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The Past in the Present. Lessons on Semiotics of History from George H. Mead and Boris A. Uspensky

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This article examines the parallels between George H. Mead's theory of time and Boris A. Uspensky's semiotics of history, looking for implications relevant to the symbolic interactionist theory of historical processes. It suggests that Mead's theory of time and theory of communication hold important implications for semiotic analysis of the historical dimension of sociocultural phenomena. A further aim is to link the symbolic interactionist tradition of the Chicago school with the Tartu school and its semiotics of history. This would fuel the further development of both theoretical orientations.

Keywords: George H. Mead, Boris A. Uspensky, history, semiotics, symbolic interaction, time

INTRODUCTION: SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN THE FACE OF HISTORY

Instead of the once-controversial question whether symbolic interactionism needs semiotics (Denzin 1987; MacCannell 1976), scholars now ask which semiotic approach is most suitable for symbolic interactionism (Manning 2003:1033). Linking semiotics only with linguistic structuralism is, namely, a thing of the past; and symbolic interactionists, once forced to reflect on what the “symbolic” component of symbolic interactionism means (Davis 1982), have found the roots of their orientation in the semiotics postulated by Charles S. Peirce, present in the works of George H. Mead and developed by Charles W. Morris, as well as by Thomas Sebeok later on (Manning 2003:1028). The new semiotic consciousness of interactionists is a positive result of the debate which has continued over the last 30 years and in which, among other scholars, Denzin (1987), Perinbanayagam (1985); Manning (1985) and Wiley (2005) have played significant roles. Another, and perhaps even

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more striking, change in the orientation of symbolic interactionism is the importance now attached to issues of time and temporality. In newer interpretations of Mead's heritage, these questions are now frequently being treated as crucial (Maines 2001:37; Flaherty and Fine 2001). Both temporality and memory find reflection in the rapidly growing number of important interactionist works; however, it seems that in symbolic interactionism, the historical dimension of sociocultural phenomena still appears only incidentally (Perinbanayagam 1985:138; Maines 2001:32–33). I do not refer here to historical analysis (Tilly 2001:570) of interactions and their results, for there is a plethora of symbolic interactionists's works which study the past of various phenomena or their changes in time. The question pertains to the construction of historical reality, its symbolic order, its continuity and discontinuity, the embeddedness of interaction in a historical context, and the creation of this context through interactions. In the chapter entitled "Membership and History" in Anselm Strauss's remarkable book the author gives a hint in this direction (Strauss 2008:150–78). Embedding actions in past, present, and imagined future interactions, the meanings and symbols generated by those interactions (Strauss 1993:24ff, 151ff) and the historicity of a self-linked with some history of relations and groups (Perinbanayagam 1985:148) can be found in the works of symbolic interactionists; research on collective memory conducted from this perspective has livened up significantly (Schwartz 1991; Zerubavel 1996, 2003); however, research on history scarcely figures among the interests of symbolic interactionism.

In this article, I argue that symbolic interactionism can include analyzing the processes of making history (Giddens 1984:199). To this end, I compare premises of semiotics of history put forth by Boris A. Uspensky, co-creator of the Tartu school, with Mead's theory of temporality. Simultaneously, I show that cultural semiotics pursued by the Tartu school came close to the pragmatic perspective, and thus also to symbolic interactionism. The conceptions of Mead, a scholar associated with the Chicago school, and those of Uspensky from the Tartu school are separated by over half a century and thousands of miles; nevertheless, they are also linked by hidden common sources of inspiration and currents of influence. However, the search for those common roots is not my intention here.¹ At the beginning, without attempting to access the views of the "true Mead" (Fine and Kleinman 1986) or referring to existing sociological interpretations of this pragmatist's conceptions, I will focus on his non-linear conception of time. In Uspensky's concepts, on the other hand, I intend to emphasize those trains of thought which come close to Mead's perspective; however, the model of semiotics of history will simultaneously inspire searching Mead's theory for resources which may be used to build a symbolic interactionist conception of the historical process. My sketch, at once analytical and reconstructive, is essentially heuristic, paving the road for further explorations in this direction.

Symbolic interactionism has many sources, but in the established perception it originates primarily from the sociological implications of Mead's thought (Blumer 1969:61–77). I will describe a possibility of developing this theory in a new direction, through the use of Mead's theory of temporality, to which insufficient attention has

been paid by social scientists (Flaherty and Fine 2001). This state of things has been changing rapidly, due to an increased interest in studies on time and particularly on collective memory, where Mead's approach proves inspiring (Adam 1994). Linking the significance of time with communicative action makes it possible to overcome limitations associated with the heritage of Durkheimian tradition, which excessively emphasized the collective nature of memory, its legitimizing and normative functions (Miztal 2005:32), marginalizing the reflexive self, capable of symbolization, and its agency (Flaherty 2011).

