

THE LIMITS OF NEOPRAGMATISM

This critique of contemporary pragmatisms highlights the Marxist attitude toward pragmatism: that it insufficiently grasps the role of power in dialogical and democratic practices. Following the radical left pragmatist C. Wright Mills, I try to show how my prophetic pragmatism follows the Marxist critique here. In the previous essay, I highlight the existential critique of pragmatism (no serious sense of the tragic or comic). Here I pursue the political critique of pragmatism (no adequate attention to the operations of institutional or structural power).

THE RENAISSANCE OF PRAGMATISM in philosophy, literary criticism and legal thought in the past few years is a salutary development. It is part of a more general turn toward historicist approaches to truth and knowledge. I am delighted to see intellectual interest rekindled in Peirce, James and especially Dewey. Yet I suspect that the new pragmatism may repeat and reproduce some of the blindness and silences of the old pragmatism—most important, an inadequate grasp of the complex operations of power, principally owing to a reluctance to take traditions of historical sociology and social theory seriously. In this essay, my strategy shall be as follows. First, I shall briefly map the different kinds of neopragmatisms in relation to perspectives regarding epistemology, theory and politics. Second, I shall suggest that neopragmatic viewpoints usually fail to situate their own projects in terms of present-day crises—including the crisis of purpose and vocation now raging in the professions. Third, I will try to show how my conception of prophetic pragmatism may provide what is needed to better illuminate and respond to these crises.

Much of the excitement about neopragmatism has to do with the antifoundationalist epistemic claims it puts forward. The idea that there are no self-justifying, intrinsically credible or ahistorical courts of appeal to terminate chains of epistemic justification calls into question positivistic and formalistic notions of objectivity, necessity and transcendentality. In this sense, all neopragmatists are antifoundationalists; that is, the validation of knowledge claims rests on practical judgments constituted by, and constructed in, dynamic social practices. For neopragmatists, we mortal creatures achieve and acquire knowledge by means of self-

critical and self-correcting social procedures rooted in a variety of human processes.

Yet all neopragmatists are not antirealists. For example, Peircean pragmatists are intent on sidestepping any idealist or relativist traps, and they therefore link a social conception of knowledge to a regulative ideal of truth. This viewpoint attempts to reject metaphysical conceptions of reality *and* skeptical reductions of truth-talk to knowledge-talk. In contrast, Deweyan pragmatists tend to be less concerned with charges of idealism or relativism, owing to a more insouciant attitude toward truth. In fact, some Deweyan pragmatists—similar to some sociologists of knowledge and idealists—wrongly collapse truth claims into warranted-assertability claims or rational-acceptability claims. Such moves provide fodder for the cannons of not only Peircean pragmatists, but also old-style realists and foundationalists. To put it crudely, truth at the moment cannot be the truth about things, yet warranted-assertable claims are the only truths we can get. To miss the subtle distinction between dynamic knowledge and regulative truth is to open the door to metaphysics or to slide down the slippery slope of sophomoric relativism. Yet the antifoundationalist claims put forward by neopragmatists are often construed such that many open such doors or slide down such slopes. In short, epistemic pluralism degenerates into an epistemic promiscuity that encourages epistemic policing by realists and foundationalists.

Neopragmatists disagree even more sharply in regarding the role of theory (explanatory accounts of the past and present). All neopragmatists shun grand theory because it smacks of metaphysical posturing. Yet this shunning often shades into a distrust of theory *per se*—hence a distancing from revisable social theories, provisional cultural theories or heuristic historical theories. This distrust may encourage an ostrichlike, piecemeal incrementalism that reeks of a vulgar antitheoreticism. On this view, neopragmatism amounts to crude practicalism. The grand pragmatism of Dewey and especially C. Wright Mills rejects such a view. Instead, it subtly incorporates an experimental temper within theory-laden descriptions of problematic situations (for instance, social and cultural crises). Unfortunately, the pragmatist tradition is widely associated with a distrust of theory, which curtails its ability to fully grasp the operations of power within the personal, social and historical contexts of human activities.

It is no accident that the dominant form of politics in the pragmatist tradition accents the pedagogical and the dialogical. Such a noble liberalism assumes that vast disparities in resources, enormous polarizations in perceptions or intense conflicts of interests can be overcome by means of proper education and civil conversation. If persuasive historical sociological claims show that such disparities, polarizations and conflicts often produce improper agitation and uncivil confrontation, the dominant form of politics in the pragmatist tradition is paralyzed or at least rendered more impotent than it is commonly believed. One crucial

theme or subtext in my genealogy of pragmatism is the persistence of the sense of impotence of liberal intellectuals in American culture and society, primarily because of unattended class and regional disparities, unacknowledged racial and sexual polarizations and untheorized cultural and personal conflicts that permeate and pervade our past and present. My view neither downplays nor devalues education and conversation; it simply highlights the structural background conditions of pedagogical efforts and dialogical events.

