Pragmatism as Problem Solving

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Abstract

At the level of sociological practice a three-sided debate occurs in American sociology between the rationalist tradition, in which the goal is the better understanding of society; the emancipatory tradition, in which the goal is improvement of society; and the skeptical tradition, which argues that we cannot know if either our knowledge or our norms are correct, and therefore it is not possible to expect progress in either. Each of these strands runs into difficulties: for the rationalist tradition, an inability to cumulate knowledge; for the emancipatory tradition, a difficulty in grounding the norms that would determine what counts as emancipation if norms are socially constructed; and for the skeptical tradition, inability to accept the logical conclusion of the argument, which is inaction even in the face of extreme injustice. The author shows that when pressed on these points, each tradition moves in the direction of pragmatism understood as problem solving, and that the practice of problem solving offers resolutions to these dilemmas.

Keywords

pragmatism, problem solving

Under the surface of contemporary sociological practice an uneasy three-sided debate unfolds between scholars who believe that the goal of sociology is improvement of society, those who hold that the goal is understanding of society, and those who argue that neither improvement nor understanding is possible.

Sociology in America has always had a reformist or emancipatory dimension. As far back as 1896 the founder of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, Albion Small, wrote in the *American Journal of Sociology*:

> It is squandering money to put more endowments into the keeping of educational institutions that are not devoting their energies in larger and larger proportion to search for solution of these moral problems, together with the solution of the physical problems, through both of which the larger welfare of men is to be secured. (Small 1896:569)

W.E.B. DuBois turned this reformist impulse into the beginnings of empirical sociology by developing a concerted program to challenge racism through the scientific study of African Americans, a program that influenced both the Chicago School and Max Weber (Morris 2017). From Jane Addams and concerns with urban inequality, through C. Wright Mills and Marxism and second-wave feminism and public sociology, American sociology has always sought to change the world as well as understand it (Romero 2020).

Scholars have noted, however, a central contradiction: despite the discipline's emancipatory beginnings and emancipatory impulses, journals in sociology today do not assess intellectual contributions by their ability to improve society but rather by their ability to further the understanding of society, and these are also the criteria by which hiring and tenure decisions are made (Stinchcombe 1999, 2001). The emancipatory strand within the discipline has always contended with an intellectual or rationalist strand that travels from Émile Durkheim through Talcott Parsons and structures the practice of academic sociology. The implicit struggles between rationalist and emancipatory approaches occasionally spill out into explicit debates, with some scholars arguing that it is not possible or advisable to avoid taking sides in social debates (Daniels 2018; Mitra 2020) and others worrying that activism will undermine the discipline's claim to scientific legitimacy and may thus undermine its ability to have any effect on the very social problems the activists wish to solve (Massey 2007; Turner 2019). Scholars who have attempted emancipatory projects tell repeated and consistent stories of temporary or permanent rejection by and exclusion from the discipline (Romero 2020).

This contradiction within the discipline has been extensively studied. Less discussed are the consequences of a third

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tradition, what has been called the "skeptical" tradition of sociology (Wolfe 1990). This tradition questions the ability of reason to produce either progress, as the emancipatory scholars want, or understanding, as the rationalists seek; indeed, these scholars are skeptical of the idea that it is even possible to identify a social problem. Popularized within the social sciences by the slow dispersion of mid-twentieth-century French social theory, and drawing on sociology's social constructionist bent, the skeptical tradition identifies all discourse as limited and turns this insight onto scholarly discourse to argue that no firm conclusions about understanding or emancipation can ever be reached. Stephen Lukes (2004:98) suggests that this tradition exercises a "power of seduction" among scholars (see also Power 2011; Szakolczai 1998). At the level of sociological practice one sees this tradition in the tendency of scholars to focus on the meta-level of discourse, such that rather than asking "What might solve poverty?" they instead ask, "When did poverty begin to be seen as a problem?" Skeptical scholars share emancipatory scholars' preoccupation with power and oppression and injustice; however, skeptical scholars also share rationalist scholars' hesitation to propose courses of action. These dual preoccupations result in the proliferation of research on the origins of categorization schemes. Such research can satisfy the goal of producing maps of power without ever following the emancipatory impulse through to the point of trying to examine what might change or overthrow categorization schemes, which would require a positive vision that the skeptical tradition shies away from. Instead, skeptical scholars restrict themselves to criticizing other people's attempts at emancipatory action or policymaking (Scott 1998) or examining how and why certain issues come to be understood as social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). Rationalist and emancipatory traditions, for their part, share a belief in the possibility that reason can produce progress that the skeptical tradition rejects.

In this article I suggest that each of these three traditions, when engaged on its own terms, reaches an unresolvable theoretical impasse: for the emancipatory tradition, the question of what to do when human communities disagree about what constitutes emancipation; for the rationalist tradition, a widely acknowledged inability of the tradition to accumulate trustworthy knowledge of the social world; and for the skeptical tradition, the difficulty of remaining skeptical in the face of extreme injustice, as one must if it is not possible to define injustice.

This article shows that when pressed on these fundamental points, scholars in each of the three traditions make the same move: they retreat to a pragmatist understanding of knowledge production that draws from each of the three traditions but is distinct from each.

Pragmatism as an intellectual movement has attracted considerable attention from social theorists, but most of the scholars who have written about pragmatism within sociology are not very pragmatist themselves. They have examined pragmatism as a theory of human action, not a practical method of knowledge generation. I show that the development of an alternative understanding of pragmatism that I call "pragmatism as problem solving" holds potential for moving the discipline beyond the theoretical impasses to which each of the three traditions have brought it.

In the first section of this article I summarize each tradition and the problems that plague each. In the second section I define pragmatism and show how each of the three traditions of sociological practice has been forced to move toward pragmatism. In the third section I briefly discuss scholars who have examined pragmatism within sociology, arguing that they have missed its main potential. And in the fourth section I argue that in the ruins of the clash among the three perspectives can be identified a promising path forward for sociology, and I begin to develop the perspective of pragmatism as problem solving.

