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# Outline of a social theory of rights: A neo-pragmatist approach

**Filipe Carreira da Silva**

*University of Lisbon, Portugal; University of Cambridge, UK*

## Abstract

This article articulates a neo-pragmatist theory of human rights by drawing and expanding upon the American classical pragmatism of G.H. Mead. It characterizes this neo-pragmatist theory of rights by its anti-foundationalist, relational, fictive, and constitutive nature, and begins by providing a reconstruction of Mead's social pragmatist approach to rights, a contribution systematically ignored by contemporary sociologists of rights. Next, it details the cost of this disciplinary oblivion by examining how much neo-pragmatism, critical theory, and legal consciousness studies have meanwhile gained by engaging with Mead's work on rights. Finally, it discusses the contributions of this historical-theoretical exercise to the rapidly growing sociology of rights, and shows that by supplementing the neo-Meadian approach with a recent interpretation of Hobbes's fictional theory of politics, there appear to be substantive gains in the empirical study of the origins, consequences, meaning, and denial of rights.

## Keywords

legal consciousness, Mead, pragmatism, rights

Human rights and sociology make strange bedfellows. The universal and individualistic way human rights are typically defined – as entitlements, guarantees and liberties that all individual human beings possess by virtue of being human – sits uncomfortably with the broadly shared sensitivity to historical contingency and social constructionism exhibited by most contemporary sociologists. Yet sociologists have never been so challenged to

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## Corresponding author:

Filipe Carreira da Silva, Department of Sociology, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, Cambridge, UK.  
Email: [fcs23@cam.ac.uk](mailto:fcs23@cam.ac.uk)

theorize human rights as in our time. Ours is the 'age of rights', an historical period in whose *Zeitgeist* human rights perform important social functions, from supporting critical positions vis-à-vis capitalism to providing the basis for claims to recognition of neglected particularities. This confronts sociologists with a dilemma. How to study rights, an object of inquiry whose growing social relevance is only matched by its unremitting elusiveness to sociology's conventional analytical lenses? This is the central question I seek to answer in this article.

This article is about a social theory of rights. It aims to provide sociologists with an alternative to liberal political theory, which conceives of rights as individualistic, *a priori*, adversarial, and as having an essence. As a result, the theory proposed here questions the dichotomy between natural and citizenship rights, closely associated with liberal political thinking. Also, the social theory developed in this article is intended to provide an alternative to the dominant sociological approaches to rights, whose foundationalism, I argue, impairs their heuristic value. My strategy to destabilize both liberal and foundationalist accounts of rights draws on resources from a widely ignored social theoretical tradition in this regard – classical American pragmatism, especially as formulated by George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). My aim is to develop a pragmatist social theoretical explanation of how rights were imagined, conquered, implemented, and sometimes denied in concrete historical situations – and how, as emergents of these social processes, they simultaneously enable and constrain, i.e., they help *constitute* human action.

Explanation, of course, is but one of the functions of social theory. Other functions include prediction of individual and collective behaviour, understanding of the meaning-making processes through which individuals make sense of the world, and self-edification, which refers to the ways in which social knowledge can help individuals re-conceive themselves, thus gaining a critical distance from their former beliefs and preferences. Besides explanation, my theory aims particularly at these last two functions. Such orientation towards symbolic processes and sensitivity to the humanist potential of social knowledge are closely related to the way I propose to define what a right is.

A right is *not* individualistic and adversarial. Neither is it something *a priori*. Rather, a right is a mutual relation, an institution made of political claims involving at least two individuals. As in any other social institution, a right is not simply a social construction of omnipotent agents. To have a right socially constitutes individuals into citizens and, as such, enables as much as it constrains action. But a right is a special sort of social institution. It refers to entitlements, liberties, powers or immunities that have been codified in international covenants and declarations, as well as in national constitutions. Instead of proposing a foundational principle common to all human rights struggles that empirical analyses should then try to uncover, my approach to rights aims at the reconstruction of the iterative processes of meaning-production and institutionalization within which rights were imagined, conquered, implemented and sometimes denied. I thus endorse the criticism of the liberal notion that rights and identities are formed prior to political struggles in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup> One important aim of a social theory of rights is thus to help explain the ways in which the social institution of rights came about in particular societies and historical epochs. 'Rights' need then to be conceived of as historically contingent, whose meanings emerge and evolve in the context of the political struggles regarding their institutionalization.

My understanding of rights includes civil, political, social and cultural rights. By using the term 'rights' in a broad sense to include 'human' as well as 'citizenship' rights, I am departing from a long-standing tradition in sociology<sup>2</sup> that subscribes to the liberal dichotomy of natural vs. citizenship rights. Not only is this dichotomy ideologically charged, and as such conveys one particular understanding of political modernity, but it is also increasingly anachronistic.<sup>3</sup> Yet this dichotomy is still very much the dominant understanding in sociology departments across the world today. Its institutional consequences include a clear-cut division of intellectual labour between research on citizenship rights (based on the nation-state, often with a focus on specific policy areas) and research on human rights (cosmopolitan-oriented, usually concentrating in issues such as transnationalism and global justice). This is far from being a balanced division of labour, however. While there is a significant body of sociological literature in citizenship, the project of a sociology of rights<sup>4</sup> is still very much in its infancy. I wish to help correct this analytical and institutional imbalance by questioning the citizenship–human rights dichotomy from which it originates. Instead of being constrained to operate within either pole, I suggest sociology refocuses its attention on the category of 'right' itself, thus undercutting that dichotomy. This exercise of conceptual refocusing draws extensively upon a sociological intellectual tradition that has been systematically overlooked in this area of research – American philosophical pragmatism and, in particular, Mead's original variety of pragmatism.

