’Dialogue and Emergence’: George Herbert Mead’s contribution to Role Theory and his Reconstruction of International Politics

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1. Introduction

George Herbert Mead’s important contribution to social psychology and philosophy has long been recognized (Joas 1980/1995; Cook 1993; da Silva 2007a, 2008), but his impact on role research in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has not received the attention it deserves. As a consequence, this article examines Mead’s analytical key concepts of dialogue and emergence as they apply to “roles nations play in international politics”. It explores Mead’s own thinking on foreign policy and international politics, as these aspects of Mead’s œuvre have garnered some attention in recent years (Baer 1999, Aboulafia 2001; Deegan 2008; Fischer 2008) and relates them to recent advances in role theory.

This chapter argues that Mead’s contribution include three core premises of social constructivistic approach to ”Foreign Policy Role Analysis” (FPRA). These core assumptions stretch the co-constitutive nature of the agent – society relationship, the importance of shifts in state behavior through role taking and making, and the sources of role change in increasingly complex societies. One may add, that Mead’s insistence on language as a social practice for and dialogue as the central mechanism of social interaction have not been fully captured by recent scholarship both in foreign policy role analysis and International Relations theory. This reading suggests that Mead’s early and innovative treatment of agency and structure, which holds that “the social does not preclude agency, but is a sine qua non for its emergence” (Baert 2009), has been lost in the translation of the many insights Mead’s œuvre offers. Thus, my claim is that a Meadian understanding of foreign policy roles as emerging social objects and Mead’s macrosociological thinking on war and international politics offer critical insights for contemporary role and IR theoreticians.

Despite a “recent turn towards (American) pragmatism” in international relations theory (Bauer/Brighi 2009; Friedrichs/Kratochwil 2009; Hellmann 2009; 2009a), the interpretation and use of George Herbert Mead’s work on international politics and foreign policy has only just begun. Some IR theorists, notably Alexander Wendt, have based their argument for systemic change on key elements of Mead’s social theory (Wendt 1987; 1999; Cederman/Daase 2003:7-8). In a similar vein, Jürgen Habermas has appropriated Mead’s symbolic interactionism selectively for his “theory of communicative action” (Joas 1985a; Da Silva 2008: 151-164). Yet, it is argued here, that these attempts have reconstituted Mead’s œuvre selectively (Herborth 2004) and thereby corroborating a tradition by leading sociologists to reinterpret Mead in light of their own research agenda (Da Silva 2006).
While Mead’s observations of the self, society and the role of the “generalized other” (Mead 1926; 1934), his account of the social reconstruction of modern society have all been discussed at length by students of sociology, psychology and philosophy (Hamilton 1992), his analysis of foreign policy role taking has not. Given Mead’s many references to politics in general and allusions to foreign policy in particular, this omission is peculiar.¹ International Politics loomed large in Mead’s mind, particularly in the mid-1910s and shortly before he died in 1931; he spent much time to understand nationalism as a source of war and thereby built central tenets of foreign policy role research.

Mead’s central finding, that the individual is not autonomous, but both a source and effect of society, is quite revolutionary for FPA as such. It does not only allow for individual preferences to vary greatly, if density and structure of social interaction vary, it also implies that individuals may reconstruct social structure through practice. The most important implication of this argument is that role researchers must not narrow their empirical analysis towards either agent or structure but engage in the analysis of their interaction. Also, Mead’s interactionist framework opens up the intellectual space to integrate FPA role theory with foreign policy learning literature (Harnisch 2010). A further inference from Mead’s work is the increasing importance of the “quality of domestic deliberation” – although he stressed this line of argument more with regard to social policy.

There are, of course, many variants of role research in Foreign Policy Analysis, but they may be roughly corralled into two groups. In the first group role conceptions are understood as “social facts” (Durkheim) which can be integrated in a causal understanding of a nation’s foreign conduct – the view expressed by Holsti when defining them as

“including the policymaker’s own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems. It is their ‘image’ of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state towards or in the external environment” (Holsti 1970: 245-246).

This representation of roles informs many of the current accounts of roles in international politics, including those by Gaupp (1983), Walker (1987), Kirste and Maull (1996), Le Prestre’s (1997) and Kirste (1998), as well as some of those in the volumes by Harnisch and Maull (2001), and Elgström/Smith (2006).

¹ Walker (1993) describes Mead’s conceptualization of mind, self and society briefly and touches upon the Chicago and the Iowa school as the main “descendants” of Mead’s thinking. However his main focus lies with operationalization of subsequent role scholarship for FPA.
In the second group, roles are conceived of more as emerging social objects which, according to Ole Elgström and Michael Smith, can be understood as “in part an effect of learning and socialization in interactive negotiation processes … where self-conceptions are confronted with expectations” (Elgström/Smith 2006a: 5). This evolutionary role conceptualization itself takes many forms: from Barnett’s take on national roles as “how the individual (or state) participates in society according to a particular identity and comes to modify behavior accordingly (Barnett 1993: 274) to the sophisticated treatment of the Habermasian “practice of reasoning” within a role theoretical framework (Arora 2006). To a greater or lesser degree they all emphasize its co-constitutive character of the self and society, the (nation) state and the international society (Jönsson 1984; Tewes 1998, Kite 2006). Together these approaches – including the causal and the co-constitutive variants – share certain common assumptions:; first, that roles emerge through dense interaction and division of labor between nation states; second that they include both historically informed ego and alter expectations and that functional differentiation between roles allows for hierarchy as well as supranational integration in international politics.