The theory of symbolic interactionism is not limited to questions of microsociology and social psychology, as it assumes that symbolic interactions are the basis for collective actions. Although a belief in the possibility of macrointeractionist analyses (Joas 1992:47–60) is spreading, and social scientists have abandoned the misconception that this theory fails to include structural factors which affect the course of interactions, one can hardly deny that it insufficiently articulates the historicity of social processes.² This is true despite the fact that symbolic interactionism has helped shape an interesting theory of collective actions and social movements, leading to problems of social change, which always infuse sociology with some issues from the field of history. Conceptualization of collective actions and social movements presupposes their emergence in communicative processes of interaction, the most crucial aspect of which is symbolization. The focus is on framing processes, in which events, individuals, collectivities, artifacts, and all elements of the environment gain meaning as objects of cognitive orientation and emotional reactions. In other words, the objects and goals of actions are defined, constructed as significant, and actions aimed at them are legitimized (Snow and Davis 1995:196–97).

Herbert Blumer, who coined the term “symbolic interactionism” and established the most characteristic variant of this theoretical perspective, worked on interpreting that part of Mead's legacy in which the latter pushed sociology and social psychology in a new direction by studying the communicative foundations of the self and society. Significantly, when presenting the sociological implications of Mead's theory, Blumer mentions categories, such as self, action, social interaction, object and joint action, whereas temporality isn't emphasized. However, when summarizing his interpretation of Mead's concepts, Blumer does broach the subject of temporality—in other words, he suggests the significance of time and history for studies on symbolic interactions. He notes that: “Social action, since it has a career, is recognized as having a historical dimension which has to be taken into account in order to be adequately understood” (Blumer 1969:77). Consequently, the symbolic interactionist character of the historical process itself appears as the subject matter. While the micro perspective of individuals, who interact here and now, may seem hardly relevant from the historical perspective, unless it is micro history, collective action presupposes a definition of the situation which must encompass the broader historical context and its influence on the interactional process. Symbolic interactionism has often been criticized for excessive situationism in its analysis; however, the concept of situation and its definitions can also be applied to phenomena of

longer duration (Lofland 1976:26n). Apparently it would prove useful to profoundly reconsider the implications of Mead's thought on time and temporality for the elaboration of the historical dimension in symbolic interactionism in terms of the constitution of historical processes—the sociological implications that Blumer did not entirely disregard, but neither did he develop them further.

RECONSIDERING IMPLICATIONS OF MEAD'S IDEAS FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORY

Owing to some symbolic interactionists and researchers of pragmatism, Mead's theory of time ceased to be obscure and limited to philosophical discourse.³ I will only present those elements which seem interesting for researchers of sociocultural phenomena. Commentators note that Mead's theory of time is unclear (Joas 1985:167). However, some actually claim that it is the issues of temporality which constitute a leitmotif throughout all of Mead's works (Flaherty and Fine 2001; Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983; Maines 2001:51). Nonetheless, no one as yet has performed a reconstruction of Mead's theory in which all the elements of that theory, including the conceptions of the conversation of significant gestures, of meaning, of time and of temporality would be linked together in a coherent manner. Such a task is beyond the scope of this essay; however, some initial steps will be taken in this direction, in order to show the possibility of a symbolic interactionist theory of history. To this end, I will focus on the essay *The Nature of the Past*, published during Mead's lifetime and containing his essential ideas regarding time.⁴ In his posthumously published work *The Philosophy of the Present* (Mead 1932), this basis for Mead's reflections remains unchanged. It is primarily the assumption that: "The actual passage of reality is in the passage of one present into another, where alone is reality, and a present which has merged in another is not a past. Its reality is always that of a present" (Mead 1964:345). Thus, of special prominence is Mead's concept of the extended present—the specious present (Maines 2001:37; Mead 1964:346; Joas 1985:172). Mead's theory of time is based on the philosophy of the present, which forms an integral part of the philosophy of action. The present is not a point in time, nor a moment. The present consists in action—it is an emergent event (Reck 1964:XLVII). The distinctive feature of the present is its constant emergence and fading⁵—continuity and newness at once, which is a feature of reality in general and of sociocultural reality in particular. A linear metaphor of temporality may indicate the direction of time's flow, from the past to the present. Mead, however, questioned the obviousness of such a view, stating that the past has its roots in the present. This paradox of expanding the past from the present led Mead to investigate the nature of the past (Reck 1964:XLVII).

The past is never subject to pure invention, although it may be creatively shaped or mythologized. According to Mead, the past must have existed before it appeared in the present experience as something past (Mead 1964:348). However, Mead rejects the concept of a past fully separated from experience and action in the present. The

past cannot be compared to a scroll inscribed with the meanings of past presents. Not only the participants in historical processes, but also historians themselves never find such a ready past—they are constantly forced to reconstruct it on the basis of traces, records, evidence collected in the present. Significantly, the past also exists in the present, influencing, but not determining it, issuing a challenge in the form of a drive toward objective historical cognition (Joas 1985:180).

