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Herbert Blumer on the Interactional Order of the Democratic Society

Abstract: The article draws attention to the potential significance of Herbert Blumer's heritage in the sociological analysis of the issues with which modern democracy has to deal. It aims to strengthen that current of interpretation pertaining to symbolic interactionism which opposes the widespread tendency to consider it as a microsociological orientation. The article emphasizes medium-range phenomena—in other words, mesosociological problems of organizations, interest groups and social movements. Blumer helped George H. Mead's ideas, including the basic concept of the self, find a fuller application in sociology. To properly evaluate Blumer's achievements, one should consider him as a researcher of the changes occurring in modern societies in general. He emphasized the existence of a constant process of defining and redefining social institutions, and thus, the role of civic agency—in other words, ultimately, of the reflexive self. In Blumer's conceptions of symbolic interaction, joint action and negotiated order one may see an elaboration of the interactional order of the democratic society.

Keywords: Herbert Blumer, democracy, symbolic interactions, negotiated order.

Introduction: Blumer's Interactionism Revisited

This article, which appraises the heritage of a scholar who died a quarter of a century ago, just before the downfall of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc, was written for three reasons. The successive waves of democratization visible in various parts of the globe in the 20th and 21st centuries have rendered the problem of modern democracy a crucial issue not only in political theory, but also—perhaps even first and foremost—in sociological theory. Thus, my primary motive is to remind readers about the existence of a conceptual reservoir for the processual analysis of sociocultural phenomena and the dynamics of a democratic society. Viewed from such an angle, Herbert Blumer's heritage shows the civic value of the Chicago school's sociological traditions and of the public philosophy of pragmatism, which fueled both the Chicago school and Blumer's work. In the presented reflections, I allude to my previous studies on the same subject (Hałas 1994: 45–68; Hałas 2011a: 247–259; Hałas 2007: VII–XX) and draw upon them. My second motive is the intention to strengthen that current of interpretation pertaining to the theory of symbolic interactionism which opposes the widespread, stereotypical tendency to read interactionism as a microsociological orientation. However, while it was correct to accentuate macrointeractionism as a counterbalance, as Robert Maines and Tom Morrione (2001: 55ff) did, the presented sketch emphasizes the sphere of medium-range phenomena—in other words,

mesosociological issues: the problems of organizations, interest groups and social movements. In this meso-area, a field is indicated in which further research should be conducted, with potentially crucial implications for the theory of democratic societies. The third and final motive for this article is the need to confirm the significance of sociology's heritage, despite attempts to devalue sociological theory as a scientific undertaking under the pretext of its insufficient interdisciplinarity (Delanty 2006: XVIII). Sociological theory is being negatively compared with European social theory, which is a new term for the "critical social philosophy of the present" (Delanty 2006: XIX); this term, by the way, can be traced back to the program of the Chicago school, where it referred to an essentially interdisciplinary project of research on order and change, which involved—at the very least—social psychology and sociology (Thomas, Znaniecki 1927).

The name of Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) is rightly associated with symbolic interactionism, which he is considered to have established among sociological theories. However, just as symbolic interactionism cannot be viewed solely through the lens of Blumer's conception, since Blumer is not the only founder of this heterogeneous theoretical orientation, Blumer's heritage would also suffer, should we interpret it only in the simplified frames of symbolic interactionism. Such an interpretation might prove all the more confusing, because symbolic interactionism has frequently been presented in a schematic and simplified way as a microsociological orientation, often criticized for its subjective bias, or—on the contrary—praised precisely for reinstating the significance of individuals and their actions. Obviously, one should remember that Blumer first used the term "symbolic interactionists" as early as 1937 (Blumer 1937: 153, 159), referring to sociologists who opposed both the multiple varieties of naturalism and cultural determinism in research of social life. He drew attention to the existence of a third point of view, which ascribes the greatest significance to common symbols and their understanding, which guides human actions. In this perspective, social interaction is primarily a communicative process (Blumer 1937: 171). The years 1892–1935 are considered the period when the Chicago school was active; its members agreed that communicative processes are of fundamental significance in the study of social phenomena. After World War II, Blumer continued the traditions of the Chicago school together with Everett Hughes, Anselm Strauss and others, known as the "second Chicago school" (Fine 1995). In those times, multiple varieties of symbolic interactionism were being developed, falling broadly into two main currents. The first one, termed "sociological social psychology," focused on changes which occur in individuals as a result of interactions. Frequently, this variant of symbolic interactionism was considered tantamount to the entire theory. The second one, in turn, concentrated on the role of communicative processes in the creation and transformation of social order. The first direction of studies was linked with the works of George Herbert Mead, a pragmatist philosopher whose lectures in social psychology had a considerable impact on sociologists. The second one was associated with William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (Rock 1979: 54–55), as well as with the influence of Robert E. Park's concepts.

