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Pragmatism and the Social Sciences

A Century of Influences and Interactions, vol. 1

Roberto Frega and Filipe Carreira da Silva

- 1 The history of the influences and interactions between pragmatism and the social sciences is as rich as it has been neglected as a field of research. This volume – the first of a series of two – tries to explore both historically and theoretically some of these multiple relationships, building upon the assumption that pragmatism has been one of the philosophical traditions that have taken most seriously the study of the social. In fact, since its origins classical American pragmatism has been a philosophy resolutely open to the social sciences. Not only pragmatists have been actively engaged in social scientific research themselves (think of W. James, J. Dewey, G. H. Mead, C. Morris), but they have also conceived of the birth and development of the social sciences as one of the most innovative traits of modern society, the one truly capable of incarnating the pragmatist conception of the scope of knowledge within human experience. It was mostly to social sciences, in fact, that pragmatist philosophers, social scientists, and reformers such as J. Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, L. Trilling, S. Hook, W. Mills turned to in order to find the analytical categories that could make philosophical thinking more attuned to the transformations changing contemporary societies. At the same time, the social sciences have always looked at pragmatism as a philosophy that offers useful critical tools for making sense of social, cultural and political practices and institutions.
- 2 If we look at this rich exchange from the perspective of pragmatism as a philosophical tradition, the following two dimensions are worth noticing. The first concerns the very idea of what is philosophy, what are its main goals, which are its methods. Contrary to what had been done in philosophy before pragmatism and contrary to what will be done afterwards, the pragmatists have shaped their philosophical understanding through a dialogue with the social sciences. Indeed, pragmatism evolved at a time when the social sciences – most notably sociology, psychology, anthropology and economics – were beginning to differentiate themselves from the common tree of philosophy. The pragmatists have generally been aware of the great potential embedded in the new social sciences. James and Mead travelled to Europe to learn about the new experimental psychology to which they contributed in a significant manner, while

Dewey never tired to celebrate the importance of the social sciences in thinking and giving shape to a more inclusive, just and human world. In addition, one has to remark that pragmatism itself as a philosophy was developed and deeply influenced by the epistemological rupture brought about by the genesis and disciplinary constitution of the social sciences: at a time when most of the European philosophical traditions were looking at the hard sciences as the new paradigm for a scientific philosophy, pragmatism saw in the rise of the social sciences a new approach to the understanding and the control of social life. For a philosophical tradition determined to sever the ancient bond with the representational conception of knowledge, the social sciences were delivering materials and methods pointing toward an engaged, transformational and emancipatory conception of philosophy: the new sciences of education, society, politics, urban studies, social psychology and anthropology offered pragmatist philosophers new understandings of the role of, as well as of the nature of, philosophy as an academic discipline. While the self image of mainstream European and American philosophy was being shaped by its ancillary dependence from the hard sciences and while the new social sciences were shaping their identity through the disciplinary opposition to philosophy, pragmatists were trying to explore the unbeaten and uncertain path of a social philosophy that wished to blur the institutional boundaries between science and practice, descriptive and normative sciences, knowledge and action, academic research and active engagement. This program, as some of the papers included in this volume show, is gaining new currency.