Another aspect of the past's existence in the present is its images in memory (Mead 1964:349). The past understood thus is a meaning of that which has seeped into the present. It is a past, the meaning of which is incessantly being sought. In other words, the past does not consist of past events, but of their meanings—the meaning of the past in the present.

The past as it appears is in terms of representations of various sorts, typically in memory images, which are themselves present. It is not true that what has passed is in the past, for the early stages of a motion lying within a specious present are not past. They belong to something that is going on. The distinction between the present and the past evidently involves more than passage. An essential condition is its inclusion in some present in this representational form. (Mead 1964:345–46)

The meaning of the past may change along with the emerging new present. Thus, although the past is real in its influence on the present, it remains merely hypothetical (Reck 1964:XLIX).

The emerging event and endowing it with meaning—the true process of semiosis—play a central role in this theory of time. An event possesses new traits, which cannot be derived from the preceding presents, since reality consists in passing from one present into another; moreover, the new present is not determined by the past. An emergent event depends on the past only in the sense of understanding the past—its selected meaning (Mead 1964:351). Emergence characteristic for events in the time process has been scrutinized by scholars in the context of the problem of causation and indeterminacy—both dealt with by Mead (Mead 1964:346). The semiotic dimension of this pragmatic concept still requires unveiling, including the meanings of time and their symbolic objectivizations.

The thesis stating that reality is always the present situated Mead's notion in opposition to theories in which the past is objective, precedes the present, and remains in a determining causal relationship with that present. The past is constituted in memory and only as long as images of the past exist; those images create a constantly shifting boundary of the present, which can move closer or further back. The future, on the other hand, exists in a hypothetical way, which consists in anticipation of events. Thus, the boundaries of the present which demarcate the past and the future are relative, and—no matter how distant the events which serve as points of reference for the past and the future—the boundaries themselves always belong to the present. This is the conception of the specious present, the boundaries of which are constantly being defined by memory and anticipation in action.

The notion of the specious present has been borrowed from William James, but—unlike the latter—Mead understood it not psychologically, but in terms of

an action—performance. Importantly, the present consists in an act of pointing out—with a significant gesture or symbol—the meaningful present character of things distant for the agent (Mead 1938:220; after Maines 2001:41). Mead reveals time in the process of social communication, which is a process of symbolic interaction; for this reason, the present has a social and symbolic character—it relies on processes of reflection and giving directions to each other by actors endowed with a self. The present manifests itself only through the use of significant symbols and significant gestures. It is experienced by individuals in a certain situation of action; thus, it is also a social temporality and the past appears on this background. On the other hand, Mead tackles the past in reference to the question of the continuity and discontinuity of the present, because reconstruction of the past enables continuity of the present.

Scholars who have analyzed this theory, while striving to discover sociological implications which are but faintly visible in the philosophical discourse about Mead's conception, have pointed out the complexity shown by the conception of the past. Various dimensions have been identified (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983; Maines 2001:43–47): symbolically reconstructed past, social-structural past, objective past, and mythologized past.⁶

Symbolic reconstruction of the past⁷ presupposes redefining the meaning of past events to endow them with meaning in the present and for the present, in the context of collective actions.⁸ Such reconstruction is necessary, since ceaselessly emerging new events create a need for constant reconstruction of the past, to facilitate interpretation of the new happenings, and thus make it possible to maintain continuity of understanding in regard to the present and sustain the orientation of action towards some purposes. The interplay of the past with the future in the present is a continuous process, crucial in history.

Another dimension reveals the social structural past, since change does not consist only in reconstructing the past. The focus here is on consequences of the past which form the context of present experience for future-oriented action, because the past establishes the structure of possible events. In other words, this operation of time refers to events from the past that structure present events. In the interpretation of David R. Maines, social structural past is the basis for the analysis of social order (Maines 2001:51–54).

The third dimension is the presupposed objective past. This is highly significant because Mead's standpoint differs from extreme constructionism, as Mead claims that for events to become recognized in the present as the past, they must take place earlier. The very fact that past events are inscribed in the present by memory implies their objective existence in the past, although they are available now only in memory.

Mead also proposed the concept of mythologized past—memory of the past which is created, not reproduced, and founded in an objective past. However, such temporal fictions have real consequences in the present, in social relations, especially in relations of power. Yet mythical memory can also prove useful when it enables explanation of practices or beliefs which help solve problems (Maines, Sugrue, and

Katovich 1983:164; Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1988:132). The mythologized past has attracted the attention of postmodern scholars, but its semiotic aspects can be traced back to Mead's theory.