Addressing the systematic neglect of Mead's work involves overcoming the current narrow, 'canonical' conception of the history of social thought prevalent among rights scholars. Of course, most rights scholars do not even show an interest in the contributions classical sociology might retain. Those who do, however, tend to associate contemporary sociology's difficulties in dealing with human rights to the epistemological constraints faced by sociology's trio of founding fathers: Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.<sup>5</sup> Bryan S. Turner, the author of arguably the most influential contemporary social theory of rights, is no exception. He too focuses on the post-war trio of founding fathers. Sociology's reductionist view of rights stems, in his view, from Weber's reduction of rights merely to claims for services or for privileges by social groups involved in competitive struggles, which serve as an instrument of class rule and expression of individualistic, possessive and egoistic society (Marx). This reductionist view couples with the strong Durkheimian notion of sociology's separation from natural right theory (Turner, 1993: 500). The alternative to classical sociology's reductionism, Turner suggests, is a new sociology of rights founded upon four basic assumptions, which he derives from the philosophical anthropology of Arnold Gehlen: (1) the vulnerability of the human body; (2) the dependency of humans; (3) the general reciprocity of social life; and (4) the precariousness of social institutions (Turner, 2006: 23). Turner merges this 'minimally foundationalist ontology' (2006: 23) with the social constructionist view, according to which rights are 'constructed in a contingent and variable way according to the specific characteristics of the societies in which they are developed and as a particular outcome of political struggles over interest' (Turner 1997: 566).

Turner's strategy of reconciling foundationalism (albeit in a minimalist version) with constructionism in order to build a new sociology of rights, however, does not strike me as particularly convincing for two main reasons. First, I find Turner's claim that there

was 'skepticism towards the idea of human and natural rights in classical sociology' (1993: 176) unwarranted. Classical sociology's scepticism towards 'natural rights theory' was not directed at rights as such, but against one specific understanding of rights, namely, that articulated by the liberal individualist tradition. But rights can, and have always been, conceived differently. A case in point is G.H. Mead, whose social pragmatism led him to conceive of rights in radically different terms from the individualistic, *a priori* and adversarial way liberal thinking suggests. The suggestion here is that Mead's conception of rights can be construed as a 'buried treasure' (Skinner, 2002: 126), a 'fruit' of intellectual history available to those willing to 'excavate' sociology's past beyond the conventional canonical view. Second, it is not clear how far Turner's foundationalism can be of help to empirical research on rights. Human frailty may be one argument used by historical actors when arguing for rights, but it is certainly not the only one and it is conceivable that it was not present in many processes of institutionalization of rights. Social theory and empirical research cannot be based upon ontological claims that ignore historical circumstances. Rights are political claims made by concrete actors, who, in order to advance their causes, mobilize available resources within specific structures of opportunity. As such, their 'foundation' is historically contingent, varying according to the multiple contexts of their institutionalization and implementation. To emphasize the historically contingent character of normative foundations, however, is not to endorse relativism. There is nothing in principle that prevents universal validity claims from being advanced by agents aware of their historicity.<sup>6</sup> The question of the genesis, scope, and limits of such universal validity claims is not metaphysical, but sociological. It lies in the normative structure of concrete social formations and is, as such, amenable to social-scientific empirical research.

A more promising line of inquiry, I suggest, lies in critically re-examining G.H. Mead's legacy. That is the aim of the first section of this article. This section begins with an analysis of Mead's theory of meaning, moves on to a brief discussion of his concept of object, to arrive at Mead's approach to rights. In the second section, I assess the impact of Mead's ideas in contemporary rights research. I focus on three strands of research: neo-pragmatism, critical theory, and legal consciousness theory. In the third section, I contrast the significant impact of Mead's ideas in these three areas with its relative neglect within sociology, in particular the sociology of rights. My claim is that there are good reasons to change this situation. My solution to this problem is a neo-Meadian pragmatist theory of rights. Given its unique focus on the constitutive, fictive, and disruptive character of social action, a pragmatist theory of rights offers significant advantages vis-à-vis existing theories, namely symbolic interactionism, rational choice, functionalism, institutionalism, and practice theories. The article concludes with an overview of the main points.

## G.H. Mead re-examined

As one of the great modern process philosophies, American philosophical pragmatism is fundamentally non-dualistic. Dualisms such as 'body versus mind' or 'materialism versus idealism' were systematically rebutted and deconstructed by classic pragmatist authors including William James, John Dewey, and W.I. Thomas. One finds this anti-

Cartesian orientation throughout Mead's system of thinking too, from his well-known social psychological theories to his seldom discussed epistemological and political writings (Silva, 2008). Mead's variety of pragmatism blended left-wing Hegelianism and Darwinian evolutionary theory, and, especially in the 1920s, drew on the 'emergence philosophies' of Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead to produce an approach that could capture meaning-making processes without ignoring the physical environment within which those processes take place. To distinguish it from symbolic interactionism, which often dilutes itself into social constructionism (or 'idealism', the deficiencies of which Mead never tired of pointing out), and to emphasize its thoroughly intersubjective character, I describe Mead's approach as 'social pragmatism'.<sup>7</sup>

A key element of Mead's social pragmatism is his theory of meaning.<sup>8</sup> For Mead, meaning is neither a subjective phenomenon lodged in the individual mind, nor something external to it. Instead, meaning emerges and develops between social organisms through gestural interaction. Mead explains the intersubjective emergence of meaning with a 'threefold' logical structure. This includes: (1) the gesture of one individual ('organism', in Mead's terminology); (2) the responding gesture of the second organism; and (3) the 'resultant' of the social act. The response of the second organism to the gesture of the first organism is the interpretation of that gesture – this response brings out the meaning (Mead, [1934] 1967: 80). Meaning is thus implicit in the structure of the social act and can be studied by analyzing patterns of action resulting from social interaction.<sup>9</sup>

