

*Historicism in Pragmatism:
Lessons in Historiography and Philosophy*

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Abstract: Pragmatism involves simultaneous commitments to modes of inquiry that are philosophical and historical. This paper begins by demonstrating this point as it is evidenced in the historicist pragmatisms of William James and John Dewey. Having shown that pragmatism focuses philosophical attention on concrete historical processes, the paper turns to a discussion of the specific historiographical commitments consistent with this focus. This focus here is on a pragmatist version of historical inquiry in terms of the central historiographical categories of the object of historical inquiry and mode of historical periodization. After describing the basic historiographical consequences of pragmatism's historicism, the paper then moves to a discussion of the philosophical results of this historicism. The focus here is on the role that historical inquiry can play in the general philosophical perspective of pragmatism as well as on some recent texts that exemplify the dual pragmatist commitment to philosophy and history.

It is often said that pragmatists are committed to a historicist way of thinking. This means that pragmatists understand things as historically situated and temporally

conditioned. This point can be understood in terms of pragmatism's approach to traditional philosophical themes: pragmatists theorize concepts such as truth and meaning in ways that prioritize historical context in our ascriptions of truth and interpretations of meaning. This point can also be understood from a more sociological perspective: pragmatists are often described as attempting to reconstruct philosophy in light of evolutionary theory's emphasis upon contingent change and this results in a thoroughgoing philosophical historicism.

Yet another way of putting the point that pragmatism is a form of historicism is to focus attention on a characteristic temperament which pervades pragmatism: I am thinking of the meliorism at the heart of the pragmatist vision. A melioristic focus on progress is central for all of the thinkers generally acknowledged as pragmatists. It is exhibited in Peirce's concept of evolutionary love, in James's constant attention to the meliorating effect of strenuous efforts, and in Dewey's central concept of growth—and if we extend the pragmatist canon outward in either direction we also discern meliorism, for example in Rorty's neopragmatist vision of a culture of hope or in certain protopragmatist images of Emerson's such as his description of experience as a series of expanding concentric circles.¹ In each case, meliorism implies a commitment to temporal progress and, therefore, a variety of historicism. The meliorist project of improving our situation on the basis of possibilities extant within it can only take place by considering where one finds oneself, how one got there, and where one can go from there. Meliorism, in other words, means taking historicity seriously.

¹ On the centrality of meliorism for pragmatism see my earlier article Koopman (2006) and my forthcoming book Koopman (2009). Some of the central themes developed in the early chapters of the book are presented in telescoped form in the first section of the present article while the other sections draw out some important consequences not addressed in detail in the book.

Historicism is in these three ways a central element in the pragmatist temperament. Yet despite these obvious ways in which pragmatism lends itself to a historicist way of thinking, this aspect of pragmatism is rarely given sufficient attention by commentators and philosophers today. From the pragmatist perspective, such lack of attention can hardly be dismissed as benign—for it means that pragmatists are not focusing their efforts on developing a central aspect of their own philosophy. This may lead to negative consequences both in terms of underdevelopment of the potentialities inherent in historicism and in terms of misconstruing the kinds of philosophical and cultural criticism fluid with the wider pragmatist vision. A more thorough book-keeping in this respect is thus warranted not only for obvious reasons of complete scholarship. It is also warranted, I believe, because a more energetic approach to pragmatism's historicism will enable us to more effectively deploy pragmatism for the historical, political, and philosophical uses to which we will put it in coming years. In other words, pragmatists can do their work better as pragmatists if they pay more attention to the historicist themes central to their own way of thinking.

This article explores exactly what it means for pragmatism to take historicism seriously. I approach this topic from two angles. I *first* explicate exactly what pragmatism's historicism amounts to—what pragmatist historicism is and what it does. I focus this angle by explicating pragmatist historicism in terms of what I will call transitionalism. Transitionalism emphasizes that we always find ourselves in the midst of historical and temporal transitions—we are in continuous flow. Following this explication of pragmatist historicism, I *second* turn to some consequences. The most important consequence is that pragmatist inquiry must take place on two fronts: it must

be simultaneously philosophical and historical. What kind of history does this involve and what practices of philosophy is it consistent with? Concerning transitionalism's implications for historiography, I argue that the study of history must be philosophically informed. To show what this might mean, I consider three central historiographical issues in the light of pragmatist philosophy. Concerning the implications of transitionalism for philosophy, I argue that pragmatists would do well to approach their work in a manner that is historically engaged. To flesh this out, I will describe three positions recently taken by pragmatist political philosophers which I believe excellently exemplify the kind of historical engagement I am calling for.

Historicism or Transitionalism in Pragmatism

In claiming pragmatism as a kind of historicism, my idea is that pragmatism locates each of its central concepts (practice, inquiry, experience, etc.) as transitional processes. Experience is not a thing, it is an event or a process. Experience happens, takes place, is temporally shot through. Experience is not a presence with its own substantial identity—it is rather wholly constituted by its relations to past and future. As one commentator puts it, for pragmatism, “the present *is not present*.”² Seemingly obscure, this view can rather straightforwardly be understood as the very plausible claim that historicity is essential to experience: experience is an affair of transitions, a stream “made of an alternation of flights and perchings.”³ James vividly described the historicity of human experience thus: “Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and

² Gavin 1992, 87

³ James 1890, I.243

sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively. It is 'of' the past, inasmuch as it comes expressly as the past's continuation; it is 'of' the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued it."⁴ We are, James is here suggesting, constantly unstilled, ever in motion, always streaming.

