

WHY PRAGMATISM?

*In 1977 I wrote an essay in which I predicted that Richard Rorty's then circulating manuscript, which would soon be published as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, would produce a pragmatist renaissance. We read this manuscript in his Princeton seminar in the mid-1970s. In the mid-1980s I wrote a first draft of my pragmatism book, which began with Ralph Waldo Emerson and ended with Rorty. After reading the manuscript Rorty sent me a note in Paris praising the book yet advising that I omit the section on Quine and himself. He suggested I end with my own work, not his. This advice exemplifies his modesty and his steadfast support for my work over the last twenty-five years. This introduction to my book gives readers some idea of why pragmatism makes a difference in our thought and life.*

Copyrighted image

A SMALL-SCALE INTELLECTUAL renaissance is occurring under the broad banner of pragmatism. The controversial works of Richard Rorty—aided by the differing views of fellow pragmatists such as Hilary Putnam, Ian Hacking and Richard Bernstein—have unsettled academic philosophy. Literary critics of the pragmatist persuasion like Frank Lentricchia and Stanley Fish have upset traditional humanists. Creative interpreters of John Dewey—like Sheldon Wolin, Michael Walzer and Benjamin Barber—who have updated radical democratic thinking now challenge liberal political theory. And pragmatist thinkers such as Jeffrey Stout are reshaping prevailing conceptions of religious thought.

Three basic issues underlie this recent renaissance. First, there is a widespread disenchantment with the traditional image of philosophy as a transcendental mode of inquiry, a tribunal of reason that grounds claims about Truth, Goodness and Beauty. The professional discipline of philosophy is presently caught in an interregnum; mindful of the dead ends of analytical modes of philosophizing, it is yet unwilling to move into the frightening wilderness of pragmatism and historicism with their concomitant concerns in social theory, cultural criticism and historiography. This situation has left the discipline with an excess of academic rigor, yet bereft of substantive intellectual vigor and uncertain of a legitimate subject matter. The unwillingness of many philosophers to tread in the wilderness results from adherence to professional boundaries and academic self-understandings. To put it crudely, most philosophers are neither trained to converse with literary crit-

ics, historians and social theorists nor ready to give up the secure self-image of academicians engaged in "serious" philosophical research.

Second, the disenchantment with transcendental conceptions of philosophy has led to a preoccupation with the relation of knowledge and power, cognition and control, discourse and politics. No longer are humanistic scholars content with a historicizing of science, morality and art that shuns the ways in which sciences, moralities and the arts are inextricably linked to structures of domination and subordination. This preoccupation with the materiality of language—such as the ways in which styles of rationality and scientificity or identities and subjectivities are socially constructed and historically constituted—has focused cultural investigations on the production, distribution and circulation of forms of powers, be they rhetorical, economic or military powers.

Third, this focus on powers has returned humanistic studies to the primal stuff of human history, that is, structured and circumscribed human agency in all its various manifestations. Gone is the once fashionable poststructuralist claim to eliminate the subject. Yet also gone is the old humanist view that elevates the human agency of elite cultural creators and ignores social structural constraints, constraints that reinforce and reproduce hierarchies based on class, race, gender and sexual orientation.

It is no accident that American pragmatism once again rises to the surface of North Atlantic intellectual life at the present moment, for its major themes of evading epistemology-centered philosophy, accenting human powers and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals make it relevant and attractive. The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse. In this world-weary period of pervasive cynicisms, nihilisms, terrorisms and possible extermination, there is a longing for norms and values that can make a difference, a yearning for principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight.

The irony of the contemporary intellectual scene in North America is that after an obsession with European theories and philosophies, we are discovering some of what is needed in the American heritage. This intellectual turn to our heritage ought to be neither a simplistic pro-Americanism in the life of the mind nor a naive parochialism that shuns international outlooks. But this turn is a symptom of just how blinded we often are to certain riches in the American intellectual and political past. Needless to say, we approach this past better equipped owing to European products such as Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism. But we also acknowledge the shortcomings of these products, that is, their ultimate inability to come to terms with the specificity of our contemporary predicament. The turn to the American heritage—and especially American pragmatism—is neither a panacea for our ills nor a solution to our problems. Rather, it should be an

attempt to reinvigorate our moribund academic life, our lethargic political life, our decadent cultural life and our chaotic personal lives for the flowering of many-sided personalities and the flourishing of more democracy and freedom.

