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Robert Morrison MacIver (1882–1960)
on
Temporality and Understanding of Social Phenomena*

Abstract: Robert Morrison MacIver – Franklin Giddings' successor at the Columbia University was a leading opponent of positivism (George Lundberg), empiricism (William Ogburn) and antitheoretical praxism (Robert Lynd). MacIver developed sociological theorizing along the Weberian tradition. The paper focuses on the temporality concerns of MacIver: 1) the question of distinct qualitative times, 2) the question of various temporal modes of being in the sociocultural realm, 3) temporality in social action. MacIver, unrecognized by today's symbolic interactionists, sought the implications of George H. Mead's work on time for analysis of activity as dynamic remaking of the present. The unity of the meaningful or symbolic and the temporal aspects of social phenomena was evident in the MacIver's theorizing. In consonance with the Bergsonian criticism of scientific mechanism MacIver was critical of variable-centered methodology. He analyzed the temporal modes of being of events, processes and cultural objects and focused on different ways society, history and culture enter the time process. MacIver made the temporality of actions the key issue. He should be classified as symbolic interactionist along with Florian Znaniecki and Pitirim Sorokin.

“January 23, Saturday, 1932

Morning was spent in an absorbing discussion in which Casey, MacIver, and Znaniecki participated. The starting point was Z.'s reference to MacIver's idea of history.¹ It led him to propose that we have to distinguish a sociological

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¹ In “Social Causation” one finds a statement on history that may substitute the lack of substantial characteristic of MacIver's argument in Abel's journal.

“History is engrossed in the time order of change, and this time order is most readily construed as a succession of conspicuous events. History is generally conceived as a story, a narrative, say the story of a people, and the narrative form inevitably emphasizes the succession of events. The interest of a narrative moves from one salient, dramatic, disturbing, or novel occurrence to another. While the technical historian is largely engaged in the discovery, verification, and reorganization of evidences relating to great or even to obscure occasions, the synoptic historian travels down the stepping stones of events, pausing on each to assess its significance. Thus we often have the semblance of a casual interpretation, such

time which manifests itself in continuity of systems in spite of lapses of astronomical time. Thus, continuity would exist if some forgotten idea of the Romans were taken up now. MacIver added that he also assumes a sociological “space” which is the milieu which may be widely scattered in space but actually constitutes a unity. Continuity, however, became the theme of our discussion.”

Excerpt from the Journal of Thoughts and Events by Columbia University Professor Theodore Abel (1896–1988)

Introduction

“Time and society” seems today to be a topic addressed much as the problem “language and society” has been once – as a crucial issue of social life, which needs to be articulated explicitly in sociological theory (Elias 1987). Sociology of time i.e. of social concepts related to time has continued to develop since it was established by the Durkheimian School (Gurvitch 1963, Zerubavel 1981, 1987) but the issue of the temporal dimension of social phenomena obviously reaches beyond this subfield. Temporality has been entering the discipline through the existing channels of interactional and interpretative concerns (Denzin 1982; Sharron 1982; Schwartz 1974, Strauss 1991), which also link sociology with philosophically prone humanities (Giddens 1981, Maines 1987). Specifically it has been piercing with history that used to challenge “a timeless natural science of society” (Tilly 1981, 37). Only recently the very issue of temporality has been voiced together with encouragement to revitalize the discipline theoretically in general (Ritzer 1990). The issue elicits what Elias called “the need for new means of speaking and thinking” in sociology, overcoming a language of substantives, which have a character of things in a state of rest (Elias 1978 : 112; Luhmann 1982, White 1992 : 17).

The question, however, was already addressed in articulate ways by eminent sociologists: Robert Morrison MacIver, Pitirim Sorokin, Florian Znaniecki, leading scholars from a generation active in 1930–1950-ties. Those European émigrée scholars in America opposed currents that were to come to dominate sociology: handy variable analysis and abstract functionalism. They left landmarks of methodological discussions of that time (MacIver 1942, Sorokin 1943, Znaniecki 1934). MacIver’s ideas are mostly forgotten today. Once a renowned, prolific scholar, Franklin Giddings’ successor at the Columbia University, leading opponent of George Lundberg (positivism), William Ogburn (empiricism) and Robert Lynd (antitheoretical praxism) MacIver was overshadowed by influential teams: at Columbia – Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, at Harvard – Talcott Parsons and Samuel Stouffer that were to shape a new paradigm in sociology at the expense of humanistic and philosophically oriented theorizing of MacIver, as well as of Sorokin and Znaniecki.

as we get on a smaller scale in biography. But in both cases the semblance may be in part illusory, for as we have seen the causal validity of the historical sequence, and therefore its adequacy for purposes of social interpretation, is tantalizingly limited.” (MacIver 1942, p. 192–193).

