

Introduction

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American and European Traditions: Uneasy Bedfellows?

In writing about pragmatism in European social thought, it is impossible not to consider the wider and more complex issue of the difficult relationship between the European and the American traditions. Where does European social theory start? The traditional answer is associated of course with the rise of sociology, and in Robert Nisbet's *The Sociological Tradition* (1967) we find the argument that sociological theory was mediated through liberal, conservative and socialist responses to the industrial revolution and then the French Revolution. The characteristics of "industrial society" preoccupied Auguste Comte and Saint Simon, and formed the social object of much of the subsequent work of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. The topic of industrial society continued to be significant in sociology until the 1960s, being the basis for example of Raymond Aron's Sorbonne lectures in the late 1950s, comparing western and Soviet industrialization (Aron 1961). While the idea of industrial society may have been somewhat eclipsed more recently by the notions of post-industrial and post-modern society, the philosophical influence of the French Revolution may prove to be more enduring. Behind the political events of the Revolution in 1789 lay the debates of the French Enlightenment.

Marie Jean Antoine de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794) is characteristic of this influence of ideas on political processes. He wrote a sympathetic *Life of Turgot* (1786), which supported Turgot's economic theories and in 1789 he published his *Life of Voltaire*. Thomas Malthus's pessimistic theory of population was partly a response to Condorcet's optimistic views on the perfectibility of society. Condorcet supported female suffrage, publishing the pamphlet entitled "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship" in 1790, and he supported the abolition of slavery. Condorcet, who was an accomplished mathematician and attempted to solve certain problems in voting behaviour, can be regarded as the first social philosopher to apply mathematical solutions to the political problems of democracy (MacLean and Hewitt 1994). The French *philosophes* were united by the idea that if the state could adopt policies that were the application of enlightened reason, then society could become a progressive creation of the human mind. In particular, if the state could remove the legacy of the reactionary Church and the aristocracy (for example by embracing universal suffrage and abolishing slavery), then an enlightened society based on freedom and equality could be created. We dwell on the French Enlightenment, partly because European social theory has seen itself either as a tradition that has its origins in Enlightenment thought (for example the position taken by Jürgen Habermas) or in opposition to it (the position broadly taken by so-called postmodern theory). The key issue here is that critics of the French Revolution argued that the Terror was not an accidental but inevitable outcome of Enlightenment thought. This was the position of Edmund Burke (1955) who in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790 defended the rights of Englishmen against what he regarded as the fiction of universal human rights. The Terror raised obvious sociological and political questions – to what extent was the American Revolution and the American Constitution a successful revolutionary transformation of society, and how did the "first new nation" avoid the pitfalls of political terror? Finally, if (old) Europe and (new) America were forged by very different social and political forces, then what were the consequences for the evolution of social theory? Because the American tradition of pragmatism stands at the centre of this controversy, intellectual reflection on the differences between America and Europe has been constitutive of what we know as contemporary "social theory".

This issue has been recently addressed by Claus Offe in his 2003 Adorno lectures which have been published as *Reflections on America* (2005). These lectures compared Alexis de Tocqueville's travels in America with those of Max Weber and Theodor Adorno. Tocqueville travelled extensively (1831–1832), producing an official study of American penitentiaries in 1833 and the two volume *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 2003) in 1835 and 1840 which is universally regarded as the most influential study of democracy in the nineteenth century (Brogan 2007). The sojourn of Weber to the States (1904) produced his reflections on the Protestant sects and the emergence of a fledgling democracy that became *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2002). Weber gave a paper at the Congress of Arts and Sciences at the St Louis Universal Exposition commemorating the Louisiana Purchase, and travelled as far a field as Oklahoma and Indian Territory. Finally, Adorno arrived in the States as an émigré from Nazi Germany and stayed for eleven years (1938–1949). Unlike Tocqueville and Weber, he saw relatively little of American society, only undertaking one brief stop at Chicago on his way to Los Angeles. His personal experiences of America were confined to New York (1938–1941) and Los Angeles (1942–1949).

In these Adorno lectures Offe outlines a set of logical answers to the question: how do Europe and America relate to each other? For example, America can present Europe with either a vision of its own future or America can be regarded as a latecomer that is an immature version of European society. Each of these versions can take on a negative or a positive interpretation. Thus America may be regarded as a technologically advanced civilization which Europeans can reproduce, or American dynamism, which is already exhausted in Europe, can nevertheless have a salutary or beneficial outcome. In negative terms, the fateful development of modernity has gone so far that American civilization represents, not so much a window of opportunity, but a dark technological abyss. Thus America can be regarded as a raw and destructive society, but Europeans have already managed to overcome this route towards modernity. This scheme – positive or negative latecomer and positive or negative immature civilization—is then applied to the three authors. Tocqueville the French aristocrat belongs unambiguously to the view of America as a vanguard society in direct contrast to

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the failures of the old aristocratic regime of Europe. The absence of a rigid status hierarchy in post-revolutionary America laid the democratic foundations of a society in which voluntary associations could offset the drawbacks of majoritarian politics. Weber, the pessimistic bourgeois philosopher of rational capitalism, admired the creative energy of the Protestant sects, and their defence of individualism in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Weber adopted the idea of “Yankyness” to signify a culture based on exuberance, energy and self-confidence. Finally Adorno (1991), a member originally of the German “high bourgeoisie”, adopted by far the most negative and pessimistic understanding of America as a mass society, based on the culture industry.