Three Dead Ends

Each of the three perspectives identified above leads, when taken on its own terms, into a dead end.

Emancipatory perspectives, although prevalent within sociology, have never sufficiently answered how to determine what would constitute emancipation if norms are socially constructed and people disagree on what emancipation means. An examination of Jürgen Habermas, who has developed the most elaborate theoretical defense of emancipatory scholarly practices, clarifies the scope and limits of emancipatory sociology. A student of the German tradition of post–World War II skepticism about the idea of rationality and enlightenment, Habermas set out to rescue the idea that it is possible to define oppression systematically, and therefore to address it. He argued that although instrumental rationality had produced a modernity that was leading to catastrophe, one could also see in the development of history the rise of what he called "communicative rationality." Habermas argued that human communication is possible only because human beings in dialogue are oriented to a shared project of understanding—even if the content of what they are communicating is adversarial. From this he attempted to develop a normative ideal as well as a theory of history. The normative ideal is the "ideal speech situation," in which all participants are free of domination and free to express their interests and beliefs, and nothing leads to conclusions other than the force of the better argument. Habermas's theory of history uses this striving for understanding that is at the heart of communication as a reference point from which to examine actual human behavior and history, such that conditions that prevent the free flow of striving for understanding can be criticized, and those that facilitate it can be commended. Social structures can thus be evaluated according to whether they facilitate or impede the shared project of understanding. Habermas (1984) conducted a historical sociology of the

development of the public sphere in Western society, which he saw as tending towards the ideal speech situation. Habermas's heirs have developed these insights into successful research traditions on civil society and deliberative democracy; these traditions are even reaching into political practice, with an increasing number of real-world experiments in deliberation, for example in Ireland recently, where the question of abortion was decided in a referendum guided by a deliberative assembly (Chambers 2019; Farrell and Suiter 2019; see Schneiderhan and Khan 2008 for empirical evidence on consequences of deliberation).

Critics of the Habermasian project have argued that space must be made for forms of communication that seem nonrational, such as storytelling, or even activities that do not seem to be communication at all, such as marches and boycotts, particularly because oppressed groups may lack the training in rational argumentation that would allow them to dominate an ideal speech situation. Privileging rationality, critics argue, is a form of exclusion that works in the interests of the dominant; they point out the exclusions constitutive of the Western public sphere (Sanders 1997; Young 2002). In theory, this is not a critique of communicative rationality but a critique of its insufficient realization. But as Iris Marion Young (2002:34) points out, there is a circularity in the theory: the theory says that only actions taken under conditions of perfect deliberation can be considered just, but conditions of perfect deliberation are possible only in a society that is already just, leaving us uncertain how to proceed in actual, unjust societies.

A second major criticism of the Habermasian tradition is that consensus is in practice elusive, even when all parties are attempting in good faith to reach it and are trained in rational communication: as Richard Bernstein ([1992] 2006) notes, even philosophers completely committed to finding consensus and thoroughly trained in the practice of rationality disagree vehemently on everything. It is hard to argue that argumentation alone ever leads to clear conclusions. If disagreement is the actual state, if the ideal speech situation can never be more than an ideal, what exactly is the benefit of striving to live up to an ideal that cannot be reached, and why should it even be seen as a goal?

Finally, it is a jump from the basic need for communication to the emancipatory argument that systems that allow communication are therefore better than others. At its most expansive the ideal speech situation is a reference point from which to examine actual speech situations. But there is a leap between the observation that communication is oriented to understanding and the argument that this can be the basis of a normative position, just as there would be a leap between the observation that human children learn to walk and the argument that therefore the best society would be the one that is organized around the most walking. On the other hand, at its least expansive, the ideal speech situation serves as a sort of proof of concept for Habermas, showing that rationality exists and is possible, but it is not immediately clear how to

build from the observation of minimum intersubjective agreement. As Dmitri Shalin (1992) notes, two participants may agree on the rules of chess but disagree on the best next move. Indeed, intersubjective agreement can coexist with oppression. The sentences "I disagree with you" and even "I am going to enslave you" are triumphs of communicative coordination if the parties to the communication both understand the situation. But this suggests that the basic observation of some sort of intersubjective rationality in communication, the least expansive version of the observation, is underdetermining for an analysis of the question of whether progress is possible in human affairs.

These objections to the Habermasian ideal—and indeed, to any emancipatory project—are essentially grounded in the observation of difference: differences in persuasive style and capacity, good faith difference among the most rational of communicators. They argue for the *need for openness*, that is, the need to remain open to alternative viewpoints to avoid imposing domination through a drive to consensus. The emancipatory goal of progress has trouble with how to ground the idea of progress. We thus turn to examine scholars who emphasize the impossibility of grounding our norms, and the consequent need for difference and openness.

Although a century of scholarship on this issue cannot be summarized concisely, one can note a thread in nineteenth through twenty-first century Western philosophy of scholars' losing faith in the idea of reason. This development has many origins: the internal working out of a theoretical tradition that began from the argument that our observations are not always reliable and therefore led to the question of whether we can be confident about any of our beliefs; the influences of non-Western philosophy; the cataclysms of the mid twentieth century, which seemed to prove that a tradition guided by reason does not necessarily have beneficial results; and increasing confrontation with actually existing human diversity in traditions and beliefs.

Although this tradition cannot be reduced to one scholar, a recent entrant into these debates whose work exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition is Chantal Mouffe, who is directly inspired by Jacques Derrida. Mouffe argues against communicative rationality because of its exclusion of nonrational modes of discourse and because rational argumentation is less available as a discursive style to the less privileged. Moreover, she argues that not only is consensus not possible, it should not even be considered a goal, not even through the force of the better argument. Mouffe argues that conflict is creative and constructive and that difference is constitutive of identity: it is necessary to construct a "them" in order to construct a "we" (Mouffe 2003:9). From this ground she argues for respect for difference. Because there can never in practice be consensus, we should not try to impose a consensus, because doing so would just be a form of domination; we should instead celebrate difference for its creative potential. Thus, she suggests that a truly democratic system is one she calls "agonistic"—structured so that adversaries encounter

each other continually, without one permanently dominating the other (Mouffe 2000). Mouffe is inspired by Derridean deconstruction, which denies the possibility of consensus in intersubjective meaning because there is no objective ground in language for ending the continual play of signifiers (Derrida 1976, 1978); even if there may be a Habermasian orientation to understanding, according to this framework that orientation is doomed, and there can never actually be understanding.