In his philosophy of time, Mead tried to reconcile the principle of emergence with the principle of causality in regard to events which bring something new into the process of the becoming of reality. A new event breaks the continuity of the sociocultural process, but being induced by the past, it is part of that process, thus sustaining its continuity (Mead 1964:353–54; Reck 1964:XLX–XLL). The emerging event does not simply result from preceding events, yet in a way it is determined by the past. The relation with the past, which determines the event, is established in the present; thus the emergent event cannot become reduced to preceding events. For Mead, the present is a meaningful collective experience, associated with the processes of human interactions and collective actions. The present, the past, and the future belong to human experience in situations of action—hence their multiplicity. Multiple presents accumulate, serving as the basis for continuity of social institutions (Maines 2001:51). “The character of the past is that it connects what is unconnected in the merging of one present into another” (Mead 1964:351).

Continuity and diversity of the experience of time are associated with meaningful actions, which are not possible without the temporal span of the past and the future. The past makes it possible to link events. As Mead wrote,

The conclusion is that there is no history of presents that merge into each other with their emergent novelties. The past which we construct from the standpoint of the new problem of today is based upon continuities which we discover in that which has arisen, and it serves us until the rising novelty of tomorrow necessitates a new history which interprets the new future. [...] Within our narrow presents our histories give us the elbowroom to cope with the ever-changing stream of reality (Mead 1964:353).

Mead did not explicitly associate reflections about time, the past and history with his analyses of self, action, communication, and meaning. Assuming substantial continuity of ideas, one may ask how his concepts of conversation of significant gestures and significant symbols, could be of any relevance for the analysis of the temporality of sociocultural phenomena. And indeed, as I claim here, Mead provides a conceptual resource for theoretical elaboration of the historical constitution of sociocultural phenomena. This thesis will be developed further in this essay, in order to highlight the convergence of semiotics stemming from different sources—pragmatist and structuralist—and, consequently, also the affinity of symbolic interactionism and cultural semiotics.

The human experience of time and history – to which Mead refers only in general terms in his lecture on the nature of time – can be grasped in the categories which he developed to deal with relationships between mind, self and society, starting with the conversation of significant gestures as an elementary “semiotic mechanism” of social consciousness. For Mead, consciousness manifests itself in the anticipation

and reciprocal adjustment of actions within the social process taking place among human beings as the communicative process (Mead 1967:75).

Human experience of temporality and making history can thus be understood in terms of communicative action and symbolic interaction—in other words, conversation of gestures and symbols, which produce meanings through adjusted actions. Agents who perform significant gestures are able to imagine the future actions which these gestures will evoke while pursuing the intended purpose (Mead 1967:72). Analogously to the reflexivity of individuals in such processes of communication, one needs to consider social reflexivity on the level of collective action. Moreover, Mead's concepts of the "significant other" and "generalized other" can be referred to action and communication on a collective level. It is suggested here that such extension of these concepts creates the possibility of analyzing agency in history, which extends beyond the limitations of idealistic, historical individualism and avoids materialistic, historical determinism.

For Mead, the significant gesture was a constituent of the social act. Its meaning is contained in the relationship between various phases of the social act, to which it refers and from which it develops. Mead's analyses, referring to pre-symbolic stages of gesture communication between individuals as biological organisms, and—further on—to significant symbols, may thus be applied to broader historical processes. Conversation by means of gestures and the reciprocal adjustment of actions of the participants in this process involve the creation of meaningful objects, to which these gestures are the responses.

Mead's formulation that there is no need to refer to subjective psychical states in order to investigate meaning, may also be applied to meaningful historical processes, and to making history. According to Mead, meaning is inscribed in the structure of the social act—in the three-sided union of gesture, response—also in the form of a gesture—and the social act which is their result: a communicative event. Although Mead in his investigations in the domain of social psychology, as known from *Mind, Self and Society*, took up the issue of significant gestures of individuals endowed with selves, the concept of significant gestures can also be extended to collective agents. During a conversation of gestures on the reflexive level, subjects participate in meaning and transmit meanings (Mead 1967:81). Participation in meaning consists in presenting that phase of action which one intends to induce in the other, thus making communication possible. The transmission of meaning consists in actually evoking this response, and if this does not occur, then—in Mead's opinion—communication failed to achieve meaning.

Just as in fencing the parry is an interpretation of the thrust, so, in the social act, the adjustive response of one organism to the gesture of another is the interpretation of that gesture by that organism – it is the meaning of that gesture' (Mead 1967:78).

The reflexivity – in the case of an individual this is self-consciousness – turns a gesture into a significant symbol, although the interpretation of gestures is not a purely cognitive process. The meaning can be described and explained using

language, but language extracts a situation from the social process – a situation which is already contained there, either logically or implicitly. (Mead 1967:79).

It is argued here that this view carries important implications for the analysis of historical processes which are founded on human collective actions. “Awareness or consciousness is not necessary to the presence of meaning in the process of social experience” (Mead 1967:77). Mead makes the pertinent observation that meaning exists in social acts before either consciousness or awareness of meanings appear. However, consciousness is essential if the gesture is to be meaningful, if it is to become a symbol in the process of semiosis. It is suggested that the distinction between the conversation of significant gestures and significant symbols in social actions may be applied to analysis of two aspects of historical processes as *res gestae* and as *historia rerum gestarum*—that is, the plane of performed action and the plane of narratives.