This chapter does not seek to endorse Mead’s concepts of dialogue and emergence without reservation, nor pretend that his role conceptualization are the only possible fruitful resource for further research, nor does it aspire to systematically reconstruct Mead’s political engagement with US foreign policy and the League of Nations. Rather, it is intended to be a systematic contribution to the intellectual history of role research in Foreign Policy Analysis and IR theory. The first part examines key concepts of dialogue and emergence as they pertain to role theory, focusing on the new issues (identity-building), the new actors (role beholders) and new interactions (role taking and making). The second part explores Mead’s conceptualization of the nexus between role-taking and society formation in more detail, focusing on the concept of “self-restraint” and the consistency between different “generalized others”. The third part traces Mead’s work on roles in international politics in his writings on World War I and the co-evolution of an international community and international organizations, most importantly the League of Nations. In the conclusion, I reconsider Mead’s role theory and describe the implications for current scholarship in the field.

2. ‘Dialogue and Emergence’: Foundational elements of Mead’s social theory

A driving concern of George Herbert Mead was the question of how to reconcile the tension between an ever more individualistic self and an increasingly universalistic social order (Da
Silva 2007a: 2). His central rationale for accommodating this tension was the idea of dialogue. In fact, most of the concepts associated with Mead in social psychology - the “I”-“me” distinction, the gesture and significant symbol assertion, and the “taking the role of the other” process - are closely related to the social process of dialogue (Ibid.: 3). In addition, these social mechanisms stretch his whole intellectual edifice, from his studies on the nature and conduct of science, to social psychological scholarship and his analysis of politics.

To begin with, the concept of the “self” is conceived by Mead as a social process in which the self becomes an object only when an actor learns “to take the role of other” and examines one’s self from that other perspective. The dialogue between the self and the other, as envisioned by the self through “taking the role of the other”, i.e. the process of role taking, is considered constitutive for the self as a social object (Da Silva 2008: 116). Here, the contrast with the Descartian individualistic notion of “cogito ergo sum” could not be starker. While Descartes locates the essence of the self within the body and mind of the actor, i.e. individually, Mead ascertains that the self cannot conceive itself as an object without the other, i.e. socially. In this perspective, states, as the constitutive elements of the inter-national community, do not “exist as such” in the Median view, but are products of their own “role play as states” in their society (Wendt 1999: 327).

The “sociological turn” of the conception of the “self” puts Mead squarely between the poles of the debate between structuralism and individualism. Mead establishes, thus a third, generative variant of social theory that starts with society but stresses the constitutive effects of interaction for the self and society (Mead 1934: 134). This “practical turn” within the “sociological turn” of his theory is important, because practices, both linguistic and other, become his theoretical center of gravity for social order and change.²

Identity-building: a dialogue of “I” and “me”

The dialogue between the self and society is based on Mead’s social psychological construction of the “self” as consisting of two aspects which themselves are in constant conversation: the “I” and the “me”. Following William James’ conceptualization of the “I” and “Me” as a stream of consciousness (James 1890), Mead does not perceive the two as ontologically different but rather as different phases of experience (Aboulafia 2001: 15). In this stream, the “I” represents the impulsive, biologically irreducible and creative part of the

² In this respect, Mead is also one of the intellectual founding fathers of the recent practical turn in International Relations Theory (Wenger 1998; Schatzki et al. 2001; Büger/Gadinger 2008; Pouilot 2008).
self (Mead 1934: 352f.). It is unknown to its bearer and the other. And yet, while unknown prior to action, the “I” is soon “objectified”, because in retrospect it becomes visible through interaction, i.e. through the reactions of the other. The “I” can thus become an object of observation, through the second aspect of the self, the “me”. Self-reflection or the “self’s construction” is therefore dependent upon the dialogue of the two parts of the self and the concrete situation in which the individual interacts (Dodds/Lawrence/Valsiner 1997: 491).

Philosophically speaking this notion of the “I” and the “Me” symbolizes the co-constitutive relationship of “freedom” and “determination”, of the individual and society, both of which cannot exist, ontologically speaking, without the other because the prior conceptualization of the other facilitates the experience of the “self”.

Fig. 1: Self-Society relation and role taking mechanism

In contrast, the “me” consists of those internalized expectations that the “me” envisioned when “taking the role of other”. In other words, the “me” pertains to our self image when we look at ourselves through the eyes of the other, that is when we import into our conduct the “perceived” attitudes of the other.
The dialogical nature of the “me” is crucial in this process. As Mead points out in his famous play and game analogy, the self grows more “self-conscious” as it increases the number of dialogue partners. During the play stage, a child only takes the attitude of a particular individual, often the mother, father or sibling (Mead 1934: 153). These specific others with whom the individual has a “formative relationship” are called “significant others”. During the game stage, e.g. during a soccer match, children have to take the role of all others in their team, group or community to coordinate its purposeful actions. While playing, children may switch roles from mother to father but during game they have to obey the rules and stick to a limited role, i.e. defender (Mead 1925: 269). “The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called the “generalized other” (Mead 1934: 154).