The value of this 'threefold' theory of meaning for the sociology of rights is readily apparent. Liberal political theory conceives of the meaning of rights as an *a priori* reality to be discovered through reason. Within social theory, the meaning of rights is typically conceived of either as an outcome of concrete interest-motivated political struggles oriented to protect vulnerable bodies (e.g. Turner 1997), or as an effect of a political actor's discursive performances (e.g. Zivi, 2011). If we are to follow Mead, however, meaning is neither external to social actors, nor is it a mere social construction. Instead, it is objectively located in patterns of social interaction. Mead's theory of meaning is not limited to social interaction (i.e. between selves), however. If it were, as a symbolic interactionist reading of Mead would assume, its exclusive focus would be on communicative action at the expense of instrumental action. Mead, however, refuses to privilege one type of experience over another. Instead, his aim is to undercut the social/communicative versus physical/instrumental dichotomy by including the creation of meaning between selves and all 'social objects' that compose their environments. 'Social objects' include whatever has a common meaning to the participants in the social act, from physical objects, to oneself and other selves, to scientific, religious, or political objects. Crucially, Mead conceives of the process of meaning creation between individuals and social objects as being dialectically generative. From the continuous tension between individuals and objects there is the constant emergence of *new individuals* as well as *new objects* (Mead, 2011: 38). Mead illustrates his claims with the societal shift toward modernity (2011: 40–1). Modern individuals have emerged as new scientific, political and social objects gradually came into being – chief among these new political objects were modern individual rights.

Rights are conceived by Mead as part and parcel of political modernity, and specifically, as a constitutive part of the normative structure of modern political communities.<sup>10</sup>

Understood as 'social objects', rights are both an aspiration and a defining feature of processes of political modernization. As such, rights help constitute individuals into modern citizens. Mead's great achievement has been to render this idea, which could have remained a political philosophical insight, into a post-metaphysical working hypothesis. Testing this hypothesis involves as much solving a scientific problem, involving epistemology, social psychology, and political science, as it requires solving an ethical-practical problem, which requires a democratic political solution. To seek a combined solution to these problems is as urgent today as it was in Mead's time.

Today's sociological empirical research and theoretical reflection on rights have much to gain from Mead's thinking for it fundamentally destabilizes current dichotomies and assumptions, including the idea that human rights are essentially different from citizenship rights or the belief that sociology can only study human rights if it conceives of them as resting upon some sort of (metaphysical) foundation. Destabilizing these mistaken yet pervasive ways of thinking, however, is easier said than done. I suggest that completing the genealogical exercise of retrieving from collective oblivion one of sociology's 'lost treasures', Mead's approach to rights, is a crucial first step in that direction.

At the heart of Mead's approach to rights is the idea that to claim a right is also to attribute it to others: 'the individual in asserting his own right is also asserting that of all other members of the community' (2011: 228). Behind this claim is Mead's notion of social institution. To better appreciate Mead's concept of social institution one needs to realize that in his view there are two poles for the general process of social differentiation. One pole is constituted by social impulses, which Mead conceives of as the physiological basis upon which social interactions take place. The other pole is constituted 'by the responses of individuals to the identical responses of others, that is, to class or social responses' (Mead [1934] 1967: 229). For Mead, these socially common responses are the defining component of the institutional pole of the process of social differentiation. In this sense, to see rights as social institutions is to conceive of them, contrary to natural rights theory, not as *a priori* attributes of individuals nor as pre-social entities, but as a mutual relation involving a triadic relation between an entitlement, the obligation to respect it, and the attitude of the 'generalized other'.<sup>11</sup>

There are two implications I would like to emphasize regarding Mead's concept of social institution. The first implication is that social institutions do not necessarily oppress, nor do they exist in opposition to, individual agents. On the contrary, like rights, social institutions, can be 'flexible and progressive, fostering individuality rather than discouraging it'. More important than the oppressive or progressive character of institutions, however, is the fact that 'without social institutions of some sort . . . there could be no fully mature individual selves or personalities at all' (Mead [1934] 1967: 262). Mead's important insight that social institutions can both constrain and enable one's assertion of one's own distinctiveness, distinct from the conception of the social institution of the 1980s theories of practice as both structured and structuring, given the evolutionary and emergent character of Mead's conception,<sup>12</sup> takes us directly to my second observation. I refer to the centrality of the concept of the 'generalized other' in Mead's thinking generally and, in particular, in his approach to rights.

The attitude of the 'generalized other' is Mead's post-metaphysical rendering of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's general will.<sup>13</sup> Through this concept Mead wishes to convey the idea