This was a recurring theme of James's career which found its earliest and clearest expression in his famous chapter on "The Stream of Thought" in *The Principles of Psychology*. The key idea which James's metaphor of the stream unleashed was that of consciousness's continuous change. Consciousness ever assumes two notable characteristics: it is in constant change⁵ and it is continuous⁶. Thought, like a stream, "flows". This means that the present does not constitute a presence so much as a focal point for experience's constant retrospective and prospective dartings: "The knowledge of some other part of the stream, past or future, near or remote, is always mixed in with our knowledge of the present thing... These lingerings of old objects, these incomings of new, are the germs of memory and expectation, the retrospective and the prospective sense of time. They give that continuity to consciousness without which it could not be called a stream."⁷

Once one starts looking for this transitional sensibility in James's writings, it begins to appear everywhere, almost as a kind of unstated master theme of his work. It appears in the subtitle of his book *Pragmatism* as well as in the account of truth set forth

⁴ James 1904, 212-3

⁵ James 1890, I.229ff.

⁶ James 1890, I.237ff.

⁷ James 1890, I.606

in its pages: “[Truth] marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.”⁸ It later turns out to be a key element of his radical empiricism as explicated in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth*: “the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience.”⁹ In sketching a metaphysics in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James wrote of a “distributed and strung-along and flowing sort of reality which finite beings swim in... and by reality here I mean reality where things *happen*, all temporal reality without exception.”¹⁰ In speaking on some of life’s ideals in his *Talks to Students*, James noted that “there must be *novelty* in an ideal,” which he explains in terms of evolving our moral universe from older into newer forms.¹¹ A particularly insightful example of James’s transitionalism occurs in his “The Moral Equivalent of War” where he argues that we ought to move from an older moral ideal of violent militarism toward a newer moral ideal of peaceful militarism.¹² This can be contrasted to less historically-attuned calls for replacing violence with peace. Such demands offer little in the way of concrete strategies since they present no third term which performs the temporal integration of the other two terms. In moving from violence to peace, where do we find the connection between the two that actually enables us to get from here to there? James’s alternative is valuable precisely because it offers a way of actually transitioning from violence to peace by way of reforming the mediating impulse of militarism. James does not simply tell us where we should end up, but rather he shows us how to get from here to there—clearly the more pragmatic approach.

⁸ James 1907, 35

⁹ James 1909a, 7

¹⁰ James 1909b, 558

¹¹ James 1899b, 656

¹² James 1910

Transitionalism was also a central element in Dewey's thinking. Of life itself Dewey wrote that it is "a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement towards its close."¹³ This transitionalism can be found throughout Dewey's writings: in his ethics, his logic, his epistemology, and in many other places besides.

In his *Ethics*, Dewey wrote that "at each point there is a distinction between an old, an accomplished self, and a new and moving self, between the static and the dynamic self." Elsewhere he claimed in similar meliorist spirit that "[m]orals means growth of conduct in meaning."¹⁴ Dewey in this way located morality as a process which consists in moving from a past problem to a future resolution. The point of moral philosophy, for Dewey, was not to determine an ideal principle of right which could be applied to any difficult moral situation, but rather was to develop practical strategies for bettering the difficult moral situations in which we so often find ourselves. This approach to ethics was perhaps most fully worked out by Dewey in his conception of democracy as a way of life.¹⁵

In his work on knowledge, Dewey evinced the same focus on process, transition, growth, and development as we find in his work on morality. In *The Quest for Certainty*, which is itself as much a work in intellectual history as in philosophy, "'Real' things may be as transitory as you please or as lasting in time as you please; these are specific differences like that between a flash of lightning and the history of a mountain range. In any case they are for knowledge 'events' not substances." Dewey's point here is that "the object of knowledge is eventual."¹⁶ Knowing, along with things known, is an event

¹³ Dewey 1934, 43

¹⁴ Dewey 1932, 306 and 1922, 194

¹⁵ This idea permeates Dewey's works from the early Dewey (1888) to the late Dewey (1939).

¹⁶ Dewey 1929, 103, 136

which takes place between an organism and an environment rather than a static quality of either mind or reality or their correspondence.

In taking a very general view of inquiry in his *Essays in Experimental Logic*, Dewey claimed that “a philosophical discussion of the distinctions and relations which figure most largely in logical theories depends upon a proper placing of them in their temporal context.” Thus thought itself is for Dewey historical insofar as it “comes between a temporally prior situation... and a later situation, which has been constituted out of the first situation by means of acting on the findings of reflective inquiry.”¹⁷ All inquiry (ethical, artistic, scientific) was for Dewey a transitional affair—a matter of moving an organism out of a problematic environment into a temporarily more stable situation. In his later *Philosophy and Civilization*, Dewey restated this point: “The life of all thought is to effect a junction at some point of the new and the old, of deep-sunk customs and unconscious dispositions, brought to the light of attention by some conflict with newly emerging directions of activity.”¹⁸ Throughout his career and in a variety of contexts, temporal transition can be seen to play a leading role in Dewey’s presentation of his own pragmatism.

Transitions were indeed crucial for all the classical pragmatists. The theme was as central for Mead, Addams, and Peirce as it was for James and Dewey.¹⁹ In this, transitionalism seems to be an unstated master theme of pragmatism. But as I have shown, it was stated, and over and over again by James, Dewey, and Mead. Thus it is pragmatism’s commentators, rather than the pragmatists themselves, who have neglected the transitionalist interplay between old and new that is central to the pragmatist way of

¹⁷ Dewey 1916, 320, 331; cf. Hickman 1992, 31-2.

