

HOLLSTEIN B., JUNG M., KNÖBL W., (WHg.), *Handlung und Erfahrung. Das Erbe von Historismus und Pragmatismus und die Zukunft der Sozialtheorie*  
[Action and experience. The legacy of Pragmatism and Historism and the future of Social Theory]

Frankfurt a. M., Campus, 2011, 381 pages

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/680>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.680

ISSN: 2036-4091

**Publisher**

Associazione Pragma

**Electronic reference**

Andreas Hetzel, « HOLLSTEIN B., JUNG M., KNÖBL W., (WHg.), *Handlung und Erfahrung. Das Erbe von Historismus und Pragmatismus und die Zukunft der Sozialtheorie* [Action and experience. The legacy of Pragmatism and Historism and the future of Social Theory] », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], V-1 | 2013, Online since 16 July 2013, connection on 23 September 2020.  
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/680> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.680>

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This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.



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## REFERENCES

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- 1 The anthology gathers the results of a symposium held on the occasion of Hans Joas' 60th birthday in November 2008 at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt. Its clear systematic focus on the integration of the historicist and the pragmatist legacy in current social theory marks a pleasant difference from the eclecticism of a typical festschrift. The editors succeeded in obliging all contributors to each take up and develop a specific

aspect of the comparison of both theories. As a result, the contributions complement each other extremely well and add up to a coherent overall impression.

- 2 I will first present several contributions I consider to be particularly innovative and subsequently phrase a fundamental question regarding the relation of pragmatism and action theory. The editors suggest in the introduction to interpret Joas' oeuvre as an attempt to merge a historicist perspective on the formation of social orders and institutions that rejects the idea of objective historico-philosophical laws of progression with a pragmatist theory of action. They point out, however, that in Joas' numerous and rich analyses in the fields of sociology of religion, the sociology of violence and the sociology of social norms, this metatheoretical bridge remains largely implicit.
- 3 Against this backdrop, the contributions of the anthology strive to make the connection explicit. The leading assumption is that both pragmatism and historicism could benefit from a dialogue that would allow for the historicist concept of experience and the pragmatist concept of action to mutually revise each other: A concept of action enhanced by experience theory could avoid the perils of a teleological reduction, while a concept of experience enhanced by action theory conversely escapes the pitfalls of relativism inherent in historicism.
- 4 The first section of contributions addresses the "Legacy of Pragmatism and Historicism" in current social theory and is opened by Matthias Jung's "Verkörperter Intentionalität – Zur Anthropologie des Handelns" [Incorporated Intentionality – On the Anthropology of Action]. Pragmatism and historicism are complemented here by philosophical anthropology as well as recent cognitive science, which allows to not merely postulate a continuity between human life as biological existence and as a "cultural form of life mediated by symbols" (25), but to actually comprehend this continuity in detail. The theory of socially mediated intentionality hinted at in Joas' writings could thus be placed on a sound scientific basis. Jung claims that by synthesizing historicist and pragmatist motives, Joas ceases to interpret intentionality in a mentalist and teleological way. Consequently, and as opposed to Husserl and Searle, he does not interpret it as a basic, preexisting feature of the mind, but instead intends to show how it emerges in the context of specific actions. According to Jung, Joas in *The Creativity of Action* conceptualizes intentionality as "reflexive articulation and continuous adaptation of the sense of action" (28) in specific situations, and in doing so heeds the pragmatist as well as anthropological intuition that all action is essentially incorporated and situated. This situatedness implies a continuity of nature and culture on one hand, and a continuity of action and experience on the other hand. Jung's main point is to show that this continuity can be further underpinned by recent results in the field of cognitive science, especially Alva Noë's encativism, which consistently interprets perceptions as actions. Following the work of Michael Tomasello, Jung also believes to be able to describe the transition from individual to collective intentionality without having to resort to mentalist approaches: In "triangular scenes of shared attention" (42), where "the attention of the child and the attention of the adult oscillates between the interacting parties and an object of mutual interest," collective intentionality emerges from situated physical activity.
- 5 While this multiple comparison of theories is certainly thought-provoking, it does leave the reader wondering whether Jung isn't omitting several major differences between cognitive science and pragmatism, as for example the tendency of cognitive science

approaches to reduce experience to a mere processing of information, which is incompatible with the openness of the pragmatist concept of experience. Also, to speak of an “anthropology” of pragmatism is far from innocent, as the efforts of at least parts of the 20th century german-speaking anthropology to determine an essence of human nature are hardly reconcilable with the acosmism and tychism of pragmatism (on the incompatibility of anthropology and pragmatism see Rölly 2010).