Blumer undoubtedly helped Mead's ideas find a fuller application in sociology, among them—the basic concept of the self as an agent's ability to ascribe meaning

to the objects, including him/herself, at which his/her actions are directed. However, Blumer's (and Mead's) works should by no means be considered merely specimens of some sociological variety of social psychology. By the way, a strict division between the psychosocial current in social interactionism and the variety oriented towards macroprocesses is unjustified, as the works of Blumer clearly show, since he drew both from Mead's inspirations and from Park's heritage.

In order to properly evaluate Blumer's scientific achievements—instead of starting out from a specific sociological theory, to the development of which he undoubtedly contributed—one should first of all contemplate him as an American sociologist, since Blumer took up topics highly significant for the United States of his time, and his analysis of those issues simultaneously made him an astute researcher of the changes occurring in modern societies in general. He pondered the important problem of principles and rules which are constitutive for the democratic society and cannot be brought down to legal matters. As John Markoff puts it, democracy has always been and remains a “multifaceted concept.” Freedom of action and civic participation give rise to the actual democratic practices, which then undergo transformation and improvement (Markoff 2005: 192–194). Blumer essentially analyzed the emergent democratic social order, which can no longer be a constant, ordered system (Blumer 1988a: 306) based upon established rules. As he stated, “This, to my mind, is not at all likely as long as we live in a dynamic, democratic, competitive society. The degree of tension, the rapidity of accommodations and the extent of shifts of relations may vary from time to time, but the mobile character of the relations remains” (Blumer 1988a: 306–307). Thus, one can say that Blumer pursued civic sociology on the grounds of social pragmatism (Lyman & Vidich 1988). His attention remained focused on the freedom to act and unite, and thus the dynamic of interest groups, which essentially represented social movements of various proportions. Blumer emphasized the dynamic character of the democratic society, which he associated with the mobility of social relations within this society. He wrote: “The key to understanding large interest organizations, it seems to me, is to recognize that they are *dynamic organizations operating in a mobile world*. They should be seen as acting organizations and not as mere aggregations or classifications of inert individuals, allegedly having a common interest” (Blumer 1988b: 313).

Obviously, sociological theory and the method of sociology are a very important part of this scholar's heritage, since he developed conceptual tools which remain useful to this day. However, one must also bear in mind the historical context of social and cultural changes in which Blumer's works were created. In his writings, Blumer presented macrosocial issues from an interactionist perspective and studied numerous problems, the analysis of which was subsequently developed in the frames of many sociological subdisciplines. Blumer's final, posthumously published work, “Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change” (Blumer 1990), shows clearly that symbolic interactionism can by no means be reduced to sociology of everyday life or to sociology of interpersonal relations. For over half a century Blumer, an active scholar right up to his death, showed namely, how important and advisable it is to adopt a perspective of collective actions, in which symbolic interaction—a kind of communicative action—plays a central role. Racial and ethnic relations, industrial relations, social

unrest and social movements, media and the mass society as well as, more generally, social problems—such is the broad range of phenomena which Blumer analyzed. He neither followed a preconceived research program nor aimed at theoretical synthesis; however, he was consistent in his assumptions, and this consistency made his works coherent as well as original. Of course, the concept of symbolic interaction is of key importance here, but—and this deserves special emphasis—even more important is the concept of joint action as a premise for the analysis of the processual democratic order. Analysis of symbolic power and interaction is crucial for the potential of symbolic interactionism's further development and influence (Sandstrom, Fine 2003: 1053). As I show in this article, inspirations contained in Blumer's works are not without significance for studies of the democratic public sphere and civic agency. This view is based on interpretations by Stanford M. Lyman and Arthur J. Vidich (1988), who saw Blumer's works in precisely such a light. David R. Maines also indicates the link between Blumer's conceptions and the analysis of democratization processes presented by Charles Tilly as a promising direction for further study (Tilly 2000), since Tilly, like Blumer, accentuates acting units as agents of change (Maines 2001: 34).