The specificities of theoretical reasoning in MacIver's meaningful sociology, and its affinities with Sorokin's integralist sociology or Znaniecki's culturalistic sociology will not be characterized in this paper. It focuses on the temporality concerns of MacIver placed in three major problem areas. They may be stated as follow:

- 1) the question of a distinct qualitative time(s),
- 2) the question of various temporal modes of being in sociocultural realm, and
- 3) temporality in social action.

I. Advancement of *Verstehen*: Qualitative Social Time(s)

As epitomized by Ricoeur in "Time and Narrative" (1985), interpretive traditions in humanities culminate nowadays in understanding meanings in temporal manifestations that cannot be adequately covered by the term "historical," at best not as this label used to refer to the cultural significance of concrete historical events (Weber 1949 : 111).

Following the turn of the century, the main breakthrough in the social sciences consisted in then founding their distinctive *verstehende* character. This was a grounding in meaning and values which at the same time was saving sociology from the mere servitude to history. MacIver developed sociological theorizing along this tradition by advancing also understanding of temporality of social phenomena. He echoed Weber's postulate of subjective understanding, as may be seen concluded from a then widely quoted anti-Lundberg passage:

"Incompetent to deal with the subjectivity of experience the behaviorists would discard it altogether. Seeking to get rid of subjective terms they get rid of the social fact, since it is fact only as created by and known to experience. They fail to perceive the essential difference, from the standpoint of causation, between a paper flying before the wind and a man flying from a pursuing crowd. The paper knows no fear and the wind no hate, but without fear and hate the man would not fly nor the crowd pursue. If we try to reduce fear to its bodily concomitant we merely substitute the concomitant for the reality experienced as fear. We denude the world of meanings for the sake of a theory, itself a false meaning which deprives us of all the rest. We can interpret experience only on the level of experience" (MacIver, 1931 : 529–530).

Ernst Nagel neatly identified the core of MacIver's "challenge to positivistic and behavioristic trends of thought in the social sciences" (Nagel 1956 : 370) as being his criticism of mathematical, statistical relations as impotent to represent dynamic orders of changes. However Nagel did not specify that MacIver rightly meant a special kind of changes, ones that are *experienced* as temporal in human terms. MacIver's approach shared with Sorokin and Znaniecki, was a reflex of the Bergsonian criticism of scientific mechanism (MacIver 1964 : 31) and the philosopher's innovative analysis of human experience of time as duration.

"We have seen that time, the category of irreversible, irrevocable process, cannot be comprehended or represented by means of mathematical equations. Mathematics can express the order of succession of instantaneous, or rather timeless, states, symbolized by t_1 , t_2 , t_3 ... t_n . These states are not times as we experience them. They have no duration and no direction. They have no passage" (MacIver 1964, 66–67).

MacIvers's criticism of variable-centered methodology (Abell 1987:6), accompanied by Znaniecki and Sorokin, preceded its being taken as a target by Blumer (1956) or Elias (1978:116). His arguments against it also went deeper as he emphasized temporality. They were in consonance with Bergson's view of the real, perceived and lived time, i.e. duration that is not measurable (Bergson 1968:46–48). Bergson's concept of duration opposed what he called "spatialized concept of time" of science using recurrent motion in space to measure time as if a line of points-instants. The latter spatialized concept was originated by Descartes. The Cartesian concept of time was atomistic, conceived as a series of separate, independent moments. Thus it was analogous to separate spatial points which are only connected into a line by one's imagination (Sherover 1975:97). Consequently Descartes reasoned "my life may be divided into an infinite number of points, none of which is in any way dependent upon the other" (Descartes, 1968:168) and needed repeated creative effort of God in each moment to explain the continuity of self.

