What sociologists should get out of pragmatism*.

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* I am grateful to Robert Owens for comments.
Abstract

Much of what seems of interest to sociologists in the pragmatist tradition consists of either side issues or notions not distinctive to pragmatism as a philosophical movement. But pragmatism was a solution to problems that had developed in other existing traditions of thought, problems that turned on the paradoxes introduced by what we can call “rationalism,” the conviction that we know the universe because the mind is the measure of all things, and—fortunately—the world comports itself obediently to the nature of our mind. The pragmatist reversal (even including Peirce’s objective idealism) makes the world the measure of all things, and has dramatic implications for the nature of science and how a community pursues truth which, if taken seriously, could be of great value to the social sciences.
My paper is entitled “What Sociologists Should Get Out of Pragmatism.” Note that the first version of the title was *Which* Sociologists Should Get Out of Pragmatism. I’ve changed it.

I have mixed feelings about the current enthusiasm for pragmatism, which I share. Pragmatism offers us a way out of many of our current theoretical problems. In a nutshell, we have fallen into a hole, and pragmatism offers us—as it offered us a hundred years ago—the only way out. But many of us want to *stay* in the hole, and so if we can’t drag pragmatism *in*, which we’re damn well going to try to do, we may try to set up an idol that we *call* pragmatism, to convince ourselves we’re not actually in the hole we are.

My argument is going to have three main points. The first is a principle regarding what we *shouldn’t* call pragmatism. The second is a principle regarding what we *should*. And the third is about why what we *should* consider pragmatism is vital for the social sciences.

Regarding the first: it is still not entirely unheard of for sociologists to confuse having no principles with having *pragmatist* principles. If you fall into the first category, more power to you, but you are not a pragmatist, merely a mercenary or miscreant.

More generally, it has become tempting for sociologists to highlight whatever their favorite notions are, and to attempt to link these with pragmatism. Of course, when we align ourselves with predecessors, we all are going to be selective in what we draw upon. But I think there’s a key principle that we can use to sort out when we are really doing something that should be linked with pragmatism and when not. When the first generation of pragmatists were writing, there were other, well established, philosophical traditions. Common sense realism had been important in the US in the nineteenth century, and there was both the subjective idealism of Kant that had been the dominant academic philosophy, and the objective idealism of Hegel that had swept American universities. Finally, there was the home grown versions of
transcendentalism that were important in the Northeast where the pragmatists came from.

Thus it seems quite plausible to say that if one has an argument to make, and it can be linked to common sense realism, to subjective idealism, to objective idealism, or to transcendentalism, there is reason to doubt that it has anything to do with pragmatism. Now of course, if one happens to be a pragmatist on other grounds, that doesn’t mean one can’t agree with anything said by those in another tradition. Just because Hegel liked mushrooms on his schnitzel doesn’t mean you can’t like it too. But if the main thing we are hoping to get out of pragmatism can be just as easily—perhaps more easily—derived from another tradition, it probably only leads to confusion to link it to pragmatism.

Sociologists are likely to think this is all up for grabs—that we get to choose what pragmatism means for us. (But if we think this, we’re violating one of the canons that Peirce consistently held over his life, namely his rejection of nominalism.) Here (and this is my second point), I want to suggest that there is a principle we can use to determine what is and what is not core to pragmatism.

And it is this: pragmatism was proposed as a solution to what was understood by its adherents as a problem. If there was no problem, there would have been no solution. So what was the problem to which the pragmatists were oriented? And who understood the pragmatists’ solution as a threat? Gross’s marvelous work on Durkheim highlights the answer—the core would be “rationalism.” On the one side was pragmatism, and on the other, rationalism in its various forms, whether explicit (Hegelian or eclectic) or disguised (realism).¹ This bifurcation goes back to the Aristotelian division between the theoretical intellect and the practical intellect.

¹. Kant’s own work elegantly avoided a free-fall into rationalism with its transcendental orientation, and to honor Kant’s rigor, which implied the “primacy of the practical,” Peirce and/or James chose the term pragmatism. In terms of the dispute with rationalism, the difficulty of the orthodox Kantian solution is the implication that there is a single possible reason; absent this, we move towards pragmatism.
And the question is who is to be master.