Social Problems and Negotiated Order in the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Blumer's works clearly demonstrate the importance of tradition in scientific development. Blumer started his scientific career at the University of Missouri and defended his doctoral thesis in 1928 at the University of Chicago. In the 1950s he brought the tradition of the Chicago school to the West Coast of the United States. Symbolic interactionism would later firmly take root there and flourish in the 1960s, the time when movements of contestation showed how problematic normative consensus can be, while civic movements striving for equal rights regardless of racial origin proved that the idea of "one American nation" is illusory. At that time Blumer (unlike the sociologists who, following the example of Talcott Parsons, assumed the existence of a structural-functional status quo of the social system) emphasized the significance of interpretation processes and making social rules in interactions which maintain or change the normative order, not the other way around. Blumer contested the dominant views, supporting the heritage of the Chicago school, where his own position originated. This does not mean that his views were constant and unchanging; however, they developed on the basis of the heritage left by Mead and Park. The role of Thomas and Znaniecki in shaping Blumer's conceptions must also be remembered. The Social Science Research Council gave Blumer the task of critically appraising Thomas and Znaniecki's joint achievement—"The Polish Peasant in Europe and America"—which was a paradigmatic standard for sociological studies in the Chicago school. The critical discussion, together with documentation of the debate, supplemented by comments by Thomas and Znaniecki, forms an important appendix to their excellent work (Blumer 1939a).

While studying at the University of Missouri, Blumer took up methodological issues associated with social research. He explored this problem under the direction

of Charles A. Ellwood, one of the main participants in the methodological debate taking place in the 1930s, which accompanied the then-current shift in the paradigm of pursuing sociology. Ellwood significantly contributed to the start of this debate (Halas 2001b: 35–36). In his doctoral dissertation, “Method in Social Psychology,” Blumer extensively dwelt on the methodological issues stemming from the relation between individuals and society. He was sufficiently competent to question views presented in the Methodological Note (Thomas & Znaniecki 1927), dealing with the subjective and objective side of social phenomena. Commenting on this work, Blumer expressed the firm opinion, consistent with the standpoint of Thomas and Znaniecki, that sociology—in order to be a science—requires the best possible linking of theory and empirical data. Simultaneously, in his view, situational analysis and the definition of the situation formed the main issue. The significance of this theoretical category was pointed out by Thomas and Znaniecki in the Methodological Note, while Blumer made it the basis of the analysis of interpretative processes in symbolic interaction.

Blumer also demonstrated how important it is to distinguish sociological problems—in other words, theoretical sociological problems—from social problems as social issues. He showed that practical application of sociology will be all the more successful when sociology develops as a science dealing with questions not directly dictated by practical needs. By applying the conception of defining the situation to the issue of social problems, he demonstrated how problematic the social problem actually is, since it is not something given but socially constructed (Blumer 1971). He showed that social problems are not self-evident facts and that sociologists should not seek the sources of social problems in objective circumstances. In reality, processes of symbolic interaction decide whether such problems will emerge and become legitimized in the public sphere. Blumer proposed studying the social process of emergence of social problems, since their development is described by collective definitions. This does not deny the sense of seeking knowledge about the objective circumstances of social problems. Rather, the message for the social researcher is that before attempting to solve social problems, one must recognize the symbolic-interactionist patterns in the processes of defining situations which are used to induce changes in social life.

Blumer’s works encompassed three areas which have spawned social problems discussed from the sociological perspective offered by symbolic interactionism: racial and ethnic relations, work relations and mass communication. Questions of race and ethnicity have been present in sociology since its dawn. The sociological point of view, which—unlike naturalist orientations—ascribed the leading role in understanding race and ethnicity to cultural factors, was significant not only in terms of theory. Above all, it influenced the institutions of American democracy. In this aspect, Thomas and Znaniecki’s work represented a turning point (Wiley 2005: 9; 2007: 134). Blumer also thought that racial and ethnic prejudices should not be interpreted merely in terms of psychological predispositions; it is necessary to study relations between groups, relations which change in the course of history. In other words, racial and ethnic relations cannot be interpreted solely through the lens of the psychology of racial prejudice—to explain them, it is necessary to take into account the context of specific social conditions, as well as historical experience (Vidich & Lyman 1985: 210). In his

analysis of racial prejudices, Blumer saw them as the struggles of various groups for positions in the frame of their relations with each other, relations which have their own collective history (Blumer 1958; Vidich & Lyman 1985: 211). He contrasted theories which attempted to explain ethnic and racial relations by referring to categories of attitude and personality with the interactive approach, which focuses on researching interactions between people seen as representants of various groups.