Mouffe's critics note that what drives her vision, as is true of many scholars in this tradition, is the wish to respect difference. But if it is not possible to reach universal conclusions, how are we to understand this universal conclusion in favor of respecting difference? Moreover, Mouffe wants to exclude certain positions from the agonistic game, arguing that they are "antagonistic" (disrespectful of the other players in the game) rather than "agonistic," but there is no way from within her framework to identify these antagonistic elements. For example, she insists that "certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination and should therefore be challenged by a radical democratic politics" (Mouffe 2000:20). But does doing so not require precisely the kind of closure and end of discussion that her entire theory has been arguing against? How can antagonistic elements be identified and eliminated if it is not possible to come to conclusions? (Benhabib 1996) And if it is possible to identify antagonistic elements, then why can the principles through which they are identified not be expanded to a positive universal conclusion? This point can be generalized to other poststructuralist arguments. For example, one theme in poststructural scholarship is that power shapes all regimes of knowledge, including the knowledge that leads us to identify something as a problem. But why would one spend time worrying about how power shapes regimes of knowledge if one did not believe there was something wrong with this state of affairs? And if there is something wrong with it, this implies a yardstick by which some things can be said to be wrong, which in turn implies that the particular regime of knowledge that has given us this yardstick has somehow escaped the functions of power.

A second problem with arguments that wish to avoid closure of the play of difference is that taking a position is inherent in human affairs: all human action has consequences, including absence of action. The consequences will in most cases be small for any given individual, but there are consequences of one kind or another. This means that if one sees social problems in the world and does not engage them because one does not want to impose closure on the play of difference, one is taking an action as surely as if one were to devote oneself to correcting the problem. The lack of action may have the consequence of helping reproduce the status quo. Lack of action may in fact be beneficial at times, for example, if the intrusion of external actors would only polarize the situation. But this is a different rationale for nonintervention than unwillingness to impose closure on the play of difference; it is, indeed, a rationale, a closure of the play of difference. In either case, lack of action no matter the

rationale will have consequences, and is best conceptualized as an action. Any action one takes or does not take will have a consequence, positive or negative. By virtue of being alive, and by further virtue of being adults with some degree of decision-making capacity, we are not only able to take a position but required to do so: we literally and logically cannot do otherwise. These objections are grounded in the logical *need for closure*, that is, that anyone capable of taking a position is, in refusing to take a decision, taking a decision. In practical terms, lack of time will prevent us from being able to take an explicit position on all or even most issues; but that should not prevent us from taking positions at least on the issues we choose to study, even if that position is a considered decision not to act.

Beyond these logical difficulties, there is another problem that may be more troubling to Mouffe and those who make these kinds of arguments: the creative potential that Mouffe identifies within democracy itself depends on closure. Oppositional perspectives cannot be articulated and opposed to dominant perspectives without a degree of agreement within the oppositional camp. What Mouffe misses, and what is necessary to make her account coherent, is the need for closure within the oppositional enclave: the differentiated opposition cannot mount a creative resistance if its energies dissipate in debates among its own members. Mouffe argues that the deliberative ideal, in striving for consensus, sacrifices the pluralist essence of democracy. But the opposite is also true: the conflictual ideal is only possible at the expense of actual conflict, because perpetual absence of closure means no conflicting sides can form. Agonism requires provisional consensus on the part of the different agonists, but the theory has no way to justify provisional closure (Vasilev 2015).

Indeed, this observation inspires an important criticism of this more relativist perspective: if taking action to limit power and domination requires closure, not the endless creative play of difference, scholars in the Mouffean tradition will be unable to oppose currents of social domination. As Antonio (1989) notes,

> Radical postmodernism leaves no space for broader moral rhetorics that address the problem of declining national community. It is silent about societal-level strategies for dealing with mounting unmet needs, the retreat from welfarism, or the downward compression of the middle class and, consequently, fails to confront the threat of despotism. (pp. 742–43)

The criticism is not that radical postmodernists have *caused* any of these problems but rather that they are unable to *respond to* any of them while remaining true to their framework.

Postmodern arguments importantly point to the social construction of our beliefs about justice, as we can see that even in the most oppressive of circumstances, human beings are able to create lives that have moments of meaning and even joy. But when it comes down to it, no postmodernist

seriously argues that a slave society or a genocidal society is equivalent to a free society, leaving unclear exactly how one should proceed given the observation of difference and the need to take action.

Avoiding both emancipatory and skeptical approaches, many sociologists seek simply to understand society, the third or "rationalist" tradition. This tradition guides academic sociology today, but the attempt to understand society has often left even rationalist practitioners dissatisfied. A central observation, from rationalist practitioners themselves, is that we do not actually see progress in understanding over a century of rationalist social science. Instead, sociological insights, descriptions, and theories come and go as fads. Many different causes for this state of affairs have been suggested. House (2019) worries about "centrifugal forces toward intellectual disunity and diffusion . . . [that prevent sociologists from] making the progress they could and should regarding scientific and scholarly development and contributions to society and public policy" (pp. 21–22). Besbris and Khan (2017) think that the prevailing demand to develop new theory with every new article "creates cloudiness instead of clarity. We stake the position that a theoretically rich landscape, where theories are plentiful, is one wherein ideas are vacuous" (p. 147). Another concern is that many scholars spend their time redescribing social phenomena through one or other theoretical lens with no clear reason for selection and no attempt at an overarching synthesis. As Duncan Watts (2017; see also Davis 1994) notes, contradictory findings can thus coexist for decades in the scholarship without anyone noticing or trying to resolve the contradictions, what he calls the "incoherency problem." Rationalist sociologists find ever more colorful metaphors for this state of affairs, from Besbris and Khan's (2017) "wheel of fire" to Gerald Davis's (2015) mystery house with "a number of architectural details that serve no purpose: doorways that open onto walls, labyrinthine hallways that lead nowhere, and stairways that rise only to a ceiling" (p. 180). Thus, rationalist approaches seem to fail in their own goal of understanding society.

