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## Review of One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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# One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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A Chinese proverb reminds us that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step. I find this less encouraging than I suspect it is meant to be, since once that step is made the journey will still be pretty long. With a little lateral thinking, we can think of this metaphor as an apt description of natural science. Forward progress is made and researchers rarely look back. As I write, I am looking at a syllabus for a graduate course in molecular biology being taught right now, and the oldest reference in it is to a paper from 2003. Sociologists face a different situation: we have to remember—and relearn—our traditions while ambling forward. As a result, we learn by taking steps both forward and backward. We advance the field with new ideas and findings but must also step back and appreciate old ideas and old findings. This distinction explains why, for example, Sigmund Freud's contribution to psychoanalysis has a continuing relevance that his earlier work on the physiology of eels does not.

Randall Collins helps us take a step forward by combining Durkheimian and Goffmanian themes in a new way—and then by showing us that this synthesis can be used to produce interesting empirical analyses. Tom Morrione, Stanford Lyman,

and Arthur Vidich help us step back, so as to secure a better vantage point. They want to teach us that Herbert Blumer was a more complicated thinker than we often take him to be. In their books we are treated to primary texts that show Blumer in a new light and, in the Lyman and Vidich collection, to a powerful historical commentary that situates Blumer's work in the tradition of post-Civil War reform. They teach us something that I identify with Philip Rieff's work: that sociological theory, culture, and tradition intersect, producing a distinctive "thought-world" with its own constraining truths. Sociological theory is more than a guide to hypothesis construction: it is something we live in and that was built out of prior struggles. That symbolic interactionism continues to speak to us today is not because of Blumer's pithy definition but because it provides sociologists with an identity that was forged at a pivotal time in American history. The moral, economic, and political climate from which symbolic interactionism arose eerily resembles our own today, as Robert Putnam convincingly argues in *Bowling Alone* (2000:367–401).

Herbert Blumer was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 7, 1900. His father, not unlike either Goffman's or Garfinkel's father, ran a small business. Famously, Blumer played professional football for the Chicago Cardinals from 1924 until 1933, when a knee injury ended his career. Morrione reminds us (2004:179–83) that during these years Blumer rubbed shoulders (literally, I suppose) with the football greats of his era: Red Grange, Bronko Nagurski, and Jim Thorpe. It's a wonderful story. This should remind us of the cachet that Blumer must have brought to the discipline. However, almost twenty years after his death, his fate is to be remembered not as a celebrity but rather as a narrow contributor to sociology. Blumer is widely thought of as "only" the inventor of symbolic interactionism and interpreter of George Herbert Mead. For curious reasons, Blumer is rarely remembered as a methodologist, despite all his work in this area, and Morrione and Lyman and Vidich do not discuss this much in their volumes. Perhaps this is because Blumer's advocacy of Cooley's notion of sympathetic introspection and his accompanying criticisms of quantitative and/or variable analysis is out of step with our present methodological détente. Symbolic interactionists themselves have become increasingly willing to employ a wide variety of methods, and so Blumer's message, perhaps best seen in his reading of Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant*, now falls on deaf ears.

Morrione's book strengthens our understanding of the Blumer who invented symbolic interactionism by combining an interpretation of Mead's social behaviorism with the methodological and substantive interests of Chicago sociologists. This is the Blumer we know. By contrast, Lyman and Vidich have a different goal: they expand our understanding of Blumer by portraying him as something more than a symbolic interactionist. They see him as the developer of a "public philosophy." As such, Blumer was a participant in policy debates to "elaborate the human promise contained in the Declaration of Independence" in the aftermath of the Civil War (Lyman and Vidich 2000:5). This is not the Blumer we know, at least not know well, and we must thank Lyman and Vidich for allowing us to become acquainted with him.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to Morrione for his work on his volume. The core chapters—about 100 pages—read seamlessly but were actually artfully constructed by Morrione from more than one source. Blumer wrote the bulk of the material in the mid-1960s, at about the time that he published his paper, “Sociological Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead,” in the *American Journal of Sociology* (reprinted and better known as chapter 2 of Blumer’s 1969 *Symbolic Interactionism*). The structure of the two accounts of Mead is very similar. The better-known account concentrates on five “central matters”: the self, the act, social interaction, objects, and joint action (Blumer 1969:62). Morrione’s new account has Blumer focusing on human conduct, objects, the self, and both the individual and social act. However, the surface similarity is misleading. In reality, Morrione’s book shows us Blumer explicating the ideas that are only skimmed in his short essay on Mead. Morrione’s account also makes us privy to the correspondence between Blumer and David Miller in which these core ideas are further refined.