¹⁸ Dewey 1928, 7

¹⁹ See Mead 1932, 88; Addams 1902, 13; Peirce 1868, 24 and 1892, 315

thinking. It has even recently been claimed that pragmatists are *not* historicist in their basic orientation.²⁰ Most commentators would, however, readily acknowledge pragmatism's claim to historicism. My concern is that very few have actually focused their attention on this theme. My central aim here is thus to give these themes the attention they really deserve. Before doing so, I wish to note a small handful of important exceptions who have lent energies toward explicating and detailing pragmatist historicism.

Discussions in recent decades of themes of historicity and temporality in pragmatism is best exemplified in the work not of pragmatist philosophers, but rather of pragmatist literary critics such as Richard Poirier (1987) and Jonathan Levin (1999) and pragmatist historians such as David Hollinger (1981) and James Livingston (1994). Hollinger, to take just one example for quotation, acutely observes that “[n]othing is more essential to an understanding of James than recognition of his commitment to the critical revision of *existing traditions*.”²¹ Hollinger here powerfully states an essential aspect of pragmatism. His claim is that pragmatism ever looks toward the revision of past performance toward future melioration. This is a decidedly transitionalist orientation.

While pragmatist philosophers have too often neglected this central idea of pragmatism, a few notable exceptions include John Smith, John J. McDermott, John Stuhr, Joseph Margolis, and Richard Rorty. Stuhr sees pragmatism as “a philosophy that takes moral orders to be temporal relations, that takes moral arrangements, directions,

²⁰ Tom Rockmore recently offers a clear challenge: “to the best of my knowledge, though pragmatists discuss history none of them sees claims to know as intrinsically historical” (2005, 266); cf. Novick 1988, 151 cited below.

²¹ Hollinger 1981, 20

and rankings to be temporal matters.”²² McDermott decisively claims that for pragmatism “[t]he manifestations of living occur in time.”²³ Smith regards as “basic” to pragmatism its “insistence on the reality of time, of change, of novelty and organic development.”²⁴ Margolis’s historicization of pragmatism is perhaps the fullest among contemporary offerings in his work on a pragmatism which postulates “that the world is a flux, that thinking is historicized, and that selves are socially constructed or have histories rather than natures.”²⁵ Finally, no less important for a broader reconstruction of pragmatist transitionalism would be the historicism at the heart of Richard Rorty’s neopragmatism (which for my purposes fits squarely in the pragmatist tradition, though some would argue that it does not). The idea is clearly featured, for instance, in Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* when he says in his Introduction of the book’s three heroes that, “the common message of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger is a historicist one.”²⁶ On this issue at least, Rorty easily and obviously is in company with every other important pragmatist.

But as I have already noted, despite these observations of pragmatist transitionalism, this aspect of James’s and Dewey’s thought remains largely neglected in the literature on pragmatism. This is unfortunate just insofar as this neglect can act as an impediment to developing the important consequences of pragmatism’s transitionalism. I would like to now turn to an initiating discussion of how these consequences might be developed along the two fronts of historiography and philosophy which transitionalism holds to be correlative with one another. In considering how we might develop the

²² Stuhr 1997, 178

²³ McDermott 1976, 102

²⁴ Smith 1992, 3

²⁵ Margolis 1999, 338

²⁶ Rorty 1979, 9

consequences of James's and Dewey's transitionalism, I will not draw on explicit discussions by these two pragmatists of issues in historiography and metaphilosophy. Rather, my approach will be to take the transitionalism just described and put it to work in the context of important contemporary debates amongst historians and philosophers concerning the status and value of their disciplines. In this way, I shall not only develop pragmatism's transitionalism, but at the same time be able to describe the relevance of pragmatism to certain key debates in contemporary philosophy and history.

Pragmatizing Historiography

In order that pragmatist philosophy may critically revise our existing traditions, pragmatists must work to explicate these traditions in terms of their precise historical content. This implies a philosophical commitment to historical research. At the same time, the historical research conducted under the banner of pragmatism must be conducted from within a historiography resonant with the central themes of pragmatist philosophy. What would such a historiography look like?²⁷

In order to understand the specific historiographical commitments that flow from pragmatism, one would have to take into account elements both explicit in the pragmatist transitionalism outlined above as well as other elements as yet only implicit. I would like to consider three such elements: this will enable me to place pragmatism in the context of three key contemporary historiographical debates. The debates in which these elements of a transitionalist historiography figure are the following: the objectivity versus relativism debate concerning central epistemological issues which impact historiography,

²⁷ Kloppenborg (2004) has answered this question by tracing the intellectual history of pragmatism's impact on the historical profession. I here answer this question by considering the philosophical implications of pragmatism for the historical profession. These two answers are natural allies.

an intramural debate amongst intellectual and cultural historians concerning the value of different modes and subject areas of historical research, and the important debate regarding the methodological status of periodization in historiography. Bringing pragmatism to bear in these debates yields a fairly thick pragmatist historiography which takes position on crucial epistemological and methodological issues relevant to the practice of historical inquiry.

The first element of a pragmatist historiography I will discuss flows from the pragmatist rejection of modern philosophy's quintessential split between facts and values. This claim on the part of pragmatism is by now so familiar that it need only be briefly summarized. The pragmatist claim is that what we hold to be factual and what we hold to be valuable are distinguishable but not dichotomous. If we change our values, then what we hold to be factually true of the world must change accordingly, just as a perceived change in what we take to be factually true of the world requires us to revise our values in light of the new evidence. Facts and values are intertwined such that they never function in total independence of one another.

This rejection of a strong split between facts and values inclines pragmatism to an epistemological emphasis on fallibilism, perspectivalism, probabilism, and other philosophical means of accommodating epistemic uncertainty. Pragmatism thus offers a middle way between epistemological foundationalism on the one hand and epistemological relativism on the other. This epistemological middle way is especially relevant for ongoing historiographical debates concerning the status of objectivity and relativism in historical scholarship. In his history of the history discipline, Peter Novick argues that this debate has always constituted the central historiographical issue for the

American historical profession. On the one side, the objectivists claim “a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction.”²⁸ On the other side, the relativists deny each of these claims and see history as largely driven by the subjective preferences of the discipline’s leading practitioners.