If the dualism of thought and reality introduced by Descartes was overcome by pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, as theories emphasizing location of meaning in situated actions, Descartes' "spatialized time" has not been overthrown. Pragmatists, Charles S. Peirce, William James, Mead in fact, left a heritage of studies on temporality. It is worth-while to mention that MacIver, although unrecognized by today's symbolic interactionists, went beyond psychosocial ideas introduced by Mead and explored by Blumer. MacIver sought the implications of Mead's work on time for analysis of activity as dynamic remaking of the present (MacIver 1964:32). MacIvers' "dynamic assessment" (1964:291f), as well as Znaniecki's "humanistic coefficient" (1934:37) and Sorokin's "meaningful interaction" (1947:40) were secure from the "spatialized" time concept that cannot give full justice to emergent character of meanings revealing itself in the conscious activity (MacIver 1964:271). MacIver boldly claimed that social sciences need a distinctive sociocultural concept of qualitative time and that social sciences cannot be adequately served either by a physicomathematical or by any of the ontological, biological or psychological concepts of time. The unity of the meaningful or symbolic and the temporal aspects of social phenomena (Elias 1987:3n) was evident in the theorizing of MacIver.

II. Modes of Temporality: Events, Processes and Objects in Duration

Social time as the experience of the flow and rhythm of events is at the core of the interest of a proper historian. As Weber argued, such a historian seeks to understand the concrete reality of an "event" in its individuality. The event is a constructive fact. It is impossible to reproduce an event in the totality. Only those aspects of events are called on that have some "general significance" for the historian. Like a judge, he takes into consideration some components of events of the case (Weber 1949:169–170), and constructs a narrative about a series of events (Ricoeur 1985b:303).

What is the very temporality of an event? Does it reveal and encompass the nature of the social time? Even historians look for a profounder notion of

temporality, like Fernand Braudel who with *l'histoire comparative* goes beyond *l'histoire traditionnelle* and is ready to eliminate events to study *la longue durée de l'histoire* (Braudel 1986: 69).

The answer to the above question was also clear for MacIver who saw history construed as a succession of conspicuous events, as a story, a narrative (MacIver 1964, 192). MacIver attempted a deeper analysis of the social time by confronting events and processes, as different manifestations of temporality. MacIver also attempted a differentiation in temporal terms between social processes and their products, or objects being cultural achievements, like a literary work of art. There is a striking similarity of his view to a phenomenological matchless analysis of a Husserl's student – Roman Ingarden who carefully analyzed the temporal modes of being² of events, processes and objects. Characteristic of each respective temporal mode are: actuality for events, continuous transience of phases for processes and endurance for objects (Ingarden 1964: 99–162).

By event MacIver meant a single manifestation, representing a unique historical moment, dated in time and space. Victory, not “winning through to victory is an event. An event is a salient occurrence, an eruptive phenomenon. It emerges from the context of more ordinary or more regular proceedings” (MacIver 1964: 127). Events occur on specific time level, in a particularly localized situation. Only one does Caesar cross the Rubicon and only one Brutus kills Caesar. Processes are continuous through time. Temporality more fully manifests itself in processes. An action, a life of a person, a race, all alike are processes because they are not in one “now.” A process cannot be conceived as merely a succession of events. It has some phases transcending the present, encompassing past and future and it emerges in time (Ingarden 1964: 110f). The notion of emergence employed not only by phenomenologists but pragmatists (Mead) proved to be of importance for sociological thematizing of emergent social realities. Temporality of objects is different both from events and processes. They outlast instants (unlike events) and do not emerge in time (unlike processes).

MacIver was particularly intrigued by different ways society and culture enter to time process³. “Society is a becoming, not a being, a process, not a product”⁴ (MacIver 1931: 511). This is clearly a view point that would never admit a fault of “process-reduction” (Elias 1978: 111–112) in sociological theorizing. Unlike the Homeric poems, the class system of Homeric days cannot be abstracted from the actions that sustained it. A social structure cannot be placed in a museum to save it from the ravages of time. It cannot be preserved in the sense in which the Homeric poems were preserved. MacIver would agree that society “fails to be” (Poulet 1956: 34).

² There are also timeless, ideal objects (mathematical ideas, for example), Ingarden, 1964, 105.

³ In his later years MacIver wrote down his reflections on time in: *The Challenge of the Passing Years. My Encounter with Time*, New York, 1962.

⁴ Hegelian, as “becoming” may sound, it puts MacIver close to a transformation of Hegel by Mead for symbolic interactionism. He justly was once classified as interactionist. So should be considered Znaniecki, Charles Elwood, Willard Waller and Sorokin but than “Chicagoans” (Strauss 1991 p. 19) in symbolic interactionism would lose their monopoly.