My basic aim in this book is to chart the emergence, development, decline and resurgence of American pragmatism. I understand American pragmatism as a specific historical and cultural product of American civilization, a particular set of social practices that articulate certain American desires, values and responses and that are elaborated in institutional apparatuses principally controlled by a significant slice of the American middle class.

American pragmatism emerges with profound insights and myopic blindnesses, enabling strengths and debilitating weaknesses, all resulting from distinctive features of American civilization: its revolutionary beginning combined with a slave-based economy and subordination of American Indians; its elastic liberal rule of law combined with an entrenched business-dominated status quo; its hybrid culture in combination with a collective self-definition as homogeneously Anglo-American; its obsession with mobility, contingency and pecuniary liquidity combined with a deep moralistic impulse; and its impatience with theories and philosophies alongside ingenious technological innovation, political strategies of compromise and personal devices for comfort and convenience. This “hotel civilization” (to use Henry James’s apt phrase), with its fusion of the uncertainty of the capitalist market with the quest for security of the home, yielded an indigent mode of thought that subordinates knowledge to power, tradition to invention, instruction to provocation, community to personality and immediate problems to utopian possibilities.

American pragmatism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition. But its common denominator consists of a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action. Its basic impulse is a plebeian radicalism that fuels an antipatrician rebelliousness for the moral aim of enriching individuals and expanding democracy. This rebelliousness, rooted in the anticolonial heritage of the country, is severely restricted by an ethnocentrism and a patriotism cognizant of the exclusion of peoples of color, certain immigrants, women, gays and lesbians, yet fearful of the subversive demands these excluded peoples might make and enact.

The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy—from Emerson to Rorty—results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.

The pragmatists' preoccupation with power, provocation and personality—in contrast, say, to grounding knowledge, regulating instruction and promoting tradition—signifies an intellectual calling to administer to a confused populace caught in the whirlwinds of societal crisis, the cross fires of ideological polemics and the storms of class, racial and gender conflicts. This deep intellectual vocation, quite different from our sense of the emasculation of the academic profession, impels the major American pragmatists to be organic intellectuals of some sort; that is, participants in the life of the mind who revel in ideas and relate ideas to action by means of creating, constituting or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes. It is no accident that the major figures of American pragmatism use the language of crisis—hence the centrality of critical consciousness in their work—and exude urgency as they search for strategies and tactics to facilitate their exercise of intellectual and moral leadership for their constituency. And on a deeper level, these figures grapple with the problem of evil, producing ever changing yet definite ideological constructions of an American theodicy.

This book does not purport to be a comprehensive account of American pragmatism. Rather, it is a highly selective interpretation of American pragmatism in light of the present state (or my reading) of American society and culture. For instance, the omission of George Herbert Mead or C. I. Lewis is not a negative comment on their significant intellectual contributions to American pragmatism. Similarly, my focus on John Dewey at the expense of Charles Peirce and William James does not reflect my deep respect for the latter two. Rather, it expresses my sense that the thoroughgoing historical consciousness and emphasis on social and political matters found in Dewey speaks more to my purposes than the preoccupations with logic in Peirce and the obsessions with individuality in James. I consider Peirce and James as profound pioneering figures standing, in part, on the shoulders of Emerson. Yet I believe that it is with Dewey that American pragmatism achieves intellectual maturity, historical scope and political engagement. In this sense, my genealogy of American pragmatism is an explicitly political interpretation without, I hope, being pejoratively ideological.

My emphasis on the political and moral side of American pragmatism permits me to make a case for the familiar, but rarely argued, claim that Emerson is the appropriate starting point for the pragmatist tradition. Furthermore, by including treatments of a historian (Du Bois), theologian (Niebuhr), sociologist (C. Wright Mills), and literary critic (Trilling), I try to show the way in which Emersonian sensibilities and pragmatist progeny cut across the modern disciplinary division of knowledge.