A historiography in tune with what Kloppenberg calls pragmatism’s philosophical *via media* would cut a fruitful middle way in this debate.²⁹ Novick himself suggests as much when he ends his book with a discussion of the historiographical proposals of two leading historians in whom both Kloppenberg and Novick detect a strong element of pragmatism: David Hollinger and Thomas Haskell. Both Hollinger and Haskell attempt “to stake out an epistemological ‘vital center’” and are thus pragmatists in Kloppenberg’s *via media* sense.³⁰ The important point is that their shared pragmatism does not so much reject objectivity as replace it with a more plausible epistemology focusing on the temporal interplay between narrower discipline-bound conversations and broader context-expanding experiences. If earlier historians “overdichotomized the difference between objectivity and subjectivity,” as is claimed in the influential essay on historiography by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, then the new pragmatist historiography abandons dichotomies in favor of a stance that acknowledges tensions between inseparable subjects and objects. As Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob argue, the middle way between objectivity and relativity is to be found in “a combination of

²⁸ Novick 1988, 1-2

²⁹ Kloppenberg 1986

³⁰ Novick 1988, 628; cf. Hollinger 1981, Haskell 1984, Kloppenberg 1989, and Kloppenberg 2004.

practical realism and pragmatism” which redescribes historical truth “as an interactive relationship between an inquiring subject and an external object.”³¹

Another way of describing pragmatism’s relevance for this key epistemological issue in historiography concerns the role of experience for the historian. According to the classical objectivistic conception, past experience functions as the reality about which the historian is trying to tell an accurate story. Experience is on this picture conceived as a foundational ground which the historian should attempt to mirror or form an adequate representation of. This objectivistic conception of experience has been subject to various important criticisms concerning the ontological status of and epistemological warrant for the precious foundation of original experience. The quickest way to mount these criticisms is to ask this question: if by definition we cannot have an experience of the past, then are not historians setting themselves an unreachable goal by requiring that their research form accurate representations of past experience? This and other criticisms have lead many historians away from objectivism and toward a relativistic conception according to which historical research is inevitably entangled in mediated linguistic constructions which offer us no access to immediate experiential foundations. Without the bedrock of past experience, the relativists argue, all we have to go on are the seemingly arbitrary pressures of semiotically-encoded archival materials and linguistically-enclosed disciplinary conversations. Historiography, many have noted, seems stuck on this epistemological fence between an untenable objectivism and an equally unacceptable relativism.³²

³¹ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 1994, 247, 283, 261

³² For historiographical discussions of empirical objectivity and linguistic relativity see Jay (1982) and Toews (1987). A more recent contribution looking through a different lens is offered by Roth (2007).

Pragmatism, because of its rejection of a dualism of facts and values, offers a way off this fence. Pragmatism affirms that our experience is shaped by two constraints. On the one hand it is made up of facts such that experience can play at least some stabilizing role in the normative assessment of historical inquiry. On the other hand the stuff of our experience is also the stuff of values such that experience cannot serve as a foundation on which historical inquiry ought to base itself. These facts and values inform one another in such a way that they are, once again, distinguishable but not dichotomous. Joan Scott, in a justly-famous article on these matters, argues that we must both “call into question [experience’s] originary status” and continue “to work with it, to analyze its operations and to redefine its meaning.”³³ Although Scott’s article does not venture a full response to this tension, the prospects it announces are enticing, and my view is that pragmatism can help us make good on this promise. Pragmatism retains experience by redeploying it as the site in which inquiries are experimentally tested instead of as the originary site in which inquiries must be grounded. Historical inquiry need not be mirror *of* experience but it must be usable *for* experience. Since experience itself is, for pragmatists, a stream for which both past and future are constitutive, the claim is that historical inquiry must enable us to focus on our existing traditions in such a way as to see them as having developed in the past and being capable of redevelopment in the future. Past experience cannot function by itself as the ground against which inquiry is normatively measured—but the past can function as a factual counterweight which our expressions of value concerning the future must tow along. The pragmatist holism of fact and value in this way implies a certain holism about past and future. With this holism in hand, pragmatism pushes historiographical epistemology beyond the tendency to slip into either

³³ Scott 1991, 797

tough-minded adherence to the rigidity of past fact or the tender-minded wishing for a valuable future. Pragmatism sees the flow of experience as caught precisely in the temporal interplay where these two positions are ever in tension with one another.

The second element in pragmatist historiography which I wish to discuss can be brought into focus by considering recent debates on the appropriate subject matter for historical research. Familiar conflicts in the discipline continue to rage between economic, social, diplomatic, biographical, intellectual, and cultural historians. In considering how a pragmatist historiography might weigh in here, it is helpful to take note of the way in which James, Dewey and Rorty all presented pragmatism in contrast to traditional philosophies whose histories they took much care to describe. Judging from the histories which the pragmatists themselves authored, it would seem that a pragmatist historiography would be at least minimally inclined toward intellectual history. This obvious affinity of pragmatism for intellectual history requires important qualifications that avoid certain pitfalls of classical conceptions of intellectual history. In a pragmatist historiography, intellectual history must be brought much closer to what is now practiced as cultural history.