He researched racial and ethnic relations as processes of symbolic interaction, in which people are categorized as belonging to certain groups and that process of identification gets reflected in attitudes, customs, collective behaviors and in politics; as a result, the status and prospects of group members depend on those classifications. Blumer used the metaphor of “color line” introduced by Ray Stannard Baker. He saw this line not as an ordinary, clear boundary, but rather as a complex symbolic structure of demarcations constructed via various forms of segregating actions, manifesting themselves in institutions or present in more insidious forms of exclusion. When the issue of full civil rights for African Americans became a subject for heated struggles in the U.S., Blumer demonstrated the insufficiency of purely institutional solutions, which are unable to neutralize the influence of the race/ethnicity factor on democratic social order.

In his works, Blumer distanced himself from the then-dominant, contending theories of social order or conflict, showing the dynamics of a modern, democratic, industrial society, with its often contradictory values. In such a democratic society, value conflicts can only be resolved through negotiations. Thus, Blumer is also a sociologist of power and conflict (Blumer 1954). In Blumer’s legacy, analysis of industrial relations occupies a prominent, perhaps even a dominant position. Unlike the Harvard school, which researched interpersonal relations and their importance in management, and unlike those approaches which emphasized issues associated with class structure, Blumer studied the relations between workers and managers as interactions and collective relations between worker organizations and management organizations. He analyzed the interactions between workers and managers as relations between organized groups (Blumer 1947), comparing them to a game with no fixed rules. His research on entrepreneur organizations, conflicts between workers and managers, on the role of strikes and the impact of industrial conflicts on social order was inspired by his own experiences as a mediator in the conflicts between the United States Steel Company and United Steel Workers (Vidich & Lyman 1985: 221).

Blumer pointed out that the transfer of power relations in industrial conflicts between worker organizations and the management to the political arena represents a highly significant change. Simultaneously, he emphasized the importance of the strike as an institution that is essential if proper relations between workers and the management are to be established (Vidich & Lyman 1985: 223–224). This analysis was based on the more fundamental interactionist premise that a democratic society should be perceived as a multitude of negotiating groups. Critics of the strike, who considered it a threat to the moral foundations of society, thought that strikes can and ought to be prevented by humanization of management relations. Blumer, on the other hand, considered the strike a social phenomenon that stems from a conflict

of interests, and thought that it actually helps harmonize the relations between the sides. In a society where groups with various and contending interests interact, creating institutions which guarantee both the rights of all sides and public good requires—in Blumer's opinion—the participation of an authority able to assess the significance of those contending interests for the public good. He emphasized how problematic such assessments can be, especially when they result from government actions, pointing out that it is crucial to differentiate legitimate strikes from illegitimate ones.

Blumer continued Park's work, studying issues of public interest in a mass society, in which collective behaviors and media of mass communication play a major role. He thought that collective behaviors, the consequences of which can be both constructive and destructive, are the most important trait of the modern society (Vidich & Lyman 1985: 226). These behaviors abound in complex, heterogeneous societies, whereas in traditional societies they are found only in rare cases, when the social order suddenly breaks down. Blumer pointed out that during collective behaviors, cultural differences, class divisions and other gradations of status lose significance. Among mass behaviors, he considered fashion (Blumer 1969a) particularly important, since—unlike Georg Simmel—he considered it a sign of the radical democratization of society. Blumer was also a pioneer of sociological research on cinema and movie as a symbolic form of communication (Blumer 1935) which affects social attitudes and sentiments, influences public relations and public opinion. In his pre-war studies on the impact of movies he formulated the hypothesis that this form of communication strengthens basic, universal human values, but simultaneously disturbs mores and threatens local cultures. In other words, he showed that new communication media become a source of new social problems. Since media are a factor in socialization, they undermine the hitherto existing sources of identity and contribute to the growing problems associated with the self, which loses its rooting in traditional beliefs and moral convictions. A morality which is based on mass consensus is uncertain, and increasingly situational; as a result, the moral foundations of democratic society and issues of public ethics become crucial research topics.