The above arguments clearly show that both Mead’s ideas on temporality and on communication are relevant for the semiotic analysis of historical processes. They emphasize the possibility of linking Mead’s concepts of conversation through gestures and symbols, presented in the context of social psychology, with his theory of the specious present in the context of his theory of temporality. Mead’s theory of reflexive social selves as interacting agents is a genuine semiotic theory (Wiley 2005), that is—a theory of semiosis founded on the elementary category of the significant gesture. This semiotic category can be applied to the study of historical processes as acts and that which has been performed. Significant symbols and the universe of discourse operate on the level of narration, which is the second notion of history. Premises of the semiotics of history have been formulated on the grounds of cultural semiotics by scholars from the Tartu school. Although this tradition of thought seems distant from American pragmatism and the Chicago school of sociology, one can indicate important affinities—indeed, considerable convergence—in the approach to symbolism and temporality. This convergence may encourage further development of the symbolic interactionist theory of historical processes.

EXAMINING THE SEMIOTIC MODEL OF HISTORY FROM A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

A semiotic model of historical processes was outlined in the frames of cultural semiotics, practiced by scholars associated with the Tartu school (Torop 1998). I will focus here on the most explicit formulation presented by Boris A. Uspensky, albeit on the background of the semiotic concept of culture, elaborated earlier together with Yuri Lotman (Lotman and Uspensky 1978). An analysis of Uspensky’s concepts shows that semiotics of history forms an integral part of cultural semiotics; in other words, it does not represent some radical “historical turn” in this semiotical research program, but rather its logical extension. The semiotic modeling of the world and programming of actions are inseparable in the communicative process, which is constitutive for culture. Thus, conceptually elaborating the temporal dimension of this process proves to be a consistent extension of the semiotic analysis of culture,

understood as the non-hereditary memory of the community (Lotman and Uspensky 1978:213). It certainly emphasizes the significance of cultural memory and opens a path to the semiotic study of history.

If such paramount importance is ascribed to cultural memory, this is because of the historical reality of culture, the temporal dynamics of its changes, difference and identity in time, as well as continuous renewal and becoming—all these phenomena depend on memory. The very birth of collective memory and the spread of this non-hereditary inscribing of experience in time made humanity's entrance into history possible (Lotman and Uspensky 1978:226). Thus, in this semiotic depiction, the processes of memory and processes of history remain tightly intertwined, with the former affecting the latter and vice versa. Memory turns out to be the result of the functioning of a semiotic device, or—to quote the authors—a “semiotic mechanism” of culture. The latter term may be misleading, since a strong characteristic of culture is the propensity to overcome all automatisms, all mechanicality—and this trait is strongly emphasized in cultural semiotics. It stems from the character of communicative processes taking place between senders and receivers who reflexively update the code of communication (Lotman and Uspensky 1978:228). The term “mechanism,” however, reflects the regular, structured and constructed features of culture.

If—unlike nature—culture as that which is generated, based on convention and the cumulation of experience, is in fact directed against forgetting (Lotman and Uspensky 1978:216), then its semiotic principles also regulate the functioning of memory. Culture understood as memory becomes defined as a system of signs, articulated in the expression plane (signifying) and the content plane (signified), that is, as a modeling system—as a collection of texts or else a system of rules which determine the production of texts. Generally speaking, culture as memory is a semiotic system. Thus, it turns out that cultural semiotics, conceived from the beginning as the semiotics of memory, was also the path that led to semiotics of history.

As this essay focuses on the general outlines of the semiotics of memory and history, which came into being in the tradition of the Tartu school, and the inspiration that this semiotics may provide to symbolic interactionists, helping them extend the reconstruction of the Chicago school's heritage in the direction of memory and history, I must strongly stress one point. While cultural semiotics lays great emphasis on the structuralizing characteristics of culture (Lotman and Uspensky 1978:213), beginning with such a function of the natural language, this theory does not separate structures from the sociocultural context of communication and the agents participating in this communication. Agency—individual as well as collective—through acts of communication is a contributive factor in cultural structuration, which endows experience with meaning. In the case of the individual this also includes self-communication, which begins with dialogue—social in its nature. The affinity with Mead's premises and symbolic interactionists' views in this respect may be noticed here. But, unlike in symbolic interactionism, in this program it is the relative autonomy of culture as a semiotic system which makes

social life possible—not the other way round. The culture system facilitates the presupposition of communicability, intuition of structure and order; it also supplies models and programs of behavior (Lotman and Uspensky 1978:213). Here we come up against the tacit issues of the semiotic character of human behaviors or actions, the use of already existing signs or symbols, and the creation of new ones—issues of conceptual deficits evident in cultural semiotics. These problems have been tackled in pragmatist semiotics, as exemplified by Mead’s works, followed by symbolic interactionists.