That pragmatists themselves have amply contributed to intellectual history ought to be more widely acknowledged, in part because their important contributions have oddly not been recognized by many historians and philosophers. Novick, for example, very strongly claims that the pragmatists “paid practically no attention to historical issues and, when they did address them, did so very ambiguously.”³⁴ This claim, were it true, would make it enormously difficult to understand canonical pragmatist texts such as Dewey’s *Quest for Certainty* and *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Rorty’s *Philosophy and*

³⁴ Novick 1988, 151

the Mirror of Nature, and other works in the tradition such as George Herbert Mead's erudite and monumental *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*.³⁵ These books are as much contributions to intellectual history as to philosophy insofar as they trace the usage of various concepts and arguments whilst developing new viewpoints through historical redescription. If one were to cut out the intellectual historical scholarship from these texts, then they would be largely incomprehensible and also of little consequence. In explicitly affirming this crucial aspect of his own and Dewey's pragmatism, Rorty for one has argued that pragmatism lends itself to sweeping intellectual histories of the kind originally written by Hegel and Herder.³⁶

The important qualification to Rorty's claim which I wish to urge concerns the fact that pragmatists have not just practiced any old variety of intellectual history. In order to be a pragmatist about it, the intellectual historian must make an effort to not make too much of a distinction between intellectual theories and non-intellectual practices. The history of ideas practiced by most historians of philosophy will not do for most pragmatist purposes. Intellectual history of the pragmatist type must be inflected by the key pragmatist thought that our practices are informed by theory and thus laden with ideas such that our ideas are always implemented in some practical context. Important for a pragmatist historiography will be not only what the philosophers said about "truth" and "right", but also what the lawyers said about "legality", what business people said about "corporations", what painters said about "visuality", and what biologists said about "species". A pragmatist intellectual history of the early twentieth century, for example, would not only consider philosophical debates between idealists, realists, and

³⁵ Dewey 1929, 1920; Rorty 1979; and Mead 1936

³⁶ Rorty 1984

pragmatists, but would also take into account legal arguments about trusts, economic shifts focused around the emerging corporate form, visual shifts registered in cubism, and evolutionary themes as explicated by both biology and eugenics. A pragmatist intellectual history of the Civil War period, to take another example, would refer to Lincoln, Davis and Sherman in the same breath as Whitman, Armour, Agassiz. It would also give voice to humble figures in the battlefields, meatpacking plants, textile factories, universities, and courtrooms who helped develop the new practical formations of which these prominent names are our best symbols.

Pragmatism is on this point relevant to an internecine historiographical conflict which has been brewing over the past few decades. The familiar conflict between intellectual and cultural historians is often framed in terms of an opposition between histories of ideas and of cultures. But the pragmatist claim suggests that all cultural practices are always already informed by intellectual theories—the life of a culture is also the life of its minds. The appropriate subject matter for the intellectual historian concerns precisely the kinds of practices, institutions, and people which cultural historians have so valuably focused our attention upon. And so the historiographical dispute between the intellectual and cultural historians dissipates. This reconciliation will likely be greeted with more dismay amongst cultural historians than intellectual historians. For the latter long ago recognized the point that, again in Kloppenberg’s words, intellectual histories “trace the movement of ideas and values across domains, from religion to popular culture, from race to politics, from gender to the economy, as well as among those who made it their business to write books.”³⁷ Intellectual historians have for some time now affirmed the cultural historical claim that the history of ideas is at its best when it treats

³⁷ Kloppenberg 2004, 218; cf. Kloppenberg 1996 and 2002.

ideas in their broader cultural context or, as Jacques Barzun put it, when it “treats ideas as objects of ideas... [connected] with persons, events, emotions, and the muddy, unexamined ideas of the many.”³⁸ It bears noting, however, that intellectual historians may meet their own source of dismay in the apt claim of cultural historians that the historiography here urged implies methods of historical research that take us well outside of our comfortable libraries: the pragmatist historian presumably ought to peer not just at books, but also at receipts, films, photographs, tools, buildings, and all other manner of artifacts of the past.

The final element of a pragmatist historiography which I wish to consider here concerns its treatment to the ever-important historiographical question of periodization. This treatment is informed by pragmatism’s explicit endorsement of a carefully qualified presentism. For the pragmatist, presentism must be understood in terms of the idea that historical research should be motivated by problems which constitute the present in which we find ourselves already flowing. As Dewey put it, in writing history “there is no material available for leading principles and hypotheses save that of the historic present.”³⁹ Presentism has long been familiar to historians. Since pragmatism takes the present as nothing more than the confluence of past and future, it offers a novel approach to important historiographical questions about periodization. This is of no small consequence given the importance of periodization for historical inquiry. The importance

³⁸ Barzun 1967, 3; this piece is from a *festschrift* for pragmatist historian of philosophy John Herman Randall whose work (cf. 1958) clearly evidences this commitment to a culturally capacious history of ideas.

³⁹ Dewey 1938, 233

of this notion for history has been ably underscored by historian Martin Sklar: “historical context is in essence established by periodization.”⁴⁰

Our historical conception of periodization will be largely structured by our conception of historical change. Whether one looks at change through the lens of historical rupture or of historical fixity will influence one’s decisions regarding relations between different historical ages. In conceiving of the present as always looking both forward and backward, pragmatism refuses to countenance either *pure* historical difference or *pure* historical identity. Time does not admit of any great breaks, but neither does it admit of stasis. Time, for the pragmatist, flows. As a result of this conception of temporality, pragmatism offers a useful alternative to a third, much more long-standing, debate amongst professional historians. If it is true that, as Hans Blumenberg has argued, “the problem of epochs must be approached from the perspective of the question of the possibility of experiencing them,” then it follows for the pragmatist that epochs themselves must be flowing things which, like experience itself, are constructed out of the retrospective and prospective dartings that ever constitute the present moment.⁴¹