MacIver's favorite metaphor for society was "a web that exists only as it is newly spun" (MacIver 1931 : 511–512). In passing it is worthwhile to notice a parallel with Thomas S. Eliot's poetic imagination. In "web's" metaphor there is an idea that the concept of pattern should be linked with the concept of time. Eliot's has expressed it in his poetic treaty on time as follow "The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, for the pattern is new in every moment" (Eliot 1943 : 13).

Preliminary as they were, MacIver's attempts to penetrate varieties of temporality set a platform for a discussion of relations between history, society and culture as respectively characterized by such dominante as events, processes and enduring products-values. Norbert Elias appealing for new means of speaking and thinking in sociology and refusing thing-like concepts used to say that society is unlike a pot or a table (Elias 1978:113). In fact Znaniecki – MacIver's friend and ally in methodological combats, very early in a book edited by Chicago University Press (Cultural Reality, 1919) expressed ideas on culture and society that grasped the historicity of cultural object in the profoundest sense of their internal temporality of duration. Certain indeterminacy of potential meaningful content is specific for cultural objects when compared with fixed "things" (Hałas 1991). This is a continuation of the Bergsonian theme of the dynamic creative evolution in the field of culture and society that is baseld on the inseparable "meaningfulness" and "temporality" of cultural objects.

A question arises: to what extent, both in the aspect of meanings and temporality, individual and group are like other cultural objects/values? Cultural objects have duration "a dynamic, irreversible course of being experienced and used by a plurality of human individuals" (Znaniecki 1952, 139). City of Troy has such a duration – its temporality is specific to changes it has been undergoing as described by Homer, by Greek tragedies, by its modern discoverer – Schilemann, etc. It is true that the character of cultural objects as given in human experience is basically alike. We can rightly say that a literary work of art, a person and a group have meaning, they are given in active experience of people etc. Thus Znaniecki argued that human individuals and human collectivities are cultural data/values and that in principle the some cultural approach may be employed to the human individual, as to language or mythology. A person thus is a "human image," a product of conscious agents, existing in the historical world of cultural data. A human image, like a poem is an object having a duration and not located in the spatial-temporal network of nature.

What is the adequacy in the analogous approach to a fictious hero and a "human image" or a person? Does it differ temporally – a concrete person – from a mythical (St. Patrick) or another fictious personality (Odysseus)? Is it not only a question of a new element –a temporal self-image?

The temporality of social objects (persons and groups) does not seem properly tackled by the analysis of the temporality of the cultural object (a narrative of a literary work of art) without specifying differences. The subjective experience of meanings which is also the time-experience is characteristic for a person. Of many aspects of that experience described by Husserl as: consciousness of the past (retention); awareness of the future (protention); as well as active recollection of the past and active anticipation

of the future (Ingarden 1964:155; Husserl, 1991), recollection is of prime importance. Autobiography, the source the Chicago School (and earlier Cooley) pronounced to be of value for sociologists, is founded on it. MacIver praised the “power to recollect” and pointed to its operation on the individual and the collective level. This view was congruent with Sorokin’s and earlier pioneering Halbwach’s work (1975) on interaction of individual and social memory. Memory, recollection and tradition are specific for social persons and groups, whatever temporal parallels may join them with other cultural temporal objects.

Relations of history, society and culture may be better articulated along this line of questioning their temporal characters. As MacIver has pointed out there is a temporal distinction between actual events, processes as transient phases and meaningful objects in duration – between the eventfulness of history, the processual character of society and enduring objects of culture. They all have foundation in actions of time and meanings conscious people.

III. Temporality of Action

For the 1930–1950 generation of scholars, action/interaction theory was well settled at the core of sociological systematic theorizing. The meaningful system of action implanted on the definition of the situation was pursued later either along normative or interpretive lines and true temporality was virtually repressed on both of them. However in “Social Actions” (1936) dedicated by Znaniecki to MacIver (Scientist, Thinker, Scholar, Poet and Friend) temporality of action was already well analyzed. He set the very principle of action as the dynamic system of the social object, the method, the instrument and the result (Znaniecki 1936: 13f, 73f). The notion of the dynamic system was emphasized to overcome any association with the natural processes because the action lasts in time, and, “it certainly does not appear to anybody as a pure process, like the flowing of a river, the burning of wood in the fire place, or a movement of an automobile”. The anticipation of the future – the planning is characteristic for the action. Such a concept of action opposes both determinist and teleological (means-end) views. Actions are conceived neither in terms of conditions nor of steady goals but of purposes shaped step by step along time.