The so-called “generalized other” requires a significant higher amount of communicative and dialogical competence from a self (Habermas 1988: 190). First, as the “generalized other” is no particular other anymore, the self must represent an abstract “other” encompassing and organizing the attitudes of all members of a social group. Secondly, there are as many “generalized others” as there are social groups with which the self interacts. Therefore, a modern individual under conditions of a highly differentiated society must incorporate a multitude of “generalized others”. In such a setting, individuality, a sense of uniqueness, arises from the inimitable mix of shared values in those social contexts which are represented through the “me” in the self.

Dialogue also characterizes the social process by which a gesture becomes a “significant symbol” and language the primary social mechanism for the development of the human consciousness. Here, Mead distinguishes between ‘unconscious gestures’, which include the most basic forms of social interaction performed by animals/primates, and ‘conscious gestures’ or signs. Based on the linguistic pragmatist position of Charles Sanders Peirces that there is no knowing without signs, Mead posits that gestures become significant gestures, or signs, only when they carry a definite meaning, that is signs must have the same meaning for all individuals involved and they generate the same or similar responses by these individuals.

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3 As Norman Denzin noted, Mead did not posit that every individual would pass automatically from one stage (play) to the other (game). Rather, he suggested that “some persons may never progress to the generalized other phase of taking the other’s attitude” (Denzin 1977: 81).

4 Robert K. Merton defined the sum of all reference groups of a role as the „role set”, Merton 1957.

5 Rose L. Coser held that the complexity of modern societies could embolden the individual, because it could use the diverging expectations between groups as a „seedbed of individual autonomy”; cf. Coser 1975.
He holds that the only type of gesture that potentially has that quality is a “vocal gesture” because both speaker and listener can hear the utterance. For Mead, “listening to the same vocal gesture” facilitates the social process of “taking the role of the other” more than any other gesture could. This implies that gestures (and vocal gestures) may fail to develop into “significant gestures”, because they do not “arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals, the individuals to whom they are addressed (Mead 1934: 47)“. In nuce, only through language does the breadth of significant symbols similarly “understood” – the “self”, society and other “human accomplishments” - become possible. As Mead explains:

“For effective cooperation one has to have the symbols by means of which the responses can be carried out, so that getting a significant language is of first importance” (Mead 1934: 268).

The concept of emergent social objects

The concept of emergence is Mead’s second major contribution to role theory and IR theory in general. In contrast to Parsons, Weber and other contemporary sociologists, Mead conceives central elements of his social theory as “emergents of social processes” rather than substantive phenomena. Mead started out with Darwin and evolutionary social science on this. However, he followed other pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey, much more closely when applying evolutionary insights to psychological and social processes (Joas 1985: 33-63). For Mead his central concept “self” was an emergent social phenomenon. He conceived it as an ideal type, emerging from a two stage social process in which the “I”, as the assertion of individuality and creativity, interacts with the “me”, a socially structured self image that we construct by seeing ourselves through the eyes of others (see above). Selves, as they constantly play roles in society, are therefore inherently social phenomena that cannot be reduced to “individual” or material properties of an actor (Dodds/Lawrence/Valsiner 1997: 487). There is a dualism of “I” and “me” that is at the center of Mead’s “Self”-conceptualization which he dissolves through the integration of Peircian language theory. For Mead, language is the only medium of significant symbols through which the “I” can gain self-reflectivity and thus the “me” can emerge. Hence, there is no self without significant signs and its content is “only a development and product of social interaction” (Mead 1934: 191).
Briefly, Mead’s understanding of linguistic development also signifies the importance of the emergence of social objects. He identified four moods of language that in turn describe phases of social advancement: First, the imperative mood indicates social relations in which force and coercion are the predominant mechanisms of interaction; second and third, the subjunctive and optative mood are related to deliberation and decision-making, increasing the self-consciousness of the self as it envisions various trajectories of action that will lead to different outcomes. Weighing alternative courses of action not only drives the inner dialogue of the self but also engages the self with others, as deliberations about the coordination of actions within groups multiply. This increase in “social interdependence” leads to the development of the last mood, the indicative, in which the individual is well-versed to indicate different courses of action to themselves and others. In sum, language does co-constitute social development as the evolution from imperative to indicative mood exemplifies. In addition, language, or rather its appropriation, is the medium for the emergence of the human mind. As Mead emphasizes:

“Mind arises through communication by a communication of gestures in a social process or context of experience – not communication through mind” (Mead 1934: 50).

By stressing this evolutionary, dialogical nature of the self, Mead rejects the Cartesian model of the self as a passive recipient of social rules. In contrast, he purports an interactionist model through which the self becomes an active interpreter of social attitudes, e.g. when taking up the role of the “generalized other” (da Silva 2007a: 52). This generic character of Mead’s theory and the appropriation of language and symbols that already exist, however, create a bias towards continuity or reification of social order. The strength of the “me” creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for the existing social order.  

