective symbolization of the future may be necessary as a means of criticizing past and present, but specific prediction of the human future is, on Mead's analysis, impossible. The future, in Mead's view, is both negation and surprise. And the self, in so far as it lives toward the future (i.e., in so far as it is an "I," a transcendent subject), cannot be fully comprehended by the generalized other, nor can it be fully controlled by the social process within which it emerges. Mead's analysis, while it *does* release the self from a total immersion in the reified social world, can hardly be described with justice as "dissolving" the transcendent subject. On the contrary, Mead's thematic is a *vindication* of the subject and of human

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freedom. Lichtman's demand that the subject be rendered "more actual" than Mead's theory allows masks, I think, an objectivistic and mechanistic demand that the subject be incorporated in the reified structures of predictive social analysis. Such incorporation, I think Mead would argue, is neither possible nor desirable.

V Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to defend Mead's theory of self and society against what I consider to be unfair and misdirected criticisms on the part of certain radical writers; I have also attempted to develop Meadian theory in a direction consistent with theories of radical social change. Mead's description of the dialectic of individual and society, I have argued, reveals the complexity of the relation between self and other. On the one hand, the self, as partially an internalization of the generalized other, is subject to more or less stringent social control and actually serves the purposes of control in a given society or group. But, on the other hand, social control is limited by the phenomenon of the "I" and by the fact that human society is composed of a multiplicity of generalized others many of which are in conflict with one another. Thus, social consensus and social control can never be complete; conflicts between individual and group, and between group and group, are inherent in human sociality. Further, since social process is temporal process, perfect order appears to be beyond our grasp. Social reconstruction (which nearly always aims at social harmony) aims at a future which is fundamentally elusive: the negation of past and present conflicts cannot insure a conflict-free future; and the ironies of history being what they are, a conflict-free future is practically inconceivable. We must, in Mead's view, act within the temporal-historical matrix in an effort to gain greater control and to establish greater human order; but our control and order will always be limited given the recalcitrance of time and circumstances. The human condition, according to Mead, is tragic, but also exciting: "We do not know where we are going, but we are on the way."[60] And in this historic journey, there is room for both humility and hope.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1966); Hugh D. Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) and *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959); C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); John Seeley, *The Americanization of the Unconscious* (New York: International Science Press, 1967).

2 See, for example, J. Asplund, "Den symboliska interaktionismens varderelevans," *Sociologisk Forskning*, VI (1969), No. 1, 1-26; and Joachim Israel, *Alienation: From Marx to Modern Sociology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971).

3 Israel, Ibid., 313-6.

4 Richard Lichtman, "Symbolic Interactionism and Social Reality: Some Marxist Queries," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, XV (1970), 75-94.

5 Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 94.

6 Leon Shaskolsky, "The Development of Sociological Theory in America-A Sociology of Knowledge Interpretation," in *The Sociology of Sociology,* ed. Larry T. Reynolds and Janice M. Reynolds (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1970), 20.

7 Thomas S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1961), 223-5 and *passim.*

8 R.D. Laing, H. Phillipson, and A.R. Lee, *Interpersonal Perception: A Theory and a Method of Research* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), 4 and *passim;* and Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 77-99, fn. 79.

9 Lichtman, 81.

10 Mead, "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, IX (1912), 401-6. Reprinted in *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead,* ed. Andrew J. Reck (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., The Liberal Arts Press, 1964), 141.

11 Lichtman, 81.

12 Ibid.

13 Becker, 149.

14 Shaskolsky, 17-20.

15 Ibid., 19. Italics mine.

16 Ibid., 19-20.

17 Mills, *Power, Politics, and People,* fn., 427.

18 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society,* ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 135.

19 Ibid., 136-7.

20 Ibid., 165.

21 Ibid., 135-6.

22 Ibid., 225.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 172.

25 Ibid., 67.

26 Ibid., 195.

27 Ibid., 184-5.

28 Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present,* ed. Arthur E. Murphy (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1932), 169.

29 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society,* 151.

30 Ibid., 195.

31 Ibid., 197.

32 Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 194.

33 Mead, "The Mechanism of Social Consciousness," in *Selected Writings,* 140-1.

34 Mead, "The Social Self," *Ibid.,* 142; originally published in *The Journal of Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, X (1913), 374-80.

35 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 174.

36 Ibid., 177.

37 Lichtman, 90-1.

38 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society,* 198.

39 Ibid., 177.

40 Ibid., 199.

41 Ibid, 209.

42 Ibid., 214.

43 Ibid., 179.

44 Ibid., 155.

45 Ibid., 210.

46 Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present, 192.*

47 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society, 164.* Italics mine.

48 Ibid., 156-7.

49 Ibid., 161-2.

50 Ibid., 157. Italics mine.

51 Mills, *Power, Politics, and People,* footnote, 427.

52 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 220-1.

53 Becker, 149-50.

54 Ibid., 150.

55 Mead, *Mind Self and Society*, 194.

56 Ibid., 309.

57 Ibid., 350.

58 Mead, "Natural Rights and the Theory of Political Institution," in *Selected Writings, 157;* originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, XII (1915), 141-55.

59 Ibid., 159.

60 Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act,* ed. Charles W. Morris *et al.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 496.