- 6 Tychism is also the main focus of Richard Bernstein’s essay “Die kreative Rolle der Imagination” [The Creative Role of Imagination], that places Joas’ theory of creative action in the context of classic pragmatist theories of creativity. In contrast to the common myth of theoretical decline that glorifies Peirce as an original genius of pragmatism while scolding James, Dewey and Mead as end products of a *watering down* of the pragmatist founding father’s insights, Bernstein shows that James’ and Dewey’s creativity theories can be interpreted as original and congenial transformations of Peirce’s anti-necessarist cosmology.
- 7 The idea of the living option James unfolds in “The Will to Believe”: an unguarded hypothesis that will only be justifiable *post festum* by the consequences of the actions it initiated, is a transformation of Peirce’s Tychism, as is James’ theory of the pluriversum. Likewise, Peirce’s legacy is represented and developed further in new and interesting ways in the vital role of imagination in Dewey’s theory of research as well as his ideal of a creative democracy.
- 8 While Bernstein traverses all three classics of American pragmatism, Charles Camic deliberately chooses a smaller section for his contribution, which deals with the transformations of Dewey’s concept of intelligence (“Wandlungen des Intelligenzbegriffs bei Dewey”). Camic also starts with a reading of Joas’ *The Creativity of Action* as a theory of “creative intelligence” (71) strongly inspired by Dewey. He takes a fascinating trip through the history of ideas of turn of the century Chicago, to the very moment when Dewey, at that time still strongly influenced by Neo-Hegelianism, transferred to the University of Chicago. He shows that three competing concepts of intelligence were one of the crucial subjects of the debates taking place at the University of Chicago during that time: a group of humanists and social scientists surrounding Albion Small, Charles Henderson and Thorstein Veblen tried to interpret human intelligence as an autonomous capacity irreducible to animal intelligence. They were opposed by a group of naturalists around C. O. Whitman and Henry Donaldson that, being ardent Darwinists, instead tried to find continuities between human and animal intelligence. Eventually, a third group of experimentalists (Charles Davenport, Jacques Loeb and others) emerged. It shared the naturalist starting point, but argued that certain phenomena claimed by strict naturalists as evidence for intelligence, among them “purpose, reflex inhibition, [...] structure of the nervous system” (78), in and of themselves could not be interpreted as sufficient criteria for human intelligence. Camic convincingly highlights the fact that although Dewey never intervened in those debates during his Chicago era, it would leave a deep impression on his future theory. According to Camic, Dewey’s own theory of intelligence, that was repeatedly modified in different phases of his work and is based on the elements *projection, prediction, outline, inference* and *testing of hypotheses* (see 85) rejects an assumption shared by all three parties of the Chicago debate: that intelligence can be reduced to a choice between different options and a strategy of situational adaptation. In contrast, Dewey places a much stronger emphasis on the imaginative and anticipative components of

intelligence that – and here Camic seconds Bernstein’s contribution – are also pivotal for a theory of creative action.