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The reconstruction of the self: as-if role taking

Yet, Mead also allows for the reconstruction of the self: based on the Peircean concept of belief and doubt and the distinction between routine and problematic situations by William James, he conceives learning as a “transformation” of the constitutive parts of the self (Herborth 2004: 80-82). In routine situation, the “me-part” of the self as the “I-part” has been reconciled with the perceptions of social norms through practices (routines). But in problematic situations, the “I-part” becomes more prevalent because old routines do not

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6 Later on Ralph Turner introduced the distinction between „role taking“ and „role making“ to signify the latitude of the „I“ in changing and modifying a role through (non) role playing, cf. Turner 1962.
promise to achieve the anticipated effects, i.e. material pay-offs and/or immaterial stabilizing effects for the self. In these situations, as the “I-part” takes over, the self acts “as-if” it were performing a new role that does not contain old routines and thus does not reify existing social structures (Mead 1934: 209-212; 214-218). In the Median sense, taking up new roles, or role making, does not imply as conscious act of manipulating one’s own role performance so as to induce alter to take on a new role.⁷ To the contrary, Mead’s theory of self-identification seems to suggest that the self intrinsically seeks to foster its autonomy. This may be done by loosening the bonds to “significant others” and bolster its “social capital” through interaction with various “generalized others”.

*The emergence of learning in societies: democratic deliberation*

To allow for learning in societies, Mead introduces “problematic situations” which call into question instruments, strategies or even goals used heretofore in the interaction between individuals and various generalized others. For Mead, some statesmen were ideal-typical incarnations of this dialogical process in the political realm. On the one hand, these individuals were better prepared to take up the role of the other, i.e. they have a higher degree of the social resource of “self-reflection”. In this reading the capacity for self-reflection depicts the varying ability to enter “into the attitudes of the group and to mediate between them by making his own experience universal, so that others can enter into this form of communication through him (Mead 1934: 257). On the other hand, these individuals may reconstruct political and moral problematic situations more intelligently than others through as-if role taking so that these can be resolved through joint action.

In a democratic society as-if role taking by these individuals is thus a creative response to an indeterminate situation, i.e. a situation of uncertainty and even risk in which no appropriate role response is obvious or promising against a given set of preferences. To counter this indeterminacy, the individual acts as-if it was performing a new role thereby allowing for a new shared meaning to emerge. In contrast to rationalist or cognitivist designs of learning, which focus on information or cognitive processing, Mead thus stresses the intersubjective, the social capacity to create new meaning, i.e. shared roles and identities (Harnisch 2010).

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⁷ Thus, processes of altercasting may be differentiated from “as-if-“role taking. The former imply that the individual already “knows” its own preferences for alter’s future role behaviour and thus can shape its own “role making” accordingly (Malici 2006). The later cannot imply conscious manipulation as the “I”, the creative element, becomes only apparent through the interaction with the other and thus cannot claim ontological priority.
On the individual psychological level problematic situations refer to situations in which the “I”, the impulsive and unpredictable part does not subject itself anymore to the “me”. This may occur when one’s actions are inhibited or there are conflicting imperatives to act in a pluralistic society with contradictory demands by various “organized others”. In these cases, the creative “I” must use language to reframe the situation by suggesting alternative courses for action (Mead 1934: 217). By reframing the situation, the “I” either chooses” to reprioritize given roles under the circumstances, thus shifting the center of the self’s identity from one role to another or it may take up a new role altogether which has not been part of the self before. Moreover, the “I” may reinterpret the meaning of a given role without abdicating it.

In Mead’s philosophy of action the notion of an emerging new order through self-reflexive discourse is not limited to democratic societies. It expands his understanding of social science, social psychology, to moral and political thinking (Da Silva 2007b: 297). In his moral philosophy, he contends that one can either deductively reaffirm old meanings of a problem in question, such as “explaining” poverty as a natural feature of human society, or one can inductively “understand” it as a problem requiring solution and offering a chance for “moral growth” (Mead 1900:15). Using analogical reasoning, he equates the moral agent with the social scientist: while the former has to do justice to all the relevant values in the problematic situation, thereby constructing a “common good” as the reference point for debate, the scientist must incorporate all the facts to come up with a working hypothesis (Da Silva 2007a: 56).

Mead holds that in the politics of modern societies “the most effective government is through public opinion” (cited in da Silva 2007b: 297). Continued and informed deliberation among competent and civically engaged citizenry is the foundation of a democratic polity, because the individual can only grow through active participation and society can only be sustained through “critical reflection”. Social criticism and personal reflections are thus two sides of the same coin as they allow agency to creatively reconstruct the social and cultural setting in which the actor lives.

In nuce, Mead’s concept of democracy merges the scientific ideal of a rational exchange of arguments between equals, in which all “facts” must be taken into account and in which every solution is necessarily provisional, with his democratic ideal of a discourse between equals, in which all citizens are capable of participating in deliberating social problems. What emerges

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8 Thereby mirroring John Dewey’s conception of a deliberative democracy (Dewey 1997; Westbrook 2000).
from Mead’s thinking is a radical democratic community in which violence and coercion are the exemption and the force of the better argument the rule.

Insofar as international politics and the roles nations play are concerned, Mead established a central tenet of FPRA by suggesting that (international) roles empower actors because they enable them to act trustfully, i.e. by consent. Through roles in complex networks of division of labour states may build up trust as the belief grows that one will not be harmed when his or her fate is placed in the hands of others. Trust as a product of role playing, thus helps to clarify how role taking enables actors to send costly signals (Kydd 2000) about their degree of self-identification with the role and their future conduct within a role. In this view, variance in role playing affects trust as a social resource which in turn impacts upon the capacity to overcome collective action problems. In Self, Mind and Society treated the nature and structure of (leadership) roles as a basic element for an individual’s capacity to sustain allegiance. Variation in the actor’s capacity for role taking and making therefore helps explaining the ability of a society (and individual) to grow.