Blumer's analysis of the modern democratic society refers to the so-called mass society. This term is free from negative connotations. In the light of Blumer's analysis, the mass society is neither homogeneous nor passive. On the contrary, its four features: massiveness, heterogeneity, unlimited access to many spheres of public life and continuous change (Blumer 1988c: 339–344) supply new frames for community life. “The opportunity offered by the largest and most heterogeneous human masses, namely, that of individuals separately or jointly, participating in decisive areas of social life, leads to an anomalous situation, one perhaps more problematic than any other. Ultimately the necessity of surviving in a world caught up in continual motion and continuous change gives a mass society its distinctive orientation” (Blumer 1988c: 344). Thus, the mass society is not the antithesis of the democratic society, since—as Blumer claims—the mass society also decides upon its actions by choosing from many alternatives (Blumer 1988c: 342–343).

Blumer used his interactionist perspective, since the premises of axiological and normative consensus proved inadequate in the new historical context of the chang-

ing modern society, being a “precarious world... a mobile system with an unfolding parade of events and developments bringing new opportunities, new obstacles, new threats, and new problems” (Blumer 1988b: 314). After all, Blumer is also a sociologist of social unrest and social movement. In other words, he not only helped create the theoretical orientation known as symbolic interactionism, but also built a sociological subdiscipline—sociology of collective behaviors. He developed this subdiscipline according to interactionist premises. As mentioned earlier, Blumer was a student of Park, whose doctoral thesis, defended in Heidelberg, was entitled “Masse und Publikum.” Blumer developed Park’s ideas further. The structural-functional orientation which predominated around the half of the 20th century omitted unorganized behaviors, and it was these behaviors which Blumer and his students began to research in depth. In a classic article (Blumer 1939b) he defined collective behaviors as those joint actions which have yet to become institutionalized. Although from Blumer’s point of view all social life consists of collective behaviors, since it is based on joint actions, in which individual lines of action must conform to the overall direction, he acknowledged the existing terminology and accepted collective behaviors as a separate research subdiscipline. In this second, narrower sense, the focus is on behaviors which are not subject to rules and established definitions of situations, and which develop from spontaneous to organized forms. Examples include crowd behaviors, public opinion, propaganda, mass behaviors and social movements, which influence social changes (Shibutani 1988: 26). Most early studies in this realm were performed by Blumer and developed further by his students: Ralph H. Turner, Lewis Killian, Kurt Lang, Orrin Klapp and John Lofland. Despite new takes on researching collective behaviors and collective actions, the interactionist orientation remains in the lead. Blumer was firmly convinced that it is precisely the specificity of democratic modern societies which requires the researcher to adopt a perspective of collective behaviors and collective actions, in other words—to study the spontaneous generation of new definitions in problematic situations, since people enter interactions with a baggage of experiences gained in differing social worlds and their interactions can no longer remain routine.

Blumer paid particular attention to social unrest, which disturbs the customary forms of life, habits, social routines and hitherto constant cultural definitions of situations. He described the factors, features and role of social unrest in the formation of social movements. Symbolic interactionism assumes that social unrest is a process that runs an uncertain and changing course and leads to results that are not causally determined. The essence of symbolic-interactionist analysis shows itself in the claim that social unrest consists in a process of defining, or rather redefining the image of the world, as well as prepares one for acting in a direction laid out by those redefinitions. A basic feature of social unrest is constant broadening of the sphere of social systems to which legitimization is denied, and thus a growing radicalization of the social unrest (Blumer 1978). Social unrest leads to a change in the vague feeling of dissatisfaction with the existing social order, consisting in a shift from an unclear perception of the problems associated with the existing social status quo to an established conception and an accompanying new standpoint regarding that order.

Social and group life consists in collective action, albeit in a broader sense. All social life is based on various joint actions, in other words—it consists in perpetual collective action. Due to symbolism, the proper term is collective action and not collective behavior. Blumer, continuing Park's tradition of studying collective behaviors, pointed out the social creativity of new forms of symbolic interactions, which may lead to giving up routine institutionalized actions. For Blumer, collective actions were an alternative to structural conceptions in sociology. Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical orientation shaped itself in response to the basic question about the possibility of constructing a democratic social order for which no support can be found any longer in the existing consensus regarding values and norms, given the social and cultural diversity of those values and norms. However, as Blumer showed: "The result is not so much a matter of confusion and chaos—as theory might lead one to expect—but rather a working arrangement between proponents of opposing precepts. This working arrangement is characterized by compromise, concessions and abstention from the complete exercise of rights, a blending of various precepts, and the search for novel, albeit perhaps merely temporary, bases for concerted action. Orderly life goes on, not as the result of values and norms held in common, but rather as the outcome of 'coming to terms'" (Blumer 1988c: 350).