The emancipatory Habermasian tradition and the skeptical Mouffean tradition lose coherence when pushed to their limits, and the rationalist alternative has not resulted in the cumulation of knowledge. Interestingly, as these perspectives have been challenged, they have each moved toward a similar resolution: a pragmatist, problem-solving resolution.

Pragmatism as the Hidden Confluence

Nineteenth-century pragmatism was not the work of one individual, and instead of a systematic text expounding pragmatism there are a series of published and unpublished manuscripts from several loosely affiliated scholars across several decades. Nevertheless, four general principles can be taken as constitutive of the philosophy.

First, pragmatists argue that there are no firm foundations on which knowledge or normative conclusions can be built (Rorty 2009). In this, like skeptical scholars, they are following a long tradition of post-Kantian philosophy that argues that it is not possible to encounter the world except through the apparatus of human cognition, that human conceptual apparatuses have a history and evolve over time, and therefore the search for a standpoint that cannot be doubted is doomed.

Second, pragmatists argue that although there can never be permanent closure in belief, in the sense of normative or ontological conclusions that will not need further revision, there is a need for provisional forms of closure to steer through actual debates and solve actual problems. This argument for provisional closure is grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's distinction between "fallibilism" and "skepticism." Peirce rejects Cartesian radical doubt as a starting point because, he argues, it is not actually possible to doubt all things at once (what he thinks of as "skepticism"), but one can nevertheless accept that any one of one's beliefs could eventually be shown to be wrong. The point then is not to look for some Archimedean principle that can never be doubted but simply to be open to being shown that any particular belief is wrong, and thus to revising one's beliefs—fallibilism (Peirce 2012).

Third, the pragmatists, particularly John Dewey in addition to Peirce, argue that this provisional form of closure is to be found in the decision making of actually existing human communities. This was grounded for Peirce in his rejection of the Cartesian solitary thinker and elaborated by Dewey into a model for democracy (Dewey 2012 [1927]). For political decisions, the relevant community is the entire body of citizens, and for scholarly conclusions, the relevant community is the group of people who have familiarized themselves with the work of that community, as judged by those who are already members of the community.

The fourth principle, what some call the main criterion of pragmatism, is that knowledge develops through attempts to solve problems with practical consequences; it is in the attempt to solve these problems and in the encounter with the empirical world that we can best determine if our fallible beliefs are in fact mistaken and through which the community of inquiry corrects mistaken beliefs (Peirce 2012). The practical consequences of theories were, the pragmatists thought, the only way to judge between rival theories. Knowledge proceeds not through detached discussion, but through exploratory attempts to change aspects of the world and see what happens.

The pragmatists were inspired by the observation, which they considered undeniable, of the progress of the natural sciences. They sought to understand how this progress had been made possible and learn lessons from it that could be applied to other domains of inquiry (Halton 1992; MacGilvray 2000:501). These observations regarding natural science were the source of the arguments about the importance of the community of inquiry, the importance of correctability and revision, and problem-solving engagement with the world as the criterion of validity. Scientific progress, they concluded, was the work of groups of thinkers, not any individual thinker, building on as well as revising and correcting each others' insights based on attempts to solve actual problems

through experiments or simply through trial and error. The pragmatist framework does not promise that the conclusions the community reaches will be the right ones; it only provides a framework for provisional conclusions that can be revised, through self-correcting communities of inquiry involved in exploratory engagement with the world.

Each of the three traditions of sociological practice has moved toward a version of pragmatism. For example, Watts (2017), a rationalist rather than emancipatory or skeptical scholar, examines and rejects several possible solutions to the noncumulation of findings and finally settles on what he calls "solution-oriented sociology," which would require bringing contradictory findings into engagement with each other by attempting to solve practical problems. Watts writes,

> the requirement that solutions work in the real world would automatically satisfy replicability requirements, thereby disciplining social-scientific theorizing . . . solving any nontrivial real-world problem would almost certainly require fundamental advances in social-behavioural science [and] would bring the incoherency problem to the forefront and force researchers to address it directly. (p. 3)

This is, of course, pragmatist problem solving. If the task is to increase understanding of the social world, taking conflicts between different rationalist perspectives seriously would be more likely if scholars attuned to any research that can help them address a social problem put different theoretical perspectives to empirical test in their search for solutions. Because problem solving sets a clear goal—solving real-world problems—it can serve an orienting function for the research community. It gives a means of theoretical accumulation by providing an orientation for research, with or without reference to explicit theoretical paradigms. Another example of attempting to take rationalism in a more pragmatist direction is critical realism (Bhaskar [1975] 2008, Sayer [1984] 1992), although this tradition seems to answer questions sociologists are not really asking (Is there a reality? Are random sampling and experimental methods the only ways to generate knowledge? Is focusing on mechanism and process useful?) and does not have good answers to questions sociologists are asking (Can anything be done about the proliferation of inconsistent understandings?—see e.g. Reed 2008). (To be fair, the questions these researchers asked may have been more pertinent at the time of this tradition's origins, and it may be these scholars' very success in bringing the field to their positions that makes their answers seem obvious today.)

