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Remarks on Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism and Mass Society

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Abstract

The development of Symbolic Interactionism in Italy has benefited from a progressively positive relationship with Anglo Saxon Sociology, which has transcended the traditional boundaries of functionalism's centrality. In its development, Herbert Blumer is a national and international point of reference because of his theoretical elaboration and contradictory relationship with the research process. His occasional and critical evaluation of mass society, considered in light of its prioritization of collective behavior, highlights an approach that suggests the differentiation of individual roles and identities as central to their relationships.

Keywords: Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism, mass society, history.

The first point to which I would like to refer is 'our' Symbolic Interactionism, the premise of the discussion and the readings that accompany our studies. This theory is gaining progressively more consensus at the national level, in relation to the growing awareness of the importance of interaction in the construction of daily life, the use of qualitative methods in research, and the importance of presence and cognition within the 'field' (Schatzman, Strauss, 1973; Van den Hoonaard, 1997). In view of this process, I would mention here, that the conditioning specified in our sociological culture is often achieved by chance, as specific books and authors arrive by

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happenance or design in Italy¹, directing researchers to read in one direction as opposed to another. It must be added here that a substantial part of these texts from the second post-war period onwards, expressed the centrality of functionalism in the US and International sociological society, and that the cultural climate considered it implicit in opposition to Marxism (Rumney, Maier, 1953).

On the other hand, it is only towards the end of the 1970s that publishers and libraries opened up in a consistent and heterogeneous way to publish Anglo Saxon studies, texts and magazines; breaking through the prevalent sociological tradition and liberal cultures, ideological walls that had preserved large swaths of ignorance and omissions. It is therefore a different generation of sociologists, not necessarily 'younger', who enter into sociological traditions clearly more heterogeneous than those that came before. This can be illustrated first in the Chicago schools, as well as in other orientations: US radical sociology no longer identifies with the solitary figure of Charles W. Mills (Colfax, Roach, 1971)², and his contribution to the publication of many national classics, which set the stage for their presence in university curriculum. At a glance, it is opportune to link the specificities of this reflection to the development of interactionist studies in Italy, as well as to the related more articulated attention to international elaborations. It would seem, based on this data, that the periodization of a discipline allows us to grasp many elements along its theoretical path (for interactionism see Denzin, 2007, and, in relation, Rauty, 2007), it is also true that other contributions can clarify the character and historical relevance. As with an article, taken in the context of its' writing, a place in time, it is a manifestation of several orientations that can be traced back to the experience of everyday life (Adler, Adler, Fontana, 1987). This is a 'reading' that includes some of the works most coherent with the theme (among them, Goffman, 1959; Douglas, 1970, 1980; Manning,

¹ I owe this suggestion to Umberto Cerroni, who reflected on the Italian publication of Marx's texts, who was attentive to the process, and cognisant of the time and distance between the original edition and the translation, as well as the difficulty of understanding the role that a certain text has in relation to the theoretical path of its' author.

² I am thinking, for example, of the incomplete introduction of Alvin Gouldner's work in Italy (Gouldner, 1970 and 1977) and also the consistent ignorance of the conclusive part of his work, dedicated to the critique of Marxist dialectics (Gouldner, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1980), or of his magazine substantially innovative and critical in the panorama of American and international social sciences (Gouldner, 1974, 1978); or the patient work and progressive publication of texts by Erving Goffman, which examined the immediate success and political use of Asylums (Goffman, 1968), with a wider and more complex interpretation than was presented previously.

1973; Gouldner, 1975), and its emerging centrality with respect to the individualization and isolation of mass society; as indicated by the authors 'an umbrella term encompassing several related but distinct theoretical perspectives: Symbolic Interactionism, dramaturgy, labeling theory, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and existential sociology' (Adler, Adler, Fontana, 1987: 218). The sense of that relational dimension was already present in the first reflection of Blumer in the 1930s, when the awareness of social psychology was immersed in understanding the importance of relational reality in the construction of existence: 'social interaction [as] primarily a communicative process in which people share experience, rather than a mere play back and forth of stimulation and response. They hold that a person responds not to what another individual says or does, but to the *meaning* of what he says or does' (Blumer, 1937: 171).

First, we must also consider here the fact that sociology, especially in the religious context in which it was initially presented in the United States, invests in University structures, leading to the silent conditioning of departments and the research processes present in them. From its very origins, we find the development, influences, and research carried out within US Universities less improvised than one might think, as they accept the characteristics of technological development, correlated and corroborated with the specificities of training and educational programs (Rosenberg, Nelson, 1994). If, as mentioned, 'The greatest invention of the nineteenth century was the invention of method of invention' (Whitehead, 1925: 96), the methodological path of research choices, correspond to the construction and reconstruction of the methods used to develop research methods, from the sociologist's point of view, with respect to the structure of society.