Methodology for Interactionist Analysis

Blumer was an astute critic of mid-twentieth-century sociology, which had become dominated by the structural-functional orientation in theory and by logical empirism in methodology. An unrelenting and provocative polemist, like Charles A. Elwood, Rober M. MacIver, Pitirim A. Sorokin and Florian Znaniecki before him (Hałas 2010: 180–186), Blumer also criticized the widely supported views of Talcott Parsons, as well as those of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Samuel A. Stouffer. Blumer's methodological criticism stands out in his scientific legacy, in which—and this deserves emphasis—the review of Thomas and Znaniecki's monumental work, "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America," occupies a special place. Pointing out this work's assets on the one hand and performing a critical analysis on the other, Blumer simultaneously established his own research perspective. This perspective consisted in developing a conceptual framework matching the nature of social life in the complex civilization of modern societies, as well as one which would permit studying the social changes which characterize those societies. Like Thomas and Znaniecki, Blumer considered it necessary to acknowledge the exceptional nature of social processes which consist in the interaction between objective factors and subjective experience. Similarly, he emphasized the indispensability of theoretical and methodological frameworks which render sociology a science, but simultaneously thought that both theory and methodology must be based on astute knowledge of human social experience, because the role of subjective factors in social life is impossible to eliminate.

Having ascribed the main role in social process analysis to interpretation, Blumer turned his critical eye toward variable analysis, which had become a basic tool of

sociological research. He criticized attempts to reduce real processes of human group life, which is based on joint actions, to variables. He rejected simplified cause-and-effect reasoning that ignores processes of interpretation. With this criticism of variable analysis he surprised the audience during his honorary speech as the president of the American Sociological Association. He pointed out that in group life, interpreting and defining establish the limits of using variable analysis; thus, the usefulness of variable analysis is restricted only to those areas of social life which aren't mediated by processes of interpretation. However, in Blumer's opinion, the disappearance of constant definitions of situations and patterns of social relations is a characteristic of the democratic modern society. He also criticized the widespread use of opinion polls which offer a substitute of studying constructed social definitions and actual opinion-forming interacting groups, to which any given person from a statistical sample must not necessarily belong. Furthermore, he sharply criticized the concept of attitude, since it is not conducive to gaining knowledge about ongoing action and its course strategically pursued by agents able to manage meanings, including their own self and identity.

Blumer was a methodologist who functioned not only as a critic. A supporter of pragmatism, he thought that empirical observation is both a source and a test of knowledge; however, he attached importance to the theoretical conceptions used by the researcher. In accordance with Mead's theory of selective perception, he supposed that the observer's expectations are projected onto the observed object; in other words, that initial characterizations sensitize the observer to certain properties of the observed phenomena and obscure others. In Blumer's view, sociology should not use rigidly defined terms from the outset. In preference to terms which possess a precise reference, sociology should rather use sensitizing concepts. Defined terms instruct what to see, whereas sensitizing concepts only show where to look. They consist in a general indication that hints at what is important. In Blumer's opinion, it is associated with a special feature of the studied reality—a changing social world reflected in everyday experience. In the social world, every object of our actions is exceptional in a way and exists in a similarly exceptional context. Thus, in sociology it is impossible to use terms which indicate the common traits of objects and ignore their specific traits. Blumer's most important critical and polemic texts were included in the book *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method* (Blumer 1969b). Debates regarding Blumer's standpoint which preceded the appearance of his book, as well as those revived by it, were published as series in the following sociological journals: *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review* and *Sociological Quarterly*, in the years 1965–1980. This publication caused further lively methodological debates.

Blumer presented a method that included the principles which should govern all stages of scientific research. In the first place, this method advocates creating an image or a research schema of the empirical world in the form of basic premises formulated with the help of theoretical concepts (Blumer 1969b: 24–26). The subsequent stages consist in formulating questions, their selection and transformation into theoretical problems, specification of the sought-after data and means for gathering them, and finally—in determining the relationships between data and interpreting the results.

For Blumer, this general outline of research procedures was a basis for criticizing the usefulness of both the hypothetical-deductive strategy and the narrow inductive strategy in building theory. A schema of concepts and problems excludes extensive gathering of data specified by the problem which may subsequently, in the light of the conducted research, become transformed or rejected (Blumer 1969b: 125). The character of the sought-after data determines the means of gathering them—the methods and techniques of acquiring them—and not the other way around.