of an internalized set of social attitudes, namely the principles and rules in the light of which individuals coordinate their own behaviour and interpret one another. It has been widely noted that this is a central notion of Mead's social psychology, on a par with his highly influential conception of the structure of the self – the phases or perspectives of the 'I' and the 'me'. What has been less appreciated is the importance of the generalized other with regard to rights. Yet a substantial part of the appeal of Mead's approach to rights resides exactly here. First, Mead's generalized other enables one to appreciate the extent to which rights are a common attitude shared by members of a political community. Mead's point is straightforward. Any given society's 'generalized other' encompasses common attitudes, i.e. what we would today call 'social norms'. Rules are one kind of social norm. Very much like the rules of a game, social norms help define the institutional framework upon which social cooperation is possible, rights-norms among them. As such, rights are an objective component of the normative structure of modern societies. Second, the internalization of the attitude of the generalized other is to have a general attitude towards all members of the community, including oneself. Mead's point is that rights are as much a part of the normative structure of a society as they are a part of the political identity of each individual citizen. But Mead has a very specific understanding of what this entails. To have a right is not the same as having a physical object, something that can be accumulated, measured, quantified. As a social object, to have a right is to enter a political relation, to belong to a community whose norms include that right as something anybody can assert and that everybody can recognize.<sup>14</sup> Mead sees the social relationships rights refer to as intrinsically reflexive. They require every member of the political community to take both roles or positions involved in a rights relation, that of entitlement and that of the obligation to respect it – this is how rights help constitute individual political identities. Third, for Mead, to conceive of rights as relational and reflexive is also to assert their contested nature. The contested nature of rights stems from the tension within the social self between the 'I' and the 'me', the former being a source of unpredictable creativity, the latter ensuring the internalization of social conventions through the attitude of the generalized other. The dialectical nature of the relation between the two phases of the self means that social norms, rights-norms included, are being continuously internalized and reproduced (through the 'me') while being contested and questioned (through the 'I'). For Mead, then, rights are contested not only within oneself (i.e. one's legal consciousness is a dialectical process, responsive to concrete action-problems in real-world situations, and which potentially evolves over time in contradictory ways), but between different selves as well (politicians, judges, and ordinary citizens, for example, often disagree about the interpretation and application of rights).<sup>15</sup> In this sense, to affirm the contested nature of rights is to affirm the political nature of the processes of identity-formation that sustain the claim to rights. Socialization is as much about social reproduction as it is about social transformation. The 'I' is constantly questioning the norms integrated by the self via the 'me' and does this by appealing to an ideal future community.

Contested, reflexive, relational; this is how Mead conceives of rights, whose meaning lies in concrete patterns of political interaction, whose institutionalization is as much a symbolic as it is a material process – bills of rights, constitutions, and the state derive much of their power and legitimacy from their fictional character, a power that, for that very reason, often makes itself felt all too tangibly in people's lives.



## Mead's impact discussed

The heuristic value of these insights did not pass unnoticed for many in the social sciences and the humanities throughout the twentieth century, both in the United States and elsewhere. Like philosophical pragmatism as a whole, Mead's social theory was often appropriated, interpreted and used as a powerful conceptual tool with which to subvert and criticize dominant models.<sup>16</sup> In sociology, Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, envisaged to a large extent as an alternative to Talcott Parsons's structural-functionalism, is the most glaring example of this sort of strategy of appropriation. Yet the symbolic interactionist reading of Mead has not been without consequences. In particular, it has been partly responsible for a narrow understanding of the extent of Mead's contributions to contemporary sociology, focused almost exclusively on his social theory of the self. If in sociology Mead's ideas have for most of the twentieth century been confined to symbolic interactionist circles, or within the interpretive scope suggested by them, the same cannot be said of other disciplinary domains. In this section, I discuss three examples of productive encounters with Mead's work that, while acknowledging Mead's social theory of the self, have tried to go beyond it and explore his approach to rights – neo-pragmatist social theory, critical theory, and legal consciousness theory.

Neo-pragmatist social theory is the most recent attempt to make use of pragmatist philosophical insights to promote social and political empirical research and theoretical innovation. Past attempts include, besides symbolic interactionism, the work of authors such as C. Wright Mills (1966) or Dmitri Shalin (1986). Neo-pragmatist social theory distinguishes itself from these earlier appropriations by either drawing upon Richard Rorty's (and to a lesser extent, Hilary Putnam's) philosophical insights (e.g. Fenstein, 1997), by resting upon historically minded strategies of theory-building (e.g. Joas, [1980] 1985, [1992] 1996), as well as by distinguishing itself vis-à-vis alternative contemporary approaches, including post-structuralism or the theories of practice as developed, for instance, by Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Gross, 2009).<sup>17</sup> It is from these last two strategies that one should expect a more fruitful encounter with Mead's approach to rights as they either explicitly deal with the classical pragmatist legacy, which includes it, or they are more directly concerned with providing conceptual tools to empirical research (also because Rorty never addressed Mead in systematic fashion). Surprisingly, however, there has been relatively little use of Mead's ideas in neo-pragmatist research on human rights. Consider, for instance, Hans Joas's genealogy of human rights (2005, 2011), David Hiley's approach to human rights (2011), or Martijn Konings' analysis of modern political institutions (2010). Joas's neo-pragmatist take on the origins of rights focuses more on Nietzsche and Weber than it does on Mead. Hiley's Rortian approach ignores Mead altogether. Only Konings addresses Mead's work alongside other pragmatist classics, namely Dewey, and even though Konings' approach is laudable on various counts, it does not refer to the specific case of the institution of rights per se.

This relative absence of appreciation of Mead's contributions to the problematic of rights among neo-pragmatists, the group of social theorists who have explored Mead the most beyond the conventional symbolic interactionist reading,<sup>18</sup> raises an obvious question. Are neo-pragmatists missing something important, or is Mead's thinking of little value to contemporary rights research? In order to show why I think the former is true,

allow me to turn to the reception of Mead's ideas by Axel Honneth, the current leader of the so-called Frankfurt School whose project is to develop a normative social theory that recovers and updates the original project of critical theory.<sup>19</sup>