The action conceived as the dynamic system has its time – different from physical and even psychological time of the acting agent (Znaniecki 1925: 61, 62). It has transactual continuity, until defined as finished by the agent or abandoned. It is not just a succession of events. It is not a transaction of gestures. Time of action, its duration overlaps possible discontinuities introduced by other actions or by interruptions, as in the case of courting a girl or educating a child by a parent.

MacIver also made the temporality of actions the key issue. He studied time with relation to change (MacIver 1964: 6) and he was clear in noticing the specificity of action in this respect in comparison to a natural process. “Besides other differences, there is here a different relation of time and change” (p. 8). In action what is in the moment does not determine that which succeeds. Again he emphasizes the foreseeing of changes. The agent brings it about in what MacIver calls a project of action. The anticipated future, the

image of what is yet to be, informs the process of becoming. Action is not in enduring present. "It exists, as it were, in the time dimension, embracing at each moment the future and the past with the present" (MacIver 1964:9).

Parallel to Znaniecki's approach as MacIver's concept of action is to this point, it takes a different direction. MacIver is not interested in duration of a cultural system of action but follows Weber's subjective approach. Again temporality is revealed in what he calls the "objective" and the "motive" of action. The objective gives answer to a meaningful "why?" question in terms of the prospectuous "in-order-to" (money). The motive answers "why this objective?" in terms of "because of" (greed), which is retrospective.

"Objective externalizes itself in action, is the completion or culmination of a serious of activities, motive is at best only inferred, is not externalized" (MacIver 1964:17).

In this way MacIver was close to the analysis of action by Alfred Schutz, praised as a significant advancement of Weber's concepts. Schutz position led him into a controversy with Talcott Parsons, around the time issue, as their correspondence reveal it in detail (Grathoff 1978:13, 108, 119). In the case of MacIver, as well as Sorokin and Znaniecki polemical views against Parsons were expressed in public. Schutz used exactly the same terms as MacIver: action, project and motive to refer to the temporality of conduct. He additionally introduced a distinction between action and act. Action refers to a conduct based on anticipating or phantasying the future act in Future Perfect Tense (*modo futuri exacti*) (19) and, as carried, is oriented to "in-order" – the future act. Acting person retrospectively can grasp the "because of" motive for the project and following action. "Because" motives – refer to the past experiences of the actor that led him to act as he did and is a "genuine" motive (Schutz 1962:22), motivating the project (in-order to) itself.

Again MacIver's insight did not lack any of these aspects put into the detailed examination by Schutz. Even his concept of typification – typically similar past act, known to the agent at the time of projecting (Schutz 1962:7) – has its counterpart in MacIver's idea of the "design" of projecting the objective of action expressed in 1942 (MacIver 1964:18).

Whatever the configuration of future and past in the present, purposeful action, Sorokin argued against MacIver that "purposeful" is not the only variant of the conscious action. Following his master at Petersburg, Leon Petrażycki, Sorokin, beside purposive motivations envisaging the future (Sorokin 1947:45), claimed that the past experience may motivate actions alone (past favor), without any purpose in mind (sincere expression of gratitude), and similarly, normative schema (absolute, "eternal" time) may motivate action alone ("Always speak the truth"). Thus "because of" motive and typical schema or design may in actual action manifests itself autonomously like the "in-order-to" motive of purposeful action.

Conclusion

In result of this reconstructive sketch of ideas formulated by MacIver the problem of temporality appears in two overlapping contexts. First, the time of

action is experienced by the agent defining the situation by the future and the past – by projection and recollection. Second, there is time – duration of cultural objects. One discovers these two modes of temporality at the heart of contemporary theory of structuration (Giddens 1981:9). Giddens distinguishes the *durée* of activity (admitting that he owns it to Schutz) and, following Braudel, the *longue durée* of institutional time, as the foundation of his concept of the duality of structure. The idea that either form of *durée* has logical primacy over the other is rejected because every moment of social interaction implies the *longue durée* of institutional time. This congruence of past and new ideas only proves that the revitalization of sociological thinking can come from sociology's own resourceful tradition. As Elias admonishes, the fetish of the new should be controlled. Relations of history, society, culture and personality can acquire new meanings in temporal perspective when events, processes, cultural objects in duration and subjective experience of time are taken into consideration – concepts laboriously thought through by MacIver.

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