3. Mead on self-restraint and social organization

As noted above, Mead purported that the „self-understanding“ of an actor depends on the ability to distance himself from his self by taking the perspective of the other. Consequently, he reasoned that the more roles of others an individual or group can take up, the greater the capacity to create and maintain lasting patterns of social organization (Mead 1934: 264). Practicing norms and rules within an organization is not only consonant with social order, it may also „civilize“ its members by teaching them self-restraint through continuous role-taking“ (cf. Williams 2001: 538-39, Adler 2008 with reference to Elias 1994). In Mead’s logic, an actor’s role-taking capacity thus becomes a crucial indicator for his or her contribution to the stability of social order. Beyond the actor’s capacity, he argued that the structure and stability of a social organization depended upon three factors: first, the degree to which actors can hold a common generalized other; second, the degree of consistency among multiple generalized others; third, the degree of integration among types and layers of generalized others (Turner 1981/1992: 144).

Mead acknowledged that the increased size and differentiation of a social collectivity does not easily translate into stable social relationships (although he may have been more optimistic than others). Rather, the consistency or at least compatibility between multiple „generalized others“ become a crucial source of the self to control and evaluate itself and thus to differentiate between the roles to be taken in various contexts (Mead 1934: 322). If these
generalized others are in contradiction, conflict is likely and social organization may become anemic.

To tackle these challenges, Mead differentiated between „abstract generalized others“ and concrete „organized others“ (Mead 1934: 264-265). He positioned that the scope of social organization is limited by the level of integration/compatibility between the values and beliefs of the „abstract other“ and the rules and doctrines of the „organized others“:

“There are social situations in which the individual finds it easiest to integrate his own behavior with the behavior of the other individual are those in which all the individual participants are members of some one of the numerous socially functional groups of individuals (groups organized, respectively, for various special social ends and purposes). …

On the other hand, those social situations in which the individual finds it most difficult to integrate his own behavior with the behavior of others are those in which he and they are acting as members, respectively, of two or more different socially functional groups: groups whose respective social purposes or interests are antagonistic or conflicting or widely separated” (Mead 1934: 321-322).

In contrast to Wendt and other IR applications, Mead captures self-restraint “not as a capacity of the powerful to hold themselves back (Wendt 1999: 359). Rather, he posits that self-restraint is a potential quality of all actors. It refers to the (social) capacity to take up various roles without giving in to the urge to feel superior and superimpose oneself upon others. On the individual level, self-restraint meant for him to balance the “creative I” with the various, even contradictory expectations within the “Me” and not to superimpose an inflated “I” upon the “Me” and society at large (Mead 1934: 307). It is worthwhile to note, that Mead, despite his optimism for social reconstruction through deliberations, acknowledged and explained why and how an increase in societal demands, variation on the “Me”-component of the self, could induce (averse) effects on the “I”-component, resulting in dissociative behavior.

In nuce, for a highly organized society to exist and persist, its constitutive members must be able to take up roles with multiple generalized others, i.e. in a Habermasian reading to integrate life-worlds of different universality. These generalized others, abstract or specific may or may not be conducive to easy role taking and role making. Their values, norms and rules may clash or contradict each other. Difficulties in role integration on the individual level for those who are highly connected thus indicate challenges for social integration at the societal level. Mead thus provided a first crucial conceptualization of the interaction between agent and structure through the variation of an agent to take the role of the other.
4. **Mead and International Politics**

The initial seeds of Mead’s analysis of foreign policy roles in international politics were sown in the years preceding the U.S. entrance in the First World War, a period of intense nationalism that challenged many of the founding fathers of modern sociology (Joas 1989; 2003). Starting with the „The Psychological Bases for Internationalism“ (1915), Mead elaborated his take on international politics, particularly on war and nationalism, through a series of articles in the Chicago Tribune (1917), defending the U.S. entry into World War I, systematicizing his thinking on internationalism in „National-mindedness and International-Mindedness“ (1929) as well as in „Mind, Self and Society“ (1934). Nationalism, which had earlier been considered a marginal phenomenon subsumed under autocratic great power politics, suddenly gained prominence. Mead, who had been working on identity building on the individual and societal level for over a decade then, was well positioned to contribute to the understanding and amelioration of this new phenomenon.

*Mead and the emergence of adverse self-identification*

Mead applied his theory of an emergent self to international politics first in „The Psychological Bases for Internationalism“. He purported that „nations, like individuals, can become objects to themselves only as they „see themselves through the eyes of the other“ (Mead 1915: 604). At the same time he noted the paradox that nations may destroy other nations that have enabled them to achieve „self-consciousness“ in the first place. Thus, a firm link was established between the habit of an actor to define himself in exclusive terms and the social practice of violent and deviant behaviour.