The historiography informing the last hundred years of American historical research could be seen as a pendulum which swings back and forth between an emphasis on temporal difference and an emphasis on temporal identity. The early years of professional history (1880 to 1910) were given to a historiography of homogeneity where the flow of time was viewed as continuous everywhere. After this, the era of the progressive historians (1910 to 1940) ushered in a historiographical commitment to

⁴⁰ Sklar 1992, 4

⁴¹ Blumenberg 1966, 466; I believe, though I cannot show it here, that Blumenberg’s central historiographical concept of “reoccupation” shares much with a pragmatist historiography.

rupture and discontinuity. The pendulum swung back and forth again in the latter half of the twentieth century, as the consensus historians of the mid-century (1940 to 1965) once again emphasized continuity only to be recently displaced by the radical historians of the century's twilight years (1965 to 2000).⁴² One interesting feature of this history of American historiography is that each side has claimed pragmatism as its ally—most notably, both the progressive historians and the consensus historians explicitly identified their work as pragmatist in orientation. This is because pragmatism is indeed congenial to both approaches—but only in more tempered forms.

Rather than describing history as alternating between periods of rupture and stability, the pragmatist conception of temporality envisions history as a process involving simultaneous differentiations and stabilizations. Historians too often employ categories of dynamic “watershed” ruptures and static “underlying currents” to do all of their explanatory work. But pragmatism offers a way out of the endless historiographical vacillation between revolutionist rupture and conservative fixity.

The pragmatist approach consists in looking at historical change through the lens of the inauguration and consolidation of cultural commitments. History is thus seen as always involving both differentiation and repetition. An example will be helpful. A pragmatist history of, say, the Progressive Era would emphasize both the profound shifts in American culture during this period as well as the continuous seams through which these shifts were negotiated. Such a history would not describe the Progressive Era as a watershed which decisively inaugurated an unbroken phase of American history from which we have yet to move past, or only moved past in the 1950s, or the 1980s, or, etc.. Rather, it would describe the Progressive Era as consolidating a set of decisive cultural

⁴² I am here basically borrowing from Novick's history of the profession (1988).

commitments which first gained currency around the time of the Civil War and which in the fifty long years afterward ushered in a different phase of historical stability which itself lasted at least through the end of the Second World War. In this way, the pragmatist periodizes historical time on the basis of cultural changes simultaneously profound and gradual.

The point, however, is most certainly not to force a philosophical abstraction onto historical reality. The point is to carve up historical time into different periods on the basis of our experienced commitments: the differentiations introduced by their inauguration and the stabilizations cemented by their consolidation. The pragmatist historian cannot write a viable history of the Progressive Era without considering the ways in which this era is both a continuation of and break from prior historical time. The Progressive Era, and this is the point which too many historians seem wary of, is not a concept that stands on its own historical feet. It has a presence, constitutes a historical reality, only as between its past and its future. The Progressive Era consolidated the commitment of the Civil War and at the same time inaugurated further commitments leading up to the New Deal. This phase of American history gains its presence and identity, congeals into the object of inquiry known as the Progressive Era, only by virtue of its transitional relations to these other historical times.

Pragmatist historiography thus holds together the historiographical alternation between rupture and repetition, by seeing both of these tendencies as constantly and simultaneously taking place in history. For, according to the pragmatist, this is exactly how the present is experienced. Not quite present, but rather always facing backward to a repetition of the past and forward to a change from the past. Pragmatist historiography

thus resonates with pragmatist transitionalism. The *historiography* central to the pragmatist way of thinking thus matches the *philosophy* that constitutes the other half of pragmatism. Common to both sides of pragmatism is a conception of humans as ever situated in the dialectic between old and new, past and future. And it is this dialectical confluence which constitutes the living present that is ever the concern for pragmatists.

Historicizing Philosophy

The outline of pragmatist historiography just provided raises the important question of how pragmatists can put history to use in their inquiries. Having described some of the core elements of a pragmatist historiography, it remains to be considered how such a historiography might function alongside philosophy within a broad cross-disciplinary pragmatist form of inquiry. Of course, there are many ways in which history can be fitted together with philosophy in the context of pragmatism. I would like to here discuss only one particularly useful way in which a pragmatist history might supply a pragmatist philosophy with materials for work before concluding with a discussion of some recent examples of the kind of cross-disciplinary pragmatism I am urging.

To many ears, pragmatism suggests practicality such that that theoretical inquiry must engage its practical subject matter in its own terms. Since pragmatism understands political and cultural practices as historical processes, the result would be a commitment to historical research as a central component of what pragmatists call philosophical reconstruction. What this means is that history ought to supply philosophy with materials to work with and that philosophy ought to devote itself to work which is firmly rooted in the historical details of the problems under consideration. To many ears, pragmatism's

practicality suggests a results-oriented and problem-solving approach. While it is important to not misinterpret pragmatism as the philosophical worship of purely instrumental rationality, there is definitely an orientation towards solutions and results within pragmatism.⁴³ Dewey's preferred term for this was reconstruction. For Dewey, both the process of inquiry, and its product of knowledge, are reconstructive in this sense. Dewey described knowledge as "the fruit of the undertakings that transform a problematic situation into a resolved one" and he defined inquiry as "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole."⁴⁴

From Dewey's account it seems to follow that the problem-solving work of inquiry stands first of all in need of problems to which reconstruction can afford solutions.⁴⁵ Here is precisely where pragmatist historiography can uniquely perform crucial work in a broader program of pragmatist inquiry. Historical inquiry can supply problems to the work of philosophical inquiry which is oriented toward solving these problems. If pragmatist philosophy must think in terms of historically-situated practices, and if pragmatist philosophy is further oriented toward solving problems, then it is natural to hope that pragmatist historiography would be oriented toward producing the problems which pragmatist philosophy might solve.⁴⁶

⁴³ For a useful discussion of this common misinterpretation of pragmatism see Hickman (2001, 72-4).