Theoretical intellect does not want to renounce practical engagement, and rationalism is the solution to the problem of the potential isolation of theoretical reason from the world. In a very small nutshell, rationalism refuses to recognize that anything fundamentally foreign to mind can be known, or *should* be known; it starts by hypothesizing the real, and then determines how we can come to know it as it truly is, but ends up hypostatizing mind. Much of what the pragmatists wrote was a careful and eloquent description of the paradoxes that come from this approach.

In contrast, the pragmatists began—like Nietzsche, by the way, and later (and grudgingly), the critical theorists—by taking Kant’s primacy of practical reason with deadly seriousness, and refusing to accept a transcendental argument that took the teeth out of this. The organism is not created to serve the spirit; the spirit was created to serve the organism. For this reason, the pragmatists began with the experience of the organism, and considered the question to be how this organism moved further towards intelligence, towards adequacy, towards anything that deserved the name of truth.

It all comes down to the Humpty-Dumptyish question of who is to be inside of whom: Rationalists of all stripes see human beings as perhaps a uniquely favored species because it understand that it dwells within the overarching sphere of truth and reason. Pragmatists see truth and reason as something humans do. That does not mean that truth is not defensible—indeed, perhaps *uniquely* defensible (as we may consider it the class of all things worthy of defense by any open-minded, honest and informed inquirer). Nor does it require that some other intelligent species be unable to have a reason completely homologous to ours. But still, ours is *ours*, in the same way that our sense of beauty is *our* beauty; our sense of ethics *our* ethics. Almost all of the
core planks of pragmatism directly support a coherent way of answering the rationalist challenge to demonstrate that these principles imply anything other than that human mental life is than a colossal and tragicomic error.

If what you like about pragmatism doesn’t have anything to do with this effort, then probably you don’t really like pragmatism.

Now, if pragmatism is fundamentally a challenge to rationalism in its various species, why should a practicing sociologist care about it at all? The answer is that the fundamental understanding of truth, and that which orients our practical decisions as to how to judge the adequacy of mental constructs, is of the most vital importance for the social sciences in particular. Although when we do our various descriptive discussions of the nature of science, we may successfully remove the notion of “truth” from our own science (or we may not), as actors, we have a regulative need for a “truth talk” as a prescriptive device to orient us in the right direction. This is what pragmatism, and only pragmatism, can do for sociology.

The reader probably thinks of Dewey as (for better or worse) the great democratic theorist of the United States, and I’d agree. We commonly—and correctly—link this to his upbringing in the “town meeting” Whitelandia of Vermont. Yet what I find most impressive is that all the original pragmatists were radical democrats in ways that would have been hard to predict. Dewey did not stay in Norman Rockwell land; industrial society was already here and Dewey understood that there would be no real democracy shy of industrial democracy. But William James, rich enough that, like many others of his generation, was “spoiled” by his indecision and lack of challenge, also had a fundamentally democratic understanding of his place in the world. In part influenced by his father, Henry Senior, famous for his Whitmanian all-love, James could never find any justification for stratification of worth. Even his brother, the
Anglophilic, hyperlocutionary Henry Junior, was impressed by the special genius of the American people, their lack of epistemic pretense and privilege.

But it is Peirce whose thoroughly democratic ethos I find most impressive. Even more spoiled than James—continually rescued by Daddy Moneybags when he screwed up one job after another, he descended below the notice of polite society and under the threshold of even pity employment. Given that Peirce was undeceived about his comparative advantages in the smarts department, we have the perfect recipe for a sulky and resentful elitism of the chosen few. Yet Peirce continually argued that we should forebear from crowning our thoughts with truth until all reasonably competent and honest investigators had come to agreement. Only in the latest part of his life did this increasingly disorganized mind reverse himself, and even here, I believe that the change is far less important than it appears, given the distance between his understanding of terms such as “immediate perception” and those of most others.

Why is this so important for the social sciences? Not because we need to assume that democracy is an inherent political good. It’s because if we reject rationalism as a possible basis for a codification of truth—and I think we all have to; certainly, no one’s been able to make a case for it in the past half a millennium that has held water—then there are, so far as I know, only three stable criteria. The first is priesthood, or authority—some people, by virtue of their consecration and not their performance, have the right to declare truth. It is not only that I am doubtful as to the effectiveness of such a principle for the production of truth, but it takes a lot of the joy out of the search for it.