When characterizing the basics of the semiotic approach to history, Uspensky mentions the “game of the present and the past” (Uspensky 1998:28), in which the past, seen from the perspective of today’s emergent events, determines the direction of the historical process. In the light of Mead’s concepts, it must be noted here that the formula of this “game of the present and the past” is too narrow, in respect also to the analysis which Uspensky in fact proposed. It is the semiotic analysis of social and cultural temporality, embracing the constructed future that also participates in the “game,” which endows the events taking place in the present with meaning regarding their imagined results.

To put it in more general terms, Uspensky presents history *sub specie semioticae* (Uspensky 1998:53) as a cultural process, consisting in communication, in which new information evokes a response of the social addressee (Uspensky 1998:53). This process always takes place in some cultural context, where acts of communication are founded in a certain code. This is a process in which meaning is ascribed to events, and in this way a text is created that is read by the social addressee. A semiotic model of history constructed in this fashion consists in linking two planes—of action or performance and of thought or interpretation. On one hand the focus is on performed events unfolding in time, on the other—on perception, or understanding of past occurrences. Reconstructing the past in the form of narrative, historical consciousness simultaneously shapes a code which makes it possible to ascribe meaning to new events, emerging in the present. This process, like the process of linguistic communication through language, neither presupposes a consensus nor guarantees it—the text of events may be variously interpreted (Uspensky 1998:53). A historical event is a communicative event, the meaning of which for the historical process stems from a reflexive reaction—the addressee’s answer.

Taking this into account, Uspensky’s semiotic model of history approaches the conversation model of social acts developed by Mead, but the latter has not applied his model to history. In the plane of events—activities and responses, or reactions—a historical process develops, to which one can apply the meaning of “history” carried by the expression *res gestae*. And “reading” the text of historical events is a *historia rerum gestarum*.⁹ As I argue here, there is common ground between the semiotics of the historical process, presented by Uspensky as the semiotics of *res gestae*, and Mead’s concept of conversation of significant gestures. I also claim that the similarity of these terms, derived from the Latin word *gestum*, is not coincidental.

A plane of history as historical events—the occurrence— and reading, or the plane of the text of past events—have been linked by Uspensky, so that a dual conception of history—*res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*—constitute one whole in this juncture. The communicative model of the historical process of *res gestae*—as Uspensky says—is semiotic in the sense that it has been constructed in an analogy to the process of communication in the natural language. The second model, in turn, refers to cognition, or the understanding of the past; in other words, it is semiotic insofar as it shows the phenomenon of semiosis in history, or the semiotization of reality, which consists in transforming certain events into relevant historical events. Thus, it consists in endowing them with a historical value, or recognizing them as historically significant. To put it differently, the focus is on constructing historical facts in the consciousness of the participants in the historical process; and those constructed facts do not remain fixed and unchanging.

It must be emphasized that semiotic analysis of the meaningful structuration of history, both as a historical process and as historical narration (consciousness), implies subjectivity. As Uspensky writes, the cultural-semiotic approach to history presupposes assuming the point of view of the participants (Uspensky 1998:21). Assumed here are both individuals as participants in sociocultural processes and communities or collective agents. Historical experience does not automatically accumulate in the historical process, but is a result of reflexive reconstruction of the past. Thus, the reflexive self is also implicitly embedded in Uspensky's model. The semiotic concept of the self was proposed by Mead, but also by Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), to whom referred scholars from the Tartu school of cultural semiotics (Uspensky 1998:139–140)¹⁰ who went in a similar direction. On the other hand, both semiotics of history, as events unfolding in time, and also semiotics of the reconstructed historical past can be approached from the perspective of Mead's theories of the present and of communication.

Uspensky admits that semiotics of history requires an analysis of semiosis, encompassing both the semiotics of language and the semiotics of the sign. Interestingly, he clearly pointed out the urge for integrating two semiotic traditions—the pragmatic one which traces its origins back to Charles S. Peirce and the structural one initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure. Uspensky speaks of two semiotic traditions, without noticing that it was Peirce who used the expression “semiotics,” whereas de Saussure preferred the term “semiology.” Uspensky interprets the semiotics of de Saussure as semiotics of communication, which may indicate the influence of that stage of structuralism that is reflected in the works of Roman Jakobson (Hałas 1985:152). Peirce's version is for him the logical semiotics of the sign. To build the semiotic model of history, he refers to the pragmatist semiotics of the sign as suitable to analyze the semiosis of history as a text (constructing meaningful historical facts) and associates linguistic semiotics with analyzing the historical process—events in time as acts of communication. This point is debatable, because precisely pragmatist semiotics (to which Mead's theory also belongs), in its quest to abolish the dualism of thinking and action, places semiosis within the act of communication. I will not

argue here with the problematic way in which Uspensky interprets the semiotics of pragmatism, which certainly never considered the sign by itself, in isolation—as he claims—in other words, separately from the process of communication. It is obvious that both Peirce and Mead associate semiosis with the act of communication, which for Uspensky forms the basis for a cultural-semiotic analysis of the historical processes. This somewhat perverted interpretation by Uspensky certainly doesn't mean that Uspensky's semiotic model of history shouldn't be viewed as a stimulus for a new application of Mead's pragmatist semiotics, quite the opposite in fact. In Mead's pragmatist semiotics, as I have attempted to show, we can find both the dramaturgy of historical reality that is played out in conversations of gestures and interactions, extended to collective agents, and a theory of temporality that allows an analysis of the discursive historical experience of the past.