- 3 A second lesson that pragmatism has learnt from the social sciences has been to take the social dimension seriously. The social sciences taught pragmatists how to think about the social, how to incorporate the social dimension in their educational, political, logical, and aesthetic thought. This is mostly visible in Dewey's and Mead's philosophies. But the importance of the social dimension can also be easily traced back to James's thought, and – though less distinctly – to Peirce's conception of social impulse and his notion of the social dimension of inquiry. This theme, so powerfully chased out of philosophy for more than fifty years, is becoming prominent again, which helps explaining the growing interest among philosophers of different kinds in pragmatism. At a time when so many are turning to the practices and to the social as central explanatory philosophical categories, one should perhaps give a fresh look to the pragmatist texts, where the epistemological primacy of practices and the centrality of the social had so powerfully been articulated well before the practices and the social were (re)-discovered.
- 4 At the same time, one can see that this process of learning has proceeded also in the opposite direction. In what concerns the contributions of American philosophical pragmatism to the social sciences, four main ideas can be singled out. The first has to do with the conception of human beings as meaning-making organisms. Human beings relate with the surrounding environment (including physical and social objects), as well as the past and the future, by means of the symbolic representations they make of those objects and categories. The social order, no less than the moral, political or economic orders, thus has an inextricably symbolic character. However, contrary to the social constructivism that dominated social sciences discourse from the 1980s onwards, which often portrayed human agency as uncoerced, classical philosophical pragmatism has always insisted upon the constitutive nature of these symbolic constructions: in other words, human agency is simultaneously enabled and constrained by institutions such as the state – states allow for more complex forms of cooperative life than any

other organizational arrangement but can be, nevertheless, extremely powerful sources of coercion. This important insight is usually accompanied by an interest in language. Especially after the 1960s, social scientists gradually become more interested in human linguistic forms of communication, from the post-structuralist view of discourse as a form of power and domination to the critical theory's interest in disentangling communicative forms of action and rationality from their strategic and instrumental counterparts. Again, as the case of the discourse ethics developed by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel illustrates, the influence of classical American philosophical pragmatism was pivotal. In this issue, almost every paper touches upon at least one of these contributions. But pragmatism's contributions extend beyond the emphasis on language and the symbolic nature of reality.

- 5 As a process philosophy, pragmatism has exerted a notable influence upon those interested in superseding rigid dualistic modes of thinking. In disciplines like sociology or political science the pervasiveness of dualisms such as individual/society or mind/body has been a reality for the better part of the last century. Critical voices within those disciplines have often found in pragmatism an important ally to overcome such dualistic modes of thinking. A good example of this tendency is James Johnson's article, where he questions a number of persisting dualisms in political science (more below). A final relevant contribution of philosophical pragmatism to contemporary social sciences refers to the crucial link between science and democracy. A classical theme among pragmatists such as Dewey or Mead, the emphasis on the internal relation between science as a problem-solving cooperative activity and democracy as a form of life has been appropriated and reconstructed by, among others, deliberative democrats of the Habermasian sort. As such, pragmatism has been a shaping force in contemporary political theory. These are, of course, but a few examples of the contributions made by pragmatism to work in the social sciences. But they suffice to help us make the point that social scientists, both more empirically or theoretically oriented, in the US and elsewhere, have been drawing upon the intellectual resources of American philosophical pragmatism in various ways. Though never a dominant influence in mainstream social science, pragmatism has nevertheless proved to be a valuable ally for those willing to critically engage with those dominant modes of thinking.
- 6 The way we have organized this issue reflects this particular mode of engagement between philosophical pragmatism and the social sciences. The issue is composed of three main sections. The first includes papers that offer general reflections upon the various ways in which pragmatism has influenced social science research. As noted above, although pragmatism was never a central influence in the social sciences over the course of the twentieth century, pragmatist ideas did impact certain social fields and sub-disciplines. A case in point is the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism (SI), whose philosophical tenets are explicitly pragmatist. But this can hardly be said to have been the case in other sociological traditions, let alone in other, more "positive," social sciences, such as economics or political science. This is exactly where Peter Manicas, with his "American Social Science: The Irrelevance of Pragmatism", starts off. Manicas builds his case against a "good deal of received opinion" according to which American pragmatism has been a strong influence in social sciences in the US. His argument is that there is hardly any evidence to support such a claim. On the contrary, mainstream American social science has evolved in relative isolation from the ideas of pragmatist authors such as Peirce, James and Dewey.