Honneth's project of constructing a renewed critical theory of society unfolded in two successive stages. The first stage, published as *The Critique of Power* in 1985, is negative in nature. It consists of an historical reconstruction of the perceived aporias of the contributions of two key critical modern theorists, Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. This negative-reconstructive journey took Honneth seven years later to a second, positive and programmatic stage of his project in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995). This major constructive work proposes an original model for an ethics of recognition. The central figures of this second stage are G.W.F. Hegel and G.H. Mead. While Hegel provides Honneth with the basic blueprint of the process of ethical formation of the human species, as consisting in specific forms of reciprocal recognition (love, law, and ethical life), Mead's notion of the 'generalized other' is said to 'represent not only a theoretical amendment but also a substantive deepening' of Hegel's second form of recognition, legal recognition (Honneth, 1995: 80). I take this to be an important indication of the relative heuristic value of Mead's approach to rights. Indeed, of all possible contributions by Mead, it is this all too often ignored dimension of his work that takes central stage in *The Struggle for Recognition*, a book that has provided Honneth with the basis of his intervention alongside Nancy Fraser and a host of other critically oriented thinkers in the so-called 'recognition vs. redistribution' debate, a central controversy on matters of social justice in the global era.<sup>20</sup>

Honneth's intervention in this debate can be construed as a systematic exploration of Mead's insight that recognition is an indispensable condition for personal and group self-realization.<sup>21</sup> Pace Fraser's dualistic model, according to which social rights claims are to be conceived as primarily economic claims (i.e. fundamentally as a redistribution issue), for Honneth, social rights claims are not confined to the material sphere of redistribution. Rather, distributive issues are to be subsumed within claims to recognition. Honneth designates this position as a 'normative' or 'moral-theoretical monism' of recognition (2003: 3, 157). It consists of a tripartite conception of justice, involving three spheres of recognition – love, law, and achievement – within which self-consciousness about the legitimacy of one's needs, the right to equal legal autonomy, and the possession of valuable talents is formed. From this perspective, questions of distribution can be evaluated via the principles of legal equality and social achievement insofar as distribution-as-recognition takes the form of calls for the 'application of social rights that guarantee every member of society a minimum of essential goods regardless of achievement' (2003: 152). Honneth's neo-Meadian argument is that the organization of economic life is already bound up with moral claims about rights and entitlements. Hence public provisions of welfare such as unemployment benefits, housing subsidies, pensions, and the like exist (also and fundamentally) as forms of recognition. Redistributive claims, as moral claims involving questions of justice or injustice, irredeemably have the character of recognition claims.

Honneth's original way of conceiving of rights claims as recognition claims has attracted a number of important criticisms over the years, from those suggesting the politics of recognition should be replaced by a 'politics of acknowledgement' (Markell,

2003: 38), to those concerned with its Eurocentric character, to those who accuse him of 'ethical sectarianism'.<sup>22</sup> From the point of view of the argument I develop in this article, however, I cannot simply enlarge this list of criticisms for there are positive contributions to be found in Honneth's work. The most obvious example is perhaps his willingness to avoid a foundationalist strategy. There are problems, however, with Honneth's proposals. The main problem is its relative sociological deficit. This flaw, I claim, is directly related to Honneth's limited and partial appropriation of Mead's legacy. Many would read this as a plea to increase the interpretive-hermeneutic orientation of Honneth's model, but the sociological deficit I have in mind is quite different. It refers to a relative lack of consideration of the institutional framework within which recognition claims are made, which in no way precludes sensitivity to the meanings agents attribute to their actions. One way to compensate for this sociological deficit involves exploring the full sociological potential of Mead's social pragmatism. Such a move, however, presupposes going beyond the symbolic interactionist reading that has dominated the reception of Mead's ideas for most of the twentieth century and to which Honneth, too, fell prey. Curiously enough, this involves looking beyond sociology and to the dominant trend in socio-legal studies in the United States today, the so-called 'legal consciousness' perspective.<sup>23</sup>

It is ironic that the most fruitful neo-Meadian empirical research programme on rights has been developed not in sociology but in law. Whereas the sociology of rights has been developed mostly around the post-war trio Marx/Weber/Durkheim, thus ignoring Mead's contributions, one of the earliest articulations of what would later be termed the 'constitutive theory of law and politics' (Ewick and Sarat, 2004: 439) is Murray Edelman's (1964) *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, in which Mead figures as a central intellectual source.<sup>24</sup> Edelman's ideas proved immensely influential. They exerted a significant influence on Stuart Scheingold, whose work differs from Edelman in its focus on rights, both as a myth and as a resource. Yet Scheingold shares with Edelman the neo-Meadian emphasis on the symbolic nature of politics. Consider, for instance, the opening sentence of Scheingold's landmark study *The Politics of Rights* (1974): 'This is a book about the law. The law is real, but it is also a figment of our imaginations' ([1974] 2007: 3). From this pragmatist insight that the reality of law is to be found as much in legal institutions as in social attitudes toward them, Scheingold develops a sophisticated critique of the idea, according to which legal rights are directly empowering – the so-called 'myth of rights'. Yet Scheingold resisted making the facile opposite argument, according to which if rights are a myth, then they are not worthy of social scientific analysis. Taking civil rights as a case in point, Scheingold argues that what is not available directly through rights may be available indirectly. The American belief in rights – i.e. the myth of rights – is itself available as a significant political resource, which can be deployed indirectly through the political process whenever legal channels are not available. In a significant parallel with Honneth's ethics of recognition, Scheingold writes: 'More concretely, I argued that indignation generated by television reports of "massive resistance" to the civil rights decisions of the US Supreme Court fueled a civil rights movement' ([1974] 2007: xix). Uniting these otherwise independent projects on rights as powerful symbolic political resources, from which concrete experiences of indignation can draw so as to criticize and transcend the existing social and political order, one finds a common source – Mead's conception of rights.