As for the Habermasian tradition, as the theorist Dmitri Shalin (1992), after critiquing Habermasian critical theory for not appreciating the value of difference, remarks,

> On several occasions, most copiously in his interviews, [Habermas] intimated that he personally feels no urge to "bring a satisfying order to chaos," that "there is nothing at all to which I have an unambivalent attitude," that rational society must be "as fallibilist and as open to self-correction as possible," that "every intervention in complex social structures has such unforeseeable

consequences that processes of reform can only be defended as scrupulous processes of trial and error, under the careful control of those who have to bear their consequences." (pp. 273–74)

That is, Habermas personally does not feel it necessary to reach for consensus, sees the value of difference, and champions the need for openness. Although these are offhand comments, more recent deliberative democrats have argued more thoroughly for a "systems turn" in the theory, which would make space for nonrational forms of persuasion and for more openness in the system. Jane Mansbridge has led the way in arguing that not every instance of communication has to be deliberative for the system as a whole to be deliberative; there is space for partisan discourse, storytelling, boycotts, and so on (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2013). As Parkinson (2015) describes this systems turn,

> Scholars in the field favour working agreements for multiple, sometimes incompatible reasons; or the more modest requirement of a meta-deliberation on the nature of the issue being faced; or a rejection of Socratic reasoning in favour of something more grounded in everyday experience; more narrative, more openness to ordinary communication styles, even less reliance on talk at all; and much more openness to contestatory engagement. (pp. 63–64)

But amid the excitement of plurality of discursive styles and openness to contestation it is hard to discern in this turn any residual traces of the Habermasian project. This turn seems to drain the communicative rationality argument of any particular force, and leave us with what are, simply, communities of inquiry. Indeed, Habermas was appreciative of the nineteenth-century pragmatists (the idea of communicative rationality is prefigured in Peirce, 2012:38), and the route his theory has traveled is an odd one, shedding the specifics that Habermas brought to the pragmatists and leaving us back with the pragmatists and their argument for communities that discuss concepts and make decisions.

Similarly, Mouffe, as well as other scholars of difference, when pressed on the question of why they are so concerned with respecting difference, also reach for pragmatist arguments. When asked how to justify the distinctions she makes if it is not possible to make distinctions, Mouffe (1989) responds,

> It is always possible to distinguish between the just and the unjust, the legitimate and the illegitimate, but this can only be done from within a given tradition, with the help of standards that tradition provides; in fact there is no point of view external to all traditions from which one can offer a universal judgement. (p. 37)

In other words, she argues that one should consult the standards of one's epistemic community, as pragmatists advocate. This move is also made by others within this camp (see, e.g., Seidman 1991:189). The advice to consult one's own tradition seems incoherent if the incommensurability of different traditions is precisely what we were struggling with, and the wish to respect different traditions was the promise

of the Mouffean argument. When forced to reconcile the contradictions of her theory, Mouffe (2003) retreats to the pragmatic argument that the merit of her approach is that it leads us to avoid being complacent, hinting toward pragmatist fallibility:

> A democratic approach which, thanks to the insights of deconstruction, is able to acknowledge the real nature of its frontiers and recognizes the forms of exclusion that they embody, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality, can help us to fight against the dangers of complacency. (p. 11; see also Chin 2018)

This reduces the grand deconstructionist tradition to a simple, if important, injunction to remember that we might be wrong.

Even if logically inconsistent, Mouffe's privileging of the internal standards of a given tradition is understandable. In fact, even Jacques Derrida, Mouffe's inspiration, who insistently denied the possibility of coming to normative conclusions about politics, repeatedly took many normative conclusions about politics, and acted on them. As Richard Bernstein ([1992] 2006) notes, Derrida

> has fought against apartheid, written a moving homage to Mandela, actively participated in resisting the French government's attempt to reduce the teaching of philosophy in secondary schools, helped to start a new "open" university in Paris, been an outspoken critic of infringements on human rights, addressed feminist issues. (pp. 83–84)

When asked about the contradiction Derrida responded,

> the difficulty is to gesture in opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality; on the other, to intervene here and now in a practical and engaged manner whenever the necessity arises. This position of dual allegiance, in which I personally find myself, is one of perpetual uneasiness. I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurate with my intellectual project of deconstruction. (Quoted in Bernstein [1992] 2006:84)

He rejects noncommitment and inaction but has nothing to say about how one should reach the provisional closure required if one is to commit and act; his actions seem to be driven by instinct, "whenever the necessity arises," but action driven by instinct seems to elide the main lesson of humility and the possibility of being wrong that the theory otherwise seems to point to.

Similarly, Michel Foucault, whose position requires rejecting every political program, and who generally shies away from proposing positive programs, is willing in an interview to outline a program of homosociality based on Greek and Roman models in which homosexuality would be accepted as part of general friendship, rather than following traditional family forms of courtship and marriage. He

speaks lyrically about individuals meeting as individuals, in friendship, outside of social codes and conventions, and simply excludes from consideration all who might favor traditional family forms instead (Foucault 1994:135–40, 171). As with Derrida, the warrant for this positive vision seems to be an impulse.

It turns out that when pressed, Habermas is much more open, and the poststructuralists much more closed, than their theories. They all point out, in various ways, that there may be striving toward understanding but this does not mean there can be understanding; and the acknowledgment of contradiction and uncertainty cannot prevent action, because one must act even in the middle of uncertainty, as inaction is itself a form of action. The work of Pierre Bourdieu can be seen as an interesting attempt to take the skeptical tradition in a pragmatist direction, as Bourdieu absorbs the lessons of skepticism but in his theoretical writings argues for the need for autonomous scientific communities as well as for engagement; however, in his empirical work Bourdieu does not attempt to solve problems, and his followers generally produce only categorization schemes (Bourdieu 1984, 1991, 1994; Fowler 2020). Bourdieuvian work is thus unable to answer how to act when one must act under uncertainty.

What is appealing about the pragmatist framework is that it does gives some advice about how to act, identifying principles that respect both the need for openness, and the need for closure. The principles that the emancipatory scholars and the skeptical scholars are reaching for, just as rationalists such as Watts do, are pragmatist principles. Indeed, Habermas (1984) was directly inspired by the pragmatists, and Mouffe (2003) has written positively about certain aspects of pragmatism (Shalin 1993). By rejecting foundationalism, the pragmatists get us out of the difficulties that Habermas's position gets us into, and by identifying principles of provisional closure, pragmatists avoid the poststructuralist dilemma and render the agonistic model more plausible by allowing for formation of oppositional perspectives. Moreover, pragmatist problem solving gives direction to the project of rationalist sociology and suggests a solution to the incoherency problem.