The second is sheer efficacy. This has worked for the sciences. Scientists often remain somewhat agnostic about the truth of certain underlying models, because they are able to correct them in practice. While no one disagrees about the usefulness of basic fluid dynamics, models
for turbulence are complex, and so no engineer goes directly from the CAD to production of an airplane without windtunnel tests. And it is for this reason that geocentrism survived for such a long time, even when few serious thinkers believed it—accurate predictions could still be derived.

This way of focusing on practical applications doesn’t work for sociology right now, and I hope it never does. Because the only way it could would be if our knowledge becomes useful for manipulating human beings. If there’s any less happy vision of the future than rule by a useless and ineffective priestly case, it’s rule by an effective one.

This is why we are particularly interested in the third possibility, which is the convergence of all interested and sincere inquirers. It is worth emphasizing how radically different this is from our current practice and current philosophy. Let’s go back to statistics, like Peirce did. The way we teach students is like this. Step one: invent a theory. Where this comes from, we don’t care. Step two: derive testable implications. Step three: test the implications. If you aren’t sent totally packing by nature, you get to…well, I suppose you can’t say that you’re right and everyone else is wrong, but at least you’re not wrong. If someone else’s theory also fits the data, well, you can try to figure out a clever test that pits one against the other, or you can, and you will, if you’re like 99% of sociologists, agree to a détente in which you can both be right in your own little world.

That’s a procedure that fits rationalism, which doesn’t inherently disqualify it. But we see that it doesn’t necessarily lead to anything that we can think of as true. Further, as Peirce noted, some of us will be right by sheer luck. Start out with 1000 sociologists, give them a series of tests that are equivalent to coin flips, then no matter how clueless they are, and how random and wrong their theories are (“it’ll go heads, heads, tails, heads, over and over for all eternity”)
some of them will be right 4 times in a row (call them PhDs), some 6 times (call them assistant professors), some 7 times (call them associates with tenure) and some 8 times (call them full professors).

I want to push on this issue, where again, I think pragmatism can suggest an important reorientation of our everyday practice. I still remember the day I realized that I had misinterpreted everything I was doing statistically, and misinterpreting all of our accumulated results. I thought that when I had a significant coefficient for an independent variable, I was making an inference that, in the population, this coefficient was unlikely to be zero. But that is incorrect. It is that I was making an inference, that, *conditional on the truth of the particular model I had proposed*, this coefficient was unlikely to be zero. Yet there I had been, using the results of these and other statistical tests to *choose* the model! If I had known my model was right, I’d be in a very different position from where I was.

Although Peirce doesn’t represent all pragmatists here, I think his emphasis on *inference* does. We do scientific inquiry, in a lab, at a site, or using a sample, in order to know about what is “out there”—out of the lab, at other sites, or in the population as a whole. That’s what inference is all about: will the thing that worked *today* work *tomorrow* as well? Currently, in sociology, we are still wedded to what I will call the *criminal* understanding of the relation between claim and evidence. This is an asymmetric understanding, where the burden of proof is against the claims-maker. Such asymmetry makes sense in some settings: it makes sense for criminal trials, given the asymmetry of a state and a citizen. In social science, it might make sense if there was a single contending qualifier of the world (that is, someone who says, “the world is like *this*”) and a single world to be qualified, where we want desperately to avoid being wrong, but don’t particularly mind not being right. The 95% confidence interval is our “beyond
a reasonable doubt.” In contrast is a civil understanding, in which we have a balanced burden, and whichever side is over 50% wins. This is more likely to arise in conditions where we are oriented by a need for practice: where we must do something—to do, or to forebear. But it also can be important where we have a large number of competing qualifiers.

Bear with me while I reproduce some of the puzzles that Peirce and others struggled with; Bayesianism does not solve the antinomy except via assumption. Imagine we are hoping to test whether education affects income. We might think, well, either education causes income or it does not. Whichever side has the most evidence is the side I will pick. To a Bayesian, our prior on “no effect” is .5. But rephrase this as “I wonder whether the effect of education on income is precisely zero.” Then the apriori chance of a zero effect is vanishingly small, so small that a Bayesian must put a rather crazy distribution on the priors to avoid it being completely unnecessary to carry out any research at all, because nothing could shake our commitment to a non-zero effect.