⁴⁴ Dewey 1929, 194; Dewey 1938, 108

⁴⁵ On this as a potential weakness in pragmatism see the final chapter of my book, Koopman (2009).

⁴⁶ My notion of historical inquiry as a practice of problematization bears more than a superficial resemblance to Foucault's (1984) carefully qualified description of his own historical research as problematization. This is intentional. Since Foucault is often badly misunderstood on this point, I leave a discussion of his work to the side in the present context, and offer the reader a promissory note that I will fulfill in a book on genealogy on which I am presently working.

I suspect that this may at first blush sound strange to philosophers and historians alike. How does a historian *produce* problems? Are not problems already there regardless of historical inquiry? And don't we have enough problems already so that we don't need historians going around muddying things up? My view is that pragmatists ought to abstain from the insoluble question of whether or not problems really exist prior to our recognizing them. What pragmatists ought to busy themselves with instead is furnishing and clarifying the problems implicit in the situations in which we are already located. The pragmatist commitment to uncertainty in all of its forms, from which there follows thorough forms of epistemic and political fallibilism, suggests that pragmatists ought to be on the lookout for ways in which our own best practices are already rife with problems which we hardly suspect. This orientation toward uncertainty, which historian James Kloppenberg takes as central for pragmatism,⁴⁷ is usefully glossed by Richard Rorty's description of pragmatists as ironists.⁴⁸ The pragmatist ironist is one who takes seriously the possibility that some of his or her most cherished beliefs just might be wrong. Rorty's attitude of irony follows quite naturally from pragmatism's embrace of uncertainty and it fits well with much of what is best in the pragmatist tradition. William James, for example, was urging ironism when he described our tendencies to be blind to the values of others that do not intersect with our own.⁴⁹ What I am suggesting is that, in good Jamesian fashion, historical inquiry helps us recognize certain blindnesses we have in regards to both ourselves and others. History reveals the contingency of our beliefs and values in such a way that we can see these beliefs and values as no longer necessary features of ourselves. This in turn enables us to explore these beliefs and values with a

⁴⁷ Kloppenberg (1986)

⁴⁸ Rorty (1989)

⁴⁹ James (1899a)

degree of ironic detachment to find out whether or not they employ assumptions or entail consequences which we should find problematic.

History in the sense in which I am describing it is neither a celebratory mode of inquiry in which we prove to ourselves that we have historically evolved in the right kind of way, nor a denigrating mode of inquiry in which we discover that our inheritance is full of injustice—in other words, we need not be a Hegel or a Nietzsche boldly committing the genetic fallacy.⁵⁰ A history oriented by pragmatism can instead furnish us with problems which provoke the difficult work of reconstructive thought. History neither vindicates nor invalidates our practices. History problematizes our practices and shows us where to focus our attention so that we might ameliorate them.⁵¹

The three elements of a pragmatist historiography which I discussed above excellently inform historical inquiry in this mode of problematization. In focusing on the continuity of facts and values, pragmatist historiography blurs the distinction between necessity and contingency that acts as an obstacle to historicizing those practices which seem to us so essential to who we are. In its orientation toward a hybrid of intellectual and cultural history, pragmatist historiography focuses attention on those aspects of our inheritance which are often most central to our ongoing constitution of ourselves. In its unique form of presentism without a substantive present, pragmatist historiography focuses historical inquiry on the way in which present problems are deeply informed by their relations to the past conditions out of which they developed.

⁵⁰ On the genetic fallacy as it relates to pragmatist historicism see Wiener (1946), Lavine (1962) and Rosenbaum (2002).

⁵¹ For a discussion of how pragmatist historiography might function in this way see the final chapter of my forthcoming book Koopman (2009) which builds on Randall (1958) as well as my (forthcoming) paper “A Pragmatist Historiography: Problem-Centered History in Dewey, Randall, and Foucault”.

I am urging that pragmatists turn their attention to forms of inquiry which are committed to both the historical work of generating problems and the philosophical work of solving problems. This bidirectional commitment to a counter-disciplinary form of inquiry might strike many philosophers and historians as too complex to effectively coordinate. To allay some of this concern, I would like to conclude by considering a few examples of the cross-disciplinary use of history and philosophy which I am urging pragmatists to take more seriously. From the fact that such work already exists, we ought to be able to infer that such work can be effectively undertaken. I will take my examples from recent pragmatist work in political philosophy and cultural criticism. This work is particularly useful for my purposes here insofar as much of the best contemporary political and cultural philosophy written under the pragmatist canopy draws rather freely from work in both disciplines of philosophy and history. This work is neither narrowly philosophical nor narrowly historical. It is, rather, both philosophical and historical at the same time, and so not narrow at all but rather quite capacious. The fact that so much of the best work in pragmatist political and cultural inquiry simultaneously employs historical and philosophical modes of thought speaks well for my argument for a bidirectional and counter-disciplinary form of pragmatism.

Of those relatively recent books that seek to engage the actual political and cultural practices of our times from an explicitly pragmatist perspective, the best are those which explicitly work on the actual histories of these practices in an effort to discern where we might take them in the future. These are *philosophically-deep and historically-attuned* texts that attempt to put pragmatism to work in contemporary political and cultural contexts. This is not to say that more narrowly philosophical work

in pragmatist political philosophy is of little or no use. It is simply to say that the work that is most useful is that which best engages with our political practices in terms that are both *philosophically general and historically specific*. Such an approach follows quite naturally from the historicism that is central to pragmatist thought.