Thus, several different traditions of sociological practice have independently groped toward a pragmatist approach, and developing such an approach holds promise for the discipline.

Pragmatism as Better Mirror

Pragmatism has increasingly caught the attention of sociologists over the past few decades. However, sociological scholarship on pragmatism is not always very pragmatist itself. A key tenet of the pragmatist tradition is that knowledge develops through attempts to solve practical problems in the world. Problem solving as conceived by the original pragmatists is a practice in which a community engages in examinations of the empirical world in order to change a particular empirical situation the community has defined as in need of

change. The difficulty of changing anything guarantees that the effort to do so will generate new knowledge, including new knowledge that may fundamentally revise the community's central principles and beliefs. Scholars studying the history of the natural sciences have suggested this understanding is accurate, and that attempting to solve practical problems has indeed been one way knowledge has advanced over the past century (Stokes 2011).

But much of the recent work of sociologists writing about pragmatism does not try to advance human knowledge by trying to solve real-world problems, and this is true of the main studies responsible for the revival of pragmatism. Rather, sociological pragmatists often attempt only to demonstrate that social actors behave in ways that accord with pragmatist descriptions of reality. For example, Hans Joas (1996), whose work brought sustained attention to pragmatism within sociology in the 1990s, draws on pragmatism to suggest that theories of human action based on either rationality or norms miss the important role of human creativity. Josh Whitford (2002) uses pragmatist arguments that actors develop goals through action, not before action, as a way to critique rational choice theory. Neil Gross (2009) develops from the pragmatist focus on problem solving a theory of "mechanisms" in sociology, which he argues should be understood as sequences in which an actor facing a problem uses habit or creativity and in doing so may bring about reproduction or transformation of the social situation.

These authors see pragmatist understandings of action as more compelling than other understandings of action; adapting the pragmatist Richard Rorty's (2009) terms, they see pragmatism as a better mirror in which to see the true state of the world than other possible theoretical mirrors. These major statements, which together have been responsible for much of the revival of attention to pragmatism within sociology, do not attempt to address problems in the world. They address, rather, questions internal to the discipline of sociology, such as whether action can be understood as rational, or what a mechanism is. Although solving problems internal to the discipline could have downstream consequences on solving external problems, recent sociological pragmatists have not been able to show such downstream consequences, or even shown much concern about them.

Gross himself worries that this state of affairs means many sociological pragmatists do not contribute much to our understanding of society. In an otherwise sympathetic examination of Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond's pragmatist analysis *The Racial Order*, Gross (2018) argues that the book demonstrates the value of many pragmatist precepts but does not seem to make any actual difference to how we understand race:

> while it may be possible to think of race in terms of fields, Emirbayer and Desmond do not show convincingly that there is great pragmatic/explanatory benefit to doing so, above and beyond the contribution that any coherent and plausible

theoretical framework makes to seeing phenomena in a new light. (p. 106)

In attempting to avoid closure sociological pragmatists sometimes end up producing genealogical studies of the kind found in the skeptical tradition (Joas 2013); these can be compelling on their own terms, and could even be helpful background for problem solving, but do not seem to be following the pragmatist precepts of trying to solve problems themselves.

In casting about for examples of sociological pragmatist scholarship that actually attempts to solve problems, Gross (2018) points to scholarship that attempts to solve problems internal to an intellectual tradition. But as Gross himself notes, summarizing the beliefs of the pragmatist John Dewey, the pragmatists thought that

> only a philosophy badly out of touch with its naturalistic purposes could pretend that the sole problems and crises it should address are those internal to itself. Dewey's alternative view was that philosophy must be attentive to meaningful real-world problems of the present. (p. 90)

As John Holmwood (2011) has argued, this situation is odd:

> many recent theorists sympathetic to pragmatism argue in favour of a form of universal pragmatics that seeks to establish a theory of action as providing foundational categories for social inquiry. . . . Ironically, this requires them to endorse the very form of sociological theory that others have seen as problematic, namely that of general theory of a kind very similar to that proposed by Parsons. (p. 16)

He suggests that we call what these scholars do not pragmatism, but "general theorising via an action frame of reference" (Holmwood 2014:1).

The "pragmatism as better mirror" perspective in recent sociology distills from the pragmatists' writings a theory of action that sees humans as problem solvers and builds social explanations on the basis of that vision. This reduces pragmatism not to a method for reaching ever newer insights but rather to one particular insight or framework. Sociological pragmatist scholarship can be interesting and useful even if it is not pragmatist, of course. And it should be noted that this rationalist translation of pragmatism may have been the only way to bring pragmatism into mainstream sociology. But although this particular framework may be appealing, unless it is turned in an explicitly problem-solving direction, it will simply add one more possible mirror to the crowded and incoherent funhouse of rationalist sociology.

Pragmatism as Problem Solving

If one seeks to apply pragmatism—not just praise it and demonstrate the relevance of some of its understandings of

human action and social dynamics—then certain difficulties arise that need to be addressed. Although the procedure to begin with a problem and try to solve it through confrontation with empirical evidence may seem straightforward, any scholar conducting this work is immediately confronted with a set of difficult questions.

First, what is a problem? How should a researcher concerned with objectivity or reflexivity identify one? In the natural sciences there may be broad consensus across normative frameworks that something constitutes a problem, such as cancer. In social issues in which there is absence of consensus, pragmatism sees the ultimate arbiter of what is a problem as the community; but this means the approach is susceptible to the prevailing standards in a community, which may be set by the dominant to the benefit of the dominant (Hildreth 2009). The pragmatists thought their hopes for progress in knowledge were well founded given the progress of the natural sciences. Whether or not they were correct about the natural sciences, there is less scope for assuming they will be correct about the humanities and social sciences, or about any political community more broadly, where the definition of progress is more contested. Communities may hold incorrect beliefs, there are subordinate and dissenting strands within any community, and different communities will identify different issues as problems (Gross 1997).

