

PERSPECTIVES

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CONFERENCE RECAP

New Directions in Pragmatism*B. Robert Owens, University of Chicago*

The Pragmatism and Sociology Conference, held August 21, 2015, at the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago, drew a crowd of approximately 120. The conference was organized by Christopher Winship, Christopher Muller, Neil Gross, John Levi Martin, and Robert Owens, and co-sponsored by Andrew Abbott. The conference was part of a crowded slate of pre-ASA events, including the Junior Theorists' Symposium, also hosted at the University of Chicago. These overlapping events created challenges for organizers and potential attendees alike. As the conference drew much more interest than initially anticipated, we had to decide whether to change our venue, our budget and, most importantly, our conception of the conference midstream. When registrations rose above 100 (we expected 30-50 at the outset), the organizers were faced with an apparent trade-off between two Deweyan ideals we valued equally highly: openness to all, and the opportunity for all to participate actively in the conference's intellectual exchanges. We decided to err on the side of openness, and ultimately we were able to seat everyone who signed up through the conference website. Happily, the level of the conversation also remained high throughout the day, and short presentations followed by long discussion periods allowed for meaningful audience participation.

The conference began with a strong sense of opportunity and purpose. Winship's welcoming address harkened back to a similar conference held a few years ago at Harvard, along with the candid assessment that "in an important sense that effort failed." An explicit goal of this year's conference, therefore, was to clarify the place

of pragmatist thought in the discipline of sociology, and to encourage substantial follow-up after the conference. Efforts in that direction are ongoing. In this short review, I give more allusions than explanations of the papers' arguments, and I hope interested readers will follow up with the papers, which remain available on the conference website: <http://sociology.uchicago.edu/pragmatismconf/papers.shtml>.

Conference panels were organized around several themes: (1) theory and evidence, (2) agency and action, (3) methodological implications, (4) pragmatism and fields of study, and (5) valuation. But the thematic conversations that dominated the day's conversations cut across these panels. The crowd continually returned to several themes: the meaning and relevance of "orthodoxy" in pragmatism; the normative implications of pragmatist thought; and what, if anything, was the pragmatic value of the conference itself. The last question was raised persistently, even urgently, in Winship's opening remarks, in Abbott's comments after the first panel, and by Susan Silbey in one of the final comments of the day. We arrived at no conclusive answer, although an authentic resolution of that point was probably always beyond the scope of the single day's proceedings. It will be borne out in months and years to come.

The applications of pragmatism to contemporary empirical work were on display in several of the presentations, notably those by Mario Small (on those to whom people turn for social support), Matthew Desmond (an ethnography of the process of eviction), and

Adam Seligman (on non-profit pedagogy and practice). Small's paper was an elegant reminder of that how we conceptualize action matters even in apparently very simple, descriptive contexts. When people turn to others for help, their action orientations may be instrumental, affective, or pragmatist—but we cannot coherently say that they are all three. Desmond took on a vastly more complex empirical setting—the production and perpetuation of a city slum—but, like Small, argued that excessive abstraction can lead us astray when we aim to understand why and how people act. Small, Desmond, and Seligman all argued that linking social research to social interventions was perhaps a more authentically pragmatist concern than linking social research to pragmatist theory. Their talks thereby compelled us to think seriously about the normative content of the interventions they described, and initiated a discussion of the normative implications of pragmatism that would recur throughout the day.

Notwithstanding Small's, Desmond's, and Seligman's important arguments, there was little apparent appetite for working out, at a theoretical level, a statement of contemporary and applied sociological pragmatism. Martin set the tone on this point early on when he suggested that pragmatist ideas are sufficiently distant from our normal habits of thought that we must continue to read the classics—we cannot trust ourselves to get pragmatism right if we unmoor ourselves from them. This set an extended conversation on orthodoxy—what it means, and whether we should value it—into motion.

In the day's classics-heavy, norm-inflected discussions, Dewey clearly emerged as the thinker of single greatest interest to the crowd. Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans made a case for Peircian semiotics as the key basis for

a pragmatist theory of action, and James, Mead, and Rorty each merited mention in at least a couple of papers. The discussion of symbolic interactionism was limited to a single extended exchange. Yet throughout the day, the discussion of Dewey was the most sustained and perhaps also the most detailed and conceptually rigorous.

The papers by Neil Gross and Hannah Waight (on Dewey's view of social science), Ann Mische (on Dewey as a resource for understanding future-oriented action), and Dan Huebner (on Mead's view of history) all explored how the classics continue to act as valuable resources for contemporary questions. Gross and Waight argued that Dewey's interest in social action did not amount to an intended "basis for a social theoretical paradigm" and that his experimentalism may entail stronger disapproval of our current methods and standards of proof than we usually admit. Mische argued, conversely, not that we have been invoking Dewey when we shouldn't, but that we haven't when we usefully could. Dewey in *Human Nature and Conduct* theorized about the "cognitive and emotional processes" by which we think about our future—a line of inquiry that Mische herself is pioneering in the present and one that opens up many further opportunities for important sociological work. Huebner made the case for Mead as a productive resource for thinking through the conceptual and definitional challenges that are never finally put to rest in historically-oriented social science.