Pragmatism as a social philosophy can be seen, not only as a system of thought that embodies the pragmatic, liberal and egalitarian values of American democracy, but also a system of thought that self-consciously understands the differences between American and European social theory. Whereas the social theories of “old Europe” are seen to be obscure, elitist and verbose, new American social theory is direct, clear and practical. In some respects we could argue that this American view of European social and political thought applies not only to Adorno, whose aesthetic theory for example is often opaque, but also to such influential figures as Leo Strauss (1899–1973). We might note controversially that Strauss, himself an émigré Jew like Adorno, was one of the most influential right-wing intellectuals in the University of Chicago (Drury 1997). In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952) Strauss argued that philosophers, who are typically in danger, should conceal their true beliefs from the public by writing subtly, indirectly and esoterically. A wise philosopher behaves with some degree of cunning circumspection. This attitude is more or less the opposite of pragmatism. Richard Rorty may be taken as an influential modern exponent of pragmatism. Rorty, unlike Strauss and Adorno, writes in a relatively simple direct style, because, above all else, he wants to be understood as communicating some basic message, not to professional philosophers, but to his “countrymen”, whose society is threatened (at least externally) and needs some repair. Pragmatism is based on the liberal belief that true and clearly expressed arguments are important in shaping a democracy – a position perhaps most clearly illustrated by John Dewey’s account of the public role of education.

The implication of our introduction so far is that European social and political theory was a product in particular of the crisis of French society at the end of the eighteenth century, or more generally that social thought as such is a product of critical circumstances such as revolutions (Turner 2006). This argument clearly has some direct relevance to the emergence of Enlightenment philosophy in France and Germany, and to the quality of sociological thought in revolutionary Hungary or post-war Poland. But what about America? What was if anything the social crisis that produced pragmatism, the Chicago School and symbolic interactionism? We would argue that the crisis behind American social thought was in fact slavery and racism. The character of American social and political thought was the legacy of early slavery, the plantations, the Civil War and the southern racial orders. It was in short “the liberalism of fear” (Shklar 1998: 116): an anxious liberalism that was underpinned by the persistent fear of enslavement.

Perhaps the most interesting historical study of American pragmatism was written by Louis Menand (2001). Its title *The Metaphysical Club* refers to the conversation society that was formed in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1872 by Charles Peirce with Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James and others. Menand’s study starts with “the politics of slavery” showing how the Civil War shaped American society and culture. Pragmatism can be seen as a response to the consequences of the Civil War, which was seen by the pragmatists as a failure of democratic culture or more specifically the failure of existing ideas. America needed reforming by ideas that were distinct, clearly expressed and practical.

The implication of this argument is that the distinction between European and American social theory can be overstated and overdrawn. At least one linking theme is that while we may be unable in the long run to avoid social and political disasters such as the Terror and the Civil War, the reform of society is a legitimate aspiration of “public intellectuals”. There are clearly differences between American and European social thought, but there are also a number of significant linkages. The “War of the Revolution” (1775–1783) obviously produced much of the philosophical ammunition for the French Revolution of 1789, but one can equally argue that much of the intellectual inspiration for the American war of independence came not just from Thomas Paine but from John Milton and the English Civil War. One cannot artificially construct, in

the world of ideas, a neat division between things American and things European. This argument as we have seen is only reinforced by the role de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in the evolution of social thought in both North America and Europe. It is deeply ironic that Tocqueville the French aristocrat who lived "between two worlds" should continue to play such a major role in American social theory (Wolin 2001).

In this introduction, we have focused on the similarities in the political realm. But a similar argument applies at a more epistemological level: the discrepancies between European and American social theory are not as wide as sometimes assumed. In the course of the twentieth century, both traditions had to come to terms with the limitations of early Enlightenment thinking – the weaknesses of foundationalism and essentialism, and the lacuna in coherence and correspondence theories of truth. In both cases, predecessors like Nietzsche and Peirce already pointed out these pitfalls and made intellectual efforts towards a non-foundationalist and non-essentialist alternative direction. As Rorty pointed out himself, in spite of the difference in style, the ideas of Foucault and Derrida are not that far removed from his own, and Dewey's before him. These interconnections between the two continents, both political and epistemological, provide both the pretext and the main text for this collection of essays exploring the impact of pragmatism on European social theory.

Outline of the Book

The earlier chapters of this volume are more conceptual and epistemological; the later chapters have a stronger political dimension. In the opening chapter, Jack Barbalet explores William James's contribution to pragmatism and in particular his theory of emotions. Long neglected, the sociology of emotions is now a rising sub-field in sociology. Leading theorists like Jonathan Turner and Jack Barbalet himself have contributed to this emerging theme of sociological inquiry. While James's general pragmatist insights are well known, his theory of emotions is less so, and as Barbalet points out, the dominance of psychoanalytic theory might account for this. Barbalet elaborates on the much-neglected intellectual impact of James's thought on that of classical sociologists like Durkheim and Weber. Barbalet argues that James's social psychology of

emotions provides an interesting platform for a sophisticated approach to the sociology of emotions.