- 9 A second section of contributions is summarized under the heading “Historismus und Pragmatismus: Verschränkungen, Fortführungen und Korrekturen” [Historism and Pragmatism: Entwinements, Continuations and Corrections]. Its opener is a comparison of the philosophies of religion of Dewey and Ernst Troeltsch by Friedrich Jaeger. Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of religion is interpreted here as a “version of civil religion” (108), whereas historicist Troeltsch “does not permit himself a turn towards civil religion” (108); more so than his American contemporary, he is thus able to account for the antinomies of the process of social modernization.
- 10 Dewey’s naturalistic concept of god, which secularizes god “to a forward-striving intentionality of human life practice” (117), leads to a “culturally religious system of Social Gospel” (111) quite compatible with the “set of values of the American consumer society” and thus forfeits the critical impetus of religion. In contrast, Troeltsch’s insistence on the autonomy of religion, according to which a strong community can only be a community of substantial metaphysical convictions (see 118), retains a stronger potential to object against the pathologies of modern society.
- 11 Hans-Joachim Schneider in his brilliant essay “Jenseits von Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Prozesse der Differenzierung und Individuierung aus der Sicht der Chicago School of Sociology” [Beyond Community and Society: Processes of Differentiation and Individuation from the Perspective of the Chicago School of Sociology] points out the significance of pragmatist action theory for the emergence of a reconstructive method within the Chicago School. His contribution aims to show that the Chicago School, based on Mead and Dewey, was able to conceptualize the connection between “sociation and individualization” (131) in a much more reflective way than the contemporary European sociology, whose protagonists, Durkheim and Weber, under a strong Neo-Kantian influence interpreted social integration mainly as an unobstructed merging into social functional contexts and value systems.
- 12 Neither Durkheim nor Weber recognize any leeway for creative action that doesn’t merely spot and utilize niches in the social fabric, but generates those niches in the first place. By integrating Mead’s and Dewey’s theories of creative action into their qualitative analyses on migrant workers, criminals, youth groups, new forms of housing etc., the protagonists of the Chicago School in their material studies provide a perspective that accounts for the *agency* of the actors investigated also on a methodological level. Schneider argues that Joas’ theory of creative action could be reconstructed as the belated “theoretical approach underlying the empirical studies of the Chicago School” (132). However, as a critical sideline it should be mentioned that, being an action *theoretical* approach, it tends to lose its grounding in the empirical data and explicitly does not proceed in terms of a *grounded theory*. Seeing that, it would be more accurate to consider Joas at least not as the only successor of the Chicago School, contrary to what Schneider suggests. Exponents of Cultural Studies such as Williams, Hall, Kellner, Grossberg and Fiske, whose theories of counter hegemonic action (see Winter 2001) are acknowledged neither by Schneider nor Joas himself, even though they explicitly place themselves in the tradition of pragmatism (see e.g. Shusterman 2000; Salaverria 2007: 206ff.; Winter 2008).
- 13 Hans Peter Krüger in his contribution juxtaposes John Dewey’s and Helmuth Plessner’s theories of the public sphere, which were developed roughly around the same time. He

states that while for Dewey a public sphere emerges every time a third person is affected by the consequences of a direct interaction between two others and begins to critically reflect those consequences, Plessner conceptualizes the public sphere as a facilitation of personal conduct between “strangers who may remain strangers to each other, who are not related among themselves and do not necessarily share the same set of values” (160). Plessner’s and Dewey’s theories of the public sphere are much better equipped to accommodate for the dual contingency of modern social conditions than a Kantian theory, which would link the public sphere to the public use of *one singular* reason. In contrast, for Dewey and Plessner it is precisely the absence of a singular reason a priori encompassing every individual, that makes public debates both necessary and possible.

- 14 A third group of contributions explores historicism and pragmatism in various disciplinary fields [“Historismus und Pragmatismus in verschiedenen disziplinären Feldern”]. In constant dialogue with Joas’ more recent works on secularization, José Casanova begins with the question “Welche Religion braucht der Mensch?” [What kind of religion does man need?] and in doing so distances himself from the monism he perceives to be underlying Joas’ complementary question: “Does man need religion?” Casanova rephrases the preoccupation with *religion* (in singular) in *the* modern era (also in singular) in a historicist way and breaks it down to several pairs of conceptual opposites: individual experience of transcendence versus the socially sacred, socially undifferentiated communal cults versus differentiated religious communities, as well as religion versus magic. None of these historical conceptual constellations can be reduced to one of the other two; and the complex interaction between them is reflected both in the sociological classics, which can’t be reduced to a singular narrative of secularization, and in the religio-philosophical elaborations of the founding fathers of pragmatism.
- 15 Hans Kippenberg in his contribution “Zur Kontingenz religiösen Gewalthandelns” [On the contingency of religious Violence] also rejects a simplifying perspective on the relation of religion and modernity that informs for example Jan Assmann’s thesis of the intrinsic violence of monotheism.
- 16 In the fourth group of essays, which is summarized under the heading “Zwischen Dilthey und Mead: Hans Joas und die gegenwärtige Sozialtheorie” [Between Dilthey and Mead: Hans Joas and current Social Theory], Wolfgang Knöbl’s exploration of macro theory between pragmatism and historicism (“Makrotheorie zwischen Pragmatismus und Historismus”) stands out as particularly remarkable and is also the most accurate realization of the theoretical program phrased by the editors in the introduction. The essay first states a “crisis of macrosociology” (273), which has almost completely ceased to develop since Habermas and Luhmann. As evidence, he cites Renate Mayntz’s thesis that “when reconstructing macro processes, one always has to bear in mind multicausal causation as well as the historicity and processuality of the macro phenomena in question” (274), which, according to Knöbl, leads Mayntz into a kind of macrosociological skepticism. But this skepticism regarding the “basic principles of social reality” (275) is running danger to misconceive social reality just as much as a complementary historico-philosophical dogmatism. Knöbl interprets Joas’ attempt to turn the concept of contingency itself into the central macrosociological methodologeme on the basis of pragmatism and historicism as a possible solution to this dilemma. The (Hegelian) objective laws of historical progress that keep making an