Pragmatism is a sprawling intellectual movement with branches running in different directions within and outside of sociology. At the conference we fell into certain habits of thought about pragmatism that focused our discussions while simultaneously stripping

away much of pragmatism's complexity. This was probably an inevitable development, and it brought with it clear benefits but also limitations. In addition to the focus on Dewey, two further narrowing assumptions about pragmatism that took hold seemed especially salient to me.

First, the conference was above all about pragmatism and American sociology. The specific contours of our national discipline structured the ongoing discussions of how to use pragmatism—this was evident, for example, in Steven Hitlin's paper on social psychology as the most (but in some ways the least) pragmatist sub-discipline of sociology, and in Daniel Silver's account of his intellectual journey into sociology after writing a dissertation on Kant and Heidegger. No one has done more to establish the significance of pragmatism to contemporary social theory and empirical sociology than Hans Joas, and his influence was certainly felt at the conference. Joas's former students Huebner and Silver were among the presenters, and almost half of the presented papers cited his work. But the focus on specifically national disciplinary concerns in the conference discussions marked a significant departure from Joas's frequent efforts to put pragmatist theory in dialogue with trends in German social theory and philosophy. For all the richness of international sociology that was thus left aside, this move helped to provide focus to the conference, and it was in a way even an exciting intellectual development. While pragmatism developed and took root in the United States, the Americanism of the conference represented a maturation of sociological pragmatism independent of the interests and ideas of its preeminent contemporary expositor.

A second, related habit of thought that became visible over the course of the day was the

treatment of rational choice theory as the assumed foil to pragmatist explanations in social science. Winship's paper and commentary by Josh Whitford complicated the dichotomy, but rational choice seemed to remain the dominant assumed interlocutor for much of the time. In one moment of productive tension, Desmond had to clarify in response to a question from the floor that rational choice theory was not the "big bad wolf" he was contesting in his ethnography. I suspect that the costs of this particular habit of thought outweighed the benefits—that is, our collective tendency to set up pragmatism in opposition to rational choice theory may have concealed more than it revealed. By setting our sights on an opponent that was too easily dismissed in simplistic caricature, we perhaps passed over some opportunities to flesh out the finer points of pragmatist epistemology, as outlined in Isaac Reed's challenging paper, and the very practical matter of how to learn and theorize pragmatically, Richard Swedberg's topic.

Several of the papers provided fascinating glimpses of pragmatism's boundaries and points of contact with other traditions, albeit in a somewhat chaotic fashion. Abbott discussed how the arrival on the scene of another intellectual movement (developmental psychology) fundamentally altered the trajectory of pragmatism between the generation of James and Peirce and that of Mead and Dewey. Nina Eliasoph used pragmatism to attempt to clarify a core concept in the institutional logics literature. Philip Gorski presented a challenging argument about pragmatist metaphysics and pragmatism's relationship to critical realism—challenging because, as he noted, a common argument and common assumption about pragmatism is that it is fundamentally anti-metaphysical. Reed pointed out in the discussion that we sociologists often rely heavily on Bourdieu's

key theoretical terms in theoretical discussions, and some of those terms—habitus and reflexivity—bear strong family resemblances to pragmatist concepts of habit and creativity. An exchange between Reed and Ann Swidler signaled that working out pragmatism's relation to Bourdieu's field theory remains an important unresolved project in sociological theory—one of several productive loose ends left open at the close of the conference.

As for what may come out of the conference, two possibilities are in play. One is a published volume that might distill the common ideas developed in the papers and the day's discussions. The goal would be to provide an agenda-setting statement on the place of pragmatism in contemporary sociology with a more systematic presentation of the key themes than the conference format was able to provide. The second possible outgrowth of the conference is a website to serve as a focal point for discussions of the pragmatist canon—a more dynamic version of a traditional “reader.”

Both ideas are still in early development, and of course both entail the risk of failure through confusion, fragmentation, or simply failure to attract attention. The range of possible outcomes for a website seems especially large, given that there are few models to follow. But the pragmatist ethos embodied in Dewey's writings on democracy is experimental and open-ended, and it seems to favor certain features of a website as a follow up to the conference, which could draw on the wisdom of the crowd and could evolve continuously. Gorski motivated his conference paper with an opening reference to a debate that took place on a blog—a compelling reminder that in consequential ways our scholarly communication system already relies on informal online channels. Those of us who are invested in seeing a clear, rigorous, and useable sociological pragmatism develop as a mainstay of the discipline may be well served to embrace experimentalism in this realm as well as others.