To explain this new and disturbing phenomenon, Mead used an argument that he developed in his writings on criminal justice. When investigating the effects of the role of the criminal in society in the 1910s, Mead found that group identities could be based on adversity (Mead 1918):

„The consciousness of the self through consciousness of others is responsible for a more profound sense of hostility – that of members of the group to those opposed to it, or even to those merely outside is. And this hostility has the backing of the whole inner organization of the group. It provides the most favourable condition for the sense of group solidarity because in the common attack upon the common enemy the individual differences are obliterated. But in the development of these
hostilities we find the same self-assertion with the attempted elimination of the enemy giving way before the larger social whole with which the conflicting groups find themselves (Mead 1918: 581f).“

Consequently, his pragmatist approach to social conflict led Mead to establish an alternative and much more ambivalent understanding of the process of self-reflection of nations. While he rejected William James’s assumption of a masculine fighting instinct, Mead considered a certain type of national self-consciousness inevitable (Mead 1915: 606). The puzzle for Mead was not why nationalism could occur but why it could take such violent forms. The major reason he found was militarism. In an argument typical of him, he held that nations could legitimate war only for purposes of self-defense and that this self-defense turns violent whenever nations are identified with the state as such rather than with the people. If the state in an exclusive understanding of sovereignty prevails over the human aspiration of its citizens, then war becomes possible. In contrast, if a nation of citizens can identify with the international society at large, then the exclusive identity could evolve into a more inclusive form of a community of nation-states. As Mead explains in an often quoted portion of „the Psychological Bases for Internationalism“:

„Militarism is not simply an evil in itself. It is typical and conservative of a state that is narrowly national in its attitude and that refuses to recognize international society that after all has made the self-conscious state possible. The problem then is a psychological problem, for it has to do with the change of attitude, the willingness to accept the whole international fabric of society, and to regard the states and the communities of which they are instruments, as subject to and controlled by the life of the whole, not as potential enemies for whose assault each state must be forever on the watch (Mead 1915: 607).“

It is important to note here that Mead never envisioned the establishment of a „world state“. Rather, he speaks in his own voice in articulating a dialogue between „civilized“, that is self-restrained, nation states. Far from abolishing the nation state and merging one „national self“ into another, cosmopolitan self, he argues that state-sovereignty must „evolve“. In his understanding nations must first abstain from a unilateral, exclusive right to self-defense (Fischer 2008: 514).

Universal communities were spreading, as Mead notes, in economics, religion and through the League of Nations (Mead 1934: 281-294). But these communities do not replace the nation state as the premier place of their citizen’s self-identification, he argues. When talking about the conduct between nations, Mead refers to a „conversation in international terms“ (Mead 1934: 271), and nowhere he suggests these should evolve into a „dialogue in supranational terms“.
In short, Mead’s conception of the nation-state is both evolving and dialogical. His experience with rampant nationalism and widespread violence initiated a scientific process of “problem-solving” in his thinking on international relations. Mead rejected an essentialist reading of the sources of WWI. He argued instead that militarism and a closed understanding of sovereignty must be overcome, so that a nation’s understanding of itself may “grow” and encompass the “generalized other” as the embodiment of the “community of nation states”. Mead’s “inter-nationalism” is all the more important for his thinking on international relations because it reflects his dialogical concept of democracy and sovereignty of the individual in the public sphere. The state is but an instrument of the political community of individuals, who are increasingly aware of their interdependence. As such, the state incorporates the values of the society itself and is no entity distinct from the collective will of the people. Democratic political institutions thus embody the evolving psychological dynamism of their constituent individuals by incorporating the principle of gradual change. Democratic institutions establish the conditions for rational dialogue, through structures and practices preventing the parts from having recourse to violent means. But these institutions must be complemented and continuously reinforced by citizens through active “citizenship”, i.e. voting, petitioning, lobbying, and discussing issues pertaining to the public (Deegan 2008: 22).

Mead, WWI and the League of Nations as the arbiter of international life

In a series of articles published in 1917, Mead tried to compose and refine a justification of America’s entry into WWI and the establishment of the League of Nations. He first outlined the reasons for the outbreak of the war – German militarism and the expansionism of its autocratic rule – and then placed his argument for US intervention right in the middle of the American debate on the war aims. Mead posited that the US should neither align with the coalition against Germany, as former President Theodor Roosevelt had argued, nor should it stay neutral as the democratic Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan had suggested (Baer 1999: 109). In contrast, Mead claimed that the USA should intervene to safeguard democracy on the international level, because, leaning heavily on Kant here (Mead 1918: 160), democracy would be the best precursor for a peaceful evolution of international politics.

“America finally entered this world war, because its issue became that of democracy defined as the right of peoples to self-government, the right of a
people to determine the foreign policy of its government, the right of the small nations to existence because they are nations, and the right of the whole western world to be free from the threat of imperialistic militarism. We are fighting for the larger world society which democratic attitudes and principles make possible (Mead 1917a: 1).“

In reflecting on the constructive and destructive effects of nationalism, Mead’s lecture on Kant, Peace and Democracy also explains why the „League of Nations“ became the central focus of his thinking on „inter-nationalism“ and world order. In this lecture and in his later writings (Mead 1929), he did not claim that the League would end all wars at once. Rather, he insisted that the establishment of the principle that members of the League would intervene if a member, no matter how small and powerless, had become the victim of expansionism, would be the impetus for an „evolutionary process“ eventually eradicating violence from inter-national conduct altogether (Mead 1929: 389).