A good example of what Morrione brings to our attention is Blumer’s interpretation of Mead’s view of the self. In the short paper on Mead in *Symbolic Interactionism*, Blumer emphasizes one aspect of Mead’s account, namely, that the self is reflexive and as such can be an object to itself. His reason for doing so is a barely disguised dislike for the work of Parsons, whose emphasis on the internalization of norms and values made the self (in Blumer’s view) a structure rather than a process. Rashly, Blumer added (without naming Parsons), that such attempts “make no sense” (1969:63). Blumer then proceeded to criticize Freud for having—again, in his view—a different but equally flawed account of personality structure. This Blumer seems unduly combative, throwing insults around without naming names. Morrione shows us Blumer in a much better light, as a man who understood that Mead’s reflexive self was only one aspect of his overall analysis of self. While Mead certainly emphasized our reflexive capabilities, he also recognized that our selves are formed out of an interior dialog between the “I” and the “Me.” This dialog reveals the central importance of the “generalized other” that was strikingly missing from Blumer’s short account. Blumer now has to tread carefully, because insofar as the generalized other reflects community standards, our incorporation of them seems very similar to Parsons’s account of the internalization of norms.

In the first appendix to the book, Morrione reprints correspondence between Blumer and Miller in which the content of the generalized other is debated in detail. This is a powerful display of theorizing and a valuable commentary on both Mead and Blumer’s own earlier assessment of Mead. Blumer begins (Morrione 2004:110) by revealing his concern that Mead’s account of the generalized other can accommodate only the “voice” of the community, whereas it needs to be able to accommodate the “voices” of the community, by which he meant that one group within a society can have contradictory views on the same issue. Blumer’s anxiety here is related to his earlier concern with Mead’s insistence in *Mind, Self, and Society* that each person must have multiple selves. In the main text, Blumer chose simply not to pursue Mead’s argument concerning this (Morrione 2004:60). If Mead is right

and we do in fact have multiple selves that embody the multiple voices of the generalized other, Blumer wondered whether the content of the generalized other must then include material that was “unrecognized and taken for granted by the group” (Morriane 2004:123), and not just its immediately apparent rules and meanings. In these fascinating exchanges, Blumer’s thought comes alive, and we are able to observe him in the act of theorizing, rather than as someone who simply pronounces.

The correspondence between Blumer and Miller teaches us that Blumer is not a “faithful” student of Mead. Blumer is quite explicit about being uninterested in the full range of Mead’s philosophical concerns. He is also not content to be only a commentator on his work. Rather, Blumer correctly sees himself as extending the framework he inherited from Mead. As a result, it is possible—and desirable—to read Blumer as an independent theorist and thereby avoid discussion of his fidelity to Mead. I believe Blumer signals this to us, although perhaps unintentionally, by his reluctance to cite Mead. There is no possibility of using Blumer as a direct guide to Mead because he does not tell us where in Mead to look. Blumer floats above Mead’s texts, reacting to the overall implications of his work. He does not offer a close reading.

Blumer’s strength and weakness was that he was a symbolic interactionist imperialist. This gave him clarity of vision but at a price. His well-known antipathy toward Parsons and Freud meant that he could find nothing useful in their work (see, for example, his bewildered reply to Jonathan Turner [1975]). He never displayed the intimidating scholarship of his contemporaries, perhaps notably Parsons, Merton, Goffman, Rieff, and Shils. On the contrary, he rarely cited anyone. In this, Blumer’s attitude is comparable to Garfinkel’s desire to protect ethnomethodology from contaminating (i.e., any) sources. Ironically, Blumer’s genius was shown early on when he recognized that an eclectic mix of pragmatism, philosophy, and homespun sociological research methods could be combined to produce a new approach in sociology and a new identity for sociologists. His later weakness was his willingness to suppress further cross-fertilization.

There is a second limitation in Blumer’s style of argument—concerning his selection of examples—which I am reluctant to mention. Nevertheless, I will do so because I think it explains part of the resistance some sociologists exhibit to symbolic interactionism. It strikes me that Blumer favored examples that work well “philosophically.” That is to say, Blumer’s examples often offer further clarification to arguments that are already clear. Let me give an example, drawn almost at random. Blumer tells us that the “world of action of human beings” is made up of different objects: “Physical objects like a hammer or a wheel, social objects like a politician or a spouse, abstract objects like compassion” (Morriane 2004:47). The beauty of Blumer’s examples is their clarity. As readers, we can all recognize his typology. However, it also seems rather banal, even platitudinous.

I think that this is the key to Goffman’s frustration with Blumer and with symbolic interactionism in general: its positions often seem so general that everyone can agree with them, at which time no one really identifies with them. In Goffman’s

case, this led him to disavow symbolic interactionism in favor of his own favorite neologism, strategic interaction. Let me make this distinction: Blumer's examples were useful in that they clarified his arguments, but they were not telling or counterintuitive. Blumer skated on thick ice because his examples seemed too safe. He could not be seductive, as was Goffman, or charming, as is our best contemporary symbolic interactionist, Gary Fine, or shocking, as was Michel Foucault, especially in *Discipline and Punish*. In this book it is Foucault's examples—of Damien's botched execution, the plague, and the Panopticon, among others—that make the book so memorable and compelling.