Blumer indicated two basic forms of conduct in researching processual, interaction-related social phenomena. He called them exploration and inspection. Exploration consists in striving, in various ways, to understand—as clearly as possible—how the problem should be formulated, what data are needed to solve it and what tools should be developed to this end. As a result of exploration, sensitizing concepts are formed, making inspection possible; inspection is the stage of actual analysis. While exploration aims at describing the investigated field of phenomena as fully as possible, to exclude the formulation of artificial problems, the aim of inspection is to show relationships on the basis of analysis of specific cases and not formal relations between predetermined concepts (Blumer 1969b: 40–46). Exploration and inspection form the basis for empirical study of the world as it naturally appears to its participants, and not of a world created artificially under laboratory conditions, or with the help of a predetermined conceptual outline.

Blumer's criticism was directed particularly against methodology which defines the rules of conduct at all stages of research in a way which is contrary to the processual nature of the empirical social world. Crucial here is this attempt at methodological adequacy in grasping that basic feature of the group life of people—interaction, the course of which is shaped by defining and interpreting situations of action that in democratic society goes on without constraint (Blumer 1969b: 132).

Joint Actions Through Symbolic Interactions

Had his contribution been limited to the conception of symbolic interaction, Blumer would have had merely reinterpreted Mead's theory of symbolic communication for use in sociology. However, he developed that theory, in order to better show the relationship between social structure and social action and to present society as the framework of human agency, not as its determinant. As Howard S. Becker aptly notes, in the text "The Sociological Implications of the Thoughts of George Herbert Mead" Blumer in fact presents his own views (Becker 1988; Blumer 1966), which are understandable for readers with no deeper knowledge of Mead's philosophical views. His theory of society presupposes acting and interacting units—either individuals or groups, organizations, political parties or international cartels (Maines 2005).

According to Blumer, sociological analysis is based on the study of joint actions and of the collectivities which participate in those actions (Blumer 1969b: 17). Thus, Blumer's interactionist perspective is determined by assumptions regarding the interpretative process in interaction on the one hand, and by assumptions on the nature

of joint action on the other. The latter deserve particular emphasis, since insufficient attention has usually been paid to them in superficial interpretations of Blumer's texts (Maines 1988: 46). In a way, Blumer himself contributed to misunderstandings associated with his theory of collective actions, since he entitled one of his programmatic articles "Society as Symbolic Interaction" (Blumer 1962). One must remember that in this work, he emphasized the significance of interpretative processes, which allow agents to adjust their respective lines of actions in the course of collective action. Blumer developed his apparently most crucial conception of collective action, drawing on the concepts of both Mead and Park. This conception includes both the social act as defined by George Herbert Mead and the conception of collective behaviors as defined by Park. Blumer made collective action the basis of sociological analysis of all human activities—both spontaneous and routine (Blumer 1969b: 18). According to him, when analyzing social processes, one must always take into account the relative autonomy of each participant, who can monitor his/her action in the communicative process. In other words, group life should be analyzed in the light of that which its participants do together (Shibutani 1988: 24). Such a standpoint, formulated when the structural-functional theory—which accentuated existing cultural patterns of action—was at the height of its popularity, led to criticism. The then-rejected actionalist and interactionist point of view was to draw attention during sociology's further development until the present day, when subjectivity and agency have regained their proper place.

Thus, without the theory of collective action it is impossible to understand Blumer's three most frequently cited theses about the relationship between meaning and action—most significant for symbolic interactionism—which proclaim that: people act on the grounds of meanings which objects have for them; meanings stem from interaction; and meanings are modified by interpretations performed by people in situations of action (Blumer 1969b: 2). Since symbolic interaction is a conception which refers not so much to individual actors as to collective actions and the functioning of groups (Shibutani 1988: 24), it must be emphasized that Blumer, like Mead, presented a conception of intersubjective meanings, which he described as common definitions created in the course of interactions. He pointed out that the subjectivity of the interpretative process is limited by the pragmatic requirement of effective action, dependent on the actions of others. Symbolic interaction as a process of communication simultaneously shapes the partners' conduct.

Thanks to symbolic interaction, human group life is a constant process of reciprocal adjustments of actions. The fixed patterns of group life demand repeated use of interpretative schemas, which find corroboration in the actions of other participants in interaction. If interpretations meet with other participants' altered definitions, these patterns may become disrupted. Thus, interpretations depend on the defining actions of participants in symbolic interactions, which may lead to transformation of the joint actions which together make up group life. Symbolic interaction, or—as Blumer alternatively termed it—interpretative interaction is a fundamental aspect of social action. It is the main process of communication, in which the complex social actions termed joint actions are shaped.