With Patrick Baert's chapter, the discussion moves in the direction of the philosophy of the social sciences. He uses a pragmatist perspective to suggest a new way of thinking about the relationship between social theory and empirical research. He rejects two dominant models of the theory-research connection: the deductive-nomological model according to which empirical research is a testing device, and the representational model according to which empirical research no longer tests, but exemplifies and reinforces the theory. Baert shows that both views are deficient, and he suggests a new perspective, inspired by neo-pragmatist philosophy and hermeneutics. He argues that research does not have to be directed towards explanation, prediction or representation. Research can also help us, as a community, to redefine ourselves and to reassess our presuppositions. Baert argues strongly in favour of research that helps to establish this form of self-knowledge.

Like Baert, Thora Margareta Bertilsson explores issues in the philosophy of science. Whereas Baert is interested in neo-pragmatism, Bertilsson goes back to the classics by providing an in-depth study of Charles Peirce. One of the founding fathers of pragmatism, Peirce has often been neglected at the expense of more accessible pragmatists like James and Dewey. Indeed contemporary neo-pragmatists such as Rorty and Bernstein tend to ignore Peirce. But Bertilsson points out that there is a remarkable richness in Peirce's writings, in particular in his notion of abduction. Bertilsson explores two very different uses of this notion. First, she discusses Umberto Eco's view that abduction comes into play in both literature and science. Secondly, she pays attention to the way in which contemporary philosophers of science draw on the notion of abduction. Abduction is a key concept in critical realist philosophy of science and Bertilsson analyses the way in which Roy Bhaskar defines abduction and sees it as central to scientific activity.

From Véronique Mottier's chapter onwards, the book takes a more political turn. She starts with the observation that contemporary feminists draw very little on neo-pragmatist philosophy. Even feminists like Chantal Mouffe and Judith Butler, who are in general sympathetic to pragmatism, exhibit remarkably little sympathy towards, for example, Rorty's philosophical orientation. In so far as feminists are inspired by

pragmatism, they refer to previous exponents of American pragmatism such as Peirce, Dewey or James. Mottier calls it a failed “rendez-vous” because while feminism and neo-pragmatism have a lot in common, there has been very little intellectual synergy between them. Mottier ascribes this to the lack of a coherent political programme in Rorty’s work. She elaborates on the differences between Rorty and a pragmatist-inspired feminist programme. In particular, she pays attention to Mouffe’s anti-essentialist feminist perspective, which calls for a reorientation of the notion of citizenship.

Starting with Dewey, Matthew Festenstein investigates the complex relationship between the pragmatist notion of inquiry and democracy. Some people argue that the two principles are very much interlinked and that the procedural notion of inquiry and deliberative democracy are basically two sides of the same coin. Others deny the closeness of this relationship and argue that, due to its commitment to non-foundationalism, pragmatism is not wedded to democratic principles and can actually be reconciled with other political principles. In this context, Festenstein distinguishes between the epistemic view of this relationship and the communitarian view. Putnam and Misak are exponents of the former; Rorty is representative of the latter. Those who argue in favour of the epistemic view are preoccupied with criteria for distinguishing proper inquiry for mere conversation. “Communitarians” are less concerned with this question and regard preoccupations regarding objectivity and truth as indicative of our Western tradition. For them, this tradition is just one among many.

Following on from Festenstein’s discussion about pragmatism and democracy, Larry Ray presents a critical analysis of Habermas’s attempt to implement pragmatist ideas in critical theory. Ray notes that already in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas drew on Peirce’s ideas to forge the link between methodological questions and cognitive interests. Habermas’s use of pragmatism was also central to his later work on the theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, and given the importance of these intellectual accomplishments, Ray pays particular attention to them. Ray discusses the criticisms of this work by Benhabib and Rorty, and he concludes that, for all its talk about discourse and dialogue, Habermas’s quasi-transcendental framework is ill-suited for dealing with actual debates that occur between real people in real situ-

ations. This does not invalidate Habermas's project and Ray is on the whole sympathetic to it. But it does raise certain reservations as to its practicality.

In a more polemical final chapter, Bryan Turner examines the relationship between Rorty's *Achieving our Country* and American politics. In *Achieving our Country* Rorty argues that Americans do not need to search elsewhere to find intellectual roots for a progressive political platform. For too long, the American Left has been searching for inspiration in Europe—the New Left drew on European critical theory and the Cultural Left (Rorty's terminology) relied on French post-structuralism. In Rorty's view, the pragmatist tradition of Dewey would have provided a more sensible source. Turner is unhappy with Rorty's patriotic stance and finds it incompatible with the pragmatist view that there are no universal, fixed foundations that ground cognitive, aesthetic or ethical claims. Furthermore, Turner argues that Rorty does not provide intellectual tools to address the way in which contemporary American democracy has become a "predatory democracy" (in Barrington Moore's terminology).

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