Moreover, many or even most of the kinds of social problems sociologists are engaged with are not the kind that can be solved in one piece of scholarship, or even in one generation. For example, some scholars argue that the pragmatist tradition understates the role of power and operates on a naïvely optimistic picture of human motivation, believing that human beings will want to solve problems; this ignores the role of greed and self-interest in preserving outcomes that are beneficial to some but harmful to others. Other scholars argue pragmatism is only able to address local issues and small problems far removed from the realities of domination in global capitalism (Hildreth 2009). Social scientists are also faced with the challenge that the phenomena they study, unlike those studied by natural scientists, are ever changing, sometimes in response to efforts to study them. And of course, the advice to simply run an experiment and see what happens ignores the difficulty of running experiments on large issues of consequence, as well as the lack of consensus about what the results of any experiment mean.

In short, problems, empirical evidence, and solutions may all be simpler to identify in the natural sciences. What does it mean to "problem solve" when problems cannot actually be solved?

Appropriately for an article advocating a pragmatic approach, it turns out that these questions are more difficult in theory than in practice. Unlike the problems that emancipatory, skeptical, and rationalist traditions run into, which are difficulties without a solution, the difficulties of pragmatist problem-solving are only apparent. I examine here two pieces of scholarship to address these issues and suggest some ways forward for pragmatism understood as problem solving.

The first piece of scholarship is, somewhat exceptionally, a sociological pragmatist contribution that does grapple with a real-world problem, Erik Schneiderhan's (2013) examination of genocide through a pragmatist lens. I examine this article not because it is a bad article but rather because it is an excellent article that applies a method that proves to be insufficient, the method of reading a particular empirical case through a theoretical lens. Schneiderhan argues that genocidal actions are not driven by culture, norms, interest, or premeditation but rather occur in practice and then are justified by turns to discourse. This is an application of Dewey's "ends-in-view" understanding of action, that human actors' goals may develop through, and after, actions, rather than causing those actions. Drawing on other scholars, Schneiderhan argues, "Mass murder is not necessarily the intention from the start. Perpetrators might try to implement a series of plans to repress or subvert other groups, but find their efforts frustrated" (p. 286). This problem then opens up a moment of confusion and introspection, which turns into the act of killing.

Schneiderhan does address a real problem, and his use of the ends-in-view understanding is a contribution. But his analysis also shows us the limits of this method of applying pragmatism in this way, because he cannot tell us anything further about why these actions occur; the act of killing, the center of analysis, remains mysterious. The analyst can suggest that it was the result of creative innovation, but not explain why that innovation took this form. Moreover, the main insight, that mass murder is not the intention from the beginning, repeats an observation that nonpragmatist scholars, such as Michael Mann (2005), have made. Schneiderhan's contribution is to read this insight as supporting pragmatism's claim to being a better mirror, but the mirror does not yet show us anything about genocide that we have not already seen.

In contrast, consider a second article, Aliza Luft's (2015) examination of genocidal actions in Rwanda, which reaches more concrete insights than Schneiderhan and gets us a step further into the mystery. Luft also draws on the ends-in-view perspective, but she combines it with an explicit strategy of comparison. In particular, she compares people at times when they killed someone and times when they did not. One of her most interesting arguments is that when people are alone, they are less likely to kill—even though the broad social context is the same, the discourses are the same, and even the person is the same. Only the situation is different. This observation accords with arguments in social psychology that groups are more likely to take extreme action, because moral responsibility is parceled out such that no individual feels responsible for what the group as a collective is doing (Myers and Lamm 1976), but it is not *taken* from these prior insights. In showing that this perspective is applicable to genocide, Luft has drawn from, but

gone beyond, pragmatist understandings of action as well as beyond insights from social psychology.

The method that allows Luft to do this is comparison across cases. Although a full incorporation of the insights of recent debates about comparative method and how they can be brought into pragmatism is beyond the scope of this article (see Prasad forthcoming for a lengthier treatment), I make a few schematic notes here.

First, "solving" implies a difference between T1 (a time when the problem exists) and T2 (a time when the problem does not exist), and some theory of how to move from T1 to T2. It requires, that is, analysis of causation. It can further be broken down into three subquestions of causation: identifying the causes of the problem (this is what Luft does); identifying what could cause the problem to be solved (which may be different from simply removing the causes of the problem, as the causes may lie far in the past); and identifying what causes or prevents the solution from being implemented (e.g., identifying the mechanisms of change and the mechanisms of resistance). Of course, all of these are preceded by a necessary step of identifying and describing a problem, but identification and description do not, by themselves, constitute problem solving, and are less likely to lead to the generation of new theoretical knowledge that is the promise of pragmatism. Moreover, for the purpose of generating new knowledge the method of taking a particular theoretical framework about social action and applying it is limited, no matter how interesting the framework and how skilled the analyst, unless the framework can be shown to tell us something new about the world. A more promising path is an explicit focus on causation with at least implicit discussion of counterfactuals. (It is possible to identify causation without counterfactuals if we are not interested in generalization and if we are attempting only to falsify a hypothesis; however, problem solving implies generalization, if only from the past of a situation to its future, and actual problem solving is usually about generating new ideas rather than testing existing ones; see Prasad forthcoming for more on this point.)

Second, comparison across cases is a powerful tool in the attempt to examine causation because it makes the counterfactual explicit. This is why Luft is able to reach insights about the circumstances under which genocidal killing takes place. She has examined where it did take place and where it did not. Schneiderhan, on the other hand, capably applies the ends-in-view perspective to rule out a potential explanation (the goal of killing as a cause of killing) but cannot offer an explanation in its place. This suggests the need to explicitly incorporate in the pragmatism as problem solving arsenal the insights and techniques that have resulted from a century of investigation of the question of causation, and recent methodological debates about the importance of comparison.

Regarding the two problems discussed above, how to identify a problem and how to problem solve when problems cannot be solved, it may seem that focusing on genocide avoids the problem of nonconsensus on what constitutes a problem by attacking a problem that is not particularly controversial. If so, this at least highlights that there are some problems even in the social sciences that everyone agrees are problems; other such consensus problems might include infant mortality, drug addiction, and food and water insecurity, and attempting to solve any of these will require and lead to significantly improved understandings of social order and social change. There are also a class of problems, such as poverty, where the problem itself is generally clear even if the possible solutions to it generate great disagreement.