Secondly, these considerations are the premise for reflection on interactionism and mass society. They were part of Herbert Blumer's intellectual biography, theoretical work and research, as well as the heterogeneous social reality that is part of it. I must evaluate the limited research activity carried out by Blumer throughout his sociological journey, as he only carried out two research studies at an early stage in his work (Blumer, 1933; Blumer-Hauser, 1933) and in both cases, he was influenced by outside voices, namely the Payne Funds³, who aimed at documenting the effect

³ The Payne Foundation originated the research, the goal was presented by Werrett Wallace Chartered, Chairman of the Committee: in 1928 William H. Short, executive director of the Motion Research Council, invited a group of university students, psychologists, sociologists and pedagogists to meet with members of Council to discuss the possibility of discovering the effects specific films had on boys, a topic on which there were many conflicting opinions, but little data. The university students

gangster films – projected for the first time since the 1920s – had on young people (Blumer, 2017). On the immediate level of his research, a keen observation and a premise of broader discussion have been purported by Joel Best, but Blumer did not make further research in relation to those topics for a specifically personal motivation: ‘how to conduct studies that could meet the standards that he applied to others’ work (Best, 2006: 6)?’ This why Best sees Blumer as a tragic figure, a victim of his own logic (Best, 2006: 11). The intransigent judgment adopted in every evaluation case by the critical Blumer is in fact, for Best, the premise for and measure of its inability to keep up with the standards and criterion of the work assumed in their reviews. This prevents him therefore, from being the author of his research. Best’s position is important and significant, but we must also evaluate Blumer’s research activity in light of his presence in the Chicago Department; here he, a premiere example of the American self-made man, between being self-taught with an excellent, sporting presence, a supportive family man, and in the context of colleagues who enhance his theoretical qualities, could not get quick recognition as a successful or adequate academic power. Blumer has problems not only in relationships with his closest colleagues (Abbott, 1999: 69), but also in the relationships with his students, for example much like Hughes, ‘few students dared work with him’ (Abbott, 1999: 21), he worked in opposition to Parsons and other insiders (Parsons, 1937). In fact, perhaps more cumbersome for him was the presence of William Ogburn, an author already recognized as fundamental in texts on social change in the 1920s (Ogburn, 1922). Ogburn taught in Columbia until 1927, and when he arrived in Chicago in 1928, he immediately became the director of the Department of Sociology. In 1929 he was elected president of the American Sociological Association, to the detriment of Emory Bogardus and Charles Ellwood (Turner, 2007). At that time he was already director of the magazine of the American Statistical Association, and in 1933, the year of the two research studies mentioned by Blumer, he coordinated a colossal survey on Social Trends (President’s Committee, 1933), which highlighted how quantitative data can be used in a great national cognitive process⁴. A hypothesis linked to

proposed a program of studies [with contributions received by the Foundation] the teachers organized themselves into a Committee on Educational Research, and the research lasted for four years, from 1929 to 1932 (Charters, 1933: VIII-IX, but also Sparks, 2006). They were on the committee, among others: L. L. Thurstone, R. Park, H. Blumer P. Hauser, sociologists of Chicago, F. M. Thrasher and P. G. Cressey, of New York University, M. May and F. K. Shuttleworth of Yale University, C. C. Peters, of Pennsylvania State University, W. W. Charters, of Ohio State University.

⁴ In 1925 Park, already advanced in years (61), became president of the American Sociological Society, then William Thomas (1927), Burgess (1934), Ellsworth Faris

these factors must, in part, consider the limited number of publications authored by Blumer at the end of his academic career, including a volume of republished articles from the past 40 years (Blumer, 1969), and a posthumous volume on industrial development (Blumer, 1990).

Thirdly, Blumer looks at US mass society in the '30s and then again in the 60s. The center of attention in the 1930s, at the roots of the 1935 mass article (Blumer, 1935), are on urban youth groups, who in the case of second-generation immigrants, come to more close and continuous contact with technology and new technological products, and whose behavior continues from generation to generation (Austin and Millard, 1998: 1), to be the object of attention and control. In this we find a substantial change in the position of 'experts' (Getis, 1998): the Chicago sociologists detach themselves from the interpretation of delinquent behavior and 'deviance' based on biological and psychological roots that prevailed since the beginning of the century (Hely, 1910; 1913; 1917; Spaulding, Hely, 1914), opting for the idea that the environment determines the genesis and development of awareness that young people experience, and this becomes a metaphor for the perception of social change and the evident collective anxieties that derive from it⁵. This research on young people, carried out alone or with Philip Hauser, views society as determined and almost subordinate in that organization, resulting from the multiplicity of technological interventions. And in a similar consideration, of a society seen as a structured dimension, as Blumer advances in an article written in Germany in 1966, and certainly influenced by the European context, which was then retranslated by two mentors Vidich and Lyman (Blumer, 1966). Here the article is probably also an opportunity to

(1937), George Lundberg (1943), Kimball Young (1945), Louis Wirth (1947), all before Blumer, who was growing in awareness that the Chicago Department does not value him sufficiently and only outside that context will he receive adequate recognition. Blumer became president of the ASA only in 1956, long after becoming director of the Department of Sociology at Berkeley where he was not able to recreate as he had hoped, that One in Spirit professed since October 1892 in Chicago by his young president Rainer Harper (also in relation to his relocation to Berkeley, some of the indications contained in Abbott, 1999: 49 No. 23) are essential.