I would like to briefly describe three camps of contemporary pragmatist scholarship written in this philosophical-historical vein. This will not only provide a few exemplars for what I have been praising as a kind of pragmatist political and cultural criticism that takes seriously pragmatism's historicist bent, but it will also provide a much-needed frame for some of the political-cultural debates that have been shaping up in pragmatist scholarship over the past few years. Here, then, are the three camps:

First, there are those who tend to associate a pragmatist politics with some form of participatory democracy, usually recalling elements from late-nineteenth century Populism, early-twentieth century Progressivism, and the late-twentieth century new social movements. The best exemplar for this approach is Robert Westbrook, who argues for this reading of pragmatist politics in his *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991) and *Democratic Hope* (2005). Another representative of this approach is James Kloppenberg, whose well-known book *Uncertain Victory* (1986) located pragmatist epistemology and political philosophy in a historical milieu inflected with both American and European traditions of thought. Most recently, we find this approach in Judith Green's *Pragmatism and Social Hope* (2008) where she takes seriously the idea that the pragmatist ideal of deep democracy must be developed in a way that is both philosophically and historically engaged. Lastly, a growing body of work in feminist pragmatism can be located in this camp insofar as much of this work follows the

insightful lead of Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism* (1996) by describing feminist pragmatism in a way that explicitly takes up the early historical development of this form of political inquiry. These authors all sketch the brand of Deweyan participatory democracy which most contemporary pragmatist political theorists defend—this is a kind of radical politics that is still pragmatic enough to know that it usually has to work with the system rather than against it.

Second, there are those who associate pragmatist politics with a straightforward brand of liberal democracy which emphasizes elements of Old Left labor politics from the early part of the twentieth century and which refuses to cast doubt on the Cold War politics of which the New Left participatory democrats are highly skeptical. The best exemplar of this approach is Richard Rorty, who explicitly defends such a politics in his *Achieving Our Country* (1998) though its broader edifice is fairly apparent in his earlier *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). It may also be possible to place Louis Menand's work in this general area, insofar as his *The Metaphysical Club* (2001) follows Rorty's lead in locating pragmatism as an expression of pride in certain quintessential events in American history. Whereas Rorty sees pragmatism as vindicating the kind of liberal democracy won during the New Deal era, Menand locates pragmatism as a vindication of the political triumphs of the Civil War era. As such, Rorty and Menand sketch two closely-related conceptions of democracy both of which resonate with much recent work in mainstream liberal political theory, though I suspect that Menand's politics are for better or worse not nearly so mainstream as Rorty's were.⁵²

⁵² Another strand of interpretation adopts the stance common to Rorty and Menand (pragmatism as a kind of official theory of America), but sees this as deplorable rather than admirable: see Jeffrey Lustig's *Corporate Liberalism* (1982) and Christopher Lasch's *The Agony of the American Left* (1969).

Third, there are those who are attempting to push pragmatist politics in new directions by taking very seriously the quintessentially pragmatist thought that democracy at its best will pervade all of our major political and cultural practices. This view is generally more comfortable than the other two approaches with discerning ways in which our current cultural practices can be seen as harboring an immense democratic potential. In contrast to Rorty's style of liberal democratic theory, this view takes cultural politics very seriously. In contrast to Westbrook's expression of participatory democratic theory, this view takes corporate capitalism as a potential source of democratic practice. For this third camp, corporate capitalism and identity politics go hand in hand insofar as they accompanied one another over the course of the actual historical experience of the twentieth century. This camp certainly does not hold that the current cultural configuration of corporate capitalism and identity politics is already the paragon of democracy, but it does argue that the pragmatist frame encourages us to accept corporate capitalist and identity political practices as two synergistic origins which could together lead to the expansion of the democratic way of life. This third view has fewer adherents than the other two amongst pragmatist political theorists, but it is nevertheless an increasingly viable option for political and cultural critics who count themselves as pragmatists. The leading exemplar of this approach is James Livingston, whose books *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution* (1994) and *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy* (2001) lay out this view with both historical acuity and philosophical depth.

It is not my intention here to settle the incipient debates developing amongst the adherents of these three camps. My hope has only been to sketch these three influential

approaches to contemporary pragmatist political and cultural criticism. What importantly separates these three approaches from much other contemporary work done under the banner of pragmatist political and cultural theory is that these approaches all explicitly take seriously pragmatism's historicism. As such, they offer a more practically-engaged criticism of current political and cultural configurations than does other work which remains at levels of philosophical abstraction too high to gain any traction in the real world of contemporary problem situations. These three camps of pragmatists best embody the kind of historical and philosophical sensitivity I described above in the work of the two thinkers whom I take to be the best representatives of how pragmatism can be put to work in the service of the American experiment: William James and John Dewey.

While it is true that James and Dewey would not always recognize themselves in the work of Westbrook, Rorty, and Livingston, neither would they expect to. What they would expect, however, is a careful devotion to forms of criticism that are simultaneously philosophically-reflective and historically-situated. It is this devotion which enables pragmatism, almost uniquely amongst modern intellectual temperaments, to focus both philosophy and history on our possibilities for melioration, conceived as the transition from problematic past conditions to better future situations.⁵³

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⁵³ For enlightening conversation on these matters I owe much to both James Livingston and David Hollinger. For their comments on a much earlier version of this paper I would like to thank Scott Aikin and Jessica Beard. For provocative questions when I presented this material at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in Columbia I thank Charlene Haddock-Seigfried and Judith Green. An unnamed reviewer for this journal provided many useful suggestions on the penultimate draft. Lastly, I gratefully acknowledge a postdoctoral research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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