The pragmatist and structural currents in semiotics are still being contrasted with each other. Uspensky's attempt to unite them in a model of semiotics of history represents a good example of the much-needed synthetic approach. As regards semiotics of the sign, apart from Peirce, Uspensky also invokes Charles W. Morris, who directly draws his concepts from Mead; this further strengthens my standpoint that the attempt to unite pragmatist and structuralist semiotics supports the thesis formulated in this essay that Mead's and Uspensky's theories are comparable. Furthermore, it strengthens the postulate to consider the implications of Mead's symbolic interactionist conception of the conversation of gestures for analysis of historical processes and to link them with his theory of time.

As stated earlier, "history" refers both to past events and to their narrative representation—also in the form of historical knowledge.¹¹ When constructing his model of semiotics of history, Uspensky takes up action and communication on one hand, and historical consciousness on the other. Thus, he concentrates—in terms of Mead's theory—on the specious present and on symbolic reconstruction of the past. The latter is an extremely important process, since it creates the language "in which history is read," and thus the frames for interpreting events in the present. In other words, the focus is on collective memory, the multiplicity, and conflicts of possible interpretations of past events. Without attempting to enter into details, it may be worthwhile to bring into further relief those elements of Uspensky's semiotic model of the historical communicative processes which appear to come close to some of Mead's concepts, and thus supply stimulus to ask for the pragmatic semiotics of history and for further encounters of symbolic interactionism with cultural semiotics.

Uspensky—as shown here—built a model of the semiotics of history on the basis of an analogy with the linguistic act or communication in a natural language. In the historical process—as in dialogue—the communicated text is interpreted by the addressee, and the meaning ascribed to this text generates a new text, communicated in the addressee's reflexive reaction. Significantly, the starting point of the addressee's reaction is his own interpretation of the text, not the message sender's intention (Uspensky 1998:22). This concept is similar to Mead's idea of gesture conversation, but Mead's theory presents pragmatics of communication in

more detail as action and acting as communicating, whereas interaction is portrayed as a communicative event which creates new meaning in the ongoing process of aligning actions.

Nevertheless, Uspensky's main formulation, already presented above, appears highly important. In his view, the model of the semiotics of history requires adopting the point of view shared by the participants in the historical process—that which they consider significant is considered to be of relevance. Uspensky speaks here of motives which constitute stimuli for action and determine the course of events. He writes about the suitability of an actionist perspective—the perspective of action. The symbolic interactionist feature of events is not explicitly stated—albeit this perspective is involved through a comparison with the acts of chess players during a game, and also with dialogue. As mentioned earlier, Uspensky thus implicitly assumes the concept of self, when he proposes applying the same categories to the semiotic analysis of the actions of individuals and communities, under the condition that the community is treated as a collective person (Uspensky 1998: 21). Mead's theory also introduces the idealization of the collective subject, or the “generalized other,” and Uspensky's model again encourages the examination of symbolic interactionism with respect to the study of historical processes.

Even if we assume the existence of objective regularities which determine the course of historical events, still—and this is a further similarity between Uspensky's views and Mead's premises—human actions do not directly or deterministically depend on those regularities, but rather on beliefs about events and the relationships between them. Thus, there is a need for reconstruction of belief systems that determine the reception of gestures and the reaction to them, described by Mead as the interactional process of role taking in order to apply cognitive rules of role taking to the analysis of making history. As Uspensky writes, in the semiotic perspective, the historical process can be presented as a process of communication, in which the constant influx of new information determines a particular reflexive reaction of the social addressee (the community) (Uspensky 1998:21).

Uspensky pertinently states that history by itself cannot teach us anything, since historical experience is not objectively given, but rather changes in time and exists, in fact, as a derivative of our reality (Uspensky 1998:28). Thus, Mead's standpoint may be recalled again—he concentrates on the present, which forms the point of view from which past events are considered, selected and endowed with a meaning. Historical experiences do not cumulate in time along with *res gestae* of events, but rather represent cause-effect relationships perceived from some current point of view. Historical experience—in other words, perception of the past—affects the future course of history, since—as Uspensky writes—the community as a “collective person” plans its further actions, constructing a program for the future.