However, there is a more subtle and more generalizable lesson about how to identify problems that Luft—and Schneiderhan for that matter—can teach us: they are both turning normative questions into analytical questions. For example, Luft's argument that killing is more likely in groups would hold even if one were not particularly concerned to reduce genocide. The analyst of a problem does not actually need to take a position on normative questions; rather, these questions are best answered by turning normative questions into empirical ones. This approach can be generalized even to problems that are not universally accepted to be problems, such as racism or sexism. There may be disagreement on whether sexism is a problem, but an empirical study proposing to analyze the conditions under which employers do or do not discriminate on the grounds of sex is an analytical question, not a normative one. It is a question about society, and as such offers rich possibilities for exploration at individual, organizational, and societal levels. Although explicit discussion of normative questions can be worthwhile for other reasons, normative consensus on what constitutes a problem is not a prerequisite for advancing an empirical agenda.

Similarly, the difficulty that problems cannot easily be solved does not need to hamstring research. Luft has not solved the problem of genocide—just as no individual study solves cancer—but by struggling with the problem she has taken steps toward doing so by identifying the conditions under which killings can happen, and more important, how and when they do not happen. Because she has identified a concrete insight about causation, her work generates next steps around questions such as, What factors lessen the phenomenon of more killing in crowds? What policies could lessen the kinds of gatherings that lead to these events? What would the policy-making and peacekeeping communities have to do in order to implement these policies? What structures of power prevent these policies from being implemented? It is unclear where to go next from Schneiderhan's research, but Luft's research, because it reaches a concrete insight about causation, unfolds a new research agenda around understanding that causal chain. The strategy of comparison could be an equally powerful tool in attempting to answer these new questions. Moreover, the approach of using comparison to develop an analysis of causation could

certainly be applied (and has been applied) to very large or global questions, such as how to bring about social revolution, with insights from actual revolutions and nonrevolutions the relevant "trial and error."

The procedure can be summarized as: turn normative questions into analytical questions, and aim for new knowledge about causation, particularly through a methodological strategy of comparison. There are no guarantees that this procedure reaches truth, much less actionable policy. The pragmatists themselves struggled with the problem of communities that settle on incorrect beliefs and how to think about truth independent of our knowledge of it, and they responded to this problem in unclear ways—for example, imagining the truth to be what an ideal community, debating forever, would ultimately reach (Misak 2004; see Margolis 1998 for a thorough critique). But the simplest response is that although there may be a truth independent of what any community believes, it is not actually possible to know if we have arrived at this truth. Thus the need to keep open a space for dissent—indeed, to consciously seek out dissent—is an important lesson to take from the skeptical tradition, but ultimately the only route forward, given the impossibility of withdrawal from responsibility, is to use reason to identify what currently seems to us the best action. We must proceed with the understanding that we could eventually be shown to be wrong, but we need to proceed nevertheless, because inaction could also be shown to be wrong.

Conclusion

Pragmatism understood as problem solving offers a resolution to some recent difficulties in social theory, such as around the question of the impasse between the need for decision and the impossibility of deciding with certainty. The pragmatist resolution, particularly in the work of Peirce and Dewey, highlights the role of the self-correcting community of inquiry in knowledge production and the role of grappling with real-world problems as the source of self-correction. A problem-solving approach even promises to deliver better rationalist understandings of society, because it forces a confrontation between alternative theories.

Using the principles of pragmatism as problem solving would have real consequences for each of the three traditions and would move each of them in a different direction: problem-solving suggests focusing more on the causes of problems than their effects, and therefore conducting studies of perpetrators and causal agents rather than victims, a point that is particularly relevant for the emancipatory tradition; studying change and causation rather than simply producing description and genealogy, a point relevant for the skeptical tradition; and attempting to solve explicitly identified social problems rather than simply producing readings of situations through different theoretical lenses, as a way of bringing discipline and coherence to the rationalist tradition.

In this way, to the rationalist tradition, in which the goal is to understand society, pragmatism as problem-solving brings direction and may help resolve the "incoherency problem" and in doing so may help produce better theories of society. To the emancipatory tradition, which seeks to improve society, the pragmatism as problem-solving perspective brings a ground from which to determine what constitutes emancipation—the deliberations of actually existing, self-correcting communities. And to the skeptical tradition's main weakness, its inability to explain its own moral commitments, pragmatism as problem-solving contributes the idea of fallibility rather than skepticism as a way forward.

Pragmatism as problem-solving also draws from the strengths of each tradition: with the skeptical tradition it shares doubts about human attempts to reach final conclusions and the need for humility and openness to being shown to be wrong; with the emancipatory tradition it shares the interest in ongoing improvement of society and the need to reach provisional closure to take action in the face of social problems; and with the rationalist tradition it shares a belief in the importance of scholarly communities of inquiry judging ideas on the basis of rational and scientific criteria, because the community allows the possibility of provisional closure while the rational criteria instantiate the possibility of finding that our beliefs are wrong.

Thus, all pragmatist problem solving scholarship is *also* skeptical, emancipatory, and rational. However, not all skeptical, emancipatory, or rational scholarship is pragmatist problem solving. There will be some rationalist scholars, some emancipatory scholars, and some skeptical scholars whose work might fall under the pragmatist problem solving umbrella, particularly those pushing their traditions to face their limits, such as Jane Mansbridge or Duncan Watts, as discussed earlier. However, not all scholars from these three traditions are pragmatist problem solvers: emancipatory and skeptical scholars are not always committed to discussions on the basis of scientific criteria, skeptical and rationalist scholars are not always interested in emancipation as a goal, and rationalist and emancipatory scholars often dismiss skeptical scholarship without engaging it. Pragmatist problem solving cannot, therefore, be reduced to any of the three traditions. It requires a syncretic fusing of the three traditions. Pragmatism as better mirror is insufficient to this task, and pragmatism as problem solving deserves more attention from sociologists.

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