In regard to method, this work is a social history of ideas. It conceives of the intellectual sphere of history as distinct, unique and personal sets of cultural practices intimately connected with concomitant developments in the larger society and culture. On the one hand, this book benefits from the groundbreaking re-

search of social historians who delve into the institutional constraints on and agency of exploited and oppressed peoples, yet the book focuses principally on how the complex formulations and arguments of American pragmatists shape and are shaped by the social structures that exploit and oppress. On the other hand, this text learns from—without endorsing—the grand tradition of idealist historiography in that it tries to get inside the formulations and arguments of American pragmatists so that the social roles and functions of ideas do not exhaust their existence or curb intellectual curiosity. This fusion of the intrinsic interest (or hedonistic effect) and the instrumental interest (or political use) of American pragmatism is the goal of this social history of ideas.

This book also attempts to address the crisis of the American Left. It does this primarily by providing an interpretation of a progressive tradition that can inspire and instruct contemporary efforts to remake and reform American society and culture. My own conception of prophetic pragmatism—a phrase I hope is not oxymoronic to readers after elucidation and illustration—serves as the culmination of the American pragmatist tradition; that is, it is a perspective and project that speaks to the major impediments to a wider role for pragmatism in American thought.

I began this work as an exercise in critical self-inventory, as a historical, social and existential situating of my own work as an intellectual, activist and human being. I wanted to make clear to myself my own contradictions and tensions, faults and foibles as one shaped by, in part, the tradition of American pragmatism. My first book, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982), attempted to lay bare the oppositional potential of prophetic Christianity—especially as filtered through the best of the black church tradition. *Prophetic Fragments* (1988) followed in the same vein. My critical acceptance of certain elements of Marxist analysis linked me to the worldwide Christian anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movement often referred to as liberation theology. Yet my promotion of American pragmatism as both a persuasive philosophical perspective and an indigenous source of left politics in America perplexed many people. So just as my earlier texts emerged out of my own political praxis in and my identity with prophetic Christianity, this book consists of my attempt to come to terms with my philosophic allegiances in light of my participation in the U.S. democratic socialist movement (Democratic Socialists of America), my particular role in the American academy (Princeton University) and my existence on the margins of the black church (as a lay preacher).

This book is principally motivated by my own disenchantment with intellectual life in America and my own demoralization regarding the political and cultural state of the country. For example, I am disturbed by the transformation of highly intelligent liberal intellectuals into tendentious neoconservatives owing to crude ethnic identity-based allegiances and vulgar neonationalist sentiments. I am dis-

appointed with the professional incorporation of former New Left activists who now often thrive on a self-serving careerism while espousing rhetorics of oppositional politics of little seriousness and integrity. More important, I am depressed about the concrete nihilism in working-class and underclass American communities—the pervasive drug addiction, suicides, alcoholism, male violence against women, “straight” violence against gays and lesbians, white violence against black, yellow and brown people and the black criminality against others, especially other black people. I have written this text convinced that a thorough reexamination of American pragmatism, stripping it of its myths, caricatures and stereotypes and viewing it as a component of a new and novel form of indigenous American oppositional thought and action, may be a first step toward fundamental change and transformation in America and the world. Like Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* and Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form*, this book is, among other things, a political act.

I write as one who intends to deepen and enrich American pragmatism while bringing trenchant critique to bear on it. I consider myself deeply shaped by American civilization, but not fully a part of it. I am convinced that the best of the American pragmatist tradition is the best America has to offer itself and the world, yet I am willing to concede that this best may not be good enough, given the depths of the international and domestic crises we now face. But though this slim and slight possibility may make my efforts no more than an impotent moral gesture, nonetheless, in the heat of battle, we have no other choice but to fight.

SOURCE: “Introduction,” *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, pp. 3–8. Copyright © 1989. Reprinted by permission of The University of Wisconsin Press.