Pragmatism was simply incompatible with the positivistic outlook of the mainstream. Yet, now that positivism has definitively declined, Manicas believes that there is much for social scientists in America to learn from the only philosophical tradition created and developed in that country. The second paper is by Patrick Baert and is entitled “Neo-Pragmatism and Phenomenology: A Proposal.” Here we are offered a pragmatist-inspired proposal for a philosophy of social sciences that rejects foundationalism, naturalism and representationalism while emphasizing self-understanding. Baert’s strategy is to reconcile American philosophical pragmatism with the work of the Continental European hermeneutics of Gadamer, Levinas and Sartre, something he does very convincingly. His neo-pragmatist social theory is one of the most innovative approaches in the field today. The first group of papers ends with Eugene Halton’s “Pragmatic E-Pistols,” where we are offered a number of imaginary letters addressed to several key figures of classical American philosophical pragmatism, including William James, Charles Peirce, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey. Especially noteworthy is the way in which Halton intertwines his own ideas with those of his imaginary addressees thus bringing those “classics” ideas back to the present.

- 7 If this first group of papers discusses the relatively marginal role of pragmatist ideas in the development of social science, the second group revolves around the question of how pragmatism has nevertheless helped empowering various marginalized groups in society. In this second group of contributions, politically hot issues such as power, legality, politics and social exclusion are addressed. The first paper, by Susan Haack, is entitled “Pragmatism, Law, and Morality: The Lessons of *Buck v. Bell*” and it discusses the key pragmatist ideas by reference to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ legal thinking and practice. In particular, she offers a detailed analysis of the 1927 *Buck vs. Bell* case, in which the forced sterilization of an institutionalized woman, Carrie Buck, was at stake. By a majority of 8-1, the Supreme Court decided that sterilizing Carrie Buck did *not* constitute a violation of her fundamental constitutional rights. The fact that was Holmes who wrote the ruling for the majority provides Haack with an opportunity to discuss at length the potentials and limitations of legal pragmatism. This relation between philosophical ideas and pressing real-world legal and moral issues, such as those raised by the eugenics programs implemented in the US and various European countries from the early twentieth century well into the 1970s, ties in nicely with Patricia Hill Collins’s “Piecing Together a Genealogical Puzzle: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism.” As Collins explains, intersectionality, a term first coined in the late 1980s by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a “knowledge project” that revolves around a number of shared ideas, namely “(1) how race, class, gender and sexuality constitute intersecting systems of power; (2) how specific social inequalities that reflect these power relations from one setting to the next; (3) how identities of race, gender, are socially constructed within multiple systems of power; and (4) how social problems and their remedies are similarly constructed within intersecting systems of power.” A genealogy of this intersectionalist discourse in American social sciences is then systematically confronted with the genealogy of pragmatist ideas around three key issues, experience, social inequalities and social action. From this genealogical reconstruction, Collins is then able to identify a number of paths not yet taken by either theoretical tradition, in what must certainly be one of the most valuable contributions in this issue. A similar concern with bringing excluded voices into the academic conversation is found in Bill Lawson’s “Of President Barack H. Obama and Others: Public Policy, Race-talk, and Pragmatism.” Focusing on the case of African-

Americans, Lawson makes use of W. E. B. Du Bois's seminal 1903 *Souls of Black Folk* to critically re-examine Barack Obama's color-blind public policies. Lawson's claim is that Obama's universalistic approach will have a detrimental impact on the social and economic standing of African Americans. One solution to such an unintended and undesired consequence is a pragmatic understanding of race, which would help Obama to see why we still need both race-talk and race conscious policies. Race, socioeconomic inequality, and human rights are but three examples of a critical agenda in the social sciences that philosophical pragmatism has been helping to foster in the US and abroad.