What about Blumer's empirical work as a public philosopher? Lyman and Vidich endeavor to show that Blumer made four vital contributions: to the study of film and propaganda, and to our understanding of race relations, labor relations, and mass society. Lyman and Vidich are also explicit about something that remains implicit in Blumer: the importance of morality for sociology. They state that the European legacy of Weber and the American legacy of Dewey and Mead teach us that we must reestablish our "moral groundings" following the demise of Puritanism (2000:102). Dewey and Mead sought to bring this about with better public education and childhood socialization, in hopes that this would produce a sense of civic responsibility that could prevent a free rider mentality. However—and critically—Lyman and Vidich argue that Dewey and Mead had to fail because they could not ground a "code of ethics" in anything other than appropriate socialization. Could Blumer do better? In their judgment, Blumer did not solve the problem of grounding morality; instead, he left us with even more reasons to be concerned about our moral well-being. It is instructive that Morrione, Lyman, and Vidich all recognize that Blumer feared that the contradictory voices from competing generalized others could provide a blank check for a situational ethics that is thoroughly remissive. Without guidance from faith, core values, or a compelling political agenda, public morality may be reduced to a competition between self and group interests. However, Blumer suggested that the contemporary world is not as bleak as this Weberian (or Rieffian) description suggests. This is because, so Lyman and Vidich claim, Blumer was able to identify something in the fabric of mass, secular society that allows for hope.

In taking a step forward, Randall Collins understands the importance of counterintuitive, empirical analyses, and so he devotes half his book to a display of the empirical payoff of his own Goffman-inspired neologism, the interaction ritual chain. Collins beautifully demonstrates the ability to appreciate past insights while extending our theoretical understanding. In Merton's felicitous phrase, he is genuinely a master of both the history and systematics of social theory. Like his former teacher, Parsons, Collins wants to build a bridge between classical and contemporary sociological theory. Reminiscent of Parsons, Collins finds convergences in the work of Durkheim, Weber, and Goffman. Collins is at odds with Parsons in that he has "promoted" Goffman over Freud (Parsons's choice), with the likely consequence that introspective analyses will be played down, and observational, ethological, analyses will be emphasized.

This synthesis produces something new: the centrality of “emotional energy” (EE) in social exchanges. Collins’s new concept is forged out of Durkheim’s account of collective effervescence and Goffman’s analysis of the ritual order. Collins defines this state as one of “heightened intersubjectivity” (2004:35). When our rituals work well we feel “entrained” by them, when they fail they fall flat: identities are not “affirmed or changed,” and we feel bored, tired, and eager to escape (2004:51–52). In a series of wonderful empirical vignettes, Collins shows that even our clothing is coded with EE: we put on our best clothes (whatever we take that phrase to mean) to signal that people are worthy enough to see us looking our best. Collins then notes that our present compulsory casualness is as hostile to a man arriving at a party in jacket and tie as a previous era was to someone arriving in jeans (2004:22, example modified slightly).

The EE that results from heightened intersubjectivity also sustains a moral order. This is because group rituals sustain conceptions of the common good, both in religious and secular environments (2004:39–40). So, in an interesting way, Collins has an answer to the question of how morality is to be preserved that bothered Mead and Blumer: not necessarily through faith or socialization but through institutionalized group rituals that possess high EE.

The second half of Collins’s book demonstrates that his approach yields interesting findings. For example, in chapter 7, Collins reconsiders Weber’s analysis of class, status, and power in the light of his theory of interaction ritual chains. Collins points out in a rather Blumerian way that survey data are misleading guides to these topics. For example, although “professors” have high status, they lose status whenever they become professors of anything. Also, any specification of rank or location also produces status decline (2004:260). Similarly, Collins points out that money means quite different things once it is contextualized: although few people have tens of billions of dollars, the consumption patterns of the super wealthy are not very different from those of the wealthiest 10 percent or more of the population. Indeed, all the super wealthy can do with their billions is buy and sell rarified “financial instruments” (2004:264). Collins also writes insightfully about the status-inversion techniques used by celebrities and others who deliberately dress down in order to acquire the “morally superior stance of the underdog” (2004:259). This leads Collins to the Blumer-like conclusion that “macro-data” have to be grounded in microsituations, where they are often played out in surprising ways.

Something similar can be said about power. Collins distinguishes between D-power and E-power. The former is the power to make people give way, the latter is the power to get things done. As Collins then argues, although both powers may coincide, they may not, and this has to be understood as it occurs in microsituations. (Incidentally, there is one of a number of magnificent photographs here in his discussion—in this case of servants serving tea to upper-class English cricketers).

I cannot do justice to Collins’s achievement in this book. It really is a magnificent display of the integration of existing theory, the development of new theory, and powerful, counterintuitive empirical research. Collins allows us to take at least one

step forward. However, it is the fate of the social sciences to have to take backward steps as well, and the books by Morrione and Lyman and Vidich teach us a lot that is vital about our traditions. All three books therefore deserve to be read carefully.

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