Thus, three statements regarding joint actions (of which symbolic interaction is a tool) prove crucial for Blumer's sociological theory (Hafas 2006: 132–133), which has important implications for democracy. First of all, in every case the joined action is, in a sense, created anew; it is constructed in a process of the reciprocal adjustment of its participants' actions—either individual or collective. Secondly, the meanings which form a basis for joint actions, even if the latter are regular institutional actions, do not function automatically—they require defining and interpretation. And thirdly, joint action presupposes not only a connection between the present, current actions of its participants, but also a connection with earlier joint actions—thus, joint action has its own history (Blumer 1969b: 18–20). The regulated character of joint actions, their predictability in institutionalized forms, the systems of social actions and the continuity of social life (Maines 2005: 59) that results from the link between present and previous actions—they all depend on processes of symbolic interaction, in which meanings are maintained or undergo change. Joint actions are constructed as a result of the reciprocal adjustment of their participants' actions and depend on whatever will happen during their formation. This creative and changing but also contingent character of social actions and institutions is rooted in processes of symbolic or interpretative interaction.

Conclusion

The appraisal of Blumer's heritage which I have presented above draws attention to this heritage's potential significance in the analysis of the issues with which modern democracy has to deal. Thus, my view is in accordance with the stance of Hans Joas, who emphasizes that in an era when the problems of democracy are global problems, it would be absurd to abandon conceptual tools developed in the field of the American social sciences, where a democratic society was researched during the process of its day-to-day development (Joas 1993: 91). The importance of such reminders about the heritage of sociological theory is confirmed by the appearance of postmodern historiography of ideas which omits the tradition of pragmatism, the Chicago school and interactionism; one example is the text by Thomas M. Kemple (Kemple 2006).

Blumer's sociological views developed on the grounds of public philosophy that grew out of pragmatism (Lyman & Vidich 1988). Although he largely refrained from taking sides, and in research he advocated distance to assure maximal objectivism, the presented theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism also carries political implications, since its principles are compatible with democratic values (Wellman 1988: 64). This stems from the significance ascribed by Blumer to definitions of situations by acting agents, which make it impossible to arbitrarily distinguish proper and improper ways of cognitively assessing social reality. The knowledge possessed by agents in social life cannot be bracketed by methods of research which would neglect their points of view. In the conception of collective action one may see an allusion to the ideal of cooperative democracy, formulated by John Dewey, as well as to Mead's concept of democracy as an institutionalized revolution (Mead 1964).

In Blumer's version of symbolic interactionism, just like in Mead's theory, one finds a fundamental question about the conditions under which order can be maintained in a democratic society, in which no consensus regarding values and norms is presupposed any longer. Blumer thought that within the modern democratic, competitive society, rapid changes of social relations will accelerate and sources of conflicts will multiply. A democratic society, in which one presupposes free interplay of interests, cannot function without an increasingly complex network of interest groups. Because of their rising competition, conflicts are impossible to eradicate. Blumer doubted that attempts to reconstruct a social order based either on the Christian tradition or on over-rationalized Republican conceptions would ever be successful. In his opinion, they do not supply a firm basis for solving the key dilemma, consisting in the discrepancy between the principle of individual freedom and the public interest.

The modern society is made up of various groups clustered around particular values and interests. Mass media communication supplies no ground for rational judgments regarding representations of reality. Blumer considers the principle of variability itself—innovativeness—an achievement and an advantage of the modern society as compared with the traditional one. He thought that problems stem from the complex and changing character of the modern society, inasmuch as it represents a danger to unconnected individuals, forcing them to join networks of dependence and create various forms of exclusive associations, which are at least potentially influential and able to protect only their members. Exclusive participation in such networks of relationships, associations and groups confers a partial, limited identity and represents a problem from the point of view of larger communities, since it forces one to question the more inclusive civic identity. In this way, the individual, no longer representing an integral social person, becomes merely a member of particular interest groups, which negotiate on a common public arena, usually via their representants. Such situation creates a potential threat to the public good. Blumer pointed out that the modern differentiated society lacks a uniform public morality constraining particularistic interests. However, the foundations for consensus in the democratic society cannot be limited solely to legal and procedural questions. Blumer attempted to investigate possibilities of constructing public values and defining the common good in the form of a negotiated agreement. He emphasized the existence of an unceasing process of defining and redefining social institutions, and thus, the role of civic agency—in other words, ultimately, of the reflexive self.

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