- 8 This examination of the ways in which practitioners outside philosophy have appropriated pragmatist ideas is continued in the final section of the issue, where the cases of sociology, social psychology, political science, economics, and psychiatry are discussed. In his paper "Towards a social externalism: Pragmatism and ethnomethodology," Louis Queré offers us a stimulating analysis of the complicated reception of G. H. Mead's ideas by ethnomethodologists. Queré's argument is that the willingness by ethnomethodologists to distance themselves from symbolic interactionists has contributed to prevent them from engaging more productively with Mead, the "founding father" of SI. In particular, Queré directs his attention to the ethnomethodologists's critique of Mead's social psychology alleged "externalism," which he rightly dismisses. Queré's historical journey thus helps us recall one important truth, namely that disciplinary boundaries and allegiances can obfuscate or even block otherwise fruitful encounters. Mead's pragmatism is also discussed in Mitchell Aboulafia's "Through the Eyes of Mad Men: Simulation, Interaction, and Ethics," a critical re-examination of simulation theory, which has gained huge currency among neuroscientists as a way of explaining how we attribute mental states and predict human behavior. Aboulafia's critical engagement with simulation theory draws on Mead's theory of the social self with a view not only to highlight weaknesses in simulation theory, but also to assist in addressing ethical questions in a more sophisticated and comprehensive way than simulation theory. Given the current buzz around neurosciences, this is an important and timely discussion. The following paper, "Between Political Inquiry and Democratic Faith: A Pragmatist Approach to Visualizing Publics," takes us to the field of political science. James Johnson's starting point is the 1930s debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey on democracy. Johnson shares the latter's concern with the public dissemination of social and political knowledge, which Dewey saw as one of the functions of a pragmatist science of politics. Johnson pays particular attention to the conditions under which social and political research is presented. He uses the example of the emergence of AIDS activism in the US during the mid-1980s, in which a pragmatist preoccupation with rendering the epidemic and its sources visible to the public could be discerned, to illustrate the claim that political scientists have much to gain from an increased awareness of the importance of the ways in which they presents their findings as well as themselves. The influence of Dewey's political pragmatism is also to be found in Kenneth Stikkers's paper, "Dewey, Economic Democracy, and the Mondragon Cooperatives." The key insight here explored is the application of Deweyan radical democratic ideas to the economic sphere: human growth vs. economic growth; bottom-up, evolutionary economics versus ideological, utopian economics; empirical, experimental science versus ideology posing as "science." But where can one find concrete applications of Dewey's ideas in the economic sphere? Certainly not in the US, where the economy is largely dominated

by the principles of autocratic corporate governance; Stikkers's alternative was to turn to Europe in order to find an example of Deweyan economy. The example he finds is the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation, a network of largely worker cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. The Mondragon, with its principles of workers as owners; owners as workers; democratic governance; reasonable wage differentials; distribution of profits according to a fixed formula; cooperation among cooperatives; distrust of state interference; profit is not an end in itself, but a means to securing employment and a better life for workers; environmental stewardship; and education for democratic economic life, provides an excellent example of Deweyan economy, although neither pragmatism generally nor Dewey in particular has influenced the shaping of that conglomerate. The last paper of this issue deals with the impact of pragmatist ideas upon an entirely different domain, psychiatry. David H. Brendel's "Can Patients And Psychiatrists Be Friends? A Pragmatist Viewpoint" discusses how pragmatist ideas can help negotiate the tension between the psychiatrists and patients around the apparently but indeed central theme of friendship. The author's "clinical pragmatism" is situated between modernist and postmodernist accounts of truth, action and pragmatism. The paper ends with an extension of the author's early work concerning the contribution of pragmatism for good psychiatric practice. As such, this will be of interest to many outside humanities and the social sciences – and an added value to this issue.

- 9 The continued impact of pragmatist philosophical ideas in other areas of scientific inquiry, throughout the twentieth century in both sides of the Atlantic, is well illustrated in the various papers included here. From psychiatry to economics and political science, from psychology to sociology, there were numerous encounters between that philosophical tradition and other areas of social scientific research. Granted, there is room for improvement, as pragmatism never really attained the status of mainstream influence in any of those disciplines. Yet the past decade has been witness to a steady and consistent increase of the currency of pragmatist themes and ideas in various fields, in particular in Europe. It is with a note of optimism that we conclude this introduction and invite our readers to peruse into this issue as they will certainly find numerous motives of interest in the excellent pieces now brought to the public.

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