impact on macro-sociology could then finally be abandoned “in favor of analyzing the specific contextual conditions of the formation and generation of newly appearing social processes” (295) (– a historicism almost reminiscent of Foucault). Knöbl then points out that while Joas has not yet performed this turn towards a “contingency sensitive macrosociology” (300), it is hinted at in his more recent work. Contingency then would play the role of “the macrosociological counterpart to the creativity of action” (307).

- 17 While overall the anthology is inspiring in every respect, it must be critically remarked that it does not take note of earlier attempts to join historicism and pragmatism, as for example Ferdinand Fellmann’s ambitious project to move Wilhelm Dilthey’s philosophy close to Peirce, James and Dewey (see Fellmann 1991). The recent international discussion regarding the relevance of pragmatism for qualitative social research (for a resume e.g. Frega 2011) could also have enriched some of the contributions.
- 18 A concluding question concerns the tacit assumption of most authors (who herein follow Joas) that pragmatism can be adequately interpreted as *action theory*. In stark contrast to Richard Bernstein’s attempt to distinguish action from practice (see Bernstein 1971) by arguing that practice was never able to shed the Marxist legacy of objective determinants whereas action connotes free and self-opinionated actors, I think that pragmatism is described more accurately as a theory of practice than a theory of action. Aristotle considers practice as an act that is collective, contingent (he repeatedly classifies it as that realm of being where things could always be different), and an end in itself that can be neither reduced to extra-practical foundations nor ever entirely transparent on a theoretical level (see Hetzel 2008). From the perspective of philosophical action theories (and I suspect that theories of communicative and creative action are included here), a subject that already exists prior to practice makes use of specific means to realize its intentions by manipulating social situations in accordance with social norms. In this manner, actions are ultimately conceptualized as based on the acting subject, and in so doing the subject is elevated to a condition of possibility of action. Joas and his followers in their self-characterization as action theorists seem to pursue precisely this legacy adopted from Weber and Habermas. But this is a difficult legacy to reconcile with classic pragmatism, which is centered on a concept of experience that rejects the idea of an autonomously acting subject. Experience in general constitutes e.g. for Dewey a “complete interpenetration of self and world of objects and events” (Dewey 2005: 18), an interpenetration that no longer allows to distinguish a subject-pole of experience from an object-pole on more than a merely heuristic level. With direct reference to James, Dewey writes: “Experience is ‘double-barreled’ in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality” (Dewey 1958: 8). The “place” of experience for Dewey lies in the act of experiencing itself rather than within the subject that makes the experience. One could say that Dewey unfounds or desubjectivates experience: experience as “doing and undergoing in alternation” (Dewey 2005: 46) can’t be adequately described in terms of action theory nor perception theory. While making an experience, the subject does not exist beforehand in order to later make an experience, but emerges only *along with it*: it is undergoing rather than actively “making” the experience.
- 19 This conceptual design corresponds more to theoretical endeavors like Whitehead’s process philosophy, Cornelius Castoriadis’ theory of a social imaginary, the actor-



networktheory (on its pragmatist legacy most recently Wieser 2012), the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (whose proximity to pragmatism is pointed out in Rölli 2008) or a deconstructivist social theory (see Mouffe 1996) than to the action-theoretical tradition that for Joas includes authors like Parsons, Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies and Simmel. His creative action is an *addition* to the rationally and normatively orientated actions this tradition explores much rather than a transgression of the action theoretical framework as such. I don't mean to imply that the subject- and action-critical tradition I have cited above is the only possible alternative to action theory. I do believe, however, that a dialogue between subject-critical theories of practice and subject-centered theories of action would deepen the socialtheoretical reception of pragmatism beyond the scope of what the – otherwise groundbreaking – contributions of *Handlung und Erfahrung* have already accomplished.<sup>1</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Translated by Julia Schleinkofer

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