This leads me to my second concern, namely, the relative absence of pragmatist accounts of why pragmatism surfaces now in the ways and forms that it does. Such an account must situate the nature of pragmatist intellectual interventions—their intended effects and unintended consequences—in the present historical moment in American society and culture. I suspect that part of the renaissance of neopragmatism can be attributed to the crisis of purpose and vocation in humanistic studies and professional schools. On this view, the recent hunger for interdisciplinary studies—or the erosion of disciplinary boundaries—promoted by neopragmatism, poststructuralism, Marxism and feminism is not only motivated by a quest for truth, but also activated by power struggles over what kinds of knowledge should be given status, rewarded and passed on to young, informed citizens in the next century. These power struggles are not simply over positions and curriculums, but also over ideals of what it means to be humanistic intellectuals in a declining empire—in a first-rate military power, a near-rescinding economic power and a culture in decay.

As Henry Adams suggests, the example of a turn toward history is most evident in American culture when decline is perceived to be undeniable and intellectuals feel most removed from the action. Furthermore, pragmatism at its best, in James and Dewey, provided a sense of purpose and vocation for intellectuals who believed they could make a difference in the public life of the nation. And it is not surprising that the first perceivable consequence of the renaissance of neopragmatism led by Richard Rorty echoed James's attack on professionalization and specialization. In this sense, Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) not only told the first major and influential story of analytic philosophy, but was also a challenging narrative of how contemporary intellectuals have come to be contained within professional and specialized social spaces, with little outreach to a larger public and hence little visibility in, and minimal effect on, the larger society. Needless to say, Rorty's revival of Jamesian antiprofessionalism—not to be confused with anti-intellectualism or even anti-academicism—has increased intellectuals' interest in public journalism and intensified the tension between journalists and academics.

The crisis of purpose and vocation in humanistic studies and professional schools is compounded by the impact of the class and regional disparities, racial and sexual polarizations and cultural and personal conflicts that can no longer be

ignored. This impact not only unsettles our paradigms in the production of knowledge, but also forces us to interrogate and examine our standards, criteria, styles and forms in which knowledge is assessed, legitimated and expressed. At its worst, pragmatism in the academy permits us to embrace this impact without attending to the implications of power. At its best, pragmatism behooves us to critically scrutinize this impact as we promote the democratization of American intellectual life without vulgar leveling or symbolic tokenism.

But what is this “pragmatism at its best”? What form does it take? What are its constitutive features or fundamental components? These questions bring me to my third point—the idea of a prophetic pragmatist perspective and praxis. I use the adjective “prophetic” in order to harken back to the rich, though flawed, traditions of Judaism and Christianity that promote courageous resistance against, and relentless critiques of, injustice and social misery. These traditions are rich, in that they help keep alive collective memories of moral (that is, anti-idolatrous) struggle and nonmarket values (that is, love for others, loyalty to an ethical ideal and social freedom) in a more and more historically amnesiac society and market-saturated culture. These traditions are flawed because they tend toward dogmatic pronouncements (that is, “Thus saith the Lord”) to homogeneous constituencies. Prophetic pragmatism gives courageous resistance and relentless critique a self-critical character and democratic content; that is, it analyzes the social causes of unnecessary forms of social misery, promotes moral outrage against them and organizes different constituencies to alleviate them, yet does so with an openness to its own blindneses and shortcomings.

Prophetic pragmatism is pragmatism at its best because it promotes a critical temper and democratic faith without making criticism a fetish or democracy an idol. The fetishization of criticism yields a sophisticated ironic consciousness of parody and paralysis, just as the idolization of democracy produces mob rule. As Peirce, James and Dewey noted, criticism always presupposes something in place—be it a set of beliefs or a tradition. Criticism yields results or makes a difference when something significant is antecedent to it, such as rich, sustaining, collective memories of moral struggle. Similarly, democracy assumes certain conditions for its flourishing—like a constitutional background. Such conditions for democracy are not subject to public veto.

Critical temper as a way of struggle and democratic faith as a way of life are the twin pillars of prophetic pragmatism. The major foes to be contested are despair, dogmatism and oppression. The critical temper promotes a full-fledged experimental disposition that highlights the provisional, tentative and revisable character of our visions, analyses and actions. Democratic faith consists of a Pascalian wager (hence underdetermined by the evidence) on the abilities and capacities of ordinary people to participate in decision-making procedures of institutions that fundamentally regulate their lives. The critical temper motivated by democratic faith

yields all-embracing moral and/or religious visions that project credible ameliorative possibilities grounded in present realities in light of systemic structural analyses of the causes of social misery (without reducing all misery to historical causes). Such analyses must appeal to traditions of social theory and historical sociology just as visions must proceed from traditions of moral and/or religious communities. The forms of prophetic praxis depend on the insights of the social theories and the potency of the moral and/or religious communities. In order for these analyses and visions to combat despair, dogmatism and oppression, the existential, communal and political dimensions of prophetic pragmatism must be accented. The existential dimension is guided by the value of *love*—a risk-ridden affirmation of the distinct humanity of others that, at its best, holds despair at bay. The communal dimension is regulated by *loyalty*—a profound devotion to the critical temper and democratic faith that eschews dogmatism. The political dimension is guided by *freedom*—a perennial quest for self-realization and self-development that resists all forms of oppression.

The tradition of pragmatism is in need of a mode of cultural criticism that keeps track of social misery, solicits and channels moral outrage to alleviate it and projects a future in which the potentialities of ordinary people flourish and flower. The first wave of pragmatism foundered on the rocks of cultural conservatism and corporate liberalism. Its defeat was tragic. Let us not permit the second wave of pragmatism to end as farce.