Full out and out Bayesianism is unacceptable for two reasons; the first is that we are helpless in specifying the full range of alternatives; while I like the factorial approach that Bruce Western helped bring into sociology, it’s still mucking about in a tiny corner of an infinite space. Any exploration of a subset of that space leads to implicit contradictions in the logic of priors.²

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² The problem is identical to that studied in the discrete choice literature in the guise of violations of the axiom of the independence of irrelevant alternatives. We all recognize that we cannot mechanically specify the same indifferent prior for the first possibility across the following two sets of models. The first includes \{(A1) JFK was assassinated by a lone gunman; (A2) JFK was assassinated by a conspiracy\}, while the second includes \{(B1) JFK was assassinated by a lone gunman; (B2) JFK was assassinated by a Cuban conspiracy; (B3) JFK was assassinated by a Russian conspiracy\}. How we divide up the space of possibilities changes the prior (and hence posterior) probability of any model. This is, by the way, formally identical to an issue that Peirce treated repeatedly, namely that when reality is knotted in different ways, what seems “equiprobable” under one partial view is not the same as what seems equiprobable under another view. Two responses will spring to a sociologist’s mind. The first is to emphasize that for most techniques, priors are not necessarily informative, but this does not help us if we are considering Bayesianism as a solution to a problem of definition. The second is to unjustifiably assume that we will always be attentive to when one model is actually a set of other models, which I
But the second problem is that it begins with a premise about individual subjectivity, which, frankly, is a disaster for a science. Pragmatism gives a very different way of beginning to think about inference and the properties of truth.

There is, in sociology right now, a very worrisome and partial focus on Peirce’s idea of abduction. Everyone I know who has read Peirce, when getting to that, gets very excited, because they think, “But that’s what I do!” It’s a pretty basic idea, inherent in all of Western thought. In statistics, it’s been well understood, and this is how Peirce approached it, as a probabilist. We all know how to go from a model to the likelihood of data, but we don’t know how to go from data to a model. That’s why most sociological statisticians became Bayesians, because it allows us to make this transition while knowing precisely what we need to assume. And that is a prior distribution on the set of all possible models.

But there isn't any way of going from data to models without such prior information, and Peirce never said that there was. He boasted about his own capacity to zero in on the truth, but that’s not very strong evidence. Umberto Eco and others are convinced that Sherlock Holmes’s stunning successes give evidence of Peirce’s theory, but Holmes was fictional, and even if he was partially based on a real person, we have only a few anecdotes of success—and no counts of failure—supporting the claim that there was something distinctive. Sherlock or sheer luck, though, it doesn’t really matter. No one ever doubted that we need to guess, use intuition, or make things up, and that humans, at least those outside of academia, are quite effective at this.

Certainly, Peirce’s arguments about abduction and syllogistic reasoning in general were not intended to increase the freedom with which we irresponsibly make up our ideas! It’s
because—as Peirce emphasized—we need to understand the way in which a *community* crawls towards truth. It does this using experience, in Dewey’s terms. And it does this best when it exposes itself to challenge from all sides, and when it tries to put its knowledge to whatever tests are compatible with the continued humanity of the objects of said knowledge. What pragmatism can give sociology, then, is a vision of how to establish criteria for success that are most likely to produce truth, which is to say, pragmatism is most likely to guide us into agreeing upon as true that which we *should* agree upon as true, namely the true—that which a community of honest, competent and critical researchers would eventually converge upon.

And this requires moving away from mechanical application of criminal understandings and towards civil ones, while, at the same time, we focus on issues that matter, and issues about which there is honest doubt. Further, it means accepting that questions that have no possible action correlate—for example, “causal” questions about non-manipulable variables—are intrinsically metaphysical and unworthy of consideration.

In sum, as Nietzsche saw, a comet was coming to wipe out the Western philosophy based on rationalism in various guises. Just as the seas can rise around us now, while we pretend to study whether it is happening and argue over the consequences and our responses, so the sciences of life rose around theology and philosophy, which simply increased the pace at which they built up the walls on their sand castles. Pragmatism, uniquely, grasped the nettle (if I may mix metaphors) in such a way that renounced neither science nor human decency, and in fact, did so in a way that each supported the other. It gives us the only avenue of which I am aware by which we can reform our practice in such a way that it is defensible as an endeavor worthy of lay support, and that is because it is the only way I can see to found a stable epistemology for social inquiry. Perhaps now, after a century of stalling, we will do so.