According to Mead, both nationalism and individualism were ambivalent in their effects. Positively, they necessitated the agent to increasingly reflect upon himself from the position of others. Hence, self-awareness is the precursor for the individual to grow into a community. Negatively, both individualism and nationalism may evolve into violence-proneness if the agent elevates his own sovereignty over that of others.

„It [nationalism, S. H.] has been a divisive factor in so far as peoples have come to conscious of themselves in their position to others, and especially in so far as they have undertaken to break the yoke which has subjected them to other peoples and to dynasties foreign to themselves. But there is no movement which has so quickened the conscious life of the western world as this growth of nationalism. It has brought together peoples found [sic] that in their difference they had a common interests. It has awakened sympathetic response in those who are of different tongue and race. Every increase in the consciousness of the selfhood of a community has meant an increase in the awareness of other groups and has laid the foundation for the community of interest and endeavour which has had its greatest expression in the formation of the League of Nations which is opposed to the central powers of Europe. In a real sense nationalism has done in part what neither liberal institutions nor socialism has accomplished. It has brought together the whole community in a common interest, and made the whole community realize that they were one” (Mead 1918: 172).

Mead’s interpretation of the League’s functions should not be taken without a grain of salt, though. In contrast to Jane Addams and other „progressive internationalists“, who castigated imperialism as the cause for war, Mead sided with „conservative internationalists“ in the pre-WW I debate. In their vision, a “League to Enforce Peace“ would be limited to a world body settling disputes, excluding far-reaching economic and social reforms (Fischer 2008: 515).
a consequence, Mead did not fully tackle the critical problem of how the individual (or the state) may reconstruct a conflictual situation when expectations by organized others diverge, when superiority feelings are inflamed to keep oneself going. He pleaded for “intelligent state craft” and reiterated the demand that “all of the interests that are involved should be taken into account” when reconstruction was used to solve conflict by creating a “larger social whole”. But he did not immerse himself into delineating the concrete social mechanisms of peaceful reconstruction on the international level.9

Mead and the limits of „national-mindedness“ on the eve of World War II

In 1929, Mead penned his last major contribution to international politics, „National Mindedness and International Mindedness“. It can be viewed as the most articulate argument on the co-constitutive nature between the nation-state and international order. Arguably, it is also the most sober and self-reflective expression of his own thinking on international politics and foreign policy.

In the article, which was published in the International Journal of Ethics, Mead first critically assesses his own interpretation of the causes of World War I. He acknowledges that recent documents released by the British Foreign Office had proven that „those who controlled public policies and finally mobilized armies were utilizing fears and hatreds and cupidity and individual greed and jalousies which were far from representing issues over which the communities themselves wished to fight or thought they were fighting“ (Mead 1929: 386). Comparing this finding to his argument in the 1917 Chicago Tribune series, in which he held that the war amounted to nothing less than a struggle between democracy and autocracy, his openness is astonishing and brave.

The main thrust of „National-mindedness and International Mindedness, however, is the question which sort of national-mindedness is required to settle differences peacefully in the League of Nations. Noting that the recently signed Briand-Kellog Pact and the League should be considered steps in the right direction, Mead insists that the use of violence in settling domestic disputes is the most important indicator that shows how far advanced the respective „national-mindedness“ really is (Mead 1929: 390-392).

9 Mead and Dewey, as progressives, believed that democracy would be self-destructive if it did not safeguard certain economic, social and judicial standards. And yet, they consistently declined, despite heavy criticism, to fix concrete, universal standards. In their view, the democratic public itself had to define and redefine these standards, continuously, cf. Shalin 1991: 51-54.
National unity may occur quickly (and haphazardly) if the state resorts to violent means, because citizens immediately identify their own good with the common good. But „national mindedness“ that safeguards the interests of its constituents must be able to balance common and conflicting interests in the social fabric and tackle them through non-violent means. Hence, national-mindedness can be distinguished from nationalism, according to Mead, because the former would not compromise the basic rights of its constitutive parts, the citizens, to establish a unity without legitimacy.

“It follows that if we do think out national and international life, we can no longer depend upon war for the fusion of disparate and opposing elements in the nation. We are compelled to reach a sense of being a nation by means of rational self-consciousness. We must think ourselves in terms of the great community to which we belong. We cannot depend upon feeling ourselves at one with our compatriots, because the only effective feeling of unity springs from our common response against the common enemy. No other social emotion will melt us into one. Instead of depending upon a national soul we must achieve national-mindedness (Mead 1929: 400-401).”

Quite frankly, Mead asserts in 1929, the United States does not possess the necessary national-mindedness. Reversing an earlier claim that the United States has never had and could never have imperialistic goals and that the Monroe doctrine served only to prevent European powers from colonizing the Western hemisphere (Mead 1917b), Mead now views America’s conduct in Latin America quite critically. He reasons that the doctrine is unintelligible and that there is no common sense in it other than that it is worth fighting for (Mead 1929: 398).