Edelman and Scheingold, however, were only among the first to explore Mead's approach to rights empirically. The legal consciousness or constitutive perspective (I use these terms interchangeably) which they inaugurated has meanwhile become the main alternative to instrumentalist views of law, itself differentiated among various strands.<sup>25</sup> A major contribution of the constitutive perspective, one that addresses the sociological deficit of proposals such as Honneth's, is its conception of legal institution. Joining the 'neo-institutionalist' wave that swept the social sciences in the 1980s and early 1990s,<sup>26</sup> the constitutive theory of law set itself the task of reformulating the traditional concept of legal institution. The result has been a radical expansion of what counts as law, or legal. A good illustration of this expanded conception of legal institutions is the work by Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey on patterns of legal consciousness (Ewick and Silbey, 1998). Legal consciousness is participation in the process of constructing 'legality', the wide range of 'meanings, sources of authority, and cultural practices that are commonly recognized as legal, regardless of who employs them or for what ends' (p. 22), and that operates both as an interpretive framework and a set of resources. As such, legal consciousness 'is produced and revealed in what people *do* as well as what they *say*' (p. 46). In their empirical work, Ewick and Silbey find three different forms of legal consciousness among their respondents, each invoking a particular set of cultural schemas and resources that enable individuals to position themselves vis-à-vis the law. Some individuals conceive of their relationships with the law as something *before* which they stand, *with* which they engage, and *against* which they struggle. A crucial component of all these different forms of legal consciousness is rights consciousness, i.e. the ways in which people act towards and think about rights. Rights emerge from this line of work as discursive resources with multiple and varying meanings, as well as institutional resources. They are defined as 'practices', a concept that captures cultural representations and brings in social relations.

This understanding of rights-as-practices shows not only the impact of the social theories of Giddens and Bourdieu and especially of William Sewell's version of practice theory upon the constitutive approach to law, but its limitations as well.<sup>27</sup> One major problem of this relationship refers to the issue of institutional origins, i.e. how to explain the historical emergence of the institution of rights. The main strength of social theories of practice lies in analyzing the reproduction of existing structures or institutions, in which they constitute an obvious advance vis-à-vis approaches such as Honneth's. Yet if one is interested in studying the origins or causes of institutional arrangements, practice theory is more limited than alternative approaches such as functionalism or rational choice theory, despite their own well-known limitations.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, such alternatives rest upon incompatible 'theoretical presuppositions' from those upon which the (constructionist, interpretive) legal consciousness studies are founded, which renders them hopelessly inadequate. The alternative envisaged here, which destabilizes and moves beyond conventional understandings of the history of sociology of law,<sup>29</sup> is to look for the theoretical solution to this problem in the history of the legal consciousness perspective. Among the various fruits of this sort of historical exercise, the social pragmatism of G.H. Mead seems to be the most promising. Mead's social evolutionary orientation to the issues of emergence, creativity, and novelty goes hand-in-hand with its hermeneutic sensitivity. Mead, however, cannot 'do our thinking for ourselves' (Skinner, 1969: 52),

in the sense of providing us with a social theory of rights relevant to our time and circumstances. That is what I propose to do next.

## How to study rights: a neo-pragmatist proposal

By definition, a neo-Meadian theory of rights is not Mead's theory but a latter-day exercise. There are two reasons why this exercise in theory construction is justified. The first is that Mead did not himself formulate a consistent 'theory of rights' as such.<sup>30</sup> The second reason is that, even if this is the case, Mead's work nonetheless contains the necessary conceptual elements to formulate such a theory. An initial indication that this is true has already been provided in the last section, in the form of several productive encounters with Mead. Now I go a step further and show how I believe a neo-pragmatist theory, particularly a neo-Meadian one, can help sociologists study the origins, consequences, meaning, and denial of rights.

This exercise in theory building is founded upon a historical reconstruction of Mead's thinking that questions the conventional symbolic interactionist interpretation to suggest that his contributions extend well beyond his social theory of the self. In particular, it is suggested that Mead's social psychological writings are but one of the three pillars that form his intellectual edifice, alongside epistemology and democratic politics. As a result, criticisms of Mead accusing him of not addressing systematically the processes of 'material reproduction of societies' (as opposed to the 'symbolic reproduction of societies'), which include processes of warfare, economic development, or state building, are shown to miss the mark.<sup>31</sup> The case of rights is exemplary. Mead's seminal contribution to the study of rights consists not merely in emphasizing the symbolic dimension of politics (as Edelman and his followers have long noticed), but in undercutting the very 'idealism versus materialism' dichotomy. Mead has called our attention time and again to the fact that a considerable part of the material power of institutions such as rights resides in their symbolic character. From a pragmatist viewpoint, one needs to appreciate not only the constraining and reproductive effects of institutions over human agency but also their distinctively enabling qualities.<sup>32</sup> To better explore this particular Meadian contribution to the study of rights, however, one needs to supplement his theory of meaning and symbolization with a more nuanced appreciation of the generative character of fictions.

Fictions tend to be looked at with discomfort by sociologists, a discomfort that in the case of rights can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham's liberal utilitarian scepticism as well as to the materialism of Karl Marx. One way of overcoming this discomfort involves turning to Thomas Hobbes's fictional theory of the state.<sup>33</sup> Recent research suggests that Hobbes has a far more transversal understanding of the nature and implications of representation than was previously thought.<sup>34</sup> For Hobbes, representation is a multi-valent phenomenon that expresses itself in different ways in different domains of action, without losing its distinctive inner logic and properties. Political representation, from this perspective, emerges as the political-judicial expression of a more general phenomenon with ramifications for the realms of theatre and theology.<sup>35</sup> The state, from this perspective, is a legal fiction with no existence except through its being represented. Its origins lie in a metaphorical covenant of representation. The 'Leviathan is at once the

cause and the effect of its foundation: it must be first imag(in)ed, so that it is brought into being' (Vieira, 2008: 177).

There is a striking contrast between this conception of the state as a fiction and Bourdieu's influential sociology of the state. For Bourdieu, some three centuries ago, a specific group of social agents that he designates the 'state nobility',<sup>36</sup>

were led to produce a discourse of state which, by providing justifications for their own positions, constituted the state – this *fictio juris* which slowly stopped being a mere fiction of jurists to become an autonomous order capable of imposing ever more widely the submission to its functions and its functioning and the recognition of its principles. (1994: 16)

For Bourdieu, then, as for most sociologists,<sup>37</sup> the state first emerges as a legal fiction only to gain effective existence as an autonomous, non-fictional order. For Hobbes, at least in the Vieira–Skinner reading, the state not only emerges as a fiction but can only subsist over time as 'the Greatest of humane Powers'. These different understandings have important implications for empirical research. According to Bourdieu, research is to be conducted on the constraints of the state over social agents to the level of the most profound corporeal dispositions, both at the phylogenetic and ontogenetic level (1994: 13–14).<sup>38</sup> By superseding the dichotomy separating processes of 'symbolic versus material' social reproduction, the fictional theory of the state, very much like pragmatism, suggests that research should adopt an integrated view of both the reproductive and constraining effects as well as the enabling qualities of fictions. It is not that the state, the law, and rights should be studied *despite* being fictions, as if they are real; rather, they are real *because* they are fictions, and they should matter for sociologists exactly because it is only by acknowledging their fictive character that one can hope to grasp their actual power.

The fictive, mythical character of rights assumes particular importance when one wishes to address their origins. Current dominant approaches to rights formation explore the motivational impact of interests,<sup>39</sup> the effect of structural factors,<sup>40</sup> and the causal power of the moral qualities of rights.<sup>41</sup> I see all these considerations as integral to a social scientific inquiry into the origins of rights provided they are re-conceived from the point of view of their constraining, reproductive, and enabling impact on human action. More than estimates of the impact of these external forces acting on the back of agents, sociology should provide explanations of how and why actors are able to make legitimate claims to rights they do not yet possess. Imagining rights-to-be is a collective socio-legal practice of world-making (rights-bearing individuals are never a *datum*, always a *constructum*), a process that is only reinforced when these are institutionalized. Rights institutionalization is of central importance to a neo-pragmatist analysis of rights as the idea or belief in human rights is radically expanded when codified. As social objects, rights gain added meaning when translated into printing. Hence the singularly powerful symbolism for political communities that written documents such as the Universal Declarations of Rights, Bills of Rights, and national constitutions command.<sup>42</sup> The identification of the mechanisms through which rights were institutionalized and the strategies mobilized by actors with that end in view are best reconstituted through legal or constitutional ethnographies (Scheppele, 2004).

Constitutional ethnographies, as legal consciousness studies have shown, are as important to the study of rights institutionalization as is the analysis of ways in which rights constitute individuals into right-bearing citizens. Yet there are no good reasons why the analysis of the consequences of rights institutionalization, a process closely associated with state-building, is to be limited to informal settings. On the contrary, from a neo-pragmatist perspective, rights are to be studied both as figments of people's imaginations outside formal arenas such as courts and legislatures, as well as inside them.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, legal ethnographies such as Silbey and Ewick's aforementioned study of NJ residents' forms of legal consciousness can be supplemented by deliberative focus groups, and even by national and cross-national surveys. What all these methodologies need to share is a common orientation towards the reconstruction of the processes through which rights constrain and/or empower individual citizens and social groups.

These are also the processes within which the meaning of rights is formed. From a neo-pragmatist perspective, this is a key question that the nascent sociology of rights needs to address. By conceiving the meaning of rights as intrinsically contested and socially constituted (as opposed to fixed and stable), I see the sociological study of its origins and effects as an inquiry into collective mobilization. In particular, it should focus on the legal and non-legal spaces in which the meaning of rights is produced and fought over, the strategies and resources employed by actors in these meaning-making practices, as well as the constraining and enabling effects exerted by institutions and structural conditions. In this regard the most obvious predecessor is the legal consciousness literature. The examination of the ways in which feminism, civil rights, and pay equity activists have made use of legal indeterminacy 'to construct expansively egalitarian readings of rights' is particularly consonant with the kind of approach advocated here (Scheingold [1974] 2007: xxviii).

Yet as political actors are able to (partly) constitute the rights they enjoy, they are also always faced with the possibility of being deprived of them. Far from being a progressive expansionary tale, the history of human rights is as much a history of creation and implementation as it is a history of retrenchment and denial. From a neo-pragmatist point of view, sociologists should focus more on how the relational and reflexive character of rights is affected by political processes of rights retrenchment and, especially, rights violations as these entail profound consequences for citizen identity. A similar point, of course, has already been made by Honneth, who suggests that the 'denial of rights' can be conceived of as a type of 'social pathology' amenable to empirical analysis through 'group discussions' and 'deep interviews', on the premise that these have a 'consciousness-raising effect' (interviewed in Petersen and Willig, 2002: 268–9). Perhaps even more interesting is the growing literature on cultural trauma (see e.g. Alexander et al., 2004), whose strong constructivist bent is very much in line with neo-Meadian sociology.

## Conclusion

There are three main contributions I wish to make in this article. The first contribution is to place G.H. Mead among the precursors of the modern-day sociology of rights. This involved reconstructing Mead's (admittedly sketchy) approach to rights as a coherent social theory of rights. This was only possible due to the combination of a historical



reconstruction of Mead's thinking, in which several aspects of his work were brought together to build a systematic account of rights, and theory-building. This second task involved a critical review of the appropriations of Mead's work on rights, including socio-legal studies. The article's second major contribution has been to shed more light on this little known historical episode of intellectual diffusion. The third, more general, contribution of the article has been to show how productive an encounter between American philosophical pragmatism and contemporary social sciences can be. In particular, I have tried to show the extent to which sociological empirical research on the origins, meaning, implementation and denial of rights can benefit from a neo-Meadian approach.

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## Notes

1. See, e.g. Engel and Munger (2003). This post-liberal approach treats rights not as empirical entities that are found in presocial nature, but as political and social creations with the causal powers to constitute personhood and identity.
2. For example, Turner (1993). Exceptions include, e.g. Somers and Roberts (2008).
3. Even among scholars of constitutional law, there is a growing tendency to equate both kinds of rights protection regimes. See, e.g. Tushnet (1992).
4. Contemporary examples of sociology of rights include Sjoberg, Gill and Williams (2001), Woodiwiss (2005), Turner (1993, 2006).
5. Examples abound: Scheppele (1994: 384); Connell (1995: 26); Somers and Roberts (2008: 396–7).
6. A similar point has been made by Joas ([1997] 2000, 2005).
7. I am not alone in making this choice. Gary A. Cook, for instance, uses this same designation to refer to Mead's approach (1993: 161 ff.).
8. Primary sources on Mead's theory of meaning include several journal articles (2011: 15–20, 47–52, 53–7; see also Mead, 1910). Secondary sources include, e.g. Joas ([1980] 1985: 98–106), Cook (1993: 48–66), and Silva (2007: 28–42).
9. Symbolic interactionists have long explored the macro-sociological implications of Mead's approach. The intersection of these meanings, expressed through the negotiation of lines of action, is what constitutes a community (e.g. Blumer, 1969).
10. Primary sources on Mead's theory of rights include (2011: 221–32; 264–79; 310–23). Secondary sources include, e.g. Betz (1974); Singer (1999: 128–41), and Silva (2008: 193–8).
11. See Singer (1999: 27).
12. As exemplars of social theories of practice, see, e.g. Bourdieu ([1980] 1990), and Sewell (1992).
13. Mead discussed Rousseau's concept of 'general will' on various occasions, both in journal articles and in lecture notes. See, e.g. Mead (1936: 13; 2011: 225).

The political theorist Iris Marion Young expressed this same idea when she wrote: 'Rights are relationships, not things; ... Rights refer to doing more than having; to social relationships that enable or constrain action' (1990: 25).



14. This insight is the starting point of the so-called 'political' (as opposed to 'legal') approaches to rights and constitutionalism in political theory. See e.g. Pettit (1997), and especially Bellamy (2007: 16).
15. On the potential for social criticism of American philosophical pragmatism, see e.g. Habermas ([1981] 1986).
16. See e.g. Dunn (1997).
17. See e.g. Joas ([1992] 1996).
18. See Shalin (1992).
19. See e.g. Fraser (1997). On the debate between Fraser and Honneth, see Fraser and Honneth (2003).
20. In rigour, Honneth's research project begins with the historical work on the workers movement by E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore. See Honneth (1995: 166–7; 2003: 131).
21. For a criticism of its 'ethical sectarianism', see Fraser (2003: 228).
22. Exemplars include Merry (1990), Sarat (1990). A different yet related perspective is the constitutive theory of law: see e.g. Thompson (1978), Habermas ([1992] 1996). Another related strand of literature studies rights as political resources for progressive social mobilization. In this case, see e.g. Silverstein (1996).
23. See Edelman (1964: 26, 34–5, 49–51; see also 1971: 53–7; 1988: 96–7).
24. See Brigham (1996). On legal consciousness research conducted by sociologists, see e.g. Larson (2004).
25. See e.g. DiMaggio and Powell (1991).
26. On Sewell's influence, see Ewick and Silbey (1998: 40 ff).
27. See Pierson (2000). For a critique of the difficulties of providing causal accounts of social institutions associated with practice theory, see Chapter 2 of Turner (1994).
28. See e.g. Deflem (2008: 132–5).
29. That is why in this article I talk not of Mead's 'theory of rights', but of Mead's 'approach to rights'. For a similar understanding, see Cook (1993: 209).
30. See, e.g. Silva (2008). For a criticism of Mead as an 'idealist', see the second volume of Habermas ([1981] 1986).
31. See Silva (2007: 62–3); Konings (2010: 64).
32. On Hobbes's fictional theory of the state, see, e.g. Vieira (2008) and Skinner (2010).
33. See e.g. Pitkin (1967).
34. As stated by Vieira (2008: 146).
35. See Bourdieu ([1989] 1998: 371–89).
36. See Abrams (1988).
37. On the law's power to create new social groups, identities, and subjectivity, see Bourdieu ([1986] 1987: 838).
38. On the law's power to create new social groups, identities, and subjectivity, see Bourdieu ([1986] 1987: 838).
39. See Tilly (1998: 56).
40. For example, poverty and unemployment; ethnic, religious or linguistic cleavages; and political regime types.
41. See McCann (2006: 30). See also Turner (2006).
42. On the importance of the written word in modern conditions, see Luhmann (1992). On the symbolic power of constitutions, see Wolin (1989).

43. See also Latour ([2002] 2010).

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## Author biography

**Filipe Carreira da Silva** is Research Assistant Professor at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, and Temporary Lecturer in Sociology, Cambridge (2012/2013). His current research interests revolve around sociological theory and citizenship studies. His areas of interest include social theory, intellectual history, modern welfare states, comparative historical sociology, and social revolutions. His current work revolves around a neo-pragmatist social theory of rights with reference to the Portuguese experience of social rights constitutionalization in the 1970s. He has written several articles and books on classical and contemporary sociological theories, including *G.H. Mead: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, 2007) and *Mead and Modernity: Science, Selfhood, and Democratic Politics* (Lexington, 2008).