⁵ An essential contribution in the innovative reflection on the reality of young people must be recognized in the work of Jane Addams, both for the consideration of the relationship between the condition of young people and cities ['capitalist'], and for the methodology of contact with which it is carried out. The most famous and dearest research (Addams, 1909); to include these reflections in his more general thinking, can be found in a very vast bibliography, (Deegan, 1998; Hamington, 2010; Misheva, 2018): in the narrow tradition of Italian studies on Addams, cf. Bianchi (2004); Tirabassi (1990); Rauty (2010, 2015, 2017).

intervene in a context aimed at considering positively the effects of American social organization in which mass reality is considered an already established detriment to previous community principles (Bramson, 1970; Bell, Newby, 1971). This point is taken for granted, generally speaking, so much so that between the 50s and 60s a series of US volumes were published on mass society⁶ and in one of these, a functionalist like Edward Shils considers the theoretical context, so the term *mass society* specifies something practically new, aimed at defining 'a territorially extensive society, with a large population, highly urbanized and industrialized. Power is concentrated in this society ... civic spirit is poor ... there is no individuality, only a restless and frustrated egoism' (Shils, 1963: 31), Maurice Stein reiterates in the same text, a society in which 'Industrialization, spreading around the turn of the century, revolutionized the work process ... Meaning and purpose had to be sought outside the factory, but the more personal sources – religion and the family – were also in the throes of change' (Stein, 1963: 266). In this sense, the indistinct characteristics that are generally attributed to the mass society according to Blumer are: 1) its massiveness; 2) the heterogenous form of the society's structural elements; 3) unimpeded access to areas of public life; 4) immersion in a constantly changing society (Blumer, 1966: 339-340).

Blumer's position on merit, which shifts the dimension of mass society to modern society is that the (comparative) studies carried out 'have not as yet been particularly successful in distilling and delineating the unique and specific character postulated from modern societies ... they fail to provide a general, congruent overview of the special features which distinguish modern societies as such, distinct from other types of society' (Blumer, 1966: 337-338), because a summary of the criticism advanced so far links the consideration of disintegration and disorganization present in society, but does not consider, for example, how 'socialization in a mass society largely ceases to be the introduction of the individual into a determined social framework and becomes instead a question of participation and adaptation to worlds differing in appearance' (Blumer, 1966: 351).

Blumer's reflection on mass society, however, is occasional and partial; central in its formation, and in its lexicon is the theme of collective behavior (Blumer, 1959), in which the subjects are clearly more active and directly involved. He is coherent in this with one of his teachers, within his own doctoral thesis (Park, 1904) and then in a manual he elaborated with Ernest Burgess, where he spoke in particular about collective behavior (Park,

⁶ Kornhauser (1959), Larrabee and Meyersohn (1961); Rosenberg, Manning White, 1962; and, to problematize the effect of that society on individuals, besides the text of Riesman, Gkazer and Reuel (1950), that of Stein, Vidich and Manning White (1965).

Burgess, 1921: 865-871). 'Collective behavior, then, is the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words, that is the result of social interaction' (Park, Burgess, 1921: 865), because, as stated above by the authors with respect to coming in front of each other, 'the mere fact that they are aware of one others presence, sets up a lively exchange of influences, and the behaviour that it ensures is both social and collective' (Park, Burgess, 1921: 865). And Blumer in his classic analysis of collective behavior, highlights that 'ordinarily human beings respond to one another by interpreting one another's actions or remarks and then reacting on the basis of interpretation. Responses, consequently, are not made directly to the stimulation, but follow, rather, upon interpretation; further, they are likely to be different in nature from the stimulating acts, being essentially adjustments to the acts' (Blumer, 1939: 220). This interpretative line advanced by Blumer, here reduced to its minimum indication, will return in his discussion on the relationship between collective behavior and social problems; there he talks about the fate of these, linking to the substance of what happens in mobilization, connected, in its orientation process and representation to the ongoing interpretation performed by individual members of society, decisive in every historically determined path (Blumer, 1971).

Thus, in a provisional conclusion, Blumer highlights substantial limitations in the advanced interpretation of sociologists towards the limits of industrial society which he first presented in his 1966 article (Blumer, 1966), to be deepened in the posthumous text (Blumer, 1990), in which Blumer confirms the presence of 'pronounced confusion, great vagueness and unwarranted premises in the present thought of what industrialization is supposed to do to social life' (Blumer, 1990: 1), in particular, due to the presence of heterogeneous effects deriving from different forms of industrialization. Factors these synthetically exposed, tend to highlight not only a non-articulated critique on the process of industrialization, but also an interactionist reflection beyond any micro hypothesis, that tends to meet also the critique of the general social organization, including questions of order and structure.

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