Uspensky presents a model of the historical process as a sequence of successive movements from the present to the past and from such a past, reconstructed in the present, to the future, which then becomes the new present, from which the past is reinterpreted (Uspensky 1998:28). A criticism of this model comes to mind,

since it simplifies a more complex process, encompassing the specious present and the construction of the future. In fact, the historical process has two directions in the present—orientation toward the future with regard to the past. A corrective view in Uspensky's model is postulated, taking into consideration the fact that reconstructing the past in the present takes place from the point of view of the future constructed in action.

CONCLUSION

Every vital, developing theory is marked both by the ability to solve new problems and by a constant readiness to reexamine its initial conceptions and premises. Assuming that the nature of the historical process remains a challenge for social theories, I have attempted to present an answer to the question whether a theory of historical processes can be built on the grounds of symbolic interactionism. I argue that, to this end, implications of George H. Mead's conceptions should be reconsidered. These conceptions are among the foundational assumptions of symbolic interactionism. Although Mead's philosophy of time has been accessed by symbolic interactionism and utilized in research on collective memory, it hasn't stimulated a symbolic interactionist theory of historical processes.

I have presented an attempt to link Mead's conception of social action and communication with his theory of time and temporality. These two conceptions have not been associated with each other in a sufficient degree in the reception of Mead's scientific legacy, which, although original, is scattered and has largely gained appreciation only after his death. The semiotic dimension of this pragmatist's conceptions has been emphasized as a possible basis for a symbolic-interactional theory of historical processes.

Such a search for a new way of interpreting Mead's legacy has been provoked by the model of semiotics of history formulated by Uspensky, the creator of the Tartu school of semiotics of culture. On the other hand, analysis of Uspensky's conceptions has led to the interesting discovery of their significant convergences with the symbolic interactionist perspective and, in particular, with Mead's conceptions. Mead's and Uspensky's ideas are not merely similar, or even parallel, since their development began from different theoretical starting points—from pragmatism on the one hand, and from structural semiotics on the other. However, they are not antagonistic or mutually exclusive—on the contrary, as shown here; they can actually cross-fertilize each other.

A better synthesis of Mead's concepts of self, action, and communication with his ideas on time and temporality in semiotic terms has been postulated and attempted. As shown in this essay, the semiotic approach implied by the theory of conversation of gestures and significant symbols should be extended to encompass Mead's theory of time and temporality. The pragmatist semiotics of temporality may supply a further impulse for the development of symbolic interactionist research on historical processes, and making history—in the performative plane of events (*res gestae*) and

in the interpretive plane of narrative (*historia rerum gestarum*). Performing history and narrating history still await a better analysis in the framework of symbolic interactionist theory.

NOTES

1. On the Tartu school and cooperation with American scholars in shaping the semiotic approach, see Sebeok 1998.
2. The almost non-existent historical dimension in the theory of symbolic interactionism appears paradoxical insofar as one of the crucial assumptions in this theory concerns the processuality of social phenomena. This is largely a result of the influence of the formalizing approach, which came from Georg Simmel, whereas Robert E. Park served as a mediator (Rock 1979:44–58). In works chronicling the development of symbolic interactionism, the conceptions of Max Weber were thus pointed out among side sources in addition to the main current, derived from the Scottish moral philosophy and fueled by Mead's ideas; however, the typological approach of this classic was emphasized, as opposed to the historical approach (Stryker 1980:43).
3. For the references to the philosophical interpretations of Mead's concepts of time see (Maines 2001:39–43) and for the reconstruction of the epistemic context for Mead's idea of non-punctual time see (Joas 1985:171–72).
4. This essay, published in 1929 and dedicated to John Dewey, with certainty presents Mead's point of view; the same cannot be said about writings published after his death. See Maines 2001:39.
5. Here, a historian of thought will note the influence of William James, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, and Alfred N. Whitehead. However, comparisons of this sort are beyond the scope of this article.
6. Maines later repeated the analysis of the first three above-mentioned dimensions, focusing primarily on structural time and its implications for social order and its continued existence in time (Maines 2001).
7. In the opinion of certain authors, analysis of symbolic reconstruction of the past brings Mead's position close to the conception of phenomenologists. On the phenomenological interpretation of Mead's ideas see Natanson 1973.
8. Patrick Baert points out that the past in Mead's theory is the past in the present or the past for the present. See Baert 1992:86.
9. "History" is understood both as *res gestae* (in Latin, *gero, gessi, gestum*—do, manage, perform, carry, also wear; *personam alcis gero*—to play some role, *se gerere*—to act, to carry out; *res geste*—deeds), and as *historia rerum gestarum* (in Latin, *historia*—research, cognition; also description, tale, account, narration, story).
10. Thus, the comparability of Mead's and Uspensky's approaches could be analyzed deeper also in this respect, comparing the concepts of Mead and Vygotsky.
11. Citing Reinhart Koselleck, Uspensky reminds us that before contamination of terminology occurred, in German the word *Geschichte* referred to *res gestae*, whereas *Historien* meant *historia rerum gestarum*.

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