Mead returns to dialogue and emergence as his central themes of social theory in “National mindedness and International mindedness”. Furthermore, he employs his analogical tripartite evolutionary argument spanning the self, society and the international community. His line of thought is straightforward: the self emerges as a free self from a dialogue with the generalized other, i.e. society, only. A nation, capable of peaceful and reasonable conduct, emerges from the self-reflective dialogue among its citizens and the inclusion of the point of view of other nations. Eliminating domestic violence through democratic practice and institutions is thus an essential dimension of achieving international peace, because identification with the common cause will emerge from rational discourse rather than „soul searching“.
5. Reflections on a dialogue with Mead

This chapter began by pointing out that George Herbert Mead’s potential contribution to role theory in IR and Foreign Policy Analysis has been neglected long for too long, and that his reception in the literature has been partial at best. The chapter therefore explored the contribution of Mead’s œuvre to the understanding of roles nations play in international politics. It was demonstrated that Mead’s contribution not least spans the ontological and epistemological foundations of role theory, the intricacies of ego-alter interaction in democratic polities, the causes of nationalism and war, and their consequences for international order. The chapter also argued that he helped to establish three core premises of FPRA: the co-constitutive nature of the agent – society relationship, the importance of shifts in state behavior through role taking and making, and the sources of role change in increasingly complex societies.

To conclude, four contributions can be identified when considering Mead’s conception of role taking in society and international politics. First, Mead makes an important contribution social theory and foreign policy analysis with his prime mechanisms of dialogue and emergence. Through his conceptualization of the “I” and “Me”, he establishes the core premise of role theory that the individual cannot be thought of as autonomous. An important implication of this, of course, is that variation of the actor’s ability to take up the role of the other does effect the density and structure of societal development. Dialogue and emergence stress the social relationship between role beholder and society, and opens up the various causal pathways of socialization, imitation, learning etc between the two. In Mead’s œuvre, we are thus presented with both an analytical framework for understanding the prominent part language and practices (symbols) play in role taking, and societal construction. As the study of roles in foreign policy analysis moves forward, students of IR theory and FPA should take into account both trajectories equally.

Secondly, Mead opened a substantive field of inquiry by specifying key terms of role theory and integrating them in a consistent framework that reaches beyond the individual-society nexus. In doing so, Mead’s œuvre yields substantial benefits for the intra- as well as interpersonal or intersocietal level of role analysis.

Two specific findings on the co-variation of an actor’s capacity for role taking and the structure of society are of particular interest here: First, many role theoreticians have found
that shifts in emphasis between the ego and the alter part of a role can be identified as distinct sources of role change and transformation (Harnisch this volume). Mead teaches us, however, that the ego-part of a role should be thought of as consisting of an irreducible core, the I and the perception of societal expectations within the self, the „Me“, both of which are in constant dialogue with each other. Some scholars, such as Jürgen Habermas, in “Postmetaphysical Thinking”, interpret the „Me“ as a conservative force and bearer of moral consciousness, whereas the “I” stands for „self affirmation“ and preservation of the self’s life story. Mead’s play and game analogy and his treatment of nationalism, however, do suggest a different, more co-evolutionary reading: He sees the dual structure of the self itself as a process and sensitive to the socio-historical context (Da Silva 2008: 159). In contrast to Habermas’, the Median “Me” is not primarily a controlling, repressive force that rules through sanctions. Rather, the “Me” is also an constitutive, enabling force in the first place that allows for self-identification.

Second, Mead illustrates the fragility of the individual-society-nexus by introducing the concept of the generalized other and distinguishing two types of “others”: the generalized and the organized other. In his conceptualization role taking becomes a „double-edged sword“: on the one hand by enabling the „I“ to objectify itself; on the other hand, by allowing for role conflict through diverging expectations by “organized others” or incoherent „generalized others“. In this respect, Mead regards religion and trade as important social processes feeding cooperation, but he does not foresee a linear or cumulative “civilianization process”. His thinking on process, how to organize and structure public deliberation so as to constitute a reflective “democratic public”, remained vague. But his thinking on the socio-political dynamics of nationalism were not. In this respect, a plausible argument can be made that recent findings by Mansfield and Snyder (2005) on the war-proneness of democratizing states can be rooted in Mead’s earlier investigations on the sources of World War I.

Thirdly, Mead goes beyond merely showing that meticulous definitions and conceptualization of causal mechanism matter. As discussed in the section on Mead and World War I, he theorizes astutely about possible adverse effects of self-identification, thereby helping us to improve our understanding about national role taking and the emergence of international society. Specifically, he warns of the limits „national-mindedness“ put on the evolution of „international-mindedness“. In addition, he discusses personal leadership, the anomic effects of militarism and the beneficial consequences of rational dialogue and creative problem-solving all of which do specifically relate to variation in the causal mechanisms of recent role scholarship.
Finally, Mead’s academic contribution and his social commitment also contain a number of interesting insights with regard to theory-building in both IR and Foreign Policy Analysis. It may help to demystify the epistemological tensions within FPRA and between theory building in Foreign Policy Analysis and IR by focusing on „problem-solving and practices“. He may also encourage role research to engage more openly with other disciplines as he reminds us of the potential of creativity, reflexivity and imagination individuals as role takers do have and may employ as decision makers. In this sense, Mead strongly supports an „ethical turn“ in role research and IR theory by highlighting „problem-solving“, „the reconstruction“ of society and emancipation of the individual. In the end, Mead’s dedication to the “res publica” invites scholars to leave the ontological, epistemological and methodological battlegrounds of scholasticism behind, and address the key challenges for contemporary IR: the dilemmas of social order in the developing world and the difficulties